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How One Georgia Performance Learning Center Helps Students Succeed

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HOW ONE GEORGIA PERFORMANCE LEARNING CENTER HELPS STUDENTS SUCCEED

by

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(Under the Direction of Barbara Mallory)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study has been to understand how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed. Performance Learning Centers are non-traditional high schools created by Communities in Schools in partnership with local school boards to serve students at risk of dropping out of school. Although started in Georgia in only 2003, the Performance Learning Centers have already resulted in student improvement as evidenced by their growth from only seven centers in the first year to 29 centers by 2007 and by their student performance reports. The perceptions of the administrator, staff, teachers, and students at one Performance Learning Center that had opened in 2005 informed this researcher of successful practices at the center. Multiple observations of the participating center's operations and classroom interactions were conducted. Interviews were conducted with the Administrator, Vice-Principal, Service Coordinator, Counselor, all five teachers, and 12 students. The Performance Learning Center implemented the seven major school improvement strategies identified in the literature, including additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas; future job skill training; instruction on study skills, test taking skills, and time management;

modification to the learning environment; student counseling for academic and personal issues; participation in community service projects; and increased parental involvement. The research identified themes of student progress, flexibility, individual student attention, relationships, preparation for lifelong learning, and community as contributing to student success at the Performance Learning Center. The school improvement strategies employed at the Performance Learning Center can be implemented in other educational environments to address specific student needs. State policy makers and educators can look at the Performance Learning Centers as a successful program worthy of emulation.

INDEX WORDS: Performance Learning Centers, Student success, School improvement strategies

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family for their patience and understanding while I pursued my educational goals.

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I acknowledge the patience and encouragement of my family, friends and coworkers over the many years that I have attended graduate school. I hope that the knowledge I have gained can be shared with others to benefit their careers and the students they teach.

I also acknowledge the contributions of my committee chair Dr. Mallory and my committee members Dr. He and Dr. Reavis for their support during my educational journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Communities in Schools is a national non-profit organization that seeks to establish public and private partnerships for the improvement of education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). In 2003, Communities in Schools of Georgia received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for $6.3 million to be distributed over five years to establish 25 Performance Learning Centers (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). The purpose of Performance Learning Centers is to provide an alternative to students in Georgia who are at risk of not completing their high school education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Performance Learning Centers are not traditional high schools, but rather alternatives to traditional high schools. Performance Learning Centers provide students individual on-line lessons/curriculum that are geared to each of the individual student's needs. The Performance Learning Centers work in cooperation with the community to help keep students in school and provide students with a marketable education for a young adult's future (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a).

The three areas of individual curriculum, community cooperation and job skills training form the basis of the school improvement strategies employed in Performance Learning Centers. The strategies include additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas; future job skill training; instruction on test taking skills, study skills, and time management; modification of the learning environment; student counseling to assist with both academic and personal issues; participation in service projects to foster a relationship with the community; and increased parental involvement in the education

process. Many school improvement strategies in practice are being implemented in many schools in a large number of school improvement programs across the United States. This study focused on one Performance Learning Center in Georgia. The researcher sought to determine how one Performance Learning Center helps students succeed.

Background of the Study

American high schools serve a diverse group of students. Researchers such as Elmore (2002), Fritz (1992) and Seaman and Yoo (2001) indicate that high schools are not meeting the needs of students. Seaman and Yoo (2001, p. 42) state "The problem of school dropouts has existed for a long time, although attention to it has grown considerably in recent years." Fritz (1992, p. 1) states that "…public secondary school student attrition (i.e., dropouts) is a nation-wide concern confronting many public high schools" and posits that high schools are not meeting the needs of students.

Many researchers use the dropout rate as evidence that high schools are failing. The dropout rate is a measure of the percentage of students that do not complete high school regardless of how long it takes or do not obtain a General Education Degree (GED). Statistics from the United States Department of Education (2004, p. 5) indicate that while high school dropout rates generally decreased from 1972 through 1987 from approximately 14.5% to approximately 13%, there has been "no consistent upward or downward trend" between 1988 and 2001. While the dropout rate is one measure of school failure, another measure commonly utilized by researchers is the completion rate.

The high school completion rate is a second measure of school failure. The high school completion rate is a measure of the percentage of students that complete high school in four years. The Educational Testing Service (2005) indicates that the actual

high school completion rate has fallen from 77.1 percent in 1969 to 69.9 percent in 2000 in the United States. In addition, from 1990 to 2000 the high school completion rate fell in all but seven states (Educational Testing Service, 2005). The high school completion rate in Georgia has declined from 61.9 percent in 1990 to 58.1 percent in 2000 (Educational Testing Service, 2005). This indicates that in 2000 Georgia's high schools had a completion rate that was 11.8 percent lower than the national average.

The methods to calculate high school dropout rate and high school completion rate are different and therefore result in different percentage rates in the literature depending on the method chosen by the particular research organization. Because of the use of both the high school dropout rate and high school completion rate in the literature, there is confusion about student success and school failure due to the variation in formulas used in various states. There is an effort underway to standardize the formulas used to measure student success across all states: "In December 2005, the governors of all 50 states and leaders of 12 national organizations signed a compact in which they agreed to adopt a common definition for the high school graduation rate" (Education Week, 2006, p. 11). Regardless of the outcome of the standardization efforts, keeping students in school is a problem faced by high school administrators across the country.

At-Risk High School Students

Increasing the number of students completing high school is a goal that schools have pursued for some time. Strategies used to improve the completion rate involve understanding the various reasons and characteristics of students who leave school in order to adopt responses that can help keep students in school.

Various reasons for not completing high school have been identified by researchers

and include that the student was failing, getting bad grades, or could not keep up with the school work (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); did not get along with teachers and/or other students (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); did not like school in general or the specific school attended (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); had disciplinary problems and was suspended or expelled (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); did not feel safe at school (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); had gotten married, gotten pregnant, or become a parent (Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); had to work to support family (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005); or had a drug or alcohol problem (Swaim, Beauvais, Chavez & Oetting, 1997; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005).

While there are many reasons that a student may leave school, there are also a few general characteristics associated with those who leave. The students tend to have high absenteeism rates (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006). Many students who leave school come from families with low socioeconomic status (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006). A final general characteristic is that they often lived in single parent homes (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006).

Students not completing high school are problematic for American society. While the earnings level for people who do not graduate has doubled in the last 20 years, it has tripled for college graduates (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005). Current students who leave school early will earn $200,000 less in their lifetime than high school graduates and $800,000 less than college graduates (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005). Those who do not graduate make up nearly half of the heads of households on welfare (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005). Students who do not graduate typically live 9.2 years less

than those that complete high school (Muennig, 2005). A 1% increase in high school completion rates could save the United States $1.4 billion per year in costs associated with criminal activity (Moretti, 2005). Finally, those who do not complete high school make up nearly half of the prison population (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005). As indicated by the literature, high school dropouts are problematic for American society because they do not earn as much as high school graduates and make up a significant portion of the population that is an economic and criminal detriment to our country.

Solutions to Completion Problem

Many strategies are being employed in high schools for students who do not appear to be getting the support they need in order to succeed academically. Successful strategies to improve the conditions for students to remain in school focus on areas including improving student academic performance and attendance (Fritz, 1992). Many school districts have implemented strategies that work to combat the high school completion problem.

One strategy is to provide additional instruction and monitoring of student performance in core academic areas (Fritz, 1992; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005). Future job skills training is a second strategy that has been shown to improve student performance in school (Fritz, 1992; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005). Instruction on test taking skills, study skills, and time management is a strategy that can assist frustrated students who may need additional organizational skills to succeed. (Fritz, 1992; Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005).

Students who have difficulties in a traditional school setting may require a modification of the learning environment as a strategy to improve performance in school (John Hopkins University, 2005c; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Student counseling to assist with both academic and personal issues is another successful strategy to help at-risk students stay in school (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Student participation in community service projects to foster a strong relationship with the community is an improvement strategy that is used widely with at-risk students (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c). Finally, increased parental involvement in the education process is a strategy that is successful with students at risk of dropping out (Seaman & Yoo, 2001). Each of these strategies has been implemented in various school improvement programs.

Alternative Programs

In some school districts alternative programs are offered to students who are not successful in traditional school settings. There are several successful programs that have been implemented to help at-risk students complete high school in an alternative setting that incorporates one or more of the strategies for school improvement (Education Testing Service, 2005). Three alternative programs that have gained national attention are the Quantum Opportunities Program, Maryland's Tomorrow, and Talent Development High Schools.

Quantum Opportunities Program.

The Ford Foundation and the United States Department of Labor fund The Quantum Opportunities Program (Promising Practices Network, 2002) for students in the ninth grade who come from families that are receiving welfare payments (Promising Practices Network, 2002). The program utilizes strategies including student monitoring, modified learning environment, community service, and job skill training (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005). The program defines success by an increased graduation rate and a rise in the likelihood of graduates to pursue postsecondary education (James, 1997).

Maryland's Tomorrow.

Maryland's Tomorrow is a program that provides opportunities for assistance to at-risk youth (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005). The students are provided with individual guidance, career and motivational speakers from varied backgrounds, a low student-to-teacher ratio, educational field trips, mentoring, and group service projects (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005). The program defines success by indicators including increased graduation rates, improved scores on the Maryland Achievement Test, and improved grade point averages (Educational Testing Service, 2005).

Talent Development High Schools.

Talent Development High Schools focus on entire high schools with student attendance, discipline, achievement-score, and completion-rate problems (Johns Hopkins University, 2005a). There are community and parental support components as with the other programs, which include utilizing faculty, administration and community stakeholder strengths and needs aligned with the student needs and desires (John Hopkins

University, 2005c). The program defines success by an increase in the promotion rates for ninth graders and increased attendance within the overall school (Educational Testing Service, 2005).

Summary of Strategies That Work

The Quantum Opportunities Program, Maryland's Tomorrow, and the Talent Development High Schools emphasize strategies such as student monitoring, modified learning environment, counseling, and parent and community involvement. These strategies can prevent students from dropping out of schools. In summary, many researchers (Fritz, 1992; Seaman and Yoo, 2001; Somers and Piliawsky, 2004) identified strategies to prevent drop outs and to lead to student success. These strategies have been implemented in school improvement programs and deserve attention from anyone interested in the problem of students leaving high school.

Georgia's Intervention to Keep Students in High School

The State of Georgia identified high school completion as a major issue in school accountability. In order to address the completion rate problem, the Georgia Department of Education and Communities in Schools (CIS) partnered to establish an alternative program to meet the needs of students who are at risk of not completing high school. CIS is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to establish public and private partnerships for the improvement of education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). CIS has a branch in Georgia entitled Communities in Schools of Georgia, which works with over 52 school systems in 47 counties throughout the state (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005b). CIS receives its funding from various donors (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005b; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). In 2003, Communities in

Schools of Georgia received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for $6.3 million to be distributed over five years to establish 25 Performance Learning Centers in Georgia (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation seeks non-profit organizations whose goals are to increase high school graduation rates, and Communities in Schools' goals are aligned with those of the Foundation (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006a).

Performance Learning Centers in Georgia

Performance Learning Centers provide an alternative to students in Georgia who are at risk of not completing their high school education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Performance Learning Centers provide resources to encourage 9th graders to remain in school through the 12th grade and ultimately to graduation. They may be housed at an existing high school or in another setting (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c). In 2007, there were 29 Performance Learning Centers spread throughout Georgia, as indicated in Figure 1, which exceeds the goal of the initial grant of 25 Performance Learning Centers by 2008 (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

America has a high school drop out problem. While educators seek ways to meet needs of high school students, research provides evidence of strategies that have been linked to student success. These strategies include additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas; future job skill training; instruction on test taking skills, study skills, and time management; modification of the learning environment; student counseling to assist with both academic and personal issues; participation in service

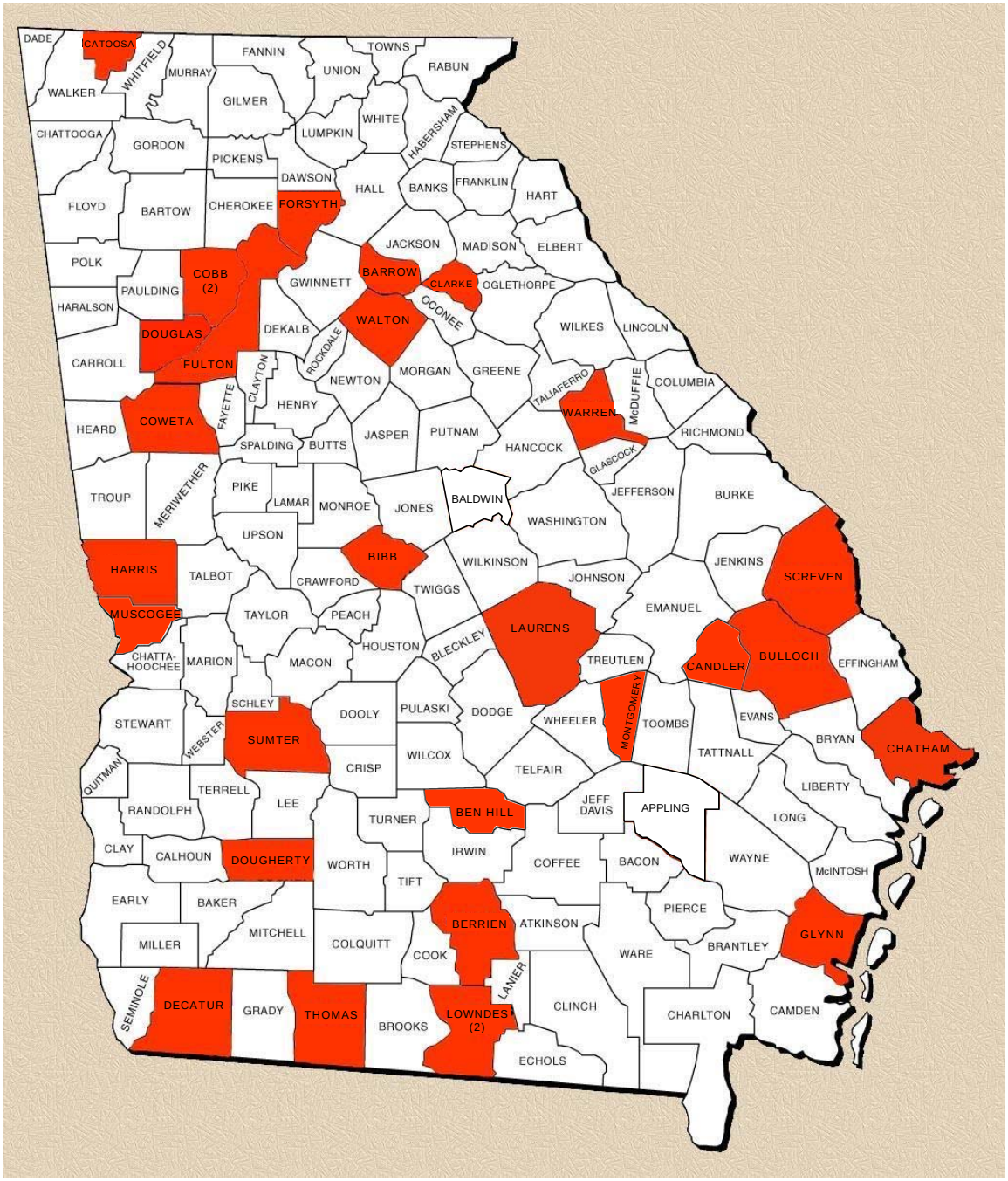
projects to foster a relationship with the community; and increased parental involvement in the education process.

Many times the drop-out prevention strategies are implemented through targeted programs aimed at keeping at-risk high school students in school. While the literature has identified the strategies, how schools apply the strategies is of interest. Several states have implemented programs such as the Quantum Opportunities Program, Maryland's Tomorrow, and Talent Development High Schools to increase student success. Georgia has recently partnered with CIS to implement Performance Learning Centers to meet the needs of students who are not completing high school.

Performance Learning Centers were established in Georgia beginning in 2003, and in 2007 there were 29 Performance Learning Centers in existence. How administrators and teachers in these schools utilize school improvement strategies to support student success is the subject of this research.

The Georgia Performance Learning Centers were established as an alternative for at-risk students to complete the requirements for high school graduation. The Georgia Performance Learning Centers have existed since 2003, and there is little research that has been conducted on their characteristics and strategies used to help students be successful in school. Therefore, the researcher's purpose was to examine how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed.

Figure 1. Locations of Current Georgia Performance Learning Centers.



Research Questions

The researcher's purpose was to understand how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed. To understand the factors leading to student performance success in one Georgia Performance Learning Center, the following questions guided the study:

1. How does one Georgia Performance Learning Center define student success?
2. How do teachers in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
3. How do administrators in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
4. How does one Performance Learning Center work with community partners to promote student success?
5. What do students in one Georgia Performance Learning Center perceive (identify) as factors that contribute to their success?

Importance of the Study

The Georgia Performance Learning Centers can provide information that is of importance not only to other school improvement programs but also to educators who are seeking strategies to help individual high school students remain in school. The administrators, teachers, and students at the Georgia Performance Learning Centers have a unique knowledge of what is happening in the centers and what works and what may not work. The administrators and teachers are responsible for making decisions that directly impact student performance, and their perspective can assist other teachers and administrators looking at issues for school improvement. The students know what

encourages them to remain in school and to persist to completion given their individual situations.

The Georgia Performance Learning Centers are relatively new, and little research has been conducted other than the in-house research of Communities in Schools. This research therefore will make a contribution to the literature by identifying the techniques the centers use to prevent students from dropping out of school and how the centers implement the techniques. Teachers and administrators are always seeking information that will improve student performance. The Georgia Performance Learning Centers were created to increase the success of at-risk students. Identifying how the Georgia Performance Learning Centers use strategies that promote student success may assist other school improvement programs and classrooms. How teachers and administrators help students succeed identified by this study can be utilized by other administrators, teachers, and school improvement programs.

With the introduction of the federal legislation No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Georgia Department of Education instituted student achievement goals that included student proficiency on the high school graduation test in English/Language Arts and Math. In order to make Adequate Yearly Progress, and thus meet state and federal requirements, student performance had to increase. The Georgia Performance Learning Centers assist this process by helping at-risk students pass the high school graduation test; the lessons learned in the centers may help other schools as Georgia and the United States strive to achieve the goal of a 100 percent graduation rate by 2014.

This research into how one Performance Learning Center in Georgia has contributed to student success provides a resource for administrators dealing with school curriculum,

attendance, graduation rates, and school improvement issues. In this way, the research provides alternatives for administrators and teachers to use to overcome barriers and help students succeed.

Research Procedures

The researcher used qualitative research design in this study to answer the research questions. Qualitative research data collection includes participation, observation, in-depth interviewing, and literature review (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). One method of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is triangulation. Triangulation is "the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, p. 148) and "allows researchers to use different methods in different combinations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b, p. 99). Interviewing the program administrator, teachers, and students, observing these program participants at the school, and reviewing program documentation will provide a means for the researcher to answer the specific research questions and utilize triangulation of participant viewpoints. This research study includes qualitative research data collection and triangulation.

Each Performance Learning Center in Georgia has an academic coordinator who serves as the principal and five teachers serving as learning facilitators. There were 29 operating Performance Learning Centers in Georgia located throughout the state in 2007 (Communities in School of Georgia, 2007). The operating Performance Learning Centers were located throughout Georgia as presented in Figure 1. The focus of this study is on one of the 29 Performance Learning Centers in Georgia. The input was generated through contact with the administrator, teachers, and students from the Georgia Performance Learning Center that was the focus of this study.

In-depth interview questions were administered to the administrator, teachers and students within the subject Georgia Performance Learning Center. The qualitative research for this study involved interviewing participants who had unique information that only they could contribute. The unique information was how the Georgia Performance Learning Centers support student success. Trustworthiness in this qualitative research study was established through triangulation because the researcher utilized information from multiple program participants and different research methods such as interviews and observations to answer the research questions.

Once written permission was obtained from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board and the participating school system, the participating Performance Learning Center was visited. During the visits, the Performance Learning Center classrooms were observed and in-depth interviews conducted with the administrator, the teachers and the students. The interview results and Performance Learning Center observations of classroom procedures were used to generate the portraiture of one Performance Learning Center.

The research was conducted with the cooperation of Communities in Schools of Georgia. The primary contacts were Luwanna Williams, Director of the Georgia Performance Learning Centers, and Linda Kelly, who was responsible for data collection and technology for Communities in Schools.

The in-depth interview results were compiled to identify common success factors. The in-depth interaction with one Performance Learning Center, along with a review of pertinent literature, provided a clear picture of how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helped students succeed.

Limitations

Because this study was conducted in a non-traditional setting, the researcher was constrained to observe and interview in a fluid environment in which some students who were interested in participating were not always available during the researcher's visits.

Delimitations

For this study, the researcher examined one specific Performance Learning Center operated by Communities in Schools of Georgia. While there are Performance Learning Centers operating in other states, one that operated in Georgia was the subject of this research. While at the beginning of the research process, 29 Performance Learning Centers were operating in Georgia, the research focused on the administrator, teachers and students at only one Performance Learning Center.

Definition of Key Terms

The *academic coordinators* for the individual Performance Learning Centers in Georgia serve the role of principal (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c).

At-risk students are those students who are likely not to complete high school in four years or to drop out of school due to poor school attendance, poor grades, discipline problems, alcohol or drug issues, family commitments, or other academic and/or social issues (Educational Testing Service, 2005).

Communities in Schools (CIS) is a non-profit organization that seeks to establish public and private partnerships for the improvement of education, and it receives funding from various donors (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a; 2005b).

Flexible schedule is one that provides flexibility in the hours students attend classes in contrast to a traditional high school's fixed all-day schedule.

Graduation rates or *high school completion rates* can be described in many different ways, including status completion rates and 4-year completion rates (United States Department of Education, 2004). The high school completion rate within this research is defined as the percentage of 17 and 18-year olds who received high school diplomas as a percentage of the total United States population of 17 and 18-year olds

A *high school dropout* is a student who quits school without earning a high school diploma (Educational Testing Service, 2005).

Non-traditional schools are any educational programs that are conducted either within or separate from the traditional high school setting and curriculum and that incorporate best practices to assist at-risk students (e.g., flexible schedules, one-on-one instruction, etc.).

Performance Learning Centers in Georgia were established by Communities in Schools to provide an alternative to students in Georgia that are at risk of not completing their high school education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). They are non-traditional programs that provide individual on-line lessons and curriculums geared to each student's needs while working with the community (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a).

School improvement programs are non-traditional education programs to help promote the academic success of students.

Summary

This study focused on one Performance Learning Center in Georgia that was funded by Communities in Schools through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Performance Learning Centers are school improvement programs that utilize a

school within a school concept. These programs have a separate administrator for the Performance Learning Center, and each center has five teachers available to implement the program. The goal of the Performance Learning Center is to provide an alternative to students who are at risk of dropping out of high school before earning a diploma.

The national high school completion rates are declining, and Georgia's completion rate is lower than the national average. The Performance Learning Centers in Georgia provide an alternative to students to reduce the number of at-risk students. Because the Performance Learning Centers have existed only since 2003 in Georgia, little research has been conducted on how Performance Learning Centers help students succeed.

The research centered on what the administrator, teachers and students perceived as the factors that denoted success in one Performance Learning Center in Georgia. The research questions focused on the perceptions of the administrator, teacher, and student as to the ways the Performance Learning Center helped students succeed and the interactions of the Performance Learning Center with community partners.

This study investigated how one Georgia Performance Learning Center provided student instruction, built community partnerships, and provided a marketable education to help students succeed. In addition, this study involved input not only from students or teachers but from all of the participants in a Performance Learning Center: the administrator, teachers, and students. The program participants' input identified what they believe are specific strengths of the Performance Learning Center and not just whether or not the program is generally worthwhile. The study results filled a gap in the literature that existed on Performance Learning Centers, because little research had been

conducted on their characteristics or the program participants' perceptions of successful strategies.

The administrator, teachers, and students at the Performance Learning Centers have a unique perspective and knowledge of what is happening in the centers. Although the centers comprise a unique school improvement program, the factors associated with student success could be applied to other educational situations in other schools. The research can benefit educators other than just those at Performance Learning Centers. With the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is of increased importance for schools to improve their completion rates, and knowledge of the perceptions of the administrators, teachers, and students of the Performance Learning Centers provided useful information to this research which may be applicable to other educational settings.

During this research there were 29 active Performance Learning Centers in the state of Georgia. The researcher focused on one Performance Learning Center, and interviews were conducted with the administrator/academic coordinator, the teachers, and the students at the center. Careful measures were taken not to identify any of those students by name to maintain their privacy and anonymity. The researcher spent time observing classes and student behavior to add value and additional perspective to the research.

After the interviews were completed, the data was compiled and tabulated to understand how the Performance Learning Center helped students succeed. These results in conjunction with a review of literature revealed how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study focused on identifying strategies employed in one Georgia Performance Learning Center to help high school students succeed. In order to understand Performance Learning Centers and their purpose, it is first necessary to understand the high school completion problem, strategies that have been identified from the literature as being successful, in addressing the completion problem, and how alternative programs address the high school completion problem using the strategies. Therefore, the review of the literature is organized by the following sections: Graduation Rate Confusion; Profile of American Students Leaving School; Reasons for Leaving School; Strategies for Keeping Students in School; How School Improvement Programs Address the Dropout Problem; The Completion Problem in Georgia; Communities in Schools Efforts in Georgia; and Georgia Performance Learning Centers.

Graduation Rate Confusion

Many states and districts avoid or underestimate the magnitude of a high school completion problem through the use of varied and often confusing means of measuring the high school graduation rate (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Education Week, 2006). *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006) states that there are too many ways for the different high schools to calculate graduation rates. Georgia presently calculates the completion rate by use of Leaver Rate, which is the proportion of those leaving school with a diploma divided by all those leaving school for any reason (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006b).

However, not all high schools and states use the same formula. An extreme example is cited (Thornburg, 2006) about the town of Shelbyville, Illinois, which counted any student who left school but promised to take the GED exam at a later date as a graduate. This method permitted Shelbyville to boast a graduation rate of 98%.

The lack of a consistent graduation method across states is confusing and can mask problems in specific schools. A practice in Houston, Texas, was the use of “leaver codes” or excuses (Balfantz & Legters, 2004). Schools used excuses such as pregnancy or military services as a way to code students as something other than a high school dropout. It took the action of outside auditors to correct this calculation method.

Even the United States government contributes to the confusion through the use of graduation statistics in the census reports (Thornburgh, 2006). The census report asks if the person is a high school graduate or possesses a GED. The census report does not include prison inmates or transient citizens which typically include a large number of high school dropouts and are not counted in the census numbers thereby lower the dropout rate reported (Thornburgh, 2006).

Although various methods of determining high school completion rates exist, researchers, including Jay Greene at the Manhattan Institute, estimate the high school graduation rate at between 64 and 71 percent (Thornburgh, 2006). This is similar to the United States high school graduation rate of between 68 and 70 percent identified by Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison (2006). Their work highlights that one third of the nation’s population between the ages of 16 and 25 did not have a high school diploma or had not yet graduated from high school in 2003. Work is in progress to create a common national calculation method of determining high school completion rates but until this

effort is complete there will still be confusion and difficulty in making direct comparisons between schools (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006).

While the issue of differing high school completion rate calculations make direct state and school comparisons difficult, so do the varying requirements for graduation in each state. Most states have state-wide required credits for graduation with a standard diploma (Education Week, 2006). The United States average number of required credits is 20.5 (Education Week, 2006). The intriguing information is the range of required credits between different states. For instance at the extremes of the range, the states of California, Wisconsin and Wyoming only require 13 credits for normal high school graduation and in comparison Alabama, Florida, South Carolina and West Virginia require 24 credits (Education Week, 2006). For information, the state of Georgia requires 22 credits (Education Week, 2006).

Although the completion rate calculations and graduation requirements differ from state to state, there is a consensus among many researchers and organizations that there is a high school completion problem (Elmore, 2002; Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Fritz, 1992; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006). While the admission of a high school completion problem has being made by the educational community, there is no indication that substantial change is occurring. Thornburgh (2006) states that the high school graduation rate has remained essentially static since the 1970's. In addition, Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison (2006) state "Experts expect the dropout problem to increase substantially through 2020 unless significant improvements are made."

Profile of American Students Leaving School

There are many statistics detailing the geographical and demographical aspects of high school students leaving school. Many different organizations track high school statistics including the United States Department of Education (2004), Education Week (2006), the Educational Testing Service (2005) and the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (Lehr et al., 2004) These organizations provide information that illustrate the high school completion problem.

A first step in identifying the geographical profile is establishing if there are areas of the United States that have higher rates of high school students not completing school. Education Week (2006) compiled a detailed report on high school graduation rates and presented maps as developed by Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2006a). One of the maps presents detailed information on the high school graduation rates in each county in the United States for the 2002-2003 school year (Education Week, 2006). The map provides general information about the geographical profile of high school graduation rates, but also identifies peculiarities such as districts with graduation rates of less than 50% located adjacent to districts with high school graduation rates greater than 80%. Figure 2 presents this detailed county by county map (Education Week, 2006).

The county to county differences can be masked by providing state averages for the high school graduation rates in the United States (Education Week, 2006). Figure 3 presents the state averaged map of graduation rates (Education Week, 2006). The two maps do support the generalization that students who live in urban areas are more likely to drop out of high school and so are students from the southern part of the United States (Lehr et al., 2004). This information provides a picture of the current situation with high

Figure 2. United States 2002-2003 County High School Graduation Rates. (Education Week, 2006)

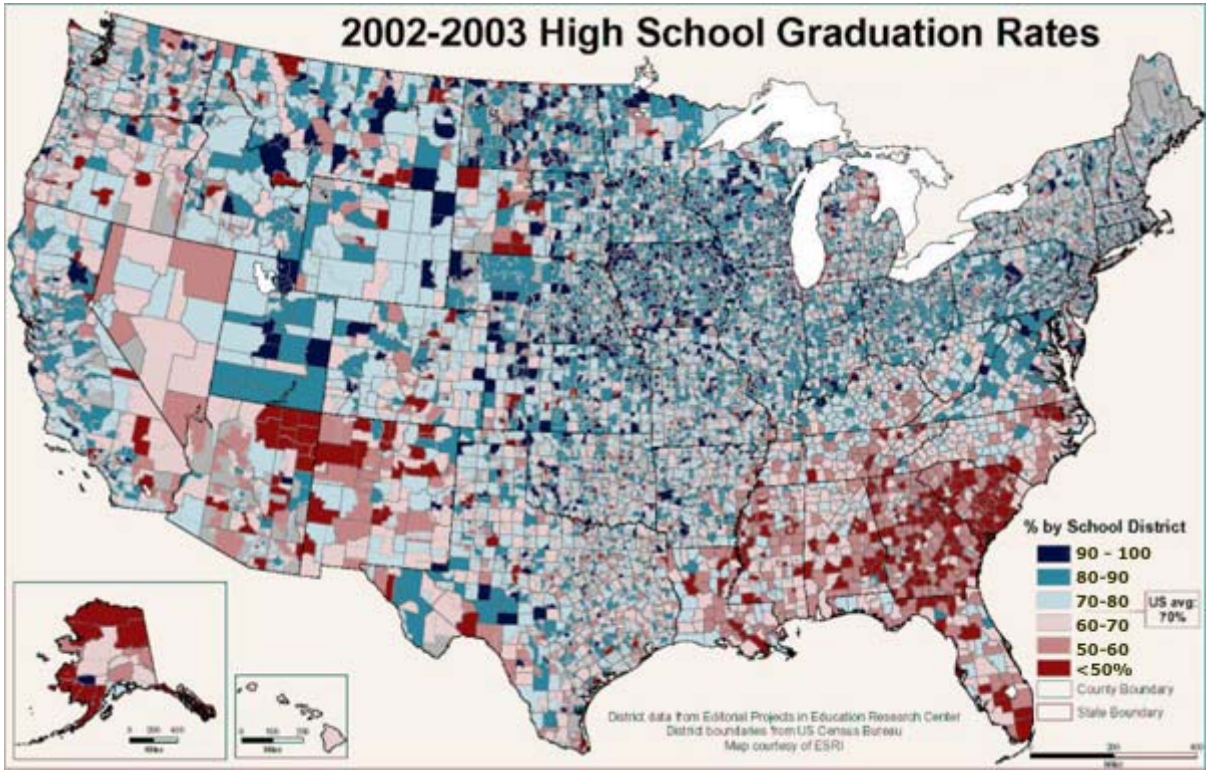
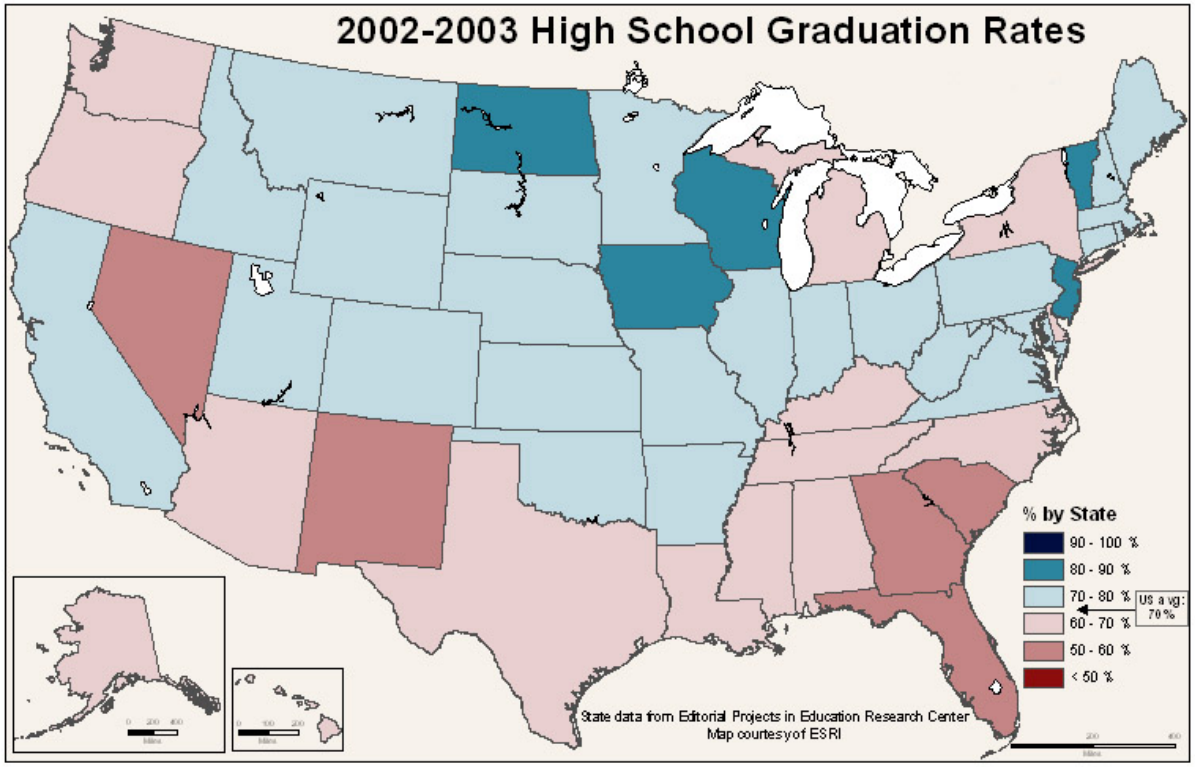


Figure 3. United States 2002-2003 State High School Graduation Rates. (Education Week, 2006)



school graduation rates. While it does not provide long term trends, it provides information useful for present day actions. The 2003 situation is important for taking near term action while 10 or 20 year old data can identify trends useful for other researchers.

The state of Georgia is not immune to the problem of high school students leaving school. In 2002-2003, the graduation rate as calculated by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2006b) was 56.3 percent as compared to a national average of 69.6 percent. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate that Georgia's graduation rates, similar to other Southern states such as South Carolina, tend to be below the United States average. Georgia also has many counties in which the graduation rate is less than 50% as seen in Figure 2.

The national demographics of those not completing high school indicate that in general males are more likely to leave school than females (Lehr et al., 2004; Education Week, 2006). The racial profiles indicate that black and Hispanic students have a higher incidence of leaving school and lower income students are more likely to not graduate (Lehr et al., 2004; Education Week, 2006; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). In addition, students who come from single parent homes have a higher chance of leaving school (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Lehr et al., 2004). Similar to the national averages, Georgia has a higher percentage of females that graduate than males and Hispanic and black students have a higher incidence of not completing school (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006b). These are general results that can be used by researchers to identify students who may be candidates for assistance.

Reasons for Leaving School

There are many factors that influence high school students to dropout of school. The various reasons for leaving school include that the student was failing, getting bad grades, or could not keep up with the school work (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005), did not get along with teachers and/or other students (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005), did not like school in general or the specific school they were attending (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005), had disciplinary problems and were suspended or expelled (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005), did not feel safe at school (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005), had gotten married, gotten pregnant, or become a parent (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005), had to work to support family (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005) or had a drug or alcohol problem (Swaim, Beauvais, Chavez & Oetting, 1997; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005).

While there are many reasons why a student may leave school, there are also a few general characteristics associated with those not completing high school. Those that leave tend to have high absenteeism rates (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Lehr et al., 2004). The students came from families with low socioeconomic status (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006). A final general characteristic is those that do not graduate often lived in single parent homes (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006).

The reasons for leaving school and common characteristics can also be used by researchers in efforts to address the high school completion problem by focusing attention on the reasons students leave school. The Georgia Performance Learning Centers were established to assist those students at-risk of not completing high school.

Strategies for Keeping Students in School

Through the identification of the characteristics and issues facing at-risk high school students, strategies have been developed to keep students in school. The literature contains numerous examples of school improvement strategies in practice to help students succeed (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Fritz, 1992; James, 1997; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). Seven general groups of strategies include the following:

- Additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas.
- Future job skill training.
- Instruction on test taking skills, study skills and time management.
- Modification of the learning environment.
- Student counseling to assist with both academic and personal issues.
- Participation in service projects to foster a relationship with the community.
- Increased parental involvement in the education process.

Strategies that are represented by these areas are found throughout the literature as detailed in the following sections. Each strategy can be discussed individually including examples of its implementation in various school improvement programs.

Student Monitoring

Many studies have documented the importance of student monitoring in preventing high school dropouts. Student monitoring can take various forms from simply additional instruction and interaction (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005; Bunting & Mooney, 2001; Caine & Caine, 2006; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; DiPerna, 2006; Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Ke & Carr-Chellman, 2006; Kenny & Faunce, 2004; Stichter et al., 2006) in core academic areas to additional individual student attention via monitoring of performance by the teacher or even by other students (Bahr et al., 1993; Fritz, 1992; Wright, 2006). One means of increasing student-teacher interaction is to provide for more opportunities for students to respond during instructional time versus simply speaking at the students with no opportunity for responses (Caine & Caine, 2006; Stichter et al., 2006; Wright, 2006). This strategy of class discussion versus lecturing is one that some teachers may need additional training to reinforce but the use of this additional interaction has been shown to result in positive student performance (Caine & Caine, 2006; Stichter et al., 2006). Student coaching on specific topics, such as a standardized test, may take the form of not just traditional instruction but student interactions via verbal questions and practice problems (Bunting & Mooney, 2001). Additional means to increase interactions can include reading aloud, asking for student help during instruction or asking the students to relate the lessons to real life experiences (Caine & Caine, 2006; DiPerna, 2006). Whatever the means of increasing interactions between teacher and student, the result of increased interaction is an improvement in student performance (Bunting & Mooney, 2001; Caine & Caine, 2006; DiPerna, 2006; Stichter et al., 2006).

There are other means to facilitate student monitoring other than simply in the traditional classroom. Instruction in core academic areas may also available during after school hours to improve monitoring of student progress (Kenny & Faunce, 2004). The instruction may be associated with the school district or may be provided by private organizations, coaches or tutors. Because the pedigree of the employees in private settings may vary greatly, it is difficult to determine if the private instructional settings provide for student academic improvement (Kenny & Faunce, 2004).

Recent changes in learning opportunities do not always support student monitoring. Online class work can make interaction with the teacher and even other students difficult and thus make it extremely difficult to monitor student progress. Although online classes may be preferred by less socially oriented students, it is still necessary for interactions to occur to increase student performance (Ke & Carr-Chellman, 2006) and supports the importance of student monitoring.

In order to determine the benefits of student improvement efforts, it is necessary to monitor student progress frequently (Fritz, 1992; Wright, 2006). Increased teacher monitoring allows for early identification of the effects of a strategy and adjustments as necessary for a particular student. Self-monitoring by students involves the students following progress within the classroom. Students may also divide into small groups within the classroom with a student leading the lesson (Wright, 2006). Bahr et al. (1993) found that monitoring by either the teacher or students resulted in a positive change in student behavior and that the student monitoring may even be better than teacher monitoring.

Whatever the method of student monitoring employed, the common result is that

student improvement is realized with all of the methods. When student progress is monitored, students are challenged to meet goals and teachers are aware of the obstacles to student progress thereby leading to academic improvement.

Table 1

Studies Related to Student Monitoring

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Bahr et al. (1993)	Compare student versus teacher monitoring in improving student behavior and performance	43 middle school students; 12 in control group, 16 in teacher monitoring group, and 15 in student monitoring group	Quantitative: data analyzed using chi-square, ANOVA, t-test analyses	Both teacher and student monitoring created positive behavior changes. Study indicated student monitoring may be better than teacher monitoring.
Bunting & Mooney (2001)	Compare student performance on standardized test in Ireland using teacher coaching	552 elementary school students; 311 in coaching cohort and 241 in comparison group	Quantitative: data analyzed using chi-square & ANCOVAs analyses	Students demonstrated performance gains using the coaching intervention
Hayward & Tallmadge (1995)	Examine vocational education program effects on student performance	2492 high school students at 12 study sites	Qualitative and Quantitative evaluations	Students demonstrated generally positive outcomes in academic performance. There was only a significant reduction in drop out rate at 4 study sites.
Ke & Carr-Chellman (2006)	Examine attitudes of students in an online class relative to academic interaction	Five students in an online class who either highly extraverted or introverted	Qualitative	Students had positive experiences with interaction in the independent class situation
Kenny & Faunce (2004)	Examine the effect of private academic coaching on student performance in Australia	1724 elementary and secondary school students	Quantitative: data analyzed using chi-square & MANOVA analyses	No significant differences in general student performance with or without coaching
Stichter et al. (2006)	Compare student performance using increased opportunities to respond in instruction and methods of training teachers	16 elementary students and teachers in two schools; each school had two groups of four students and teachers	Quantitative data analysis	Students demonstrated performance gains using the opportunities to respond intervention

Job Skills Training

A second strategy for keeping students in school is to prepare them for life after high school with practical information as a part of their learning. Job skills training, or vocational education, as part of a student's high school education can play an important role in motivating students (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Fritz, 1992; Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Hughes et al., 2001; University of Minnesota, 1997). Real life experiences can direct student learning to areas of specific interest and encourage continued education.

One means to prepare students for life after high school is school-to-work programs. School-to-work programs provide an opportunity for collaboration between community business leaders and students (Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Hughes et al., 2001; University of Minnesota, 1997). General strategies within a vocational education program that encourage success include a smaller and more personal learning environment, vocational education incorporated into the academic program, supportive volunteers and mentors and counseling services for job and personal issues (Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995).

School-to-work programs were aided by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 which provided funding to states to strengthen and expand school-to-work programs (Hughes et al., 2001). By 1997 approximately 25% of all companies with over 20 employees were participating in school partnerships (Hughes et al., 2001). Hughes et al. (2001) compiled information from numerous research studies on school-to-work programs and found positive results. The compiled information indicates that school-to-work improves student attendance, grades, graduation rates and the likelihood of

attending college. The students felt as though the teachers and fellow students were “a supportive second family” that encouraged their learning (Hughes et al., 2001, p. 29). Overall, students, teachers and employers had positive experiences with school-to-work programs (Hughes et al., 2001).

School-to-work programs, such as the Goodwill Industries program in Colorado, can provide benefits to the students while at the same time benefit employers (University of Minnesota, 1997). This program provides activities in the classroom, on the job and with mentors. The classroom activities can include learning about various occupations, writing a resume and even interview role playing. The on the job activities can include shadowing a particular person to experience an occupation. Mentors can provide a personal perspective to students in the form of advice and encouragement. The success of this type of program requires dedicated program staff and community business leaders and focus on individual students (University of Minnesota, 1997).

Job skills training incorporates real world activities into the traditional educational arena, focuses student learning into their areas of personal interest, includes more personal attention and includes supportive personnel. All of these attributes of job skills training contribute to an increased student interest in learning and an overall improvement in student academic performance.

Table 2

Studies Related to Job Skills Training

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Hayward & Tallmadge (1995)	Examine vocational education program effects on student performance	2492 high school students at 12 study sites	Qualitative and Quantitative evaluations	Students demonstrated generally positive outcomes in academic performance. There was only a significant reduction in drop out rate at 4 study sites.
Hughes et al. (2001)	Examine numerous studies on school-to-work programs and their effects on student performance and attitudes	Various	Various	Student attendance, grades and graduation rates improved. Students, teachers and employers had positive comments.

Instruction on Test Taking Skills, Study Skills, and Time Management

Students who are at-risk may have the skills to succeed academically but may lack organizational skills necessary to handle numerous classes and other activities at once. Schools are often focused on instruction in core academics and fail to recognize the importance of test taking and study skills for student achievement (Carter et al., 2005; Cosden et al., 2004; Cukras, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006; Fritz, 1992; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Glenn, 2004). These skills may be considered soft skills that do not deserve the attention of educators who are already pressed for time to teach core academic subjects but they are important skills for at-risk students. Gettinger and Seibert (2002, p. 350) state “capable students at all grade levels may experience difficulty in school, not because they lack ability, but because they lack good study skills.”

There can be serious consequences if students do not learn good organizational skills. Research has indicated that students do not complete homework and other assignments for various reasons (Cosden et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006). The

students may not understand the importance of the work to the learning unit, may think the work is too hard or just not think they have time to complete the work. Schools are attempting to address these issues via a variety of methods (Cosden et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006). Teachers can create assignments that build upon each other as part of a larger project or as a direct extension of the classroom work can add purpose to the work. Time can be provided at the end of a class for students to start homework assignments and ask questions related to the assignment. Some schools have created homework time either at the beginning or end of the school day or at other designated times during a week to have teachers available to assist with homework questions (Cosden et al., 2004). Some schools have implemented lessons in study skills to improve student performance (Cukras, 2006; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). The key to homework is to provide meaning to homework assignments and not to discourage students but make homework meaningful and manageable (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006).

Test taking strategies and skills are an area of increased interest due to the importance of test results in the No Child Left Behind Act (Carter et al., 2005). Understanding the test taking strategies that can affect student performance is necessary in order to develop solutions. Research has shown that “Poor test-preparation and test-taking skills, motivational problems, and test anxiety have negative impacts on students’ test performance and achievement” (Hong et al., 2006, p. 154). In preparing for a test, higher performing students were found to control their studying environment, arrange for adequate study time and seek help from teachers prior to the test (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Glenn, 2004). While taking a test, higher performing students took the time to go

back and review answers and had less anxiety about taking the test than the lower performing students (Carter et al., 2005). Helping students to develop positive test taking strategies can improve their test performance and possibly their attitude towards school (Carter et al., 2005; Hong et al., 2006).

Research has also been conducted on the influence of the test taking environment on student performance (Kiger, 2005). Work on the differences between standardized test results when the test is administered in a small classroom environment versus a large group environment has shown no significant differences in test results (Kiger, 2005). This research indicates that it is the student preparation that is important to test results and not the test taking setting.

In general, there are helpful tips for students to improve their study skills. Skills include planning time specifically to study in a quiet environment, starting assignments early and in manageable blocks rather than cramming, identify problem areas and ask for help and prioritizing work to stay focused (Cukras, 2006; Fritz, 1992; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Glenn, 2004; Lambert & Nowacek, 2006). If a student is instructed in these organization skills, the literature indicates that students will be less stressed over school work, will perform better on tests, will have a better attitude about school and therefore be less likely to drop out of high school.

Table 3

Studies Related to Test Taking and Study Skills

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Carter et al. (2005)	Compare student test results and test anxiety after lessons on test taking strategies	38 high school students with disabilities	Quantitative: chi-square, t-tests	There was a significant improvement in test scores and test anxiety after presentation of the test taking lessons
Cukras (2006)	Evaluate influence of study strategies on test performance	19 community college students	Quantitative: correlation analysis	There was strong evidence of study plans positively influencing test performance
Fritz (1992)	Evaluate influence of Maryland's Tomorrow program (including study skills training and job skill training)	233 high school students – 139 in Maryland's Tomorrow and 94 not	Quantitative data analysis	Maryland's Tomorrow was a positive influence on student performance
Gettinger & Seibert (2002)	Summary of various studies related to study skills instruction	Various	Quantitative data analysis	Various studies concluded that "study skills are fundamental to academic competence"
Hong et al. (2006)	Compare student test taking strategies between high and low performing students on math tests	156 high school math students in 9th to 12th grades	Quantitative data analysis	Study identified differences in test preparation and test taking strategies between the two groups
Kiger (2005)	Compare student test results between tests taken in classroom versus large group environments	308 10th grade students taking standardized test	Quantitative: ANOVA data analysis	Study found no significant difference between the two testing environments

Modified Learning Environment

Students who are at-risk of dropping out of school may simply not thrive in the traditional school environment of sitting and listening to teacher lectures throughout the day. Modifications to the traditional environment can affect student attitudes and their academic success and the modifications can take many forms (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Fritz, 1992;

Hahn, 1995; James, 1997; John Hopkins University, 2005c; Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; Kemple et al., 2005; Kemple & Rock, 1996; LaPoint et al., 1996; McPartland et al., 1996).

One popular modification to the traditional environment is the increased use of computers and technology in the learning environment. The use of computers and technology has been shown to encourage student success in the core academic areas of math, science and English (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995). Some schools have gone to the point of becoming a "technology showplace" by incorporating technology into all aspects of the school (Lindroth et al., 2007, p. 42). Computers, cameras, projectors, Smartboards and wireless technology can engage students in learning and keep school fun and inviting (Lindroth et al., 2007).

Another modification to the traditional environment is the expectation of students to express themselves, ask questions and work in small groups (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995). Core academic area results benefit from assignments requiring more oral presentations and small group work that has students verbalizing to each other a problem and solution (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995). The students in High Schools That Work programs utilize the challenging assignments and peer interaction to motivate themselves and the results have shown improvements in the performance of at-risk and non-college preparatory program students (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995).

Another alternative approach is to create a smaller group of students (e.g., less than 100 students) that take most of their classes as a group in high school (John Hopkins University, 2005c ; Kemple & Rock, 1996). The same group of teachers would stay with the students throughout high school. The familiarity associated with the same group of

students and teachers can create a family-like atmosphere which results in a solid support structure for students (Hahn, 1995; Kemple & Rock, 1996). One example of a way in which students have been placed into smaller groups is at Career Academies. Career Academies have existed since 1969 and create small groups of students who take classes together with a goal of a preparation for a particular career such as health care or business (Kemple & Rock, 1996). Another example of an alternative program is Maryland's Tomorrow. Maryland's Tomorrow includes strategies such as additional student instruction and monitoring, instruction in study skills, time management and test-taking, student counseling, and job skills training (Fritz, 1992). The modification to the learning environment by Maryland's Tomorrow has been shown to improve performance for at-risk students (Fritz, 1992).

Modifications to the learning environment can also involve the reorganization of an entire school as done for Talent Development High Schools. The Talent Development model reorganizes the school into small learning communities and includes Career Academies for upper grade levels, extra instructional time including after hours programs, additional professional development for teachers, counselors that remain with the student throughout high school, increased parental involvement and community service activities (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; Kemple et al., 2005). This an extreme case of complete school reorganization that has been shown to be effective for at-risk students to stay in school (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; Kemple et al., 2005).

The use of new and inventive learning activities can make school exciting and hold the attention of students. Students in today's schools are not frightened by new technology but are excited by it. By modifying the traditional learning environment, a

school can engage students and improve their performance.

Table 4

Studies Related to Modified Learning Environment

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Bottoms & Mikos (1995)	Evaluate characteristics of successful school improvement program	Seven *High Schools That Work* sites	Quantitative data analysis	Modifications to the learning environment shown to be one factor of success
Fritz (1992)	Compare changes in academic performance of students in Maryland's Tomorrow over a three year period	233 high school students; 139 in Maryland's Tomorrow and 94 not participating	Quantitative: data analyzed using ANOVA analysis	Academic performance of students showed statistically significant improvement; Absence rates did not show statistically significant improvement
Hahn, Leavitt & Aaron (1994)	Compare changes in academic performance of students in Quantum Opportunities Program	250 students at five program sites: 50 at each site split equally between experimental and control groups	Quantitative: data and survey chi-squared analysis	Students had higher graduation rates and went on the postsecondary education more often
James (1997)	Compilation of school improvement studies programs comparing changes in academic performance	Various	Various	Various
Kemple & Rock (1996)	Evaluate ten Career Academies and their success	Ten Career Academies located across the United States with enrollments between 100 and 200 students	Quantitative data analysis	Career Academies have a positive influence on student learning, teacher job satisfaction and community involvement
Kemple & Herlihy (2004)	Compare changes in academic performance of students in Talent Development High Schools over a three year period	Students in five large Talent Development High Schools	Quantitative: t-test	9th grade students improved in credits earned, promotion rates and attendance
Kemple, Herlihy & Smith (2005)	Compare changes in academic performance of students in Talent Development High Schools over a four year period as an extension to Kemple & Herlihy (2004)	Students in five large Talent Development High Schools	Quantitative: t-test	9th grade students improved in credits earned, promotion rates and attendance; results continued as students progressed to higher grade levels; graduation rates increased

Student Counseling

Students who are at-risk often struggle with negative feelings about their abilities or are distracted by negative influences outside of school that affect their academic performance. Student counseling has been shown to provide a positive influence on academic performance and attitudes (Auger, 2005; Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Cochran & Cochran, 1999; Colbert et al., 2006; Harrison, 1992; Ray & Altekruse, 2000; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Counseling can take many forms from individual student counseling, to small group counseling and even school-wide counseling and change (Auger, 2005; Cochran & Cochran, 1999; Colbert et al., 2006; Lavoritano & Segal, 1992; Ray & Altekruse, 2000).

The key component to effective student counseling is the comfort level and familiarity of the student with the counselor. This can mean that the counseling may be not only the traditional school counselor but can also be the teacher in a modified learning environment or even an adult tutor (Auger, 2005; Colbert et al., 2006; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Traditional school counselors can take a leadership role by recognizing how to best leverage those who can have the greatest influence on the students (Auger, 2005; Cochran & Cochran, 1999). School counselors can "move from working primarily as individuals to developing professional teams or 'communities'" (Colbert et al., 2006, p. 74). Counselors can also attempt to develop familiarity with students by doing simple things such as being in the halls during class changes, be seen around the school, hanging around after school and volunteering to help with school activities or clubs (Kareck, 1998). These simple things can build comfort levels within the student.

Research has been conducted to evaluate if the best form of counseling is on an individual level, small group or large group (Ray & Altekruse, 2000). The results indicate that all the forms of counseling show benefits and there was not a significant difference in student results based on the format although the students preferred individual counseling (Ray & Altekruse, 2000).

The key to counseling students is that everyone at the school, at home and in the community works as a team to identify issues and develops and implements actions to help the students succeed (Auger, 2005; Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Cochran & Cochran, 1999; Colbert et al., 2006; Harrison, 1992; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). When the student builds a comfortable relationship with the counselor real progress can be made in addressing student problems and improving attendance and learning in the classroom.

Table 5

Studies Related to Student Counseling

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Colbert et al. (2006)	Evaluate school change feedback process (SCFP) for helping student performance	High school with 3500 students	Qualitative analysis	Initial results show the SCFP helps student performance due to feedback from education staff
Lavoritano & Segal (1992)	Study on short-term counseling affects on student self-esteem	42 high school students from three different private schools	Quantitative data analysis – t-tests	Results indicated some areas of self-esteem went down but showed significant increase in valued competencies
Ray & Altekruse (2000)	Evaluate student performance from either individual, small group or large group counseling	64 college students	Quantitative data analysis – ANCOVA	Performance increased for all forms of counseling at a similar level although students preferred individual counseling
Somers & Piliawsky (2004)	Evaluate pilot program for dropout prevention which provides a mentor / counselor for at-risk students	96 9th grade students in a public high school	Quantitative data analysis – ANCOVA	Results indicated that the dropout rate was lower for the program participants than the control group

Community Service and Service Learning

Students can also gain an appreciation for their positive influence on the world outside of the classroom by giving back to the community. Students who participate in community service or service learning projects benefit from the expertise, knowledge, and other resources that school partners can bring to education programs (Bonnette, 2006; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; DiMaria, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Scales et al., 2006; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006). Community service can be defined as service that benefits the community but does not necessarily support school curriculum learning for the students. Service learning tries to make community projects support the school curriculum objectives (DiMaria, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Scales et al., 2006). At-risk students may not be interested in the traditional school setting but may be excited about working in community service or service learning partnerships (Benigni, 2006; Scales et al., 2006; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006).

While schools should work to establish partners in the community, they "should not agree to work with every partner that walks through the door" (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006, p. 467). Community partners must share goals with schools that allow both the partner and the student to benefit from the experience (Benigni, 2006; Bonnette, 2006; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006). "The best service-learning projects use, enrich and enliven the material taught in school" (Richardson, 2006, p. 38). Students can benefit from being able to apply their particular skills to a project and lets them develop positive habits like meeting deadlines and being dependable (Bonnette, 2006). Students can also learn other career skills, communication skills and the variety of careers available in the community

(DiMaria, 2006; Richardson, 2006). The community partners can gain affordable assistance with their issues and nurture future valuable employees for the community. The classroom portion of a service learning curriculum may include lectures, demonstrations or group activities to bridge the community service portion of the program to the classroom (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005; Bonnette, 2006).

Not all programs must be costly to the schools. Programs like Berlin UpBeat in Berlin, Connecticut are funded from grants and donations from the community (Benigni, 2006). The program involves students in service projects with a variety of community organizations which provides an activity for students that is beneficial to both the students and organizations. The commitment of both the school and community is evident in that 87 percent of the high school faculty is involved with at least one UpBeat activity and over 300 students participate in the program (Benigni, 2006). A 2005 survey of college undergraduates indicates that the service trend is not just evident in specific areas (DiMaria, 2006). The survey indicates that approximately 83% of college students volunteered during high school (DiMaria, 2006).

Whatever the form of service, “community service and service-learning may be related to academic success because they provide young people with two key resources: A feeling of usefulness and being valued, and a way of tangibly demonstrating to students the utility in the ‘real world’ of what they learn in school” (Scales et al., 2006, p. 55).

Table 6

Studies Related to Community Service and Service Learning

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Scales et al. (2006)	Compare student attitudes and behaviors related to service learning	217,000 United States 6th to 12th grade students	Quantitative: ANOVA data analysis	Community service and service learning shown to have a positive influence on student success

Increased Parental Involvement

Regardless of the effort taken by teachers and administrators in schools, the support and increased involvement of parents in the education process can be one of the greatest influences on a student's success (Anthony & Kritsonis, 2006; Buck, 2003; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Ridge, 2006; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). The involvement of parents can take many forms from simply encouraging students at home to active involvement in the classroom and school curriculum development (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Buck, 2003; Christie, 2005; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Ridge, 2006; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). Ridge (2006, p. 58) presented a survey of high school principals who identified the most important activity a family can do for the success of a student is to "maintain regular communication with school personnel".

The involvement of parents in education is not only a good idea but is required by the No Child Left Behind Act (Buck, 2003; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). The act requires states that want federal funds investigate ways to involve parents. Many states have developed plans and even laws to encourage parents to be involved in the education process and seventeen states have programs that encourage schools to involve parents (Christie, 2005). Maryland has even called to include at least two parents who have children in the state's public schools as members on the state board of education

(Christie, 2005). The state of Georgia has mandated that parents should be involved in the education of their children (Buck, 2003). Georgia laws have identified the important "areas of effective parental involvement" which include areas such as school-to-home communication and collaboration with community agencies (Buck, 2003, p. 78). While Georgia is making strides to involve parents, it does not have a structured program like those in some other states (Buck, 2003).

Schools must take steps to involve parents because "many parents never enter the school building or know the face of their child's teacher or principal" (Anthony & Kritsonis, 2006, p. 8). Student success can be achieved if "the goal is to hold parents and schools mutually accountable" (Christie, 2005, p. 646). Parents who are involved with their child's education will know when a child is having trouble at school and can help to keep the child from becoming another dropout statistic.

Table 7

Studies Related to Increased Parental Involvement

Study	Purpose	Participants	Design / Analysis	Outcomes
Buck (2003)	Review of parent roles and current Georgia laws mandating parental involvement to determine what they say and how they align with successful areas	Georgia laws as of 2003	Qualitative review of laws	Structured parental involvement programs are beneficial to schools. Parental support has a positive effect on student performance.
Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005)	Review of thirteen studies on parental involvement to determine its influence on student success	The studies reviewed included elementary, middle and high school students	Quantitative data analysis	Studies identified that parental involvement had a positive influence on student success
Seaman & Yoo (2001)	Review affect of Even Start literacy program on parental involvement in student education	313 Even Start participants	Qualitative study	Parental involvement identified as major deterrent to students dropping out of school and increasing student success

How School Improvement Programs Address the Dropout Problem

Each of the school improvement strategies detailed above have been implemented in various school improvement programs in an attempt to keep students in school and increase the high school completion rate (Educational Testing Service, 2005; James, 1997; Lehr et al., 2004). There are in 2007 a large number of special programs that are aimed at increasing high school graduation rates that are using one or more of the strategies for school improvement. The Educational Testing Service estimates that there were approximately 10,900 alternative programs serving approximately 612,000 students in the United States in the 2000-2001 school year (Educational Testing Service, 2005). Table 8 contains a small sampling of the school improvement programs active today and indicates the strategies that they utilize to help at-risk students.

Table 8

Examples of United States School Improvement Programs

	Strategies							
Program	Student monitoring	Job skills training	Test taking and study skills training	Modified learning environment	Student counseling/ support	Community service projects	Increased parental involvement	References
Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success	X		X	X	X	X	X	(Lehr et al., 2004)
America's Choice	X			X	X			(Education Week, 2006)
Career Academies	X	X		X	X	X	X	(Lehr et al., 2004); (James, 1997)
Check & Connect	X			X	X		X	(Education Week, 2006); (Lehr et al., 2004)
Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program			X	X	X	X	X	(Lehr et al., 2004)
Communities in Schools Performance Learning Centers	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	(Educational Testing Service, 2005); (James, 1997)
Interpersonal Relations/Personal Growth Class	X		X	X	X			(Lehr et al., 2004)

	Strategies							
Program	Student monitoring	Job skills training	Test taking and study skills training	Modified learning environment	Student counseling/ support	Community service projects	Increased parental involvement	References
Learning to Work Centers	X	X		X	X			(Education Week, 2006)
Maryland's Tomorrow	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	(Educational Testing Service, 2005); (Fritz, 1992); (James, 1997)
Ninth Grade Dropout Prevention Program	X		X	X	X		X	(Lehr et al., 2004)
Ninth Grade Success Academies	X		X	X	X			(Education Week, 2006); (James, 1997)
Quantum Opportunities Program	X	X	X	X	X	X		(Educational Testing Service, 2005); (James, 1997)
Preventing School Dropout Beginning in Elementary Grades	X		X	X	X		X	(Lehr et al., 2004)
Project COFFEE	X	X		X	X			(Lehr et al., 2004)

	Strategies							
Program	Student monitoring	Job skills training	Test taking and study skills training	Modified learning environment	Student counseling/ support	Community service projects	Increased parental involvement	References
School Transitional Environment Project (STEP)	X		X	X	X		X	(Lehr et al., 2004); (James, 1997)
Support Center for Adolescent Mothers				X	X		X	(Lehr et al., 2004)
Talent Development High Schools	X	X	X	X	X			(Education Week, 2006); (Educational Testing Service, 2005); (James, 1997)
Teen Outreach Program (TOP)	X	X		X	X	X		(Lehr et al., 2004)
Young Adult Borough Centers	X			X	X			(Education Week, 2006)

While there are literally thousands of alternative programs (Educational Testing Service, 2005) and Table 8 has highlighted several of the programs, there are a few larger programs that have been shown to be successful at using the strategies to keep students from dropping out of school (Educational Testing Service, 2005). Three specific examples are Maryland's Tomorrow, The Quantum Opportunities Program, and Talent Development High Schools which, as indicated in Table 8, employ many if not all of the school improvement strategies. Table 8 also presents the major strategies incorporated by school improvement programs that have been presented by numerous researchers and organizations as being those that lead to student success.

Georgia Graduation Requirements and Their Completion Problem

Thus far the high school completion problem and school improvement strategies and programs have been discussed on a national level. In order to understand the situation in Georgia, it is first important to understand the basic requirements for graduation. The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2006b) recently examined statistics on Georgia's high schools through 2002-2003 including their graduation rates and requirements for graduation as compared to the entire United States. In relation to graduation requirements, Georgia requires 22 credits to graduate versus the national average of 20.5 credits (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006b). Similar to 23 other states, Georgia requires students to pass a statewide exam in the areas of English, Math, Science and History in order to graduate (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006b).

The state of Georgia is not immune to the problem of low high school completion. The high school completion rate in Georgia declined from 61.9 percent in 1990 to 58.1

percent in 2000 according to the Educational Testing Service (2005) and thus in 2000 Georgia had a high school completion rate that was 11.5 percent lower than the national average. In 2002-2003, the graduation rate as calculated by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2006b) was 56.3 percent as compared to a national average of 69.6 percent. Another indicator of the problem is that the number of 9th graders in 1999 in Georgia was 125,420 and four years later in 2003 the number of 12th grade students had dropped to 77,780 (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a). The National Center for Education Statistics has reported the four-year completion rate for the entire United States and individual states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Table 9 presents the four-year completion rates for Georgia and the United States for comparison. As indicated in the table, the four-year completion rate for both Georgia and the United States generally declined from 1990-1991 through 1998-1999 and generally increased from 1998-1999 to 2003-2004. Although the Georgia rate increased from 1998-1999 through 2003-2004, the rate was still 12.1 percent lower than the national average in 2003-2004. The performance of Georgia in graduating high school students led to Georgia having "the worst overall graduation rate" in research conducted in 2002 (Greene, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, although graduation rates have been calculated by different organizations, the results are consistent and indicate that Georgia has a problem with high school graduation rates and the state is lower than the national averages.

Table 9

Historical Four-Year Completion Rates

	1990-1991	1991-1992	1992-1993	1993-1994	1994-1995	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
US	73.7	74.2	73.8	73.1	71.8	71.0	71.3	71.3	71.1	71.7	71.7	72.6	73.9	74.3
GA	70.3	69.5	68.2	66.3	63.5	61.9	62.0	58.2	57.5	59.7	58.7	61.1	60.8	61.2

Communities in Schools Efforts in Georgia

Communities in Schools is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to establish public and private partnerships for the improvement of student education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Similar to Maryland's Tomorrow, The Quantum Opportunities Program, and Talent Development High Schools, Communities in Schools was identified as a successful program by the Educational Testing Service (2005). Communities in Schools was named as one of the nation's best charities two years in a row by *Worth* magazine which stated that for every $100 donated to Communities in Schools $90 goes directly to their programs (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005b). Just as other successful programs used research-based strategies, Communities in Schools employs many of the same strategies to keep students in school (Educational Testing Service, 2005). These strategies are:

- Individual student tracking
- Counseling for individual students or groups
- Student assistance by volunteers or mentors
- Life skill and vocational training
- Student tutoring
- Assistance programs for community service, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy avoidance and parenting skills

Communities in Schools of Georgia is an office of the national organization and "partners with over 52 school systems and reaches over 65,000 young people in 47 counties across the state" (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005b). Communities in Schools of Georgia has offices across the state working with local school systems to

create partnerships between public and private groups and "works closely with the Georgia Department of Education" (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005b). During the 2003-2004 school year, Communities in Schools of Georgia programs "also provided services to over 20,000 parents and other adults within the local communities they serve" (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a). One of the ongoing programs of Communities in Schools of Georgia are the Performance Learning Centers.

Georgia Performance Learning Centers

In 2003, Communities in Schools of Georgia received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for $6.3 million to be distributed over five years to establish 25 Performance Learning Centers (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). The purpose of Performance Learning Centers is to provide an alternative to students in Georgia who are at risk of not completing their high school education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Performance Learning Centers provide a resource to encourage 9th through 12th graders to remain in school and ultimately to graduation. Presently, there are 29 Performance Learning Centers spread throughout Georgia as listed in Table 10 and geographically presented in Figure 1 exceeding the expectations of the original grant by establishing more than 25 centers in less than five years (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007a).

In order to be considered for enrollment in a Performance Learning Center, students must be referred to the program by their teachers or school counselors (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Students may be referred based upon their situation in schools which may include being behind in credits, being absent from school a significant number of days, needing a non-traditional setting or schedule to meet individual needs

and/or at a high risk of dropping out of school (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Students are then interviewed prior to acceptance into the center (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Once students enroll in the Performance Learning Center they may stay in the center until graduation with the Performance Learning Center students or they can return to their traditional high school when their academic performance has improved and graduate with their home high school (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c).

Table 10

Existing Performance Learning Centers in Georgia

Athens / Classic City	Glynn County
Barrow County	Harris County
Ben Hill County	Laurens County
Berrien County	Lowndes County (2)
Bibb County	Marietta City (Cobb County)
Bulloch County	Montgomery County
Candler County	Pinevale / Valdosta City
Catoosa County	Savannah – Chatham
Cobb County	Screven County
Coweta County	Sumter County
Decatur County	Thomas County
Dougherty County	Warren County
Douglas County	Walton County
Forsyth County	West End / Atlanta

The Performance Learning Centers typically have an enrollment of between 75 and 150 students (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c). The teacher-to-student ratio is 1 to 15 providing for more individual instruction time than a traditional high school setting (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c). The Performance Learning Center is staffed by five teachers or learning facilitators, a principal or academic coordinator and a Communities in Schools services coordinator for handling non-instructional issues with parents and the community (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c).

Consistent Performance Learning Center Implementation

In order to provide consistency in the implementation of the Performance Learning Center program, Communities in Schools of Georgia provides a structured process for the establishment of a Performance Learning Center through the marketing of the program to the schools and community and into actual operation of the center (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a). The Performance Learning Center information manual (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a) provides a significant amount of information to any community contemplating a Performance Learning Center and those that have already committed themselves to a center. The information contained in the manual not only includes the philosophy behind Communities in Schools objectives but also includes procedures and template forms and letters for all aspects of a Performance Learning Center. In order to understand the level of consistency Communities in Schools of Georgia desires, an overview of the organization of Performance Learning Center's was presented in their information manual.

First of all, the partnerships necessary in the operation of a Performance Learning Center is evident. The Performance Learning Center information manual (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a) is an electronic collection of information packages meant to assist in the development and operation of a Performance Learning Center. One important aspect of deciding to pursue a Performance Learning Center is understanding the roles and responsibilities of the partners in the center which include the local education agency, the local Communities in Schools office and Communities in Schools of Georgia. Each organization has specific assignments which they must be willing and able to carry out such as hiring staff, preparing or even renovating the facilities, procuring supplies and equipment and interviewing students.

Secondly, the marketing of a new Performance Learning Center must be developed. Once the decision is made to pursue a Performance Learning Center, the Performance Learning Center must be marketed to the schools, community and businesses to obtain the support necessary for operations. The Performance Learning Center information manual contains a section on marketing a center which includes information on creating press releases, writing newspaper articles, creating newsletters and brochures and creating a website.

Thirdly, the faculty and staffing are consistent as the manual delineates. A significant portion of the Performance Learning Center information manual is several areas critical to the development of the Performance Learning Center. The areas of information include planning, preparing the facility, hiring staff and selecting students. The planning section provides specific timelines of activities that should be completed during the year prior to opening a Performance Learning Center and the groups responsible for each item. Table

11 presents the implementation timeline to illustrate the level of planning and coordination necessary for development of a new Performance Learning Center. The preparing the facility section includes information on responsibilities for physical preparation of the Performance Learning Center. The hiring staff section includes responsibilities, job descriptions for the various staff positions and sample interview questions. The selecting students section includes templates and letters for the various aspects of selecting students including publicity, student referrals, student applications to the center, student and parent interviews and acceptance letters. One aspect that displays the philosophy of the Performance Learning Centers in regard to commitment by not only the student but also the parents are templates for both a student and parent contract. The contracts hold both students and parents accountable for the student's educational commitment and indicate that if commitments are not met the student will be asked to leave the Performance Learning Center.

Once a Performance Learning Center has been established, the Performance Learning Center information manual includes sections on operations of the center, curriculum and on Performance Learning Center evaluations and record keeping. The Performance Learning Center information manual provides a picture of consistency regarding the formation and implementation of a Performance Learning Center.

Table 11
Performance Learning Center Implementation Timeline (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a)

Specific Actions	Date / Deadline	Responsible Organization
Brief superintendent on Performance Learning Center	Fall	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Follow-up with interested districts to schedule presentation	After briefing	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Visit district and make presentation to local Communities in Schools program and school board	Fall	Communities in Schools of Georgia and local Communities in Schools
Request letter of intent from interested school districts	1 week after presentation	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Deadline for district to submit letter of intent	December	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Commitment to submit seat time waiver to Department of Education by January 10th	December	Local school district
Identify proposed facility	January	Local Communities in Schools & school district
Schedule implementation meeting with district to approve the proposed facility and discuss Planning Checklist	January	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Communities in Schools decision to approve district; submit Letter of Acceptance as Performance Learning Center site and Planning Checklist	January	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Identify contractor for renovations	January	Local Communities in Schools & school district

Table 11
Performance Learning Center Implementation Timeline (continued) (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a)

Specific Actions	Date / Deadline	Responsible Organization
Start construction/renovations/wiring of Performance Learning Center building	As soon as building available	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Memorandum of Agreement submitted to district	February	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Memorandum of Agreement submitted to local Communities in Schools	February	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Identify guidelines for instructional day	February	Local district
Staff selection/hiring - Job descriptions submitted to district	February	Communities in Schools of Georgia
- Advertise academic coordinator and learning facilitator positions	February	Local district
- Interview/hire academic coordinator	March	Communities in Schools of Georgia & local district
- Interview/hire services coordinator, administrative assistant and learning facilitators	May/June	Interview Team
- Service coordinator and administrative assistant begin work	June	Communities in Schools of Georgia & local district
Student selection - Provide brochures and applications to school district and local Communities in Schools program	March	Communities in Schools of Georgia
- Identify pool of potential students	March	Local district

Table 11
Performance Learning Center Implementation Timeline (continued) (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2006a)

Specific Actions	Date / Deadline	Responsible Organization
Student selection - Schedule community orientation	March-April	Local district
- Administer Basic Achievement Skills Inventory (BASI)	April-May	Communities in Schools of Georgia
- Interview and select students	April-May	Student Selection Committee
- Obtain completed copies of incoming students' records	June	Performance Learning Center Staff & district
Order NovaNET	March	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Order student furniture, classroom tables and printer stands	March/April	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Install computers	June	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Performance Learning Center renovations complete	July	Communities in Schools of Georgia
Summer training for all Performance Learning Center staff	Last week in June	Communities in Schools of Georgia
On-site NovaNET training at Performance Learning Center for all learning facilitators	July/August	Performance Learning Center staff
School starts – Performance Learning Center opens	July/August	Performance Learning Center staff

Georgia Performance Learning Center Impacts

By January of 2004 there were seven Performance Learning Centers in operation in Georgia serving 670 students (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005f). The demographics of these 670 students are presented in Table 12 (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005f). Table 12 indicates that the students in the Performance Learning Centers were approximately 64% black and approximately 36% of the students were black females. While the initial status report covered only the first semester of operation of the Performance Learning Centers, the results indicated that the students were showing improvement in areas of school attendance, behavior and academic performance.

Table 12

Demographics of Initial Seven Performance Learning Centers in January 2004 (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005f).

Race	Gender	Percentage of Students
African American	Male	28.0
	Female	36.2
Caucasian	Male	18.4
	Female	14.2
Hispanic	Male	1.2
	Female	0.9
Multi-Racial	Male	0.1
	Female	0.1
Asian	Male	0.3
	Female	0.4
American Indian	Male	0.1

The most recent comprehensive Performance Learning Center data available was for the 20 Performance Learning Centers operating during the 2005-2006 school year (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007b). During 2005-2006, there were almost 2,700 at-risk students served by Performance Learning Centers in Georgia (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007b). The Performance Learning Center progress report indicated that 91% of the students improved their academic averages and approximately 90% of the students improved their behavior as evident by the drop in average suspensions by a factor of five (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007b). During the 2005-2006 school year, 634 students at the Performance Learning Centers graduated high school and 1,141 students had graduated from the Performance Learning Centers in Georgia during their first four years in existence (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007b). The 2006-2007 progress report was not as comprehensive as the 2005-2006 report, however if did contain information that detailed continued Performance Learning Center influences. During 2006-2007, 27 Performance Learning Centers were in operation, 2,800 students were served, and 873 students graduated bringing the total number of graduates since the start of the centers to 2,014. The impact of the Performance Learning Centers in Georgia was impressive considering that the centers had only been in existence for five school years.

Summary of Literature Review

The issue of high school completion is one that is confusing and complicated due to the differences in the reporting of high school statistics. With various organizations reporting differing statistics it is hard to obtain a clear picture of the magnitude of the problem. Varying state requirements for high school graduation also make a direct

comparison of all United States high school statistics difficult. Regardless of the high school completion rate and graduation requirement confusion, all researchers and organizations do agree that there is a true high school completion problem in the United States and the problem has not been improving in recent years.

Many organizations have conducted work to characterize those that leave high school and track geographic and demographic statistics to support the characterization. The work of the various organizations can identify those groups of students who may be at the highest risk of leaving high school. While being a part of the student groups does not mean they will leave high school, it simply means that those students are at a higher risk. Geographically those students who are from the southern part of the United States and from urban areas are more likely to leave high school than those from other areas of the United States and rural areas. Demographically male students, those who are black or Hispanic, are of a lower household income and come from single parent homes are more likely to leave high school. This information can be used by educators to target groups of students at the highest risk to minimize the number of student leaving high school.

Many researchers have also identified reasons why students leave school including poor attendance, bad class grades, disciplinary problems and personal issues with family or substance abuse. These characteristics can also be used by educators to target at-risk groups.

School improvement programs have been and continue to be developed to target the at-risk students and keep them in school. Various general strategies are used including additional instruction and monitoring of student performance in core academic areas, instruction on test taking and study skills, student counseling, participation in community

service projects, increased parental involvement and a modification to the traditional learning environment. These general strategies are used in thousands of school improvement programs across the United States.

Many of the most successful school improvement programs utilized many if not all of the strategies. Some of the more visible and successful programs include Maryland's Tomorrow, the Quantum Opportunities Program and Talent Development High Schools. These programs have seen success in keeping students in school through high school graduation and have spread in implementation since their initial trails.

The high school completion problem is an issue in Georgia similar to the rest of the United States. Statistics have shown that the high school graduation rates are actually lower than the national averages which support the generalization that students in southern states are at a higher risk of leaving school.

Organizations are working in Georgia to address the issue of high school completion. Communities in Schools of Georgia is part of the national Communities in Schools organization which has been successful with various programs in educational improvement. One of their successful and growing programs in Georgia are the Performance Learning Centers. A 2003 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation started Communities in Schools of Georgia's quest to establish 25 Performance Learning Centers in the state in five years. Performance Learning Centers are an alternative program providing individual on-line curriculums for at-risk students. The Performance Learning Centers work with their local community to meet the education needs of the students and market needs of the community. There are presently

29 Performance Learning Centers operating in Georgia which exceeded the original grant's goal both in the number of centers and the time frame for their establishment.

The consistency of implementation and operation of the Georgia Performance Learning Centers is evident when reading the Performance Learning Center's information manual. Communities in Schools of Georgia has put together an information manual that supports consistent implementation of a Performance Learning Center with detailed implementation timelines, sample letters, template forms, marketing materials and staff hiring guidelines to make it easier for new school districts and ensures program consistency. This same level of information is present for the actual operation of a Performance Learning Center and recording and reporting student results.

Twenty nine Performance Learning Centers were operating throughout Georgia in 2007 and initial results indicated improvement in student academic performance. While the performance data is limited to only three years, the program results to date are promising and indicate that this is a program that deserves additional attention and research to ensure lessons learned can be used by educators to improve the current problem of low high school completion rates.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

The researcher's purpose in this study was to examine how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed. Chapter 2 presented an overall picture of the declining high school completion rates in the United States and a general description of high school dropouts. The researcher also elaborated on seven groups of strategies which have been linked to student success and examples of dropout prevention programs that implement these strategies. Georgia is not immune to the problem of at-risk students and a recent program in Georgia, Communities in Schools Performance Learning Centers, has been implemented to help students succeed. In Chapter 3, the researcher described the research procedures and method to address the purpose of the study of how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed.

The research questions, the research design, participants and instrumentation were presented. Data collection and analysis of the data were discussed which lead to how the data was reported to answer the research questions. Finally, a summary of Chapter 3 provided an overview of the research procedures.

Research Questions

The researcher proposed to understand how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed. To understand the factors leading to student success in the Georgia Performance Learning Centers, the following sub-questions were addressed:

1. How does one Georgia Performance Learning Center define student success?

2. How do teachers in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
3. How do administrators in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
4. How does one Performance Learning Center work with community partners to promote student success?
5. What do students in one Georgia Performance Learning Center perceive (identify) as factors that contribute to their success?

Methods

The major purpose of this study was to describe how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helped high school students succeed. The process involved the investigation of strategies used within the learning center to address needs of the at–risk students who attended the school. The strategies used within the Performance Learning Center can be evaluated against those identified in the literature and discussed in detail in Chapter 2: additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas; future job skill training; instruction on test taking skills, study skills and time management; modification of the traditional learning environment; student counseling for both academic and personal issues; participation in community service projects and increased parental involvement in their child's education. The study was designed to provide a greater understanding of how an alternative school setting helped reduce the numbers of students who were not completing high school.

Research Design

The process involved a qualitative research study to answer the research questions. This qualitative research study contained aspects of qualitative research data collection which include document analysis, observation, in-depth interviewing, and literature review (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). One method of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is triangulation. Triangulation is "the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, p. 148). Interviewing the program administrator, teachers and students; observing these program participants at the school; and examining program documents assisted the researcher in answering the specific research questions because triangulation "allows researchers to use different methods in different combinations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b, p. 99). Another method to establish trustworthiness, similar to triangulation, is fairness in qualitative research. Fairness is defined as "a quality of balance; that is, all stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices should be apparent in the text" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003c, p. 278). Denzin and Lincoln (2003c, p. 278) go on to state "omission of stakeholder or participant voices reflects, we believe, a form of bias." By observing and interviewing all participants in the Performance Learning Center and including their viewpoints fairness in the research is achieved. This research study included the aspects of qualitative research data collection, triangulation and fairness.

Although many quantitative studies have been conducted to identify and determine why students are not completing high school, the researcher of this study wanted to understand how one school in an alternative setting was successful in helping students. Performance Learning Centers have only been in existence in Georgia for a few years,

but they have had effectiveness in promoting student success as evidenced by 91% of the students improving their academic averages and approximately 90% of the students improving their behavior during the 2005-2006 school year (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007b). The purpose of the study was to understand how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed by remaining in school and meeting graduation requirements. The answer as to how they help students succeed lies in qualitative information about the center's operation and from participant viewpoints and not on quantitative information, such as test scores and attendance rates. The researcher's purpose of learning how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed therefore lends itself to qualitative analysis.

Participating Performance Learning Center

School Portraiture

The participating Performance Learning Center was located in the county seat for a Georgia county that had a population in July 2005 of just over 85,000. The town is located in north-central Georgia in proximity to the city of Atlanta. The racial demographics for the city indicate that approximately 54% of the population was Caucasian and approximately 42% was black. The county public school system included nine elementary schools, three middle schools, two traditional high schools, an alternative school, a Career Academy and the Performance Learning Center.

The Performance Learning Center operated as an another option versus the traditional high school setting for students who either lack interest, had poor academic performance, had problems with school attendance or were at-risk of not completing high school. The students had various reasons for attending but one commonality was a desire to complete

their high school education. The enrollment at the Performance Learning Center was less than 100 students. The school staff included an Administrator, Vice-Principal, Services Coordinator, Counselor and five teachers. The small enrollment created an atmosphere in which staff and students had the potential to gain familiarity and trust.

The five teachers covered disciplines of science, math, social studies, language arts and technology electives. The students performed lessons on NovaNet (a computer-based lesson program) in addition to classroom and home assignments. The assignments were paced for the individual student and the teachers were available for additional assistance before, during and after school. Each classroom was adequately equipped with computers to support the computer-based curriculum. The students completed individual projects in the different academic areas as well as participating in at least one service learning project per year in the community or at a local elementary school.

Participants

While there were 29 Georgia Performance Learning Centers in operation in 2007-2008, the focus of this study was on one center. In order to gain in-depth information, it was necessary to focus the researcher's time and energy on a single Performance Learning Center. A broader focus on multiple centers restricts the researcher's ability to spend quality time observing center operations and collecting data via face-to-face interviews. The other Performance Learning Centers were located throughout the state as shown in Figure 1 but had similar goals and organization as presented in Chapter 2. The participating Performance Learning Center was chosen as the target site for this research study because it was a center established in the Fall of 2005 which was willing to participate in the study and they have shown significant student improvement based on a

program progress report for the 2006-2007 school year. The students showed an increase in their academic averages with an average increase of approximately 9 points and approximately 64% of the students improved their academic average. During 2006-2007, the target Performance Learning Center had 35 students graduate and had an improvement in behavior as evidenced by a significant reduction in disciplinary problems.

The participants were volunteers from the target Performance Learning Center. During the initial facility visit, the researcher spoke with each class about the purpose of the study and distributed permission forms. Only those that return signed forms were able to participate in the study. The Administrator, Vice-Principal, Services Coordinator, Counselor, all five teachers and 12 students of the Performance Learning Center participated in this study. Participation in the study gave the Performance Learning Center **t**he opportunity to showcase their center and present their strategies for success to other Performance Learning Centers and other school improvement programs. The participants may even learn from each other about what each other think are their successful strategies.

Instrument

To gather data for the study, the researcher developed a set of interview questions, included as Appendix A, tailored to the individuals being interviewed (e.g., administrator, teachers or students). The interview questions were developed by the researcher to collect data that would answer the research questions. There are two sets of interview questions: one for the administrator and teachers and one for the students. The questions focused on establishing a portraiture of the center participants and on the dropout prevention

strategies of:

- Additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas.
- Future job skill training.
- Instruction on test taking skills, study skills and time management.
- Modification of the learning environment.
- Student counseling to assist with both academic and personal issues.
- Participation in service projects to foster a relationship with the community.
- Increased parental involvement in the education process.

In order to determine validity of the research instrument questions, the questions were supplied to the administrator of the Performance Learning Center and the researcher's dissertation committee for review and comments prior to initiation of field work.

During the first visit to the Performance Learning Center, the researcher was introduced to the faculty and students and briefly talked with each class, teacher and the staff member about the purpose of the study and distributed consent forms approved by the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board. After the interviewees had signed a consent form, interviews were conducted by the researcher. The interviews were conducted in a conference room away from the classroom to reduce an anxiety that the participant may have in a larger setting. The participant was also reassured that all interview results would be kept confidential and that their name would not be used in the results. If permission was given, the interview was taped to supplement the researcher's notes.

The qualitative research instrument also included observations of the Performance Learning Center operations, facilities, personnel interactions and reviews of available

documents.

Data Collection Methods

The data for this study was collected at the participating Performance Learning Center by the researcher. The researcher spent several days on-site observing the center in operation and during that time interviewed the administrator, teachers and students. The data collection methods for this study include a school portraiture, participant profiles, document collection, program observations and participant interviews. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that the major aspects necessary for qualitative research include participation, observation, in-depth interviewing, and a literature review. The data collected was used to determine how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed. The observation time in the subject center provided additional insights into the implementation of the dropout prevention strategies that interviews alone may not provide.

Document Collection

During the process of the study and field observations, any type of available document that provided information relative to the Performance Learning Center was collected by the researcher. These documents provided another means to understand the philosophy and organization of the center that "may not be available in spoken form" and "are of importance for qualitative research" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b, p. 156). The type of documents included operations manuals, student assignments, class pacing guides, mentor agreements, service learning agreements, student/parent agreements with the center and school performance statistics. The documents collected were reviewed and their contributions to the overall portraiture of the center were extracted.

Observations

The researcher spent time at the Performance Learning Center observing interactions between the teachers, students and administrative staff. This included observing classes, meetings and any other activities occurring during the visitation days which provided information to the researcher about the center and the relationships between the participants. Observations are important because “social scientists are observers both of human activities and of the physical settings in which such activities take place” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b, p. 107). The observations are important because “even studies based on direct interviews employ observational techniques to note body language and other gestural cues that lend meaning to the words of the person being interviewed” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b, p. 107).

The researcher visited the participating Performance Learning Center on three separate school days. The visits were coordinated with the Administrator to ensure that the visit would not interfere with any school activities and to ensure that normal classes were in session to facilitate the researcher’s study. Each visit by the researcher lasted the normal hours of operation from approximately 8:00 am until approximately 3:00 pm. The first visit involved meeting with the Administrator to learn about the Performance Learning Center, talking with each class to describe the purpose of the study and hand out consent forms and observing the school layout, facilities, staff and activities throughout the day. The second and third visits were primarily taken up by interviews of administrative staff, teachers and students who had returned signed consent forms.

Interviews

On the second and third visits the researcher was provided an area in a conference

room to conduct interviews. The researcher identified the students who had returned consent forms and the students were then randomly called to the interview area. The interview questions in Appendix A were utilized depending on whether a staff member or student was being interviewed. Each student interview lasted between 10 and 20 minutes depending on the student and the depth to which they answered each interview question. The teacher and staff interviews were conducted as their schedules permitted with most being at the end of the day after their classes had ended. The teacher and staff interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 1 hour depending on the depth to which they answered each interview question and if they had additional information they wished to convey to the researcher.

The researcher maintained all notes and observations from the field work and interviews were documented and all information kept confidential. During the interviews, the researcher asked permission to digitally record the conversation to ensure all information was captured. The interviews were recorded as well as the answers. The interview responses were also hand written by the researcher and added to each interviewee's interview sheet. In order to keep track of each interviewee's responses, each interviewee was assigned a letter to represent them. All recordings were downloaded to the researcher's computer hard drive for storage. A study notebook was used as the single source of hard copies for the researcher to ensure all observation data and notes were in one place and properly documented. The researcher's notes were used to support the data analysis, school portraiture, school improvement strategies employed and study conclusions. All information is presented in narrative or tabular format as appropriate.

Data Management

The researcher ensured that all data collected was managed properly and kept confidential. The researcher maintained the results and notes from the field observations and interviews. If permission was given, the researcher digitally recorded the interviews and used the recording to supplement the contents in the interview transcription. The information was organized into subject areas depending on the situation being observed which included the operations of the building, interactions between the teachers and the students or other topics. All documents collected were maintained by the researcher in notebooks for future reference. The study notebook, interview recordings and collected documents were confidentially maintained by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Based on the analysis of the data collected, the researcher was able to identify major themes and key ideas to respond to the research questions. The researcher, first of all, compiled a school portraiture including a narrative description of the school physical location and characteristics, the students, staff, how they interact together and why the Performance Learning Center was established. Next, the participants of the study were described including their gender, race, situations that brought them to the center and any other distinguishing characteristics. Documents collected from the Performance Learning Center during the research field work such as school performance statistics, agreements between participants, lesson plans and operations manuals were reviewed and the information within the documents used in the generation of the school portraiture and participant profile.

This is a qualitative study including an interview instrument. Analysis of qualitative

data included phases of organizing the data, establishing categories, coding the data, evaluating the data and writing the report (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The responses from the interviews were recorded and interview sheets were generated that contained the pertinent answers to the interview questions. The instrument responses were compiled using the school improvement strategies presented in Chapter 2 as categories. For each interview, the successful strategies noted by the interviewee as successful strategies were identified. This is "content analysis, in which the researchers establish a set of categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each category" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b, p. 348). The comparisons between the responses of the administrator, teachers and students were presented and analyzed as appropriate. Table 13 presents the qualitative item analysis that was used to tally the interview results and facilitate the comparison between the responses of the various program participants. The final report also presents a narrative description of the data collected, data analysis and how the data answers the research questions to complement the content analysis.

Summary

In summary, this study was qualitative research into one specific Georgia Performance Learning Center. This study addressed the researcher's purpose of how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helps students succeed. The focus on one center permitted in-depth information to be obtained from the program participants. The process involved three separate visits to the subject Performance Learning Center to conduct observations and interviews. Observations of the subject Performance Learning Center were conducted by the researcher to generate a portraiture of the center including it's location, layout, physical features and operations. Interviews with the administrator, staff,

teachers and students provided insight to their unique perspectives of why this center is successful and if the successful school improvement strategies presented in Chapter 2 are implemented. Interview results were analyzed and presented to answer the research questions.

Table 13

Qualitative Item Analysis

Item	Research	Interview Question*	Research Question
1. Graduation statistics	Lehr et al., 2004; Fritz, 1992	A/T 1 S 2	1
2. Attendance	Seamon & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006	A/T 1 S 2	1
3. Staff motivation	Lehr et al., 2004; James, 1997; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison; 2006	A/T 2, 3	2,3
4. Staff qualifications	Lehr et al., 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison; 2006	A/T 2	2,3
5. Staff education	Lehr et al., 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison; 2006	A/T 2	2,3
6. Staff years of experience	Lehr et al., 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison; 2006	A/T 2	2,3
7. Staff and student relationship	Lehr et al., 2004; James, 1997; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison; 2006	A/T 2, 3 S 2	2,3
8. Modified learning environment	Bottom & Mikos, 1995; Fritz, 1992; Hahn, Leavitt & Aaron, 1994; James, 1997; Kemple & Rock, 1996	A/T 2, 4 S 3	2,3,5
9. Student monitoring	Bahr et al., 1993; Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Bunting & Mooney, 2001	A/T 4 S 3	2,3,5
10. Study skills	Fritz, 1992; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002	A/T 4 S 3	2,3,5
11. Test taking skills	Carter et al., 2005; Hong et al., 2006; Cukras, 2006; Kiger, 2005	A/T 4 S 3	2,3,5
12. Time management	Carter et al., 2005; Hong et al., 2006; Cukras, 2006; Kiger, 2005	A/T 4 S 3	2,3,5
13. Student academic counseling	Colbert et al., 2006; Lavoritano & Segal, 1992	A/T 4 S 3	2,3,5
14. Student personal counseling	Ray & Altekruse, 2000; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004	A/T 5 S 4	2,3,5

15. Parental involvement in school	Buck, 2003; Gozalex DeHass et al., 2005	A/T 6 S 5	2,3,5
16. Parental involvement in academics	Seamon & Yoo, 2001	A/T 6 S 5	2,3,5
17. Community service projects	Scales et al., 2006	A/T 7 S 6	4
18. Stakeholder involvement	Scales et al., 2006	A/T 7 S 6	4
19. Job skills training	Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Hughes et al., 2001	A/T 7 S 6	2,3,5
20. Student motivation	Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c	S 1	5
21. Student years of attendance	Lehr et al., 2004; Fritz, 1992	S 1	5
22. Student mentoring	Lehr et al., 2004; James, 1997; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison; 2006	A/T 7 S 6	2,3,5

* A/T indicates administrator and teacher questions and S indicates student questions.

CHAPTER 4

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helped students succeed. In order to address the purpose of the study and answer the following research questions, the researcher focused on one Performance Learning Center, observed operations at the center, reviewed supplied documents including a center performance evaluation, and interviewed the administrative staff, teachers, and students using the questions in Appendix A. The questions that guided the study were:

1. How does one Georgia Performance Learning Center define student success?
2. How do teachers in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
3. How do administrators in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
4. How does one Performance Learning Center work with community partners to promote student success?
5. What do students in one Georgia Performance Learning Center perceive (identify) as factors that contribute to their success?

The time spent in the Performance Learning Center was valuable to the researcher's understanding of the environment and of the relationship of the students and teachers. During the on-site visits, the researcher was able to interview 12 students, the Administrator, all five teachers, the site Service Coordinator, the Vice-Principal, and the

Counselor as well as gather documents used by the center to accomplish their tasks. The number of interviews provided a firm base of information to answer the research questions.

The interview questions presented in Appendix A were reviewed by the Dissertation Committee and the Administrator of the participating Performance Learning Center for any comments and suggestions prior to the interviews. Suggestions included to make the questions more open ended to elicit detailed responses rather than simply yes or no answers and to arrange the questions into groups of similar topics. All suggestions were incorporated to focus the interview on answering the specific research questions. The questions were also reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Georgia Southern University and the reviewing officials of the participating county Board of Education prior to any interviews.

In Chapter 4, a portraiture of the Performance Learning Center and profiles of the Administrator, teachers, staff, and students was provided. The results of the individual interviews were analyzed to help the researcher understand how successful school improvement strategies were implemented. The portraiture was used in conjunction with the interview results to provide insight into how this one Georgia Performance Learning Center helped students succeed and answer the research questions.

Portraiture of the Performance Learning Center

Overview

The participating Performance Learning Center (PLC) was established in the Fall of 2005 to address the problem of high school dropouts and meet the needs of at-risk students in the county. The Performance Learning Center was located in the county seat

of a small rural Georgia county that had a population in July 2005 of just over 85,000. The town is located in north-central Georgia in proximity to the city of Atlanta. The racial demographics for the city indicate that approximately 54% of the population is Caucasian, and approximately 42% are African-American. The county public school system included nine elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, an alternative school, a Career Academy, and the Performance Learning Center. The alternative school was established for the students from the county with discipline problems that caused issues in the traditional schools. The Career Academy was a charter school, which enabled students at the Performance Learning Center as well as the two county traditional high schools the opportunity to take classes there to help them in the work environment. Students also were allowed to take basic academic courses at a local technical college to help prepare them for college. The PLC was located in a middle-class residential area within the town limits and was next to a huge stadium, which was still used for primary school student's football games and intramural sports.

Facility

Banners on the front of the building announced the academic institutions that were housed within this multi-functional facility. The building housed not only the students enrolled in the Performance Learning Center, but it also housed the county Career Academy. Many students in the PLC took classes on business essentials and study skills at the Career Academy. The building also housed a local technical college, which allowed enrollment by the PLC students. Students at the PLC could take advantage of the classes at the technical college and earn college credits for freshman English and Math classes. The other institutions complemented the curriculum of the Performance Learning

Center in helping at-risk students with study skills and preparation for life after high school.

In addition to the Performance Learning Center, the Career Academy, and the local technical college, the building also housed the county's alternative school. The schools did share a lunchroom and bathrooms but had distinct and separate classroom areas. Students from each school could be seen sharing the hallways as they moved between classes without incident. While the building served many purposes, it did not appear to be a problem and actually assisted the students of the Performance Learning Center due to the availability of a variety of classes and opportunities at the Career Academy and local technical college.

The PLC was housed in a building that was a former traditional high school for the county. When the traditional high school moved to a newer and bigger building in July 2005 to accommodate a larger enrollment, the PLC and alternative school began using the facility for operations in August 2005. The Career Academy began operations in August 2006. The building was a one-story brick structure that was spread out in a "U" shape and was clean and had no structural problems evident. There was a small parking area in the front of the building and a larger parking area in the rear of the building. The main entrance was shared by the Performance Learning Center and the other schools which co-occupy the building although the Performance Learning Center office and facilities were located directly inside the front doors. Figure 4 presents a collage of photographs of the exterior of the building and the environment surrounding the school.

Figure 4. Performance Learning Center Environment.

Layout

When entering the Performance Learning Center, the researcher was greeted by a clean and bright interior with wide hallways. To the left of the front door was the lunchroom with a gourmet-equipped kitchen as it served as a classroom for the culinary arts classes provided by the local technical college in the building. To the right of the front entrance were the offices of the Performance Learning Center. At the front counter of the PLC office sat the office manager with a smiling face to greet everyone and answer any questions.

To the left of the front counter in the Performance Learning Center office was a reward wall displaying actual incentive awards that the students could earn. A benefactor of the school had provided donations for the school as incentives such as store and

restaurant gift certificates for the students, and the wall provided a positive image of the center. The Performance Learning Center Administrator's and Service Coordinator's offices were also accessible at the front of the center. The front office served as the nerve center for the Performance Learning Center because of the constant interaction between students and staff and was therefore a focal point for the management of the center.

Management

The management and operation of the Performance Learning Center was a team effort that included the Administrator, Vice-Principal, office manager, Service Coordinator, counselor, teachers, and parents. The Administrator and Vice-Principal for the Performance Learning Center served dual roles in the county by also serving as the Principal and the Vice-Principal of the alternative school housed in the building. The interviews with both administrators reflected a commonality of responsibilities within the building. The Performance Learning Center Administrator was very visible in both facilities. The Vice-Principal worked at the Performance Learning Center, but his primary focus was on the alternative school.

The office was run by the office manager. The researcher observed that the office manager knew every student enrolled in the PLC, their families, their grades, and where they should be and when. If anyone needed to know anything, the office manager was the one who kept the electronic records for the PLC. There was a parent volunteer who was always present in the office to help with the students' needs. This was one way for the center to keep parents involved in the school and was a reminder that parental involvement was a key to the success of the Performance Learning Center. There was also a security officer present in the building for any issues that might arise with any of

the co-located schools.

The Service Coordinator worked very closely with the office manager and Administrator to meet all of the students' needs. The Service Coordinator focused on interactions with the students as evidenced by her running in and out of classes checking that students were present and on task. When a student was on task, she had a handful of gift certificates ready for them as their reward for their hard work.

The workday of the five teachers present at the school was from 7:15 a.m. in the morning until 5:15 p.m. in the evening Monday through Thursday. The class operating hours were from 8:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday. The teachers were available after classes each day to provide extra instruction, answer student questions, or simply talk with the students. All aspects of the management of the Performance Learning Center were focused on making sure that learning occurred in the classroom.

Classrooms and Curriculum

The classrooms were located down the hall from the main office. There were five separate classrooms, one for each of the five teachers at the center. A notable feature of each classroom was the number of computers. Computers were available for each student as most of the student's work was completed on the computer. The computers appeared to be brand new. The Electives Facilitator was one of the teachers at the PLC, and he had a background in the technology industry in addition to his teaching certificate and thus took care of the PLC computers.

The teachers had at their desks a master computer, which allowed each teacher to bring up on his or her screen any of the student computers in the classroom if a student was in need of help or assistance. However, many teachers stated they did circulate

throughout the classroom and go to the students. Some of the teachers stated that the curriculum program was very sensitive to some of the answers, especially in the science curriculum, so exact wording in certain instances was necessary to register a correct answer and grade.

The curriculum at the Performance Learning Center was delivered via NovaNet. This was a program that provided classes for the high school curriculum that enabled the students to earn Carnegie credits for their classes. Built into the system were pacing guides with deadlines for each online class. The PLC offered courses in English, Math, Science, Social Studies, and electives in technology to meet the curriculum requirements. The teachers also supplemented the curriculum where needed with additional classes and projects. This was observed by the researcher in the science curriculum with the addition of a Botany unit not included in the on-line material, but was a part of the county's curriculum. Each curriculum component included a test which students had to demonstrate proficiency at 80% in order to pass the class. The students had two opportunities to pass the test. If they failed to do so, the teachers provided an alternative test or project for students to complete in order to receive credit for the course. The alternative might include an oral test, a review of the student's notebook and homework for the component, or a separate report on the information. The teachers indicated that it was rare to have to give an alternate test or project because the components were at the student's own pace, and an 80% on the computer-based tests therefore was typically achievable. In the case of classes that the teachers created for the students to complement the on-line curriculum, such as Botany or Psychology, the teachers created their own pacing guides for the students to follow. The management of the Performance Learning

Center and the classrooms was an important part of the center, but the true focus of everyone and everything was the students.

Students

The students at the Performance Learning Center were there by their choice to complete their education: they had taken an entrance test, signed a commitment contract, and completed an interview with the Performance Learning Center staff, and each had a different reason for attending. The flexibility in schedules was a key draw of the Performance Learning Center, and students were seen coming and going throughout the day, taking advantage of the flexibility of the non-traditional school setting provided by the center. Some students had jobs, and some had children or other family members for which they were the primary care providers. Some students had transferred schools many times and had lost valuable credits. Therefore, they needed only a few credits to graduate and that was what led them to the Performance Learning Center. Whatever their circumstances, the students were held accountable for their commitment to the center and would be asked to leave the center if they did not complete their work. There was a sign-out sheet available in the office, which helped the staff to track the students and their attendance. The message was clear that while the Performance Learning Center would do everything they could to help the students, the students also needed to honor their commitment.

Summary of Portraiture

The primary purpose of the Performance Learning Center was to help students succeed in their education, and co-location with other schools assisted the teachers and staff with their purpose by offering study and business skills classes. The atmosphere was

friendly and warm as evidenced by the student and staff interactions and discussions anytime they came in contact with one another. These attributes contrasted with a traditional high school that was physically large and, due to the number of students enrolled, had minimal interactions between the students and staff and therefore lacked the familiarity among everyone at the Performance Learning Center.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The respondents to the study interviews fell into several distinct categories, which included the Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, teachers, and students. During the Fall of 2007, the Performance Learning Center included an Administrator, Vice-Principal, Service Coordinator, Counselor, five teachers, and approximately 100 students. The following profiles were generated partly from information shared during the individual interviews and partly from personal observations during interviews and during the school day. It was important to understand the background and motivations of the individuals at the Performance Learning Center to understand the context of their interview responses.

Administrator

The Performance Learning Center Administrator was an African-American male in his thirties who had worked at the center since its inception in the Fall of 2005. The Administrator had worked for 15 years in the public school system. The first four years he had worked as a classroom teacher, and for the past 11 years he had worked in various aspects of public school administration, including the last two years at the new Performance Learning Center. The Administrator stated that as a student he also had been considered at-risk and in danger of dropping out of high school. Because of his personal

experience, the Administrator had an understanding of what it took to succeed and how to establish goals or even more importantly how to reach those goals. He was led to his current position because of his “desire to be a principal again and also wanting to be part of a cutting edge system in which we are impacting an under represented group of students.” The Administrator had a genuine understanding of where the students at the center were in their lives because he had been there himself.

The Administrator served a dual role as the principal of the Performance Learning Center and also of the county Alternative School housed within the same building. The Administrator was certified in leadership by the state of Georgia. The Administrator was seldom sitting down in his office unless he was in a meeting. The Administrator was in constant communication with his students, faculty, and parents via personal discussions, email, and telephone. The Administrator believed that motivation and caring about where the students were and what they were doing to finish their credits were key factors in giving at-risk students the “push” they needed to succeed. He was always smiling, available to talk, and walking the halls to interact with everyone. As an administrator he believed his greatest contribution to his students was to be “a caring administrator who truly wants his students to graduate.”

Teachers

The five teachers at the participating Performance Learning Center were all state certified teachers. There was a Social Studies Facilitator, a Science Facilitator, a Math Facilitator, an English Facilitator, and an Electives Facilitator. The teachers came from diverse backgrounds but had the common goal of wanting to help the students at the Performance Learning Center succeed.

The Social Studies Facilitator was an African-American male in his thirties. He previously had worked as a long-term substitute in a middle school before getting his Social Studies teaching certification, then two years as a teacher at the alternative school in another Georgia county, and was beginning his second year at the Performance Learning Center. He met the Performance Learning Center Administrator at a job fair, came to the school for a walk through, and then joined the staff as a teacher. He had a background in the food processing industry, had a Bachelors degree in Political Science, and was nearing completion of a Masters degree in teacher education. He gave all of his students an "interest inventory" because he felt the best way to motivate students was to give them lessons that related to their interests and their experiences: "this lets me know what they are interested in and in turn this motivates them to work on gaining knowledge that they deem important."

The Social Studies Facilitator believed his background gave him the knowledge necessary to teach his subject and his passion for teaching helped to motivate the students. He served as a mentor to the students. Some students were assigned directly to him as a mentor, but he counseled and took time for any student who asked. He was available before and after school as well as during lunch for tutoring, mentoring and counseling. He emphasized the art of conversation with his students and encouraged class discussion whenever possible. He also required students to submit notebooks once a week, which gave him the opportunity to see where students were in their work and where they needed help. It was also a crucial teaching opportunity for him because he could use the notebook as an opportunity to teach students about note-taking and organizing their thoughts.

The Science Facilitator was an African-American female in her forties who had been in her position for two years. She had come to the Performance Learning Center from a larger nearby county after seeing the position on a website because the center hours were suitable to her personal needs. She had a Masters degree and was certified in science education and had many years of teaching experience in public education from a neighboring county. She taught six subject areas including Biology, Chemistry, Physical Science, Earth Science, Botany, and Environmental Science. Botany and Environmental Science were new for the 2007-2008 school year. She believed that encouragement and motivation were the key components to her student's success.

The Science Facilitator taught each subject with a pacing guide including deadlines for the students to meet. While student work was primarily done individually, she did include students in group projects to perform hands-on lab assignments. While specific students that were assigned to her as a mentor, she had an open-door policy like the other facilitators in the school. The school had an open lunch policy that allowed students and teachers to go off campus to eat; however, the Science Facilitator's room was normally occupied with students finishing assignments and getting assistance. She was available before and after school and during lunch for mentoring, tutoring, and counseling. She believed that her greatest accomplishment was when her students passed the graduation test. She stated that "one student came back and thanked me after the graduation test. He said if it was not for me and everything I taught him, he would not have passed."

The Math Facilitator was an African-American female in her thirties. She was a certified Math teacher and had taught in a traditional high school for two years and at an alternative school before coming to the Performance Learning Center. She also served as

the senior academic counselor to make sure all seniors had the necessary credits to graduate. She felt as though she was born into education as there were 31 teachers in her family. She told the researcher: “I love new challenges, and this position presented just that. It was a new and very misunderstood program, and I jumped at the opportunity to be a part of something that was going to ultimately decrease the dropout rate.”

The Math Facilitator had as much desire for the students to graduate as did the students themselves and also a desire to see them continue in post secondary education. She did what was necessary to provide them with resources and give them all the tools that they need to become successful. She believed that one-on-one instruction was vital to success as were good relationships among the faculty, staff, and students. She believed the teachers were educators in a non-traditional environment and a family in a non-traditional environment. The Performance Learning Center was the support system many students were lacking in their homes or at their traditional high school. The Performance Learning Center existed to make sure these students did not fall through the cracks.

The English Facilitator was a Caucasian female in her thirties. She had formerly been a teacher in another state and then a stay-at-home mother who had taken this job after a divorce. She had been called and offered the job a day before she had started. She had a Bachelors degree in English Education and was working on her Masters degree. She preferred to assess students against their own past performance and measure their personal growth rather than looking only at standardized test results.

The English Facilitator required the students to work hard and was well-respected for the fact that she gave students choices on how to best accomplish their tasks. She provided individual instruction for each student and also offered test preparation sessions.

Like the other facilitators, she was a counselor and mentor as well as a tutor. She made a point that for every learning style there was a different teaching style, and she tried to match each student's needs.

The Electives Facilitator was a Caucasian male in his fifties who had been the county Teacher of the Year in 2006-2007. He had formerly taught for the company Sysco and had taught computer networking for a local technical college. He had been invited to help start the Performance Learning Center by the local Board of Education in 2005 because of his computer expertise. He had Bachelors, Masters, and Specialist degrees in education and was a Sysco certified academy instructor. He stated that he was the first in his family to have a Bachelors degree and that a qualification to teach at the Performance Learning Center was to "have a non-traditional background and be able to adapt to a non-traditional environment and changing circumstances."

The Electives Facilitator believed the one-on-one interaction with the students and being able to "shift gears with the students frequently as needed" was a great asset to have when working at the Performance Learning Center. He was a counselor and a mentor. He stated that he had been formally assigned to be a mentor to four students but like all of the facilitators his door was open to all who wished to enter. He taught students to use Microsoft Office products and other computer related technology that they would need in the work world. He monitored the students daily, and all students had a pacing guide and deadlines to adhere to for all course work.

Staff

The Vice-Principal was a Caucasian male in his forties. Similar to the Performance Learning Center Administrator, the Vice-Principal also served the same role at the county

Alternative School which was located on the same campus. The Vice-Principal had a Bachelors degree in Science and a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. He had formerly worked in the Atlanta Public School System and had 17 years experience working with students at different age levels. He had come to the Performance Learning Center because of his desire to work with a diverse group of students, and it was his first year at the center. While he did split his time between the Performance Learning Center and the Alternative school, he was seen hustling back and forth between the facilities assisting the Administrator. He felt that his greatest contribution to the students at the Performance Learning Center was time, especially for one-on-one interactions.

The Performance Learning Center Service Coordinator was a Caucasian female in her twenties. She had both Bachelors and Masters Degrees in social work. The Service Coordinator role focused on student attendance and community involvement. During her undergraduate work, she had done an internship with the participating county Department of Family and Child Services (DFACS), and for her master's degree she also had done an internship with the county, so she was very familiar with the county and the system. She was interested in the students and helping them to succeed. She stated: "That was my focus when I started. I wanted to be the person that these students looked to for motivation. I tell them they are going to graduate, they will graduate." She closely monitored all of the students at the school and assisted them in setting up individual schedules. If a student was not at school, she was on the phone to find out why. She stated that because of the closer relationships at the Performance Learning Center "it is easier here to keep tabs on the students".

The Service Coordinator was actively out in the community looking for mentors for

the students and prospects for the students to do job shadowing projects. She wanted the community to understand that students at the Performance Learning Center were not bad students. They were good students who had just fallen through the cracks and needed motivation and support to succeed. She stated that the relationships with the students and the faculty and staff were much closer that at the traditional high school. The Performance Learning Center received students from the two local traditional high schools, and students had stated that no one cared about them at their former high schools. The Service Coordinator paired up each student with a community mentor by the end of the first semester that the student was enrolled in the center. The faculty and staff all had open-door policies with the students for counseling, mentoring and tutoring before and after school and during lunch. It was understood at the Performance Learning Center that part of your job was to establish a relationship with the students. “Time and being there to help them graduate” was the Service Coordinator’s greatest contribution to the Performance Learning Center: “They do not want anything else from you other than to know that you are there for them.”

The Performance Learning Center Counselor was a Caucasian female in her fifties. She split her time between the students at the Performance Learning Center, the county Career Academy, and the county Alternative School. She had a Masters degree in Vocational Career Rehabilitation and had been a counselor at one of the high schools within the county. Having worked at one of the local high schools, she was very familiar with the situations that had led the students to the Performance Learning Center. Because her time was split between three schools, the Counselor focused her time at the Performance Learning Center on academic counseling. While she would address a

personal issue if necessary, most personal issues were addressed by the Service Coordinator who strictly dealt with only the students of the Performance Learning Center.

The Counselor had also been employed at a local two-year junior college and therefore had knowledge of higher education requirements. While at Performance Learning Center, the students could take college freshman English and college freshman Math at the local technical college housed in the same building as the Performance Learning Center. The Counselor had knowledge of the exact needs of the students and helped guide them through the system to achieve their goals and go to college.

Summary of Faculty and Staff

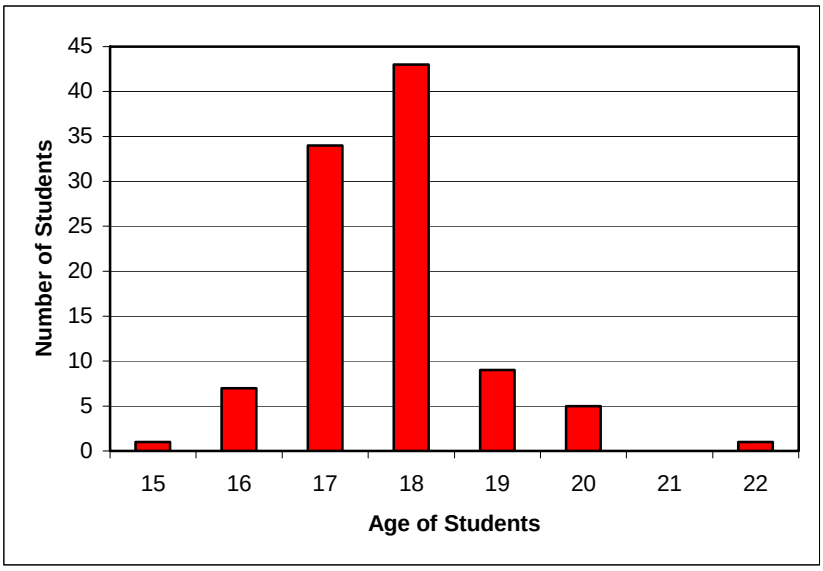
The profiles of the staff and teaching faculty can be summarized briefly. Of the nine staff and faculty, there were four males and five females with four African-Americans and five Caucasians. The ages of the personnel varied with one in her 20's, four in their 30's, two in their 40's and two in their 50's. The years of teaching experience varied, with one having started at the Performance Learning Center directly out of graduate school and the others having come to the center from other teaching jobs. Several had worked outside the public school system during their careers, one at a technical college, one as a Sysco computer networking specialist, and one as a stay-at-home mother. Their reasons for being at the Performance Learning Center varied as well. Several came to the center for the opportunity to work in an innovative program, while others came because they needed a job or were attracted by the work hours. While each of the teachers and staff had diverse backgrounds and roads that led them to the center, they all were willing to work hard to help the students graduate.

Students

The student enrollment at the Performance Learning Center continually changed as some students met their goals and left and other students started the program. At the time of the on-site visits in the Fall of 2007, there were 100 students in the computer records at the center, and their ages ranged from 15-22. Figure 5 presents the age distribution of the Performance Learning Center students at the time of this research. Of the 100 students in the records, 77 percent of the students were either 17 or 18 years old. Of the 12 students interviewed, one was 17 years old; seven were 18 years old; and four were 19 years old. Of the 100 students in the records, there were 47 males and 53 females. Of the 12 students interviewed, there were 10 males and 2 females. Of the 100 students in the records, the Performance Learning Center only had racial information for 53. Of the 53 students with race information on record, there were 27 Caucasians, 24 African-Americans, one Hispanic, and one American Indian. Of the 12 students interviewed, there were 6 Caucasians and 6 African-Americans. The student respondents generally reflected the demographic makeup of the Performance Learning Center except in the area of gender. While the center attendance is approximately 50 percent male and 50 percent female, the respondent volunteers were primarily male. In order to provide perspective on the student respondents, it is necessary to describe each one.

Student A, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Al, was a 19-year-old Caucasian male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since February of 2006 and had known about the center because his sister attended as well. He had previously attended one of the local high schools but “I got a little behind in my credits” due to failing classes and “heard that they [the PLC] could help me get credits faster.”

Figure 5. Student Age Distribution - Fall of 2007.



Student B, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Bob, was a 17-year-old African-American male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. He had attended one of the local high schools in 10th grade but had moved out of state for 11th grade and then moved back for 12th grade. Bob stated that each time he moved, the districts would not accept classes from each other and he lost credits and was on the verge of dropping out. He viewed the Performance Learning Center as "my last option."

Student C, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Carl, was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since December of 2006. He had previously attended one of the local high schools but "my freshman and sophomore year I slacked off" and failed several classes. He came to the Performance Learning Center to make up classes because he "wanted to graduate with his class."

Student D, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Doug, was an 18-year-old African-American male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. He had previously attended one of the local high schools but due to class failures was “lacking credits from my base high school” and had heard the “PLC could help me with credits.”

Student E, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Earl, was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. He had previously attended one of the local high schools, but there were “too many social cliques at the old school.” He had been “sent to the county’s alternative school for firecrackers,” where he said, “I heard about the PLC.” Earl said he “thought that it [the PLC] sounded cool and it was for me.”

Student F, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Fred, was a 19-year-old African-American male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since Spring of 2007. He had previously attended high school in another state and initially had gone to one of the local high schools and “they sent me here.” Fred said: “I just started over here so I could meet the Georgia requirements.”

Student G, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Gayle, was a 19-year-old Caucasian female. She had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since it had opened in August of 2005. She had previously attended one of the local high schools but had dropped out after earning only six credits at age 16. Gayle said the local high school “told me that they did not want me back unless I was going to graduate,” so she had come to the Performance Learning Center to get back into school.

Student H, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Hank, was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. He had previously attended one of the local high schools but due to class failures “really needed to get caught up on my credits.”

Student I, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Ian, was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. He had previously attended one of the local high schools but he “wanted to get away” and “my friends went here and liked it.” Ian was at the Performance Learning Center “to finish my credits” and was planning to finish by December 2007. His mentor was a local police officer, and he was anxious to graduate because “the police department will pay for me to go to the police academy.”

Student J, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Jim, was an 18-year-old African-American male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. He had previously attended one of the local high schools but had been having trouble keeping up with the other students in class and had heard about the center from a teacher.

Student K, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Kim, was an 18-year-old African-American female. She had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since August of 2007. She had previously attended a high school in Atlanta and had moved to the local area in May of 2007. She needed only a few credits to graduate, and the center was the best fit for her.

Student L, hereby referred to by the pseudonym Larry, was a 19-year-old African-American male. He had been enrolled at the Performance Learning Center since it had

opened in August of 2005. He had previously attended one of the local high schools. He had heard about the center from a friend, and his mother had researched the center. Larry wanted a school that "treated you like an adult" and had a flexible schedule to accommodate his going to work.

Table 14 summarizes characteristics of the 12 students interviewed for this study. In summary, of the 12 students interviewed, nine had come from one of the two high schools in the county, and two had moved to the area and gone directly to the Performance Learning Center. One student had gone to school in the county in 10th grade, moved to another state for 11th grade, and when he had moved back to the county for 12th grade, could not transfer all of his credits so went to the Performance Learning Center. Of the 12 students interviewed, ten had been attending the Performance Learning Center for less than one year, while two had been at the center since it had first opened in 2005 (i.e., greater than two years).

The students each had different reasons for attending the Performance Learning Center, but six of the 12 indicated they were behind on credits and needed to catch up. Other reasons that were mentioned in the interviews included to get away from the normal high school, to avoid high school cliques, to be able to leave when needed to go to work, and because the Performance Learning Center was their "last option". Four of the students responded that they were told of the Performance Learning Center by others including friends (two), a teacher (one), and their sister (one).

Nine of the 12 students stated that one requirement for attendance was an entrance test, five stated an interview, three stated a minimum number of credits, and one stated that a requirement for attendance was "no playing around."

Table 14

Student Respondent Demographics

Respondent	Age	Gender	Race	Time at Center
Student A	19	Male	Caucasian	< 1 year
Student B	17	Male	African-American	< 1 year
Student C	18	Male	Caucasian	< 1 year
Student D	18	Male	African-American	< 1 year
Student E	18	Male	Caucasian	< 1 year
Student F	19	Male	African-American	< 1 year
Student G	19	Female	Caucasian	> 2 years
Student H	18	Male	Caucasian	< 1 year
Student I	18	Male	Caucasian	< 1 year
Student J	18	Male	African-American	< 1 year
Student K	18	Female	African-American	< 1 year
Student L	19	Male	African-American	> 2 years

While each student had a slightly different background and reason for attending the Performance Learning Center, one thing they all had in common was a desire to complete their high school education and a belief that the Performance Learning Center would help make their graduation a reality.

How Does One Georgia Performance Learning Center Define Student Success?

To respond to each research question, the researcher reviewed the results of the individual interviews for each of the categories of respondents. The four categories included the Administrator, staff, teachers, and students at the Performance Learning

Center. The process identified common themes from the responses to the interview questions within the respondent category and commonalities and differences between the respondent categories. The results of the interviews were then used to answer each research question.

Administrator View of Success

The Performance Learning Center Administrator's view of success was whether students were completing credits and whether the social attitude of the students was improving since enrollment at the center. The Performance Learning Center evaluated student progress every four weeks by examining various indicators such as work progress, test results, and attendance. The Administrator indicated that the students were averaging a 15 to 20 point increase in academic areas as well as improvement in behavior as indicated by a reduction in the number of suspensions. When asked what he believed was the best accomplishment of their Performance Learning Center, the Administrator responded "helping 60 students graduate," 25 during the first year of operation (i.e., the 2005-2006 school year) and 35 during the 2006-2007 school year. While the center did not calculate a specific graduation rate, students were not dropping out of the program either prior to graduation or prior to catching up with their credits and returning to their home high school. Graduation rates at the two traditional high schools in the county were 65.7% and 81.2% in 2007. The majority of the Performance Learning Center students had previously attended the high school with the lower graduation rate. The center was helping students graduate, and the Administrator stated that the "PLC gave them an opportunity to succeed."

Staff View of Success

The Vice-Principal's view of success was based on graduation rates, a technology-based test (i.e., the Georgia High School Graduation Test), and teacher feedback. The Vice-Principal judged the graduation rates and test results against the county results and the two traditional high schools individually. The Performance Learning Center showed an overall improvement of 8.6 percentage points in student test results compared to their scores before attending the center. Teacher feedback on student test results and attitudes gave him information on student behavior and performance in the classroom versus relying solely on an end of the year test. He viewed student monitoring as an ongoing process with the "teachers monitoring the students and making observations." The results of the student monitoring informed the staff as to what items or subject areas they needed to improve upon.

The Service Coordinator's view of success was focused on student attendance and communications. She spent a lot of effort tracking student attendance, including calling home to find out why a student was not in school. All students at the Performance Learning Center had to sign in and out to track their attendance. In 2006-2007, the center showed an improvement in average student attendance that equated to attending school approximately one extra day per year. The Service Coordinator conducted parent conferences that focused on both attendance and student work. She stated that "the students that I talked to today I will look at their attendance after today" and see "if there is any improvement" after the conference. Communications between the teachers, students and staff was vital to the Service Coordinator because she wanted to know that "they are seeking the help that they need." She strove to talk with everyone she could as

often as she could so that any issues were addressed promptly. While keeping up with all the students was important, she did not compare the students but evaluated each individual student's progress to indicate individual success.

The Counselor's view of success was the withdrawal rate of students and whether students went on to additional education at the local technical college or other educational institution. The Counselor provided individual advisement on a routine basis to discuss student progress and academic plans. While she did not track specific statistics on the student withdrawal rate or actions after graduation, she had not seen students dropping out of the program prior to meeting their academic goals. Her focus was "to have students graduate and continue their education." The accomplishments at the Performance Learning Center have resulted in "any student of the center graduating with at least a 2.0 grade point average being offered admission to a local 2-year college without having to take an SAT or ACT test." The Counselor believed the program was accomplishing its goal of helping students succeed.

Teacher View of Success

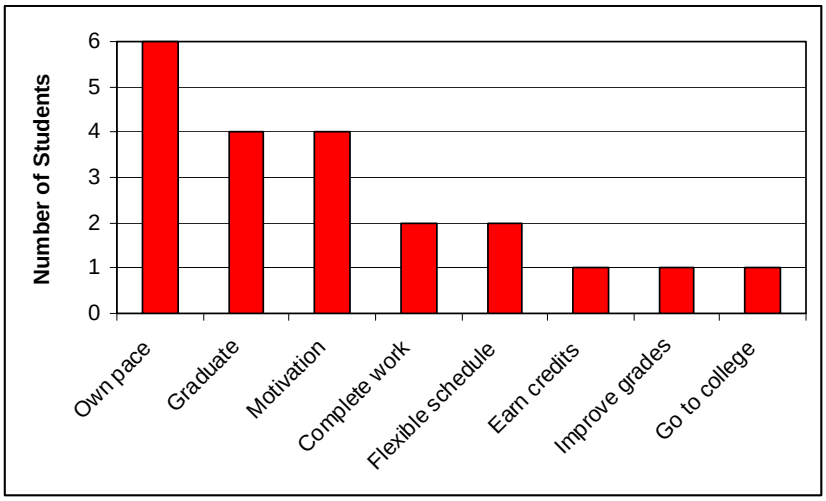
The teachers had a slightly different view than the Administrator and staff of what defined student success. While two of the five teachers indicated graduation rates and one indicated attendance, four of the five indicated that individual student progress was an indicator of success. Other items mentioned by the teachers included learning new things for students to be successful, participating in classroom discussions and conversations, computer-based test results, and having skills that could be translated to the work environment. The teachers stressed the importance of constantly monitoring student progress to ensure students moved forward in their education. The teacher views were

best stated in one of the teacher interview responses: “Many students are three years or more behind in academic matters, so if I can get them to the level they should be I feel they and I have succeeded.” Another teacher spoke for the others by stating: “We are successful if we graduate students.”

Student View of Success

The students had a variety of views about what defined the success of the Performance Learning Center. Of the 12 students interviewed, Figure 6 presents the responses of the students. Some students indicated more than one indicator of success. As seen in the figure, the three indicators mentioned most often were being able to work at their own pace (six), graduating high school (four), and being motivated to work and succeed (four). The words of the students reflect their views of success: “I have finished a lot of work that would not have been finished otherwise”; “It is easier for the students and the teachers are more helpful here”; “I am really motivated to get my schooling done.” “I am actually doing my work and not falling asleep in class.” A final compliment to the Performance Learning Center was “they persuade you to want to do it.”

Figure 6. Student Indicators of Success.



Documents Indicating Success

Two documents obtained during the visits to the Performance Learning Center were the progress reports for 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. The documents provided insight into what the participating center wanted to show the public about how they defined student success. The progress reports indicated four areas specific to student success, which included producing high school graduates, increasing student attendance rates, improving student behavior as indicated by the suspension rates, and increasing test scores. The reports were a sign of what the school district believed were indicators of student success that they wanted people to know outside of the Performance Learning Center. Two documents obtained from Communities in Schools of Georgia were the overall Georgia Performance Learning Center progress reports for 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, which were compared to the participating center's information for the two years.

The indicators were presented as center averages for attendance and suspensions. In 2005-2006, the participating center showed an improvement in average student attendance that equated to attending school approximately six extra days per year. In 2006-2007, the participating center showed an improvement in average student attendance that equated to attending school approximately one extra day per year for an average of seven days missed during the year. The two traditional high schools that supplied students to the participating center had problems with student attendance. The Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement report card for 2006-2007 indicated that the percentage of students missing more than 15 days of school was 13 percent at one of the two traditional high schools and 26 percent at the other compared to a state average of ten percent. The 2005-2006 report indicated that 22 students at the participating

Performance Learning Center had previous discipline problems. The 2005-2006 suspension rate for these students dropped from an average of 7.5 suspensions per year before attending the center to 1.3 suspensions per year while at the Performance Learning Center. The 2005-2006 progress report for all Georgia Performance Learning Centers indicated that 489 students had previous discipline problems. The 2005-2006 suspension rate for these students dropped from an average of 8.7 suspensions per year before attending a center to 1.9 suspensions per year while at a Performance Learning Center. The 2006-2007 report indicated that 12 students at the participating Performance Learning Center had previous discipline problems. The 2006-2007 suspension rate for these students dropped from an average of 4.3 suspensions per year before attending the center to 0.3 suspensions per year while at the Performance Learning Center. There was no data for 2006-2007 for all Georgia Performance Learning Centers. The progress report information indicated that the participating Performance Learning Center had shown improvement in student attendance and the traditional high schools in the area had students missing school at a higher percentage than the state average. The progress report information also indicated that the participating Performance Learning Center had shown improvement in discipline as reflected in the suspension rates and the improvement was similar to the overall Georgia Performance Learning Center results.

The academic improvement areas presented the overall increases in subject area results as well as the percentage of students who improved. For example, the 2006-2007 progress report indicated that in Language Arts the academic average increased from 73.5 to 82.9 with 65.9% of the students improving at the participating Performance Learning Center. Table 15 presents the results for the participating Performance Learning Center

and all Georgia Performance Learning Centers in 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 for the four major subject areas.

The participating Performance Learning Center used the progress reports as an indicator of their impact and success in student education and to tout this success to Communities in Schools, the county Board of Education, parents, students, and other interested stakeholders.

Table 15

Student Academic Averages and Improvement

	Participating PLC				All Georgia PLCs			
Subject	Prior to PLC	During PLC	Increase	Percentage of Students Improved	Prior to PLC	During PLC	Increase	Percentage of Students Improved
2005-2006								
Social Studies	67.5	85.0	17.5	80.0	66.0	78.9	12.9	75.4
Science	68.0	81.5	13.5	86.2	65.0	76.1	11.1	72.4
Language Arts	62.5	85.4	22.9	86.5	66.5	80.8	14.3	81.5
Math	62.0	77.4	15.4	76.5	62.6	79.7	17.1	78.8
2006-2007								
Social Studies	74.8	82	7.2	63.4	67.7	80.8	13.1	NA
Science	72.5	79.1	6.6	60.7	64.9	80.4	15.5	NA
Language Arts	73.5	82.9	9.4	65.9	67.2	80.1	12.9	NA
Math	70.4	72.8	2.4	37.5	64.2	78.6	14.4	NA

NA – Data not available

Summary of Student Success

Based on the analysis of the observations, document reviews, and interview responses with all Performance Learning Center participant groups, the researcher found that the various respondents had slightly different views of what indicated success at their Performance Learning Center. High school graduation and individual student progress were noted in the center's program progress reports and mentioned in the interviews with all respondent groups. Attendance as an indicator of success was important to the Administrator and staff but was mentioned by only one teacher and no students. Attendance was also observed as an important contributor to Performance Learning Center success. Each student was required to sign in and out at the office, and the Service Coordinator constantly monitored the sheet and called students and parents with any issues. Individual student progress and self-motivation were the most important indicators to the teachers and students. Students were observed in the classroom working on the computer to complete assignments and the teachers monitoring work on their master workstation and "floating" around the room.

To summarize, the findings were that one Georgia Performance Learning Center identified high school graduation, individual student progress, attendance, and students working at their own pace as the definitions of student success. All of these findings support a common theme of student progress. That the Performance Learning Center encouraged student attendance and the curriculum was pursued at the individual student's pace supported student progress towards eventual graduation. The students also responded positively to flexible class scheduling and being treated as adults. In contrast to the traditional high school, Performance Learning Center students attended classes and

working at their own pace encouraged the students to continue their academic progress. What was evident from the interview responses was that although the indicators of success were verbalized differently by the respondents, they all agreed that the Performance Learning Center helped students succeed.

How Do Teachers in One Georgia Performance Learning Center Help Students Succeed?

The second research question pertained to the individuals who have the most contact with the students and can best influence their education – the teachers. The researcher's observations of the Performance Learning Center and the interview results were used to answer this research question.

Administrator View of Teachers

The Administrator stated that the relationship between the students and staff was one of "trusting and caring" as evidenced by students coming to the teachers with problems, both academic and personal. He stated that there were "advisory groups broken down by grade level and each teacher is responsible for their advisory" as organized by the Service Coordinator. The Administrator indicated that study skills, test taking skills, time management, and other academic skills were reviewed by teachers during advisory sessions and test preparation sessions. The advisory sessions were part of the routine curriculum and occurred every Thursday between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. By having a scheduled time, the students knew the teachers would be available and not be too preoccupied with other activities to help them. The small student enrollment and consistent staff members allowed the students and teachers to form stronger relationships than in a traditional high school with many teachers and a large student body.

Staff View of Teachers

The staff of the Performance Learning Center worked closely with the teachers to help them with student needs. All three of the staff members interviewed talked about the teachers providing counseling and test taking skills and preparation as part of the routine curriculum and during weekly advisement sessions. The staff also mentioned mentoring, job skills preparation, tutoring and individual student attention as ways in which teachers helped students succeed. One staff member stated the teachers helped students succeed by "knowing them and what they have and do not have and addressing student needs on a one-on-one basis."

Teacher View of Themselves

Many of the strategies that the teachers used to help students succeed were repeated by all of the teachers at the Performance Learning Center. Four of the five teachers indicated that motivation was their most important contribution to the students. Motivation took the form of simple words of encouragement, providing the necessary resources for learning, getting students to think about their future and providing flexibility in instructional format for individual needs. One teacher stated he would "motivate them to learn more and make things very relevant to them and their lives." Another teacher stated that they required students "to think about the future rather than dwell on their current life" situation. One-on-one time with the students was discussed as an important aspect of being a teacher at the center. Most students had very little individual attention in the traditional high school, and therefore attention on the students was a focus for most teachers. Teachers stated that students have told them that in the traditional high school they "need a smaller class and more one-on-one attention";

teachers did “not have enough time for them”; they were “lost in a big class”; and there were “uncaring adults to teach them”. Teachers accomplished one-on-one time for the students by being available during lunch and after school to help students with problems. All teachers also indicated that they provided instruction in study skills, test taking skills and time management. The teachers did this through a variety of methods including covering the information in their weekly advisory session, providing practice tests with feedback and conducting special sessions. Teachers stated that they “create labs for the students”; “students take a sample test before they take the real test”; “show them test-taking strategies”; and “plot their schedules and pacing guides”.

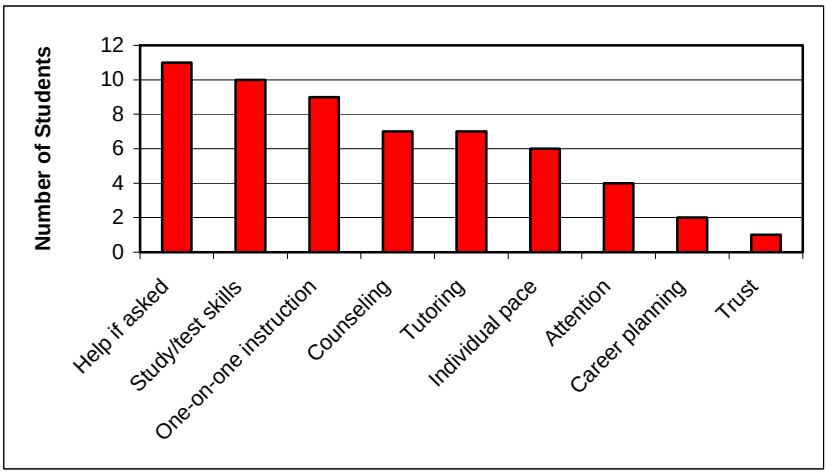
Another area mentioned by most teachers was their role as a counselor and mentor to the students. This occurred not only during the weekly scheduled advisement time but during lunches, after school, and at special sessions if necessary. The teacher contributions were best summarized by one teacher’s response to the question: “The relationships we have with the students. I know some of them would not have graduated otherwise. I think every teacher here can say that about some students.” While all of the teachers came from different backgrounds, their views of how they helped students succeed were remarkably similar, and their enthusiasm for their jobs was evident during the interviews.

Student View of Teachers

The student respondents discussed a variety of means in which the teachers of the Performance Learning Center helped them succeed. All but one student indicated that the teachers were available to help if they needed help. One student commented that at the traditional high school the teachers said they would help if asked but just never had the

time. All but two of the students indicated that study skills, test taking skills, and time management were covered by the teachers. In some cases that was done during the regularly scheduled Thursday advisory time, and in other cases it was part of classroom instruction. Regardless of when and how the topics were covered, students indicated that assistance with these skills was very helpful to them. All but three of the students indicated that one-on-one instruction was available and that this was something that was not available at the traditional high school. Other predominant contributions noted by the students included counseling (seven students), tutoring sessions at various times throughout the day (seven students), and students being allowed to work at their own pace (six students). Of the 12 students interviewed, Figure 7 presents the responses of the students with some students indicating more than one teacher contribution to their success. Similar to the consistency in the teacher responses, the student responses were also very similar with certain contributions noted by almost all of the students. It should also be noted that there were no negative comments of any sort by the students when discussing the contributions of the teachers. The actual responses of the students express their views of the Performance Learning Center teachers: "Anytime you have a question you can ask the teacher"; "they are always there to help you"; "they have time to go over more information with you"; "they provide extra effort to help students"; they "give students confidence to work independently"; they "help you set goals and accomplish those goals"; "the PLC is more focused on the student"; and they established a "relationship of trust".

Figure 7. Student View of Teacher Contributions.



Documents Indicating Teacher Contributions

In the Performance Learning Center progress reports for 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, the contributions of the teachers were recognized. The reports highlighted that teachers provide counseling through one-on-one assistance and are called facilitators instead of teachers because they assist in the learning process. The reports also point out the extra help and resources provided by the teachers in addition to mentoring to provide for the students' future success.

Summary of Teacher Contributions

Based on the analysis of the observations and interview responses, the researcher found that the various respondents were consistent in what they viewed as the contributions of the teachers to the success of the students at the Performance Learning Center. For all groups of interview participants, the three main contributions were the availability of the teachers to provide one-on-one instruction geared to the individual student's pace; instruction in study skills, test taking skills and time management; and

acting as a counselor and person for the student to talk to about whatever is concerning them. The teachers were observed providing one-on-one instruction and counseling students with issues during class time. Teachers were also observed helping students outside of normal class time during lunch and before and after class hours. Teachers supported students working at their own pace through use of the computer-based curriculum and tracking student progress through course pacing guides. These findings support a common theme of individual student attention. The Performance Learning Center's structure of small enrollment and consistent staff encouraged teacher-student positive relationships which resulted in one-on-one instruction and counseling which was not available to students in the traditional high school setting. The positive interactions were revealed to the researcher in the facility observations and interviews of the students and staff. The teachers were the heart of the Performance Learning Center, the ones closest to the students, and the ones making the most direct difference in their education and future.

How Do Administrators in One Georgia Performance Learning Center Help Students Succeed?

The third research question focuses on those leading the Performance Learning Center – the Administrator and staff. The researcher's observations of the Performance Learning Center and the interview results were used to answer this research question.

Administrator View of Himself/Staff

The Administrator viewed his contribution to the students as "being a patient understanding role model who is willing to listen and support when needed" to help them graduate and succeed. He supported the students by maintaining constant communication,

having an open door policy, conducting management by walking around and encouraging trust of each other. The Administrator made sure he spoke to all of the students he passed in the halls and wanted them to know he was available if they needed him for anything. The Administrator believed that he was the person that the students felt most comfortable talking to and he encouraged the students "to be responsible and independent."

The Administrator viewed his responsibility to the teachers as "providing them with the resources they need to be effective in their classrooms." The Administrator stated that there was a part-time counselor at the center to play a role in developing relationships because although the teachers, staff and he were available, sometimes the students wanted another person to lean on for support. The Administrator and staff encouraged parental involvement through a series of parent workshops and conferences to give parents the opportunity to participate in their children's education. He viewed parental involvement as fair, but more was needed "because the students need so much support." He and the staff supported job training by organizing and encouraging "internships and job shadowing" opportunities.

Staff View of Themselves and Administrator

The staff had a variety of views on how they and the Administrator helped students succeed. Two of the three staff members interviewed identified time as their most important contribution to the students. They went out of their way to be visible and available to the students rather than sitting in their offices and waiting for students to come to them. They wanted all of the students to know that they were available for extra instruction to help them meet their goals. All described their relationships with the students as good, and positive personal interactions between the staff and students were

observed. These relationships were formed because at the Performance Learning Center there were “more one-on-one services for the students. Here it is a smaller environment and you know everyone.” One staff member stated: “Relationships with the students are closer than in the traditional high school.” One-on-one attention, counseling, tutoring, and job skills training were identified as additional administrator and staff contributions to the Performance Learning Center.

The staff identified various means to promote job skills and career training, such as assemblies, job fairs, job shadowing, Dress for Success, and Business Essentials. The center had 12 students actively involved in job shadowing at the time of the research. Dress for Success was a program at the center conducted on Wednesdays in which the students came to school dressed for the occupation they were interested in obtaining after high school. Business Essentials was a course taught at the neighboring Career Academy in which students learned about writing resumes and other activities to prepare them for the workforce. All of the staff said that parental involvement was present but that more involvement was desired. One staff member indicated that “some parents were very involved and others are not there at all” and thought it was “vital for parents to be involved in their student’s life.” The Performance Learning Center involved parents through a parent’s night, a community dinner and an orientation meeting at the beginning of the year in addition to the regular daytime student progress meetings held as needed throughout the year.

Teacher View of Administrator/Staff

All of the five teachers described a positive relationship between the students and the administrator and staff. The relationships were referred to as “respectful” and “mentor-

like." One teacher indicated that they "give them more one-on-one teacher interaction, more technology based instruction and more practical projects." All of the teachers noted the staff was available for counseling as needed and as wanted by the students which included before school, after school, and through lunch. The teachers told the researcher of the positive influence of staff mentoring, tutoring, progress reports to students and parents, student social development advice, and the flexibility for the students of off-campus lunches. Treating the students as responsible individuals with the off-campus lunch period was noted as having a positive influence on the student's attitude.

Three of the five teachers mentioned the job shadowing program and the career courses available to the students through the neighboring Career Academy. One of the teachers noted that 12 students were involved in job shadowing and the Business Essentials course, as was noted by the Performance Learning Center staff in their interviews. All of the teachers wished for more parental involvement in supporting the student's education by staying involved in what they are doing in and out of school and watching for problems. Some of the statements from the teachers about the parents were "some parents are very involved and others are not there at all"; "they come when they are called"; and "involvement is fairly low because many of our students have slack parents which is why then end up here in the first place". The administrator and staff encouraged involvement through parent's night, volunteer activities, and phone calls. It should be noted that while four of the five teachers mentioned the center encouraged parent volunteers in the office and classroom, the administrator and staff did not mention this method of parental involvement.

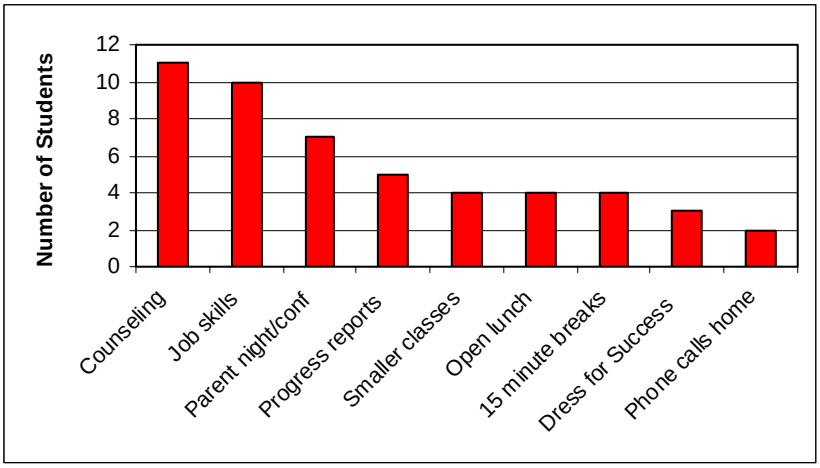
Students View of Administrator/Staff

The students had nothing but praise for the administrator, who was described with the following quotations: “a father figure”, “wants to see everyone succeed”, and “I want to please him”. One student was grateful to the administrator just “to have the school”. The staff was described as “like family”; “friendly”; “they give everyone a chance”; they “treat you like an adult”; and they “stand behind you like parents”. These descriptions were possible because of the small student enrollment and an Administrator and staff who went out of their way to make time for and interact as often as possible with the students to encourage them to succeed. Also mentioned by more than one student as an administrator/staff contribution were the progress reports for the students and parents, smaller classes, the open lunch period when students could leave campus, 15 minute breaks between classes, the Dress for Success program, and phone calls home to parents.

Ten of the 12 students noted job skills and career training as a contribution with the Career Academy classes, Dress for Success and job shadowing specifically mentioned in the interviews. One student noted that the administrator helped him get into Auto School. The involvement of parents received a mixed reaction from the students based on the interview question “how are your parents involved in your PLC?” Seven of the twelve students interviewed indicated that their parents were involved, although the answers indicated mainly that they received progress reports and sometimes attended meetings. Students said “my parents work all the time” and “my mom is sick so she can not get involved”, and one student said “I do not know.” Other students indicated that their parents were informed and involved and that “they are always welcome in the classroom.” Similar to the administrator and staff, no student mentioned parent

volunteers in the office or classroom. Figure 8 presents the responses of the 12 students interviewed. Some students indicated more than one administrator/staff contribution to their success. As indicated in the figure, all but one student indicated that the administrator and staff are available for counseling.

Figure 8. Student View of Administrator/Staff Contributions.



Summary of Administrator/Staff Contributions

Based on the analysis of the documents, observations, and interview responses, the researcher found consistency in the contributions of the Administrator and staff to the success of the students at the Performance Learning Center. The Performance Learning Center operations manual emphasized that the formation of a positive relationship with students was critical to success. The positive relationship between the Administrator, staff, and students in all of their personal interactions was observed. No one was observed passing each other in the halls without a greeting. For all groups of interview respondents, it was evident that the Administrator and staff cared about what the students were doing and needed and took the time to let the students know they cared. The student

interview responses corroborated the observations. The students were grateful and wanted to show the Administrator and staff their appreciation by performing well.

The Performance Learning Center operations manual and all groups of interview respondents and also recognized internships and job shadowing as positive contributions coordinated by the Administrator and staff. Those experiences of working with "authority figures" in the business world were important partly because the level of parental involvement in the students' education was not consistent.

The enrollment contracts with the center included the parents because the students needed support away from school to ensure success at school. Parent volunteers were observed working in the office, which was a way to get them involved in the school. All respondents indicated that some parents were involved and others were not. The responses from the Administrator, staff, and teachers reflected that this was an area that they were continuing to focus on by looking for strategies to get parents more involved.

In summary, the findings were that one Georgia Performance Learning Center identified positive relationships, job skills training through internships and job shadowing, and encouraging parental involvement as the ways in which the administration helped students succeed. These findings support two common themes. The first is relationships which were observed by the researcher during the school day and supported by the interview responses. The relationships between the administration and students, parents and the community encouraged student success and was a theme identified by most of the students as being absent in the traditional high school setting. The second theme was preparation for lifelong learning provided by job skills training to encourage student success during and after their time spent at the Performance Learning

Center. The theme of individual student attention by the administration was also noted by the findings as it was for the last research question. If the teachers were the heart of the Performance Learning Center, the Administrator and staff were the brain that was leading the center by supporting the students and teachers in whatever they needed to help the students succeed.

How Does One Performance Learning Center Work with Community Partners to Promote Student Success?

The next research question pertains to the individuals and organizations outside of the Performance Learning Center who influence the students – the community partners. The researcher's observations of the Performance Learning Center and the interview results were used to answer this research question.

Administrator View of Community Partners

The Administrator indicated that the Performance Learning Center encouraged community involvement by having all students participate in a variety of service projects such as a blood drive, tutoring elementary school students, and working with senior citizens. He stated that the center also partnered with the American Legion and Home Depot. The projects made the students feel more like a family that was helping others, opened their eyes to a larger world, and brought the teachers, staff and students closer together to foster trust and support student education. While the Administrator was aware of and supported the community involvement, he indicated that the Service Coordinator had the responsibility for these activities.

Staff View of Community Partners

The staff at the Performance Learning Center stated that service learning projects were an integral part of the center and that the Service Coordinator was the driving force behind the projects and community involvement. Communities in Schools required that the center "offer three service learning projects a year and every student must participate in one." This was not a requirement for graduation but "a requirement of CIS." The center participated in projects such as a car wash and Muffin Monday to support United Way and Operation Christmas Child to support Samaritans Purse. In late 2007 the center would be taking all of the students to Atlanta for Samaritans Purse, and the students would then be asked to write about their experience in the project. The Service Coordinator stated that the projects were important for the students because "they are given a lot of extra experience in things that normally they would not be involved in the first place so they are networking with the community."

Community partners also contributed to student incentives. The Performance Learning Center had an individual benefactor who provided financial support for the purchase of student incentives such as gift certificates to local stores. Many local restaurants also provided coupons and gift certificates that the center provided as incentives. Each semester Wal-Mart provided student rewards, and the American Legion provided the center a grant. Every nine weeks students were selected to go out to lunch with the Administrator as a special activity. At the end of the year the students were selected to receive "gift cards or a bucket full of prizes from the staff." All these rewards and incentives would not have been possible without the support of the local community.

Teacher View of Community Partners

The teachers identified many of the same community involvement activities as the Administrator and staff. The teachers mentioned the car wash for United Way, Operation Christmas Child, volunteering with senior citizens, and blood drives. The teachers also mentioned activities not noted by the Administrator and staff, such as food drives, toy drives, Special Olympics, soup kitchens, elementary school health fairs, and a non-denominational religious program called Faith in Serving Humanity (FISH). One teacher described a trip that she coordinated to Applebee's in which she discussed the use of math in everyday life by discussing the bill and counting calories. Two of the teachers stated that the Performance Learning Center partnered with Wal-Mart and one indicated the American Legion and Home Depot. It was interesting to note that three of the teachers stated that the center did not have any partner organizations. As with the Administrator, the teachers knew about many of the community involvement activities but recognized the Service Coordinator has the point of contact for these activities.

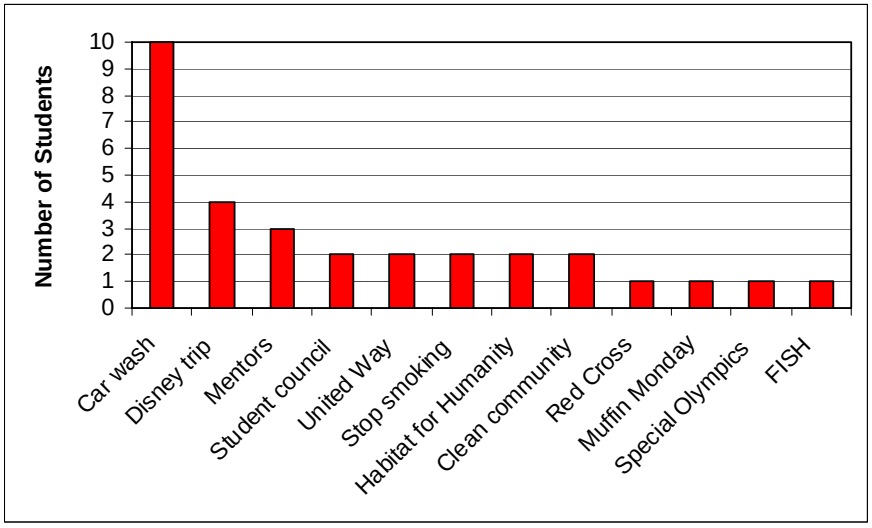
Student View of Community Partners

The interview responses indicated that the students were all aware of community involvement activities and all were willing participants in one or more activity. All but two students mentioned participating in a car wash to benefit the United Way which was planned for soon after completion of the interviews. This activity appeared to be the most noted because it was the activity that was happening closest to the time of the interviews. While no other community service activity or partner was mentioned in as many interviews as the car wash, there was a variety of community service activities included in the interview responses.

A Disney World trip was mentioned by four students and was an effort by the students of the center to conduct a variety of fundraising activities in order to pay for a trip to Walt Disney World. The Performance Learning Center had a student council which included four students. One of the student council members was interviewed and stated that “we do projects for the school.” They indicated that “students can bring up ideas for fundraisers and present them to the administration.” One student noted that there were always community services projects available and “we do something different each year.”

Three students noted an association with a mentor. Of the 12 students interviewed, one student had a mentor from the childcare industry, one from the local police department, and one in nursing. One student noted that the mentors “let us know what we need to do in the field that we want to go into and how to prepare for that field of work or study.” Other activities noted in the interviews included the United Way, an elementary school no smoking program, Habitat for Humanity, clean community program, the Red Cross, a Performance Learning Center program called Muffin Monday to benefit United Way, FISH, and the Special Olympics. Of the 12 students interviewed, Figure 9 presents the responses of the students to questions about community service and partners. Some students indicated more than one community service or community partner as being a partner of the Performance Learning Center. The information from the interviews indicated that there were a large number of community service opportunities and that each student had a cause or group that captured their attention. The Performance Learning Center provided many opportunities to the students to get involved in the community and the interviews indicated that the students had gotten involved.

Figure 9. Student Views of Community Service and Partners.



Summary of Community Service and Partners

Based on the analysis of the observations and interview responses, the researcher found consistency in what were viewed as the contributions of community service and community partners to the success of the students at the Performance Learning Center. The display of student incentives was prominently displayed for the students to see. Rather than the community service projects as a school requirement, the researcher observed that the students' attitude was they wanted to participate and not that they had to participate. Whether it was helping build a Habitat for Humanity house, helping with Special Olympics activities, or conducting a car wash for United Way, the students had a positive response to working on community service projects. For all groups of respondents, the variety of community service projects offered everyone something in which they were interested. The Administrator, staff, and teachers commented on the incentives provided by the community partners while the students did not mention the incentives but focused on the community service activities.

In summary, the findings were that one Georgia Performance Learning Center identified the availability of community service projects and the support of community partners as a positive encouragement for student success. The projects and partners gave the students a way to feel important and act as contributors to their community. These findings support a common theme of community. The Performance Learning Center community service projects, mentoring, job shadowing, and community partners resulted in students who were more in touch with their community and felt like part of the community. The mentoring partners eased the student anxiety of moving from the educational world into the work world. As compared to the traditional high school, the Performance Learning Center encouraged students to be active members of the community in which they lived.

What Do Students in One Georgia Performance Learning Center Perceive (Identify) as Factors That Contribute to Their Success?

The final research question is perhaps the most important to the success of the students and that is what the students perceive as the factors that contribute to their success. The answers to this research question are dispersed throughout the conclusions to the first four research questions and can be summarized for this question.

The researcher observed that in the classroom that the students were on task, the teachers floated around the room and provided one-on-one instruction as needed, and the student-teacher interactions were friendly and reflected a positive relationship. In summary, the researcher found that students identified the following items in their interview responses as contributing to their success at the Performance Learning Center that were different than at their traditional high school.

- “Work at your own pace”
- “Teachers more helpful and available”
- “One-on-one instruction”
- Administrator, staff and teachers “provide motivation”
- “Counseling when needed”
- “Smaller classes”
- “Treat you like an adult”
- Performance Learning Center “is like a family”
- “I am really motivated to get my schooling done”
- Study skills, test taking skills and time management through “a study skills class”, “goals” and “what to do to not waste time”
- Job skills and career training through “Dress for Success”, “job shadowing” and even the Administrator “helped me get into Auto School”
- “Mentors in areas we want to get a job in”
- Community service projects that “are something different each year”

These findings set the Performance Learning Center apart from the traditional high school and thus resulted in at-risk students completing their education rather than giving up on their education and futures. These findings also support all of the themes identified by the researcher in answering the first four research questions. The theme of flexibility in their education was of value to students as expressed by the ability to work at their own pace and be treated like an adult with their class schedules. Student progress was conveyed by the students in their desire to graduate. Individual student attention was important as identified in the Performance Learning Center by one-on-one instruction,

smaller classes, and instruction in study skills, test taking skills and time management. The theme of relationships was expressed through the motivation of the staff, counseling, helpful teachers, and feeling like a part of an education family. Preparation for lifelong learning was supported in the Performance Learning Center by job skills and career planning, counseling, job shadowing, and classes provided by the Career Academy. The theme of community was evidenced by the student participation in many different community service projects and mentoring which in many cases directly supported student ambitions after high school.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the research findings as developed from the Performance Learning Center observations and interviews of the center participants. The Performance Learning Center was described via portraiture of the county, building, co-located organizations, and the student population. The respondents to the interviews were profiled to gain an understanding of their demographics and circumstances that led them to the Performance Learning Center. Each of the research questions were investigated and answered using the program documents, facility observations, and interview responses.

The results of the first research question identified high school graduation, individual student progress, attendance, and working at the student's own pace as the definition of student success. The results of the second research question identified one-on-one instruction geared to the individual student's pace, study skills, test taking skills, and time management instruction, and counseling as the things teachers do to help students succeed. The results of the third research question identified one-on-one positive

relationships, job skills training through internships and job shadowing, and encouraging parental involvement as ways in which the administration help students succeed. The results of the fourth research question identified the availability of community service projects and the support of community partners as a positive encouragement to the students to promote their success. The results of the fifth research question built upon the first four research questions. The research identified many items including working at your own pace, more helpful teachers, one-on-one instruction, smaller classes, counseling, mentoring, and treating you like an adult as what students perceived as factors provided by the Performance Learning Center leading to their success.

The researcher identified the following themes in answering the research questions:

- Student progress
- Flexibility
- Individual student attention
- Relationships
- Preparation for lifelong learning
- Community

All of these themes demonstrated in the Performance Learning Center provided opportunities for student success that were not supported by the traditional high schools as reported by the study participants.

The research questions provided the parts that answer the overall research question of how does one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed. The research also revealed that not one negative comment was heard by the researcher during any of the facility observations or interviews. All of the staff and students were at the

Performance Learning Center because they wanted to be not because they had to be. It was because of this type of environment that students wanted to and did succeed.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Communities in Schools is a national non-profit organization that seeks to establish public and private partnerships for the improvement of education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). In 2003, Communities in Schools of Georgia received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to establish 25 Performance Learning Centers (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). The purpose of Performance Learning Centers is to provide an alternative to students in Georgia who are at risk of not completing their high school education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Performance Learning Centers provide students individual on-line lessons/curriculum that are geared to each student's needs. They work in cooperation with the community to help keep students in school and provide students with a marketable education (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Because the high school graduation rate in the United States is only between 68 and 70 percent, there is a need for the services of the Performance Learning Centers (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006).

Focus of the Research

Similar to other nationally recognized programs, such as Maryland's Tomorrow, The Quantum Opportunities Program, and Talent Development High Schools, Communities in Schools was identified as a successful program by the Educational Testing Service (2005). Communities in Schools established Performance Learning Centers, which have accomplished student success by increasing student attendance, increasing test scores,

and graduating students. To do so, the Performance Learning Centers have employed best practice strategies including additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas; future job skill training; instruction on study skills, test taking skills, and time management; modification to the learning environment; student counseling for academic and personal issues; participation in community service projects; and increased parental involvement. Although many high schools have adopted some of these strategies, traditional high schools have not been as successful as the Performance Learning Centers in reducing the percentage of high school dropouts.

In 2002-2003, the graduation rate in Georgia was 56.3 percent as compared to a national average of 69.6 percent (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006b). Performance Learning Centers began providing an option to students in Georgia who were at risk of not completing high school (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005a). Performance Learning Centers provide resources to encourage 9th graders to remain in school through the 12th grade and ultimately to graduation. The centers may be housed at an existing high school or in another setting (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2005c). In 2007, there were 29 Performance Learning Centers spread throughout Georgia, exceeding the expectations of the original grant of establishing more than 25 centers in less than five years (Communities in Schools of Georgia, 2007a).

The researcher's purpose was to understand how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helped students succeed. To understand the factors leading to student success, the following sub-questions were addressed:

1. How does one Georgia Performance Learning Center define student success?

2. How do teachers in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
3. How do administrators in one Georgia Performance Learning Center help students succeed?
4. How does one Performance Learning Center work with community partners to promote student success?
5. What do students in one Georgia Performance Learning Center perceive (identify) as factors that contribute to their success?

The process involved investigation of how strategies were implemented within the learning center to address needs of the at risk students who attended the school. The study was designed to provide a greater understanding of how a particular non-traditional school setting helped students. The researcher achieved that purpose of learning how one Georgia Performance Learning Center helped students succeed through qualitative analysis of program documents, facility observations, and participant interviews.

One of the data collection instruments was a set of interview questions tailored to the individuals being interviewed (e.g., administrator, teachers, or students) and designed to answer the research questions. There were two sets of interview questions: one for the administrator and teachers and one for the students. The questions focused on establishing a portraiture of the center participants and determining which dropout prevention strategies identified in the literature were employed at the center.

In order to address the purpose of the study, the researcher observed operations at the participating center and interviewed students, teachers, staff and the administrator. The Performance Learning Center operated as an alternative to the traditional high school

setting for students who lacked interest, had poor academic performance, had problems with school attendance, or were otherwise at risk of not completing high school. The students performed lessons on NovaNet (a computer-based lesson program) in addition to classroom and home assignments. The students completed individual-based work using a pacing guide for each subject and participated in service learning projects in the community and at a local elementary school.

The time spent in the Performance Learning Center was valuable to the researcher's understanding of the environment and of the relationship of the students and teachers that was reinforced during the individual interviews. During the on-site visits, the researcher was able to interview 12 students, the Administrator, all five teachers, the site Service Coordinator, the Vice-Principal, and the counselor as well as gather documents used by the center to accomplish their tasks. The number of interviews provided a firm base of information to answer the research questions.

Discussion of Research Findings

In Chapter 2, the researcher identified numerous reasons students dropped out of high school and various school improvement strategies to help students succeed. The findings of the research detailed in Chapter 4 indicated that the Georgia Performance Learning Center was attended by students whose reasons for being at the center were consistent with the literature. The PLC also implemented all seven school improvement strategies found in the literature, and the result was improved student performance.

Success of the students was defined as high school graduation, individual student progress, attendance, and working at the student's own pace at the Performance Learning Center. Strategies that promoted student success were one-on-one instruction geared to

the individual student's pace; study skills, test taking skills, and time management instruction; counseling; job skills training through internships and job shadowing; encouraging parental involvement; more helpful teachers; and smaller classes. The research also identified the availability of community service projects and the support of community partners as promoting student success. All of these strategies are identified in the literature and are detailed in Chapter 5.

The literature identified various reasons why students left school, including:

- Failing, getting bad grades, or being unable to keep up with the school work (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Not getting along with teachers and/or other students (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Not liking school in general or the specific school they were attending (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Having disciplinary problems and were suspended or expelled (Seaman & Yoo, 2001; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Not feeling safe at school (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Getting married, getting pregnant, or becoming a parent (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Education Week, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Having to work to support family (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005)
- Having a drug or alcohol problem (Swaim, Beauvais, Chavez & Oetting, 1997; Focus Adolescent Services, 2005).

Within just the 12 students interviewed, many of these reasons were reflected in the interview responses. Six of the 12 students indicated they had been behind on credits and needed to catch up. Other students indicated they had wanted to get away from the traditional high school and to avoid high school cliques. One of the students interviewed had spent time at the county's alternative school due to disciplinary problems. Other student responses indicated that students came from one-parent families in which they received inadequate parental guidance. Students who had to take care of a sick parent or had to work found the flexible schedule of the Performance Learning Center supported their needs. With the exceptions of being a parent and having drug or alcohol problems, the reasons for being at risk cited in the literature were all reflected in just 12 students at the Performance Learning Center. These results indicate that the Performance Learning Center is reflective of the literature.

Strategies to Help Students Succeed

School improvement strategies to help students succeed are identified in the literature (Baltimore County Public Schools, 2005; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Fritz, 1992; James, 1997; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). Seven major strategies included additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas; future job skill training; instruction on test taking skills, study skills, and time management; modification of the learning environment; student counseling to assist with both academic and personal issues; participation in service projects to foster a relationship with the community; and increased parental involvement in the education process. The research found that all of the seven groups of successful strategies were employed at the Performance Learning Center.

Additional instruction and monitoring in core academic areas was identified in the literature as improving student performance (Bunting & Mooney, 2001; Caine & Caine, 2006; DiPerna, 2006; Stichter et al., 2006). At the Performance Learning Center, additional instruction was accomplished by the one-on-one instructional and on-line course work. Teachers were available not just during class time but also before and after school and even during lunch to provide extra assistance to students. The teachers ensured that students had the information they needed and monitored the student performance for problem areas through use of a pacing guide to track individual student progress. The frequency of the monitoring was dependent on the subject area, with most teachers indicating “daily monitoring of progress” but at least weekly progress monitoring.

The literature identified job skills training as an area of high school education that could be a positive motivation to students (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Fritz, 1992; Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Hughes et al., 2001; University of Minnesota, 1997). The Performance Learning Center provided job shadowing and mentoring opportunities to the students for future job skills to help them transition from school to the workplace or future educational opportunities. The research identified students who worked with police officers, nurses, child care professionals, and auto repairmen in order to gain future job skills in their areas of interest. All students were provided a mentor, who could be a teacher at the center or someone from the community who was assisting with future job skills training. The Performance Learning Center allowed students to take classes at the co-located Career Academy in areas of business skills to promote future job success.

Test taking skills, study skills, and time management were vital to a student's success. The literature states that "poor test-preparation and test-taking skills … have negative impacts on students' test performance and achievement" (Hong et al., 2006, p. 154). The Performance Learning Center assisted students with test-taking skills by providing practice tests, including skills instruction as part of the normal curriculum, and teaching students to spread out test preparation and not just to cram before the test. Gettinger and Seibert (2002, p. 350) identify study skills and time management as contributors to student success because students may struggle "not because they lack ability, but because they lack good study skills." The Performance Learning Center incorporated study skills and time management into regular class instruction and weekly advisement. Several teachers required students to maintain a course notebook to track their work, which was collected weekly by the teacher for review. Class work was completed using an individual pacing guide to keep the students on schedule and space out work so there was not the stress of an uneven work load. Continuous monitoring of student progress allowed teachers to re-enforce good study and time management skills.

The literature is rich with examples of how the modification of the learning environment can encourage student success (Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; Fritz, 1992; Hahn, 1995; James, 1997; John Hopkins University, 2005c; Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; Kemple et al., 2005; Kemple & Rock, 1996; LaPoint et al., 1996; McPartland et al., 1996). Bottoms and Mikos (1995) identify the increased use of computers as a positive move for schools. The Performance Learning Center was based on computer-based instruction for the students. The NovaNet curriculum and student tests were all conducted on the computer at the

Performance Learning Center. The approach of having a smaller group of students with the same group of teachers also was presented in the literature as beneficial (Hahn, 1995; John Hopkins University, 2005c; Kemple & Rock, 1996). The Performance Learning Center had an enrollment of approximately 100 students, and the same instructors taught the same subjects regardless of whether the student was a freshman or senior. The entire makeup of the Performance Learning Center was a modification to the traditional learning environment. From the small class sizes, dedicated staff, flexible schedules, individual student-paced learning, and availability of the teachers and staff for student counseling, the Performance Learning Center was a definite modification to a traditional high school.

Student counseling and mentoring was shown in the literature to provide a positive influence on student performance (Auger, 2005; Bottoms & Mikos, 1995; Cochran & Cochran, 1999; Colbert et al., 2006; Harrison, 1992; Ray & Altekruse, 2000; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). The Performance Learning Center had a weekly scheduled advisement time, and every one of the teachers and staff acknowledged being available to talk to the students whenever they needed about either academic or personal issues. Students said "they help you when you need it and they also mentor you when you need it" and "you can go to the counselors for anything". The research revealed that the faculty and staff wanted to help and the students knew about and appreciated their supportive attitude.

The literature identified working outside the classroom and giving back to the community as a positive influence to students (Bonnette, 2006; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2005; Childtrends, 2002; DiMaria, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Scales et al., 2006; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006). Students can learn good habits and

responsibility (Bonnette, 2006); career and communication skills (DiMaria, 2006; Richardson, 2006); and exciting alternatives to textbook learning (Benigni, 2006; Scales et al., 2006; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006). The students at the Performance Learning Center participated in and were familiar with many different service learning projects. The students were required to participate in at least one community service project per semester as part of the Performance Learning Center curriculum. The students did not talk about the projects as work but as something they wanted to do. The students helped work with an anti-smoking program with elementary school children and built homes for Habitat for Humanity as just two examples. The center promoted the programs through the Service Coordinator interactions with the community partners, but it was the students who learned and grew from the experiences.

The literature identified the involvement of parents in the education process as one of the most important influences on student success (Anthony & Kritsonis, 2006; Buck, 2003; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Ridge, 2006; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). Ridge (2006, p. 58) reported on a survey of high school principals that identified the best thing parents could do to promote student success was to “maintain regular communication with school personnel”. The Performance Learning Center sought to involve the parents in the school in as many ways as possible. Both the teachers and Service Coordinator focused on informing parents promptly about student progress or any concerns they observed such as sporadic attendance or misbehavior. The center encouraged parents to visit the classroom, and parent volunteers were present in the office. The Administrator scheduled routine parent meetings and parent information/dinner nights, and parents were a part of the student initial interview and enrollment process. The research findings made clear that

the Performance Learning Center put the involvement of parents as a high priority. Students need encouragement and support at home as well as at school. The involvement of parents in the education process is needed to support student success.

While many school improvement programs discussed in Chapter 2 included one or more of the seven strategies presented in Table 8, few included all of the various strategies as the subject Performance Learning Center did. The effectiveness of the strategies was evident not simply from the researcher's observations but in the interview responses of the students, teachers and staff.

The Performance Learning Center was also unique in its implementation of individual strategies. While the literature identified other schools that implemented a strategy, the schools often provided only one option. As an example, to provide students the opportunity to see a counselor might mean to provide a counselor for each grade level versus one counselor for the entire school. At the Performance Learning Center, counseling meant that in addition to a dedicated counselor position, every teacher and staff member made sure the students knew they could talk to someone whenever a student wanted. Another example was parental involvement. The Performance Learning Center did not just utilize nighttime information meetings but involved parents in the entrance interview process, asked parents to make contracts with the school, encouraged parent volunteers, invited parents to observe in the classrooms, and had regular parent conferences. It was the effective use of all seven school improvement strategies and the multiple ways each strategy was implemented that made the Performance Learning Center successful and an excellent role model for other school improvement programs.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of the study were derived from observations of Performance Learning Center operations and participant interviews as well as best practices identified in program documents. The major findings of the study were

1. The Performance Learning Center defined student success through high school graduation, individual student progress, and school attendance.
2. The teachers contributed to student success by providing one-on-one instruction geared to the individual student's pace; acting as a counselor for academic and personal issues; and providing instruction on study skills, test taking skills, and time management.
3. The Administrator and staff contributed to student success by promoting positive individual relationships, promoting student attendance, providing opportunities for job skills training, providing flexibility in student schedules to support individual situations, and encouraging parental involvement in student education.
4. The support of community partners and availability of community service projects contributed to student success by providing positive encouragement to student progress in the form of incentives and providing students an opportunity to feel important to others in the community.
5. The implementation of school improvement strategies at the Performance Learning Center were recognized by the students as different from the traditional high school and contributed to their feeling like part of a family, desire to attend school and make academic progress leading to their success.

Conclusions

The Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, teachers, students, researcher observations, and program documents identified the theme of student progress as identified by student attendance, graduation and academic progress as contributing to student success. Therefore, the researcher concluded that

- Implementing best practices of encouraging school attendance and a curriculum delivered at the individual student's pace can lead to student progress and success.

The Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, students, and researcher observations identified the theme of flexibility in schedules as a positive influence on student attitudes and thus contributing to student success. Therefore, the researcher concluded that

- Students will respond in a positive manner when provided flexibility in scheduling class attendance.

The Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, teachers, students, researcher observations, and program documents identified the theme of individual student attention as identified by one-on-one instruction, counseling, mentoring and students working at their own pace as contributing to student success. Therefore, the researcher concluded that

- Individual student attention through one-on-one instruction as supported by a small school enrollment and consistent staff encouraged students to learn.

The Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, teachers, students, researcher observations, and program documents identified the theme of relationships as identified

by availability of all staff to students whenever needed, acting as role models and maintaining a family-type atmosphere as contributing to student success. Therefore, the researcher concluded that

- At-risk students will avail themselves of opportunities to learn in a safe, close-knit school environment with positive relationships.

The Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, teachers, students, researcher observations, and program documents identified the theme of preparation for lifelong learning as identified by availability of job skills training and job shadowing as contributing to student success. Therefore, the researcher concluded that

- Job skills training prepared students for their future after high school and encouraged lifelong learning.

The Performance Learning Center Administrator, staff, teachers, students, researcher observations, and program documents identified the theme of community as identified by community service learning opportunities, community partner incentives and community mentors as contributing to student success. Therefore, the researcher concluded that

- Mentoring and community service projects permitted students to give back to others and network with their community.

Therefore, the researcher concluded that the themes of student progress, flexibility, individual student attention, nurturing relationships, preparation for lifelong learning, and community as evidenced by this research at the Performance Learning Center contributed to student success.

Implications

Many schools are likely struggling with how to help their at-risk students succeed. The school improvement strategies employed at the Performance Learning Center can be implemented in other educational environments to address specific issues in either traditional or non-traditional schools. The results at the subject Performance Learning Center illustrate that at-risk students may simply need more one-on-one attention in academic and personal issues to help them succeed. By making students feel like part of the school family versus just a number, students will be motivated to succeed. Educators need to understand specific issues by talking to students and reviewing student academic progress. Once the issues are understood, specific school improvement strategies that have been proven to be successful in the Performance Learning Center environment can be implemented in other education situations.

While other high schools may not be able to implement all of the strategies in all of the ways as the Performance Learning Center can, high schools could develop implementations for specific strategies best able to suit their students' needs. State policy makers should review research-based best practices when evaluating school improvement strategies looking at both which are working and how successful programs implement the practices. Policy makers must continually evaluate educational needs and fund programs to address those needs that are based on proven success. Education professionals must remain up to date on what is happening with implementation of best practices but also what is best for the students based on current societal issues. Traditional educators may not be able to fully implement certain strategies but they can evaluate if methods that have proven successful at the Performance Learning Center can be adapted for use in the

traditional high school setting within existing constraints.

This research has implications for traditional schools and school administrators. Although enrollment in a Performance Learning Center involves a screening process, and traditional schools generally enroll students who reside in attendance zones, traditional school administrators and teachers may employ the same strategies for student success. Class sizes may need to be addressed, but school administrators may find means by which to structure the school day so that students have student-centered experiences.

One of the common themes found in this study was respect for the student through individualized instruction and culturally sensitive teaching. Administrators and teachers with commitment could request additional staff members, parents, or others to provide more help with one-on-one instruction for individual students that are struggling. Administrators could also organize a mentor program within the school and pursue implementation of a job shadowing program with the school board and the community stakeholders. Research has yielded insight into best practices, and these interventions and strategies may transcend whether a school is non-traditional or traditional. All of these implications from this research are ways for the administrator to become proactive in their school and encourage student success.

This research also has implications for traditional high school teachers. Teachers could strive to interact more with the students, foster relationships, and discover the individual needs of the students. Typical high school situations with high student enrollment and constantly changing teachers make relationships difficult to establish. Once the needs are evaluated, teachers could develop additional practice work in focus areas and provide additional instructional sessions. The additional instruction could be

offered outside of the normal instruction time even if only on a few days of the week. Teachers would need to sacrifice their personal time for the good of the students which is not always the norm in today's schools. However, if teachers tell students they will offer extra assistance the teachers must follow through on their promise or teachers will lose the trust of the students. This research identified that what students want from teachers is for them to follow through on promises and show that they care about student needs.

Recommendations

Similar to how most counties have an alternative school for disciplinary problem students, it would benefit most counties to have a Performance Learning Center. The centers are of a small size with a minimal staff so are not a tremendous financial burden considering the immense educational benefit they provide. Even if school districts do not open a Performance Learning Center, educators can learn from the center's results that the strategies employed do help students succeed.

Two follow-up topics for attention arose from this research. The first is that other Performance Learning Centers should be researched to discover if the strategies and student success are unique to this one particular center. Other Performance Learning Centers may employ additional strategies to help students succeed, which could supplement this research. The second topic would be to examine the demographics of those students who seek non-traditional programs to determine if they differ from those students who are dropping out of school. If there are more males dropping out of the traditional high school but the ratio of males to females in the alternative programs are the same, then perhaps strategies are necessary to reach those males who are dropping out but not seeking help. This research into the operations of the Performance Learning

Centers was a valuable first step that can open the door to future research into how to help students succeed.

Concluding Thoughts

Educators come in contact with many students in the course of their careers. Students in turn come in contact with many educators with different philosophies and approaches to teaching. Not every student is compatible with every teacher. As a society we have many students that fall through the cracks in the education system. While the strategies looked at in this study are not new, they do take time and attention to implement. I believe it is of benefit to everyone in Pre-K through the twelfth grade to take time and have the initiative to look at students who are struggling in elementary school. We should look beyond their current grade, make changes for struggling students early in their academic careers, and carry out those changes before parents and students are forced to look beyond the traditional high school educational system for an alternative. However, it is important to be aware that the demands in life for some students are thrust upon them a lot faster than others and in many cases not by their choice. In those cases, it is up to the educators to provide effective educational alternatives. Life is about change, and as we grow as a society, we need to help everyone succeed. The more individuals who achieve educational success, the stronger our society is as a whole, which benefits all of us.

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APPENDIX A

INSTRUMENT/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Administrator (1 addresses research question #1, 2-6 will address research questions #2 and #3, 7 will address research question #5)

1. Please describe the education background and circumstances that lead students to the Performance Learning Center. How do your students describe their experiences in the traditional high school setting? Describe the indicators of success that you use to judge student performance? If you use any indicators, on what frequency do you evaluate them? To what do you compare the indicators of success, county averages or individual student improvements?
2. As an administrator, what led you to this position at the Performance Learning Center?
    a. What are the qualification requirements to be the administrator of the PLC?
    b. What is your educational background and how did that lead you to the PLC?
    c. How would you describe your relationship with the students of your PLC?
    d. What do you do differently from the traditional high school to help students? What are typical problems that students have that led them to attend the Performance Learning Center? How do you address their various problems?

3. What contributions have you made to the students of the Performance Learning Center?
    a. As the administrator, what do you believe are your contributions to the teachers of the PLC?
    b. As the administrator, what do you believe are your contributions to the students of the PLC?
    c. What do you believe are the best accomplishments of your PLC?
    d. How would you describe the relationship between the students and staff of your PLC?
4. Describe how the Performance Learning Center provides for additional instruction in the core academic areas.
    a. Do you monitor student performance? If so, describe the frequency of monitoring and your performance indicators?
    b. Do you help students with study skills, test taking skills and time management? If so, what methods do you use to teach these skills? Is the instruction part of the routine curriculum or are they taught in special instructional sessions?
    c. Have you made any modifications to the traditional high school environment at the PLC? If so, what are they?
    d. Does your PLC provide student counseling for academic issues? If so, how is it implemented? Is the counselor assigned only to the PLC or only on a part time basis? Are all students counseled or is it a voluntary program?

5. Does your PLC provide student counseling for personal issues? If so, how is it implemented? Is the counselor assigned only to the PLC or only on a part time basis? Are all students counseled or is it a voluntary program?
6. How do you involve parents in your PLC?
    a. How would you describe parental involvement in the PLC operation? In what ways are parents involved in the operation of the PLC? In what ways do you wish for more involvement or less involvement?
    b. How would you describe parental involvement in the PLC academic planning and instruction? In what ways are parents involved in the academic planning and instruction of the PLC? In what ways do you wish for more involvement or less involvement?
7. Does the PLC address job training? In what ways?
    a. Does your PLC participate in community service projects?
    b. If so, what type of projects and how were your community partners obtained?
    c. Does your PLC partner with any other organizations?
    d. If so, what type of partnerships and how were your partners obtained?

Teachers (1 addresses research question #1, 2-6 will address research questions #2 and #3, 7 will address research question #5)

1. Please describe the education background and circumstances that lead students to the Performance Learning Center. How do your students describe their experiences in the traditional high school setting? Describe the indicators of success that you use to judge student performance? If you use any indicators, on

what frequency do you evaluate them? To what do you compare the indicators of success, county averages or individual student improvements?

2. As a teacher, what led you to this position at the Performance Learning Center?
    a. What are the qualification requirements to be a teacher at the PLC?
    b. What is your educational background and how did that lead you to the PLC?
    c. How would you describe your relationship with the students of your PLC?
    d. What do you do differently from the traditional high school to help students? What are typical problems that students have that led them to attend the Performance Learning Center? How do you address their various problems?
3. What contributions have you made to the students of the Performance Learning Center?
    a. As a teacher, what do you believe are your contributions to the students of the PLC?
    b. What do you believe are the best accomplishments of your PLC?
    c. How would you describe the relationship between the students and staff of your PLC?
4. Describe how the Performance Learning Center provides for additional instruction in the core academic areas.
    a. Do you monitor student performance? If so, describe the frequency of monitoring and your performance indicators?

   b. Do you help students with study skills, test taking skills and time management? If so, what methods do you use to teach these skills? Is the instruction part of the routine curriculum or are they taught in special instructional sessions?
   c. Have you made any modifications to the traditional high school environment at the PLC? If so, what are they?
   d. Does your PLC provide student counseling for academic issues? If so, how is it implemented? Is the counselor assigned only to the PLC or only on a part time basis? Are all students counseled or is it a voluntary program?
5. Does your PLC provide student counseling for personal issues? If so, how is it implemented? Is the counselor assigned only to the PLC or only on a part time basis? Are all students counseled or is it a voluntary program?
6. How do you involve parents in your PLC?
   a. How would you describe parental involvement in the PLC operation? In what ways are parents involved in the operation of the PLC? In what ways do you wish for more involvement or less involvement?
   b. How would you describe parental involvement in the PLC academic planning and instruction? In what ways are parents involved in the academic planning and instruction of the PLC? In what ways do you wish for more involvement or less involvement?
7. Does the PLC address job training? In what ways?
   a. Does your PLC participate in community service projects?

b. If so, what type of projects and how were your community partners obtained?

c. Does your PLC partner with any other organizations?

d. If so, what type of partnerships and how were your partners obtained?

Students (1 is a background question, 2-5 will address research question #4, 6 will address research question #5)

1. What led you to the Performance Learning Center?
    a. What are the requirements for you to be a student in the PLC?
    b. How long have you been enrolled in the PLC?
2. What do you believe are the best accomplishments of your Performance Learning Center?
    a. What do you believe are the contributions of the administrator to the students of the PLC?
    b. What do you believe are the contributions of the teachers to the students of the PLC?
    c. How would you describe your relationship with the staff of your PLC?
3. Does the PLC help you with additional instruction in core academic areas?
    a. Does the PLC monitor your performance?
    b. Does the PLC help you with study skills, test taking skills and time management?
    c. What modifications to the traditional high school environment have helped you the most at the PLC?
    d. Does your PLC provide you counseling for academic issues?

4. Does your PLC provide you counseling for personal issues?
5. How are your parents involved in your PLC and academic work?
    a. Does your PLC try to involve your parents in the school?
    b. Does your PLC try to involve your parents in your learning or classroom?
6. Does the PLC help you with future job training or vocational education?
    a. Does your PLC participate in community service projects?
    b. If so, what type of projects and how do you interact with your community partners?
    c. Does your PLC partner with any other organizations for mentoring, tutoring, etc.?
    d. If so, what type of partnerships and how do you interact with your partners?

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Phone: 912-681-5465
Fax: 912-681-0719
Ovrsight@GeorgiaSouthern.edu
Administrative Annex
P.O. Box 8005
Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Maureen E. Rosenberger
178 S. Old Belair Road
Grovetown, GA-30813

CC: Dr. Barbara Mallory
P.O. Box-8131

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Date: July 25, 2007

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered: **H07227**, and titled **"How one Georgia Performance Learning Center Helps Students Succeed"**, it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

N. Scott Pierce
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs