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Drop In or Drop Out: A Case Study on the Effects of Academic Track Placement, and Levels of Student Skill and Will, on Successful Ninth-Grade Completion

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DROP IN OR DROP OUT: A CASE STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF ACADEMIC TRACK PLACEMENT, AND LEVELS OF STUDENT SKILL AND WILL, ON SUCCESSFUL NINTH GRADE COMPLETION

by

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DISSERTATION

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my children:

Nevada Reese Bella and Cole Mateo Calvin.

May you always follow your passions with love, honesty, integrity, skill, and will.

May you never allow anyone to sway you from who you believe you are meant to be.

May you never allow anyone to limit or soften your aspirations.

May you never allow anyone to stand in the way of your dreams.

You are my love and light—always.

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My family, those bound to me by blood, and those bound to me by friendship, I share my gratitude and sincere love and appreciation for each and every one of you. I thank my mother, Camille Montoya, for giving me relentless love and guidance and for always being a stellar nana for our kids; I thank my in-laws for loving me as a daughter and for their support; I thank my cousin Dianna Baca for allowing me to stay with her and her family during the summer semesters and during the long weekends while I was taking my coursework; I thank my children, Nevada and Cole, for never allowing me to have an excuse to not complete my dissertation; and I thank all my family and friends for their continued support throughout this program. I chose to embark on this challenging academic journey, because I needed to prove to myself that I was, and am, worthy of being a respected academic and leader in my community and in my daily existence. Many times, throughout this expedition, I was told that I was senseless for overfilling my already full plate. I felt egocentric for choosing this for me, as it consumed much of the time that I could have spent with my family and friends; however, my hope is that this journey will translate into hope and assurance for all of my family, friends, and former and future students, and especially for my children, Nevada and Cole. For my wish is that my children, along with all of you, will understand the meaning and importance of dedication to self-growth and commit to lives of purpose, learning, love, growth, integrity, and persistence.

I thank my husband, Matthew, for his authentic love and unyielding commitment to support my personal and professional goals. His daily demonstration of living an honest, deliberate, loving, and hard-working life is an exemplary model for our family. I

could not ask for more in a man, life-partner, friend, and father to our children. I could not have done this without his willingness to compromise and adjust his schedule to support mine. *He is my one true love.*

This educational leadership experience has afforded me the opportunity to participate in engaging discourse with respected and thoughtful individuals from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and to make decisions and be reflective of myself with a critical lens that I would not have accessed, had I not committed to this educational and professional growth platform. For that, I am forever grateful, and will move forward in my daily work with these people as my friends, peers, colleagues, critics, change-agents, advisors, and leaders. I thank Dr. Gabriella Duran-Blakey, Dr. Kimberly Blea, and Dr. Beth Jones for making me believe that I am right where I need to be. I thank my UNM cohort for their love, laughter, and critical contributions and discourse to this process, and to field of educational leadership. The contributions that each individual has given to the group, both personally and professionally, are abundant, and because of their generosity and selflessness, I will be a more ardent, purposeful, and critical leader to affect those around me to also be reflective and cognizant of the effect of their actions, non-actions, decisions, and commitments.

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growth mindsets, and to foster enriching opportunities to those with whom I work and engage, as you have done for me.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my brother, Calvin Wilson, who was and is my spiritual and emotional guide. Being on the University of New Mexico campus, reading my texts, writing my compositions, and engaging in critical discourse with my peers, made me reflect that even though you are not here in the physical world with me, you were and are with me in your most beautiful spirit every step of the way, providing me with a path to continue to move forward in my life with clarity, confidence, reconciliation, and gratitude. I miss you and keep you close to me, every day.

ABSTRACT

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The ninth grade is a transition year from middle school to high school where many students struggle to successfully navigate a new environment, new teachers and peers, new academic and behavioral expectations, and the concept of graduation requirements. This qualitative study examined the effects of academic track placement, and student levels of skill and will, on successful ninth-grade completion in one New Mexico Title I high school. It also provided insight into their perceptions of the success factors and challenges that they felt impacted their ability to successfully promote to the tenth-grade, and thus, remain on-track for graduation.

This study was a single instrumental case study that focused on one issue (successful ninth-grade completion), at one Title I high school, with one cohort of ninth graders, in the timeframe of one school year. The research paradigms used to frame this study were constructivist and transformative. This particular high school was the focus of this study, because its students continue to persist at a higher rate than other Title I high schools, and not drop out, regardless of their lower levels of academic skill and the situations of poverty that plague their community. The sample included 235 of the 340

ninth-grade students in the cohort. The data sources for this study included reports on cumulative grade-point-average, interim reading and mathematics assessment data, and academic credit data; results from the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination scale questionnaire; results from a questionnaire on factors that influence ninth-grade success; and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 16 students.

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"From the time that I knew myself, I wanted to be a teacher and change the world, because I was early taught that education was life altering."—Deborah Jewell-Sherman

Overview of the Topic

When students transition from middle school to high school, they face many challenges. Not only are ninth-graders confronted with a new school environment, principal, teachers, peers, expectations, and the requirement to earn academic credits, but they and their families are often not offered crucial information about graduation requirements, which is why many students fall off-track for graduation during their first year of high school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Chaney, Burgdorf, & Atash, 1997; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Sottie, Dubus, & Sossou, 2013). The ninth grade is often the point at which students decide whether to stay in school or drop out (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). In fact, research has shown that ninth-grade attrition is more pronounced than tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-grade attrition, as more students drop out at this critical juncture due to the challenges that surface during the transition to high school (Curran Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The majority of students who decide to leave high school with less than two years left to graduate do so due to specific learning challenges and not being able to achieve the academic credit and assessment requirements outlined in their states' graduation requirements (Koenig, 2011). When accountability measures combine with these transition factors, it can become overwhelming for these students to promote throughout the remainder of high school successfully, especially if they are English Learners and/or students who require special education services. Taken together, evidence attests that ninth grade is *the* pivotal point that predicts the likelihood that students will, or will not, graduate within four years.

When students enter high school, they are assigned to either *choice-based*, or *compliance-based* academic tracks based on their levels of academic skill and/or levels of English language acquisition. There are five academic tracks that I will refer to throughout this study: 1) Advanced Education Track, 2) General Education Track, 3) English Learner Education Track, 4) Special Education Track, and 5) English Learner and Special Education Track. Students who are identified as English learners are required by law to receive English language acquisition services, which is in the form of an elective course. Students who qualify for special education services are also required by law to take courses that often pull them out of the general curriculum setting. A new environment and expectations, coupled with being assigned to academic tracks, can either become a support or challenge to successfully promote to the tenth grade. What we are faced with then, is how to disrupt this toxic mixture of structures, revisit how they may diminish, rather than increase capacity for success, and restructure the pathway to graduation to align with the ninth-grade year.

This study will focus specifically on one cohort of ninth-graders in one Title I high school in the state of New Mexico. In order for students in New Mexico to successfully graduate from high school, they must earn 24 academic credits in specific content areas; they must demonstrate competency in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies through high stakes graduation exams; they must take a minimum of one Advanced Placement, honors, dual credit, or distance learning course; and they must be cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) trained. New Mexico's current graduation exams include the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers exam

(PARCC) and state End-of-Course exams (EOCs). Perhaps, situated within this mixture of requirements, is where the problem resides.

School and district leaders are challenged with how to increase graduation rates; how to prepare students for college and career readiness when they enter high school with a deficit in prerequisite mathematics and reading skills; how to address truancy with students who face the challenges that come with living in poverty; how to maintain a strong workforce of teachers and principals with little turnover; and, how to prevent students from dropping out, or falling off-track toward graduation in the ninth grade (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Curran Neild et al., 2008). Though elementary and middle schools' impact the dropout rate, it is during the ninth grade year on, where the skill and opportunity gaps begin to widen. These issues that plague public high schools are not unique to New Mexico—they also reside in other public school systems across America. Addressing high school dropout rates is a compelling priority for all school personnel across the country, as state dropout rate data prove to be dismally high, year after year (Amos, 2008; Baker & Sansone, 1990; Blount, 2012; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Vera et al., 2016; Wexler, Pyle, & Fall, 2015). From 2010 to 2016, the national dropout rate decreased from 7.4 percent to 6.1 percent ("National Center for Educational Statistics," n.d.). Federal, state, district, and school leaders across the country continue to battle with which high yield strategies work best to improve student achievement to prevent students from dropping out of school in the secondary educational setting, but efforts continue to prove ineffectual, as state reading and mathematics proficiency rates and graduation data continue to improve only

incrementally, or remain stagnant (McFarland et al., 2017). Our national graduation rate is 83 percent, our national reading proficiency rate is 35 percent, and our national mathematics proficiency rate is 33 percent (McFarland et al., 2017). These data indicate that on average there are 66 percent of students who enter the ninth grade below proficiency in reading and mathematics, which makes on-time graduation for these students, and their teachers and principals, a great challenge. This also means that there are other variables besides grade-level proficiency that impact students' ability to graduate with their designated cohorts. In the state of New Mexico, the graduation rate is currently 70 percent, reading proficiency is 31.1 percent, and mathematics proficiency is 21.6 percent (NMPED, 2018). Evidence is growing that students who fall off-track during their ninth-grade year have very low odds of graduating from high school, and that one-third of dropouts in our nation never made it past the ninth-grade (Curran Neild, 2009; Curran Neild et al., 2008; McFarland et al., 2017).

These problems pull into focus the importance for school leaders to establish effective strategies to support students' transition to high school, and to develop strategies that monitor students' academic progress throughout their ninth-grade year, so there can likely be dramatic increases in graduation rates three years later (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum, 2014).

Academic Tracks, Student Skill, and Student Will

There are many variables that influence students' success when they enter high school. I believe that the constructs defined by federal, state, and district policies within

a school, the level of students' academic skill[1], and the level of students' will[2] all contribute to whether or not students successfully complete the ninth-grade and remain on-track for graduation. When students enter the public school system, they are placed in imperceptible academic tracks based on their levels of need when it comes to academics, behavior, and English language acquisition. For the purposes of this study, I have identified, and will refer to, the following five academic tracks: 1) Advanced Education Track, 2) General Education Track, 3) English Learner Education Track, 4) Special Education Track, and 5) English Learner and Special Education Track. These academic tracks have been established by the required services and graduation requirements outlined in state and federal law regarding New Mexico graduation requirements, English language acquisition requirements, and Special Education requirements. Students also enter high school with different levels of academic skill and will, which influences their ability to successfully earn enough academic credits to complete the ninth-grade.

Cultural Capital

The issue of successful high school completion for all students is controversial, as students come with differentiated levels of human capital (Dumais, 2002; Swartz, 1997) when they enter high school. The ideology of human capital is a concept that French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, expanded upon to define specific forms of power within society. Swartz (1997) explains Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as resources such as: verbal facility, cultural awareness, educational credentials, and information about the

[1] Students' level of "skill" is defined by their: grade-point-average, number of credits earned at the end of their ninth grade year, reading proficiency rate, and mathematics proficiency rate.

[2] Students' level of "will" is defined by the determination that a student has to successfully complete the ninth-grade and graduate from high school measured by the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale.

school system. Social capital is hence, cultural capital, and indicative of students' backgrounds, language acquisition, knowledge and skills, and access to resources. Students go to school every day with challenges that constantly change and are differentiated, and the constructs within the public school system don't necessarily foster the differences in ways that lead to the successful completion of high school for all students. School success is more heavily influenced by students' cultural capital inherited from their families, than by individual efforts of academic achievement or influence from their schools (Dumais, 2002, 2005; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Swartz, 1997). Because of the substantial influence of cultural capital on a student's success in school, it is crucial to embark on pedagogical action (Swartz, 1997), which is the investment toward the child from family members and individuals of influence within the community, to support the child toward successful outcomes. There continues to remain a great need for strategic intervention at the elementary and middle school levels to ensure that students entering high school have the skills necessary to successfully meet the academic needs of earning a high school diploma (Ravitch, 2013). Students who come from situations of low cultural capital struggle to achieve successful outcomes in the public education system, and without schools and districts implementing strategic intervention for these students, there will continue to be inequitable opportunities within public school systems across the nation.

Impact of State and Federal Laws on Student Achievement

Given the complexity of leading a high school, it is imperative that principals have the knowledge, skill, and strategies to ensure successful completion of high school for all students, and not allow the stratification within the school system to predispose

some students to outcomes of failure, and others toward outcomes of success. Because federal laws regarding English learners and special education require compliance and accountability, regardless of how much these laws perpetuate segregation within schools, the efforts of school leaders must be intentional and focused to provide successful outcomes for all students by partnering with local non-profits that provide resources and supports to fill the social and economic gaps that prevent students from optimally achieving to their full potential in school. Laws and policy that enforce compliance must be turned into models of support that maintain students' progress and language and academic development, rather than stifle their growth by forcing them into classes that perpetuate their segregation from their peers.

The historical, social, and political evolution of the public educational system has always focused on models of standardization that serve a one-size-fits-all model. The tax-supported public education model has shifted since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century from a vocationally focused school system that could train the next generation to compete nationally in the marketplace, to an academically focused school system that continues to respond to President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education's Report, *A Nation At Risk* (Gardner, 1983). Instead of maintaining a flexible approach to meet students' needs, the educational system has historically forced students to fit into its rigid constructs. Students who are able to attend school with the adequate supports and resources necessary to adapt to the schooling process, choose to drop in. On the other hand, students who find themselves struggling to adapt to the obstinate expectations, eventually give up and drop out, leaving educational leaders,

reformers, and politicians wondering how to intervene with preventative policy and reform measures.

New Mexico's Achievement Gap Resulting from Its Opportunity Gap

Opportunity and achievement gaps are magnified with students who attend public high school with inequitable life circumstances (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Parker, Jerrim, Schoon, & Marsh, 2016; Quinn, Cooc, McIntyre, & Gomez, 2016). It is an especially prominent issue in states with consistently low student achievement performance outcomes such as: Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Nevada, South Carolina, and New Mexico (Carr, 2017) . New Mexico is a sizeable state with large indigenous, Mexican, and Latin American immigrant populations known to constantly struggle with impoverished living situations that prevent them from actualizing the priority of an education (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). As a state, New Mexico maintains a consistently low-ranking in K-12 education and is one of the highest in rank when it comes to poverty (Dounay Zinth, 2007). In order to improve student performance in New Mexico's public education system, the Governor, Secretary of Education, and State Legislators continue to enact stringent policy requirements in accordance with high stakes testing and graduation requirements, and a controversial teacher evaluation accountability model, in their effort to improve the K-12 public education system. Over the course of six years under the leadership of Governor, Susana Martinez, there has only been incremental growth in school improvement in New Mexico, as child poverty remains unaddressed by city, state, and federal leaders. Poverty, however, is the diagnosis that perpetuates deficits in student achievement year after year (Bass & Faircloth, 2013; Bishaw & Benson, 2017; Nott, 2016). The effects of

poverty extend well beyond public school walls, yet educators and educational leaders, are held ruthlessly accountable for the effects.

My Roots in New Mexico

This study will focus on one Title I high school in the state of New Mexico. I chose the state of New Mexico, because it is where I was born and raised, and year-after-year, it is ranked low in education and high in poverty, which leads to unproductive outcomes for our students and community. As a native of Santa Fe, I was born to parents who always wanted the best for me. They were best friends who married at the young age of 17. My mother gave birth to me when she was 20 and divorced my father due to his infidelity, and drug and alcohol abuse. We lived with my grandparents until my mother was able to afford a repossessed mobile home for the two of us. I was her everything, and I felt her love every day. My mother did not attend college, but she worked hard her entire life, which in turn, provided me with a good life, as she was, and continues to be, my role model. I never knew I was poor, because I was always embraced by the relentless love of my mother and grandparents, and I had all my basic needs met. I was never scared, hungry, cold, unloved, or sick without remedy. It wasn't until I was in middle school when I realized that having food stamps, and living in a mobile home, characterized a life of being a part of a poor and working class family in comparison to the life situations of my peers. My mother later married my stepfather, which resulted in our mixed families becoming one, and the birth of my brother. Their 22-year marriage ended with my father's infidelity, and the death of my 22 year-old-brother, who died in a motorcycle accident. I carry on each day with a cratered heart,

praying for my own individual resolve, peace, and happiness without my brother, Calvin, and without a large piece of my mother that died with my brother.

I discuss my childhood, as it is reflective of the struggles that challenge many families in the state of New Mexico, and it provides context for my study. New Mexico is also the place where I have developed my capacity as an educator and educational leader, which makes my passion even stronger to improve educational outcomes for the students within our state.

Statement of the Problem

Every day in schools across the nation there exists an ever-flowing discourse amongst schoolteachers and leaders regarding ways to retain and engage all students at the secondary level in the K-12 public education system, with the goal of achieving preparedness and readiness for college, careers, and life. How do schools avert students from disengaging, and eventually, dropping out? Developing preventative approaches to address high dropout rates in the K-12 public education system is one of the greatest priorities in education today (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; Lemon & Watson, 2011; Roderick et al., 2014). The expectation of proficient academic performance for all students is outlined through federal policy and school reform initiatives such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Race to the Top Grant Program of 2009, and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. These policies require students identified as English learners, and students with exceptionalities, to be enrolled in programs-of-study that force them to take classes in order for their schools to be considered compliant. Even though the intentionality of these laws is to ensure these particular students are in

these programs and courses to better support their academic needs, they often predispose them to segregation within their schools that negatively affect their sense of belonging, which in turn, can lead to student disengagement and dropping out of school. Compounding this challenge is the exterior layer of social and economic dilemmas that students face beyond the school walls, yet bring with them each day, to their quest to achieve an education that is believed will pave their way to a brighter future. The United States spends an exorbitant amount of energy discussing the achievement gap; however, there exists minimal discourse surrounding the opportunity gap within our country that creates inequitable access to basic educational resources (Coleman et al., 1966; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Yussen, Allen, Cronin, Song, & VanMeerten, 2016). Politicians and school reformers maintain sharp focus on how to improve the public school system every year with new mandates, high accountability measures, grant opportunities, and initiatives, but they largely fail to address the deeply rooted social and economic attributes of each community that shape and directly influence the public schools located within them. All public schools, regardless of their socioeconomic atmospheres, are expected to adhere to the same standardized performance guidelines, which put the public schools in our country, and the students they serve on a daily basis, on an unlevel playing field.

This case study will focus on one cohort of ninth-grade students at a single Title I high school in New Mexico, Hope High School[3], that continues to demonstrate increases in graduation rate data, student achievement data, and college and career readiness indicators, regardless of the low socioeconomic factors that challenge its efforts to

[3] The name of the high school is changed to protect the identity of the city and the school.

provide its students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in college, careers, and life. Given the continued growth and achievement in this school, regardless of the high rate of poverty that challenges its students, teachers, and leaders on a daily basis, it is important to study how students' levels of will and determination contribute to this culture of success. Does graduating every student college and career ready mean that it is the responsibility of the public school system to ensure all students graduate with high skill and high will? Do those students with high skill/low will, and those students with low skill/high will, not deserve to graduate just because they have not found a way to conform to this American standardized mechanism called the public high school? How students are successfully able to navigate the public education system is dependent on their academic track, their level of skill, and their level of will, which are the three foci of this study.

Research Questions

This case study is designed to address the following questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade *completers* and *non-completers* perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

Conceptual Framework

This case study analyzes ninth-grade students' progress toward successful ninth-grade completion by examining the how students' academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will, influence their ability to successfully complete the ninth-grade.

Figure 1 below presents the triangulated relationship between a student, his/her academic track, and his/her levels of skill and will.

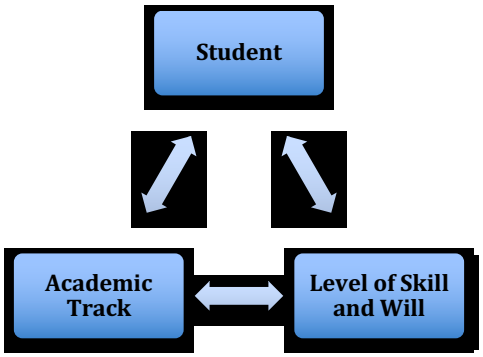

Figure 1. The relationship between students, their academic track, and their levels of skill and will.

The progress of each student in the ninth-grade cohort will be analyzed based on whether or not they complete the ninth-grade based on their academic track, and their levels of skill and will, at the end of their ninth-grade year.

The conceptual framework (see Figure 2) demonstrates the process as to how students will be identified as being on-track or off-track for successful ninth-grade completion based on key variables at the end of the school year. Each student will be examined through each of the two lenses to determine how their academic track (lens one), and levels of skill and will (lens two) contribute to their success, or lack thereof, during their ninth grade school year. My first research question will analyze how many students successfully complete the ninth-grade based on their academic track. My second

research question will analyze how many students successfully complete the ninth-grade based on their levels of skill and will. My third research question will address what ninth-grade *completers* and *non-completers* perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and remain on-track for graduation based on a questionnaire given to all ninth-graders in the cohort that will provide greater insight into their home life situations, their perceptions of school and their own academic progress, as well as face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a stratified randomized sample from each of the four skill/will matrix quadrants[4]. Research regarding student success in high school is often measured by the strength of correlational relationship of specific variables such as: grades, attendance rates, and suspension rates. There exists a combination of research studies that consider the relationship of students' ninth-grade experience based on their academic track placement, their levels of skill and will, and their stories reflecting on their lives and schooling experiences.

[4] Skill/Will Quadrants: The skill/will matrix, developed by leadership coach and executive, Max Landsberg (1996), is a paradigm taken from a business and management coaching model that categorizes employees into four areas: those with high skill/high will, high skill/low will, low skill/high will, and low skill/low will.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework that illustrates the process in which the three research questions will be addressed.

Academic Tracks

Stratification in the public school system organizes students based on their academic levels. Students are assigned to special education programming who have diagnosed exceptionalities; students are assigned to English language development programming if their first language is not English and if they have not yet tested proficient in the English language; students are placed in general education programming if they are considered to be an academically average student that is a native English speaker with no special education exceptionalities; and students are placed in advanced programming if they demonstrate higher levels of academic and English language proficiency. This stratification is invisible to the common eye, but to schoolteachers and leaders, they are tracked groups of students with differentiated opportunities. This is problematic, as these stratified groups create specific learning conditions for certain students that may help them toward graduation, or may prevent them from graduating on time with their peers. Stratifications were established to provide compensatory support to schools and students, but many worried that compensatory initiatives such as special education, English learner education, and Title IX placed too much focus on deficits, and less attention on high academic achievement and scholastic standards (Rury, 2016). Because these discriminatory beliefs and academic stratifications still exist in the K-12 public education system, the role of the high school principal is crucial to the creation of systems that work to benefit all students, regardless of their academic strata and levels of cultural capital (Swartz, 1997), on their paths toward graduation.

The tiers of public school academic tracks (see Table 1), are tracks that students are aligned with based on their academic proficiency in reading and math, their levels of

English language acquisition, and whether or not they have learning exceptionalities. The five stratified tiers are centered on "choice-based" and "compliance-based" educational opportunities.

Table 1

Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks that Provide Some Students with a Choice-Based Education, and Others with a Compliance-Based Education

Five Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks
Tier 1: Advanced Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 2: General Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 3: English Learner Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 4: Special Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 5: English Learner and Special Education Track *(Compliance)*

The existence and perpetuation of academic tracks in public schools are evident to school-based personnel; however, they are not easily identifiable by students, families, and community members. Because these tracks are indiscernible, they continue to propagate educational inequities in the public school system by placing students who are the most at-risk of not graduating on time in compliance-based tracks that are grounded in state and federal law. Currently and historically, students have confronted the adversities that life might offer; however, federal and state policy should support students, and not contribute to those barriers, that prevent students and school systems from achieving successful outcomes. The intention of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975, were to ensure that the students

with language acquisition and/or cognitive deficits would not be left without adequate resources and supports to succeed in the public education system; yet, these laws have inadvertently created academic tracks that perpetuate segregation in schools that limit students' access to the general curriculum, especially in the high school setting. The imbalance of students' educational experiences based on their academic tracks is exhibited (see Figure 3).

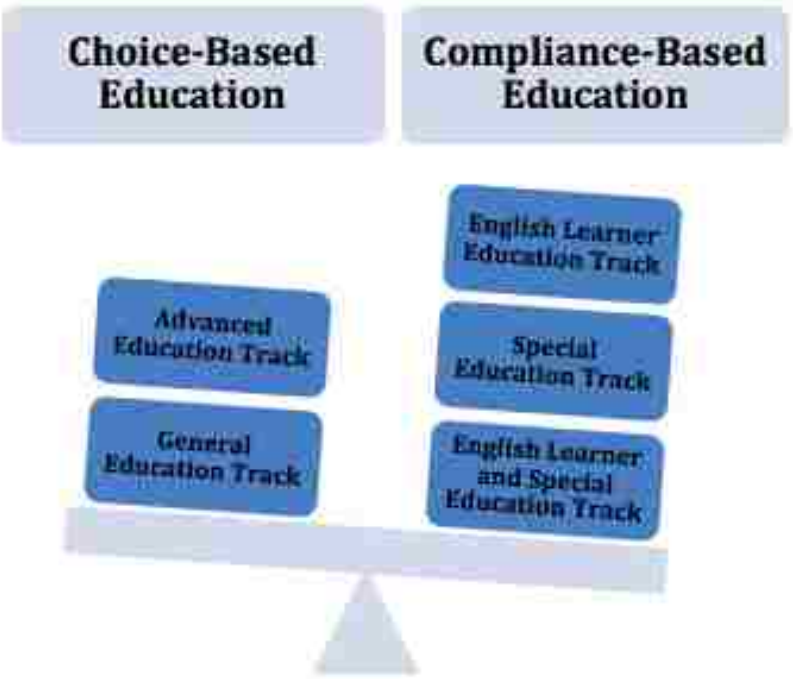

Figure 3. Visual display of the inequity in public education academic tracks when it comes to choice-based education and compliance-based education.

The three compliance-based education tracks are determined by state and federal policy, which dictate courses that students must take in order to receive English language development or special education services. These mandatory courses take away from students' opportunities to participate fully in the general curriculum, as they are required to take English language development and special education compliance courses, instead

of being able to choose their courses of study. The other two academic tracks are available to those students who have stronger academic skills and English language proficiency, which affords them greater opportunities to choose courses that are of interest to them, keeping them engaged in school.

Students' Level of Skill

Students' levels of skill and will also contribute to their progression through the K-12 system, but is more impactful at the high school level, as they have to earn academic credits, and pass graduation competency exams, in order to graduate on time. For this study, students' progress toward successful ninth-grade completion will be measured through the following academic variables (see Figure 4).

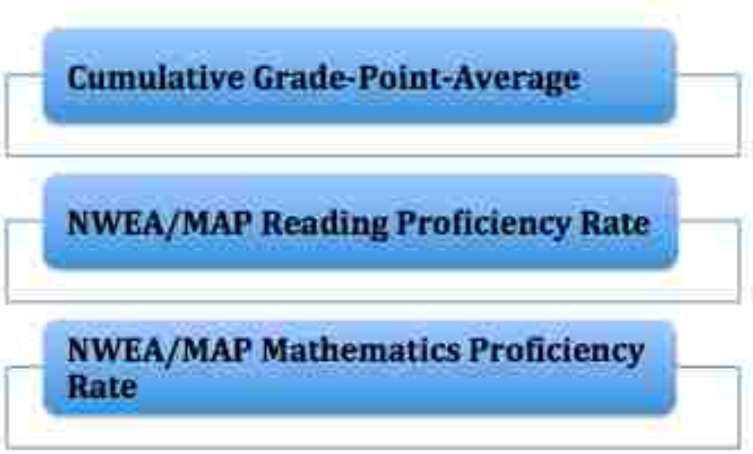

Figure 4. Listed are the three academic variables that will be measured to determine participants' levels of skill.

They can quickly fall off-track for graduation by failing one or more of their courses within their ninth-grade school year, and situate themselves into a track of credit recovery, which creates a greater challenge to graduate within four years with their designated graduation cohort.

Students' Level of Will

The responsibility of a student's educational success is not only the responsibility of educators and educational leaders, but also, the student and her/his family. To measure the level of students' will in this study, I will use the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale as a tool to measure the level of students' self-determination/will on a scale from 0 (extremely low self-determination/will) to 150 (extremely high will/self-determination) (Mithaug, Stolarski, Wolman, Campeau, & DuBois, 2006). The tool focuses on the following capacity traits: knowledge, ability, and perception, and the following opportunity traits: opportunity at school and opportunity at home, to measure the level of students' self-determination/will (Mithaug et al., 2006).

Skill/Will Matrix

After the students' levels of skill and will are established, they will be aligned within the four groups of the skill/will matrix. The skill/will matrix, developed by leadership coach and executive, Max Landsberg (1996), is a paradigm taken from a business and management coaching model that categorizes employees into four areas: those with high skill/high will, high skill/low will, low skill/high will, and low skill/low will. By using this coaching model framework with students, I will explore a possible new educational paradigm to identify specific characteristics that students embody to help school leaders advise and direct their students toward successful ninth-grade completion, and eventually, high school graduation. When students enter the public school system, they attend with inequitable foundations of knowledge, experience, access, and support. Because of this, students do not have equitable opportunities to engage in the general curriculum and graduate in four years. These circumstances

substantiate the importance to not only research the impact of academic variables, but also as the role of students' levels of will, in their educational experience.

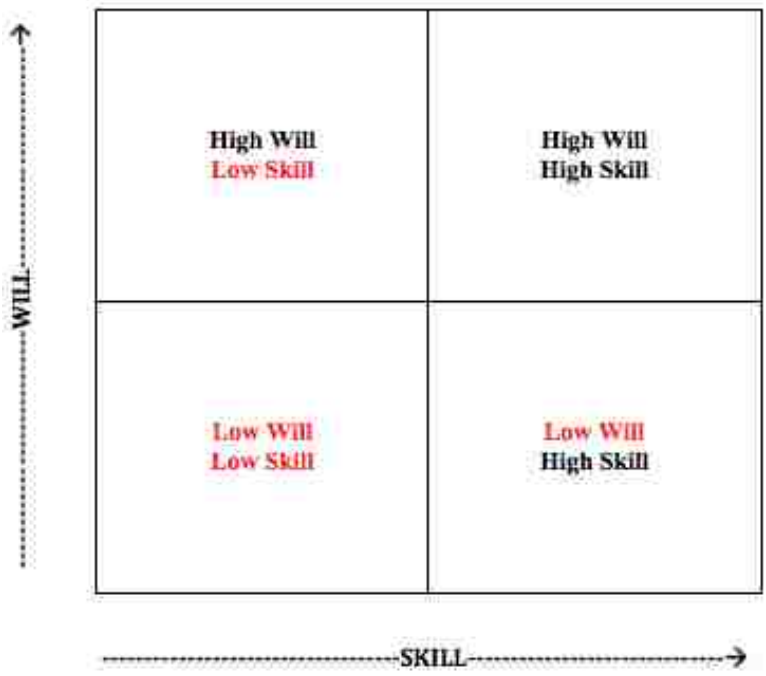

Figure 5. Max Landsberg's Skill/Will Matrix that determines in which quadrant individuals function primarily based on their levels of skill and will.

Students' level of will to successfully complete the ninth grade, and eventually graduate from high school, is a key variable that must be considered when analyzing students' progress and success in their educational setting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of academic track placement, and students' levels of skill and will, on one cohort of ninth-graders on their path toward high school graduation in Hope High School—a Title I school in New Mexico. Ninth graders, out of all students in high school, have the highest rate in terms of dropping out of school (Curran Neild et al., 2008; Somers et al., 2009; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). If

students pass the ninth-grade with all their academic credits, then the likelihood of their completing high school increases. Sixty percent of students who fail to advance to the tenth-grade after their first year of high school end up on a path to dropping out of high school (Curran Neild et al., 2008). This study will provide teachers and school leaders information on key indicators that influence successful ninth-grade completion, so they may have a better understanding regarding how to more effectively monitor and support ninth-graders to remain on-track toward graduation throughout their ninth-grade year.

There is a large body of research on high school graduates and dropouts; in fact, maintaining student engagement in school to prevent students from dropping out has continuously challenged educational leaders for decades. Previous research has focused on key variables as predictors to measure students' success in high school, such as: grades, attendance, and proficiency levels (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; Lemon & Watson, 2011; L. A. Maxwell, 2012). This case study will add to this body of literature by not only analyzing students' academic factors, but also their levels of will, and the academic tracks to which they are assigned, when it comes to successfully completing the ninth-grade. Even though nationally there is a large body of research regarding graduates and dropouts, there is minimal research in regard to student persistence and achievement in Title I high schools, in the state of New Mexico.

Professional Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to a deeper comprehension of the challenges that Title I high school students experience that prevent them from successfully completing the ninth-grade, and ultimately, graduating from high school in four years. It is a qualitative case study with some quantitative features that will not only determine how groups of

students perform based on their academic tracks placement, and levels of skill and will, but it will also contribute to a more profound understanding of students' life stories and experiences in the public school system that contribute to, or take away from, their academic success and completion of high school. Because high school graduation rates are highly dependent upon students graduating in four years with their designated cohorts, it is necessary to research ninth-graders' experiences to better inform schoolteachers and leaders how to implement early intervention to prevent them from contributing to the growing high school dropout national statistic.

Definition of Terms

Academic Competency: The demonstration that a student is proficient in English Language Arts and mathematics.

Academic Credit Hours: Academic credit hours, also known as Carnegie Units, are measured by the time and work involved in each academic course in the high school setting.

Academic Track: A track in the public education system that students align with according to their levels of academic proficiency, English language development needs, and learning and social/emotional needs. In this study, the following academic tracks are recognized:1) Advanced Education Track, 2) General Education Track, 3) English Learner Education Track, 4) Special Education Track, and 5) English Learner and Special Education Track.

Achievement Gap: The gap in student achievement amongst subgroups of students regarding their socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and gender.

Achiever: A student who demonstrates competency and proficiency in his or her academics.

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate: The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class.

Advanced Education Track: A track in the public education system where students who demonstrate high levels of academic proficiency and will choose to participate in honors, Advanced Placement, and dual credit courses to successfully graduate from high school, and at the same time, prepare for the rigors of college.

AIR Self-Determination Scale: A questionnaire developed by the American Institutes for Research in collaboration with Columbia University's Teachers' College, to determine individuals' levels of self-determination.

Attendance: The total number of missed class periods that a student is absent from his or her school.

Average Daily Attendance: The total number of days that a student attends school divided by the total number of days in the academic school year.

Bilingual Education Act of 1968: The first piece of federal legislation that upheld the expectations for elementary and secondary public schools to recognize and support the needs of English learners.

Civil Rights Act of 1964: The first piece of federal legislation that banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Common Core State Standards: National standards of academic practice in English Language Arts and mathematics that outline what K-12 students should be taught at each grade level to be ready for college and careers.

Completer: A student who finishes the ninth grade with a minimum of six academic credits.

English Learner: A student whose primary language is other than English.

English Learner Education Track: A track in the public education system where students who are English language learners are required by federal and state policy to take courses that support their English language development and acquisition.

English Learner and Special Education Track: A track in the public education system where students who are both identified as English language learners and who have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities, or other exceptionalities, are required by federal and state policy to take courses that support their English language development and acquisition, and to take courses and receive resources that support growth in their areas of disability/exceptionality.

Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974: A federal law that prohibits racial discrimination against school based staff and students and requires school districts to provide equal participation and access to the general curriculum.

Exceptionality: A cognitive, psychological, or physiological deficit in a student that requires him or her to receive additional support through an individualized educational plan (IEP) based on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

FERPA: This is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act is a federal law that prohibits any students' educational records to be obtained by anyone without the legal parents/guardians' signed consent and approval.

General Education Track: A track in the public education system where students participate in the basic courses required to successfully graduate from high school.

Grade-Point-Average: The calculated average of the letter grades that a student earns in school on a 4.0 scale.

High Skill: High skill indicates that an individual demonstrates high levels of academic achievement through grades and assessments.

High Will: High will indicates that an individual demonstrates behaviors and attitudes of determination to complete high school.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): A legal document that requires schools to provide additional supports and services to children with cognitive, psychological, or physiological deficits.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): The first piece of legislation enacted by Congress to ensure that elementary and secondary public school students with disabilities would be entitled to a free and appropriate public education like their peers.

Low Skill: Low skill indicates that an individual does not demonstrate high levels of academic achievement through grades and assessments.

Low Will: Low will indicates that an individual does not demonstrate behaviors and attitudes of determination to complete high school.

NWEA MAP Test: An assessment created by research-based organization, NWEA (see definition below) that measures growth and proficiency in reading and mathematics.

Mathematics Proficiency: The score on a standardized test that demonstrates that a student is proficient in mathematics.

NAEP Assessment: The National Assessment for Educational Progress is a national assessment that has been consistently administered to students in the K-12 system since 1966. It measures students' proficiency in reading and mathematics.

Non-Achiever: A student who does not demonstrates competency and proficiency in his or her academics.

Non-Completer: A student who does not finish the ninth grade with a minimum of six academic credits.

NWEA: A research-based organization that supports students and educators by creating assessments that measure growth and proficiency in reading and mathematics.

Opportunity Gap: The gap in opportunity to pursue education amongst subgroups of students due to their socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and gender.

PARCC Examination: The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers is a consortium that aligns their English Language Arts and mathematics assessments with the Common Core State Standards.

Reading Proficiency: The score on a standardized test that demonstrates that a student is proficient in reading.

Special Education Track: A track in the public education system where students who have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities, or who have other

exceptionalities, are required by federal and policy to take courses and receive resources that support growth in their areas of disability/exceptionality.

SES: Socioeconomic status of a student.

Skill/Will Matrix: The skill/will matrix is a paradigm taken from a business and management coaching model that categorizes employees into four areas: those with high skill/high will, high skill/low will, low skill/high will, and low skill/low will. The matrix was developed by leadership coach and executive, Max Landsberg (1996).

Title I: Federal financial assistance provided to schools with high percentages of students from low-income families to support student achievement.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations of this study are as follows:

1. This study is confined to the timeframe of one school year.
2. The sample I chose is only one cohort of ninth-graders in one public, Title I high school in New Mexico. It may, or may not, be representative of other schools with similar enrollment and demographics.
3. Students were categorized as either having high skill or low skill based on only two variables (cumulative grade-point-average and NWEA MAP reading and/or mathematics proficiency).
4. Participants were categorized as having high will based on their score being ≥ 66.6 percent on the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale. This cut score was determined by dividing the 100 percent scale into three parts to determine high, medium, and low levels of will, then combining the medium

and low levels of will to determine a binary construct (high will/low will) that was needed for the study.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter One includes an overview of the topic including how to prevent students from dropping out of school by providing extra academic and social supports during their ninth-grade year so they will be able to successfully advance to the tenth-grade with their cohort and remain on-track for graduation. It describes how students' performance in the ninth-grade will be evaluated in this study based on three lenses: 1) academic track placement, 2) level of academic skill and will, and 3) what support factors and challenges they perceive to be significant to their success, or lack thereof, in the ninth grade. Chapter Two covers the literature surrounding the significance of a high school diploma, high-stakes high school graduation requirements, the challenges that Title I schools experience, the importance of successfully passing the ninth-grade to remain on-track for graduation, the effects of poverty on student success, the academic and social effects of academic tracking, and the implications of students' levels of will on their ability to remain on-track to graduate from high school in four years. Chapter Three introduces the purpose of the study and research questions, mode of inquiry and rationale, research paradigms, role of the researcher, research site, sample, conceptual framework, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, reliability and validity, limitations, human subjects protection, and summary. Chapter Four presents the results of the study. Lastly, Chapter Five will include a summary of the study, findings related to the literature, implications for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

"True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world."—Paulo Freire

Introduction

Many students who transition from middle school to high school, regardless of continued policy and reform efforts, continue to struggle to successfully pass their ninth-grade year on their paths toward graduation (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Kieffer, Marinell, & Neugebauer, 2014; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Yowell, 2002). Ten years ago, in 2008, it was reported that only 70 percent of high school seniors graduated and earned their high school diploma in the United States (US Department of Education, 2008). That number increased to 83 percent in the 2014-2015 school year with a range from 69 percent in the District of Columbia and New Mexico, to 91 percent in Iowa (McFarland et al., 2017). This is significant, considering the District of Columbia and New Mexico are very diverse states in comparison to Iowa (Burris, 2016). An average of 30 percent of students who drop out of high school enter the workforce without the basic skills and knowledge to positively contribute to the greater good of society, which places them in situations where they become dependent on government assistance (Bishaw & Benson, 2017). This is problematic, as this is where students find themselves in cycles of generational poverty that are not easy to escape—especially without a high school diploma.

Issues that plague American public high schools include: how to increase graduation rates; how to prepare students for college and career readiness when they enter high school with a deficit in prerequisite mathematics and reading skills; how to

address truancy with students who face the challenges that come with living in poverty; how to maintain a strong workforce of teachers and principals with minimal turnover; and how to prevent students from dropping out, or falling off-track toward graduation, in the ninth grade (Iver, 2011). Ninth-grade attrition from high-poverty schools differs from low-poverty schools in that the average ninth-grade dropout rate in low-poverty districts is 27 percent, whereas the average dropout rate in high-poverty districts is 40 percent (Johnston & Williamson, 2011; McFarland et al., 2017).

It is during the ninth-grade year where the state cohort graduation rate is calculated. A graduation cohort is established during the 40th day of their ninth-grade year and is divided by the total number of those students who graduate within four years. According to a report from the National Center of Education Statistics,

> State education agencies calculate the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) by identifying the "cohort" of first-time 9th-graders in a particular school year. The cohort is then adjusted by adding any students who transfer into the cohort after 9th grade and subtracting any students who transfer out, immigrate to another country, or die. The ACGR is the percentage of students in this adjusted cohort who graduate within four years with a regular high school diploma. The U.S. Department of Education first collected the ACGR in 2010–11. (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 214)

This, however, should not negate the significance of the influence of elementary and middle schools' impact on the dropout rate. It is during these years where the academic skills in reading and mathematics, and opportunity gaps, begin to widen, which place students at a greater risk of low achievement in their high school classes, and thus, not earning enough academic credits toward graduation.

School leaders are required to remain compliant with state and federal policy and regulation when it comes to resourcing students' needs to be able to achieve the expectations outlined in graduation requirements; however, some of these policies create

unintended consequences for students that place them at a greater disadvantage than their peers when it comes to passing their ninth-grade year, and remaining on-track for graduation (H. M. Umansky, 2016). Academic tracking is a result of school leaders adhering to state and federal compliance measures when it comes to supporting students with special needs and students identified as English Learners (Alexander, Cook, & DcDill, 1978; Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Bernt Karlson, 2015; Callahan, 2005; VanDeWeghe, 2005). In public high schools, there are five academic tracks to which students are assigned: 1) Advanced Education Track, 2) General Education Track, 3) Special Education Track, 4) English Learner Education Track; and 5) Special Education and English Learner Education Track.

Table 2

Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks that Provide Some Students with a Choice-Based Education, and Others with a Compliance-Based Education

Five Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks
Tier 1: Advanced Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 2: General Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 3: English Learner Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 4: Special Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 5: English Learner and Special Education Track *(Compliance)*

The first two tiers of academic tracks are those where students get to *choose* their courses and programs of study, while students in the last three tiers are *required* to take specific courses mandated by state and federal law based on lower cognitive levels, and lower levels of English language acquisition.

According to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, if students' basic physiological and psychological needs are not met, then cognitive growth is unlikely (Francis & Kritsonis, 2006). If students are coming from situations of poverty where their basic needs are not being met, then the systems, structures, and policies created within the school environment become even more instrumental in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional experiences and outcomes.

Research Strategy and Approach

I began this literature review by outlining my research strategy and approach, as well as restating the purpose of my study and my research questions, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the guiding ideas that frame the impetus of this study. The objective of this comprehensive literature review was to identify, review, and analyze previous research surrounding: academic and behavioral factors that impact ninth-grade completion, challenges of Title I schools, academic tracking and social and economic reproduction, cultural capital, how student will and grit influence ninth-grade completion, and how Title I high school leaders and teachers can positively impact ninth-grade students' performance regardless of socioeconomic status or cognitive ability. I utilized EBSCO Host, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest, JSTOR, and other University of New Mexico library search engines to conduct an extensive review of peer-reviewed articles, professional journals, and professional reports regarding the issues that challenge students to successfully pass their ninth-grade year. I searched using the following key terms and phrases: Title I, ninth-grade, English learners, education, special education, high school transition, ninth-grade transition, ninth-grade success, academic tracking, grit, perseverance, motivation, school culture, truancy, poverty, minority students,

cultural capital, algebra I, graduation exams, high school dropouts, dropout prevention, ninth-grade intervention, high school interventions, early-warning-indicators, and school structures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to address the following research questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade *completers* and *non-completers* perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

Symbolic Significance of a High School Diploma

Graduating from high school is an established ritual, and earning a diploma is symbolic. High school graduation welcomes students into a community as thoughtful and learned citizens who are deemed prepared to contribute to the development and growth of a society (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The high school diploma is a symbolic representation of a student's ability to meet or exceed the standardized expectations for high school completion outlined by each state's public education department (Hoffman, 2013). When students enter the public education system in kindergarten, high school graduation is the common goal for every student. For parents and teachers today, earning a standard high school diploma is more important than ever (Thurlow, Cormier, & Vang, 2009). It is a revered milestone that is considered a basic credential in students'

transition from high school to seek a job, enlist in the military, or pursue postsecondary education. Every school year, highly qualified school leaders and teachers participate in professional development, they plan aligned and rigorous lessons, they prepare their classrooms to be safe learning environments that contribute to students' learning, and they foster strong relationships with all students to promote their academic and social/emotional growth to be able to experience positive outcomes (Sherman, 2011). This is the goal of our public education system, but not always the reality. The reality is that budgets get cut every year, resources become scarce, teacher shortages leave many classrooms with substitutes who are not highly qualified, and many of our children who deserve a high quality education end up falling through the cracks, and left without the academic knowledge, skills, and language to successfully graduate from high school with a diploma.

Many students who drop out of high school realize during their adult lives that they are living with a handicap that prevents them from obtaining basic educational and career opportunities, due to their lack of this important credential (Kimmel & Baker, 2001). The life of a high school dropout includes being four times more likely to be unemployed and applying for public assistance than that of a high school graduate (Koenig, 2011). The lack of a high school diploma affects young adults personally, socially, and economically, and it has an adverse effect on their communities (Amos, 2008). Students who drop out of school often pursue a General Education Diploma (GED); however, many employers prefer a high school diploma to a GED, which puts dropouts at a greater risk of not getting well-paying jobs (Koenig, 2011). Because our public education system cannot guarantee standardized systems and services for every

child, every day, there needs to be additional resources provided to students to be able to meet the standardized expectations and requirements to earn a standard high school diploma. The problem with standardized high school graduation requirements for all students is that students are not standardized. They do not all enter high school with the same academic proficiencies, motivations, passions, experiences, and opportunities, yet the public school system expects the same output from each student (Thurlow et al., 2009). To hold all students to the same performance standards is problematic, and a significant reason why many students disengage from school, and eventually choose to drop out.

Ninth-Grade is a Critical Year

The ninth grade is the most critical year of students' high school years, as the transition to high school is the leakiest of junctures in the education K-12 pipeline (Herlihy, 2007). Of all the grade-level transitions that take place in high school, promotion rates from the ninth-grade to the tenth-grade continue to be lowest of all (Johnston & Williamson, 2011). High school, unlike elementary and middle school, adheres to academic expectations and requirements that dictate students' progress toward graduation through attainment of academic credits, or Carnegie units (E. Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2009). Students' grade levels are determined by the number of academic credits earned, rather than age, or number of years in attendance. If students don't pass their classes during their ninth grade year, they don't earn the credits required to advance to the next grade level, which is unlike their experience in their elementary and middle school years. As many as 40 percent of ninth grade students fail to earn enough academic credits to successfully advance to the tenth grade (Herlihy, 2007). This

is even more problematic in Title I schools, as 40 percent of students drop out of high school after the ninth grade versus 27 percent in low-poverty schools (Johnston & Williamson, 2011).

In order for schools and school districts to increase graduation rates, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on keeping ninth graders engaged and on-track for graduation, as this is the year that most students drop out of the school system (Herlihy, 2007). This is partially due to the ninth-grade being the largest cohort of students within a high school setting (Curran Neild et al., 2008). High school graduates earn more of their academic core credits than that of their peers who are considered dropouts during their ninth-grade year (Hampden-Thompson, Warkentien, & Daniel, 2009). This demonstrates the importance of students earning all of their academic credits during their first year of high school. When students get off-track for graduation during their ninth-grade year by not earning enough academic credits, the likelihood of dropping out increases (Hampden-Thompson et al., 2009). Having to monitor so many students in one grade level is difficult, but it makes it that much more critical for school leaders and teachers to create systems of support to prevent so many students from feeling overwhelmed and invisible, and on a path to eventually dropping out of high school.

Algebra I—The Gatekeeper to Graduation for Ninth-Grade Students

Students are entering high school without prerequisite skills to succeed in their academic core classes, which creates challenges within the classroom setting that not even the most effective teachers can tackle (Zirkel & Pollack, 2016). This is especially a challenge in the academic core subject, mathematics. The strongest predictor in long-term academic and economic success and achievement is competence in mathematics

(Balas, Pollard, & Sanchez Eastwood, 2015). Mathematics is a complex subject area that many students and adults struggle to master, as it involves specific content-vocabulary, skills, concepts, and formulas that do not necessarily align with what is expected of the general level of intelligence in other aspects of life (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, & Savolainen, 2013). Most research surrounding the relationship between anxiety and mathematics has shown a negative association between mathematics and achievement due to the mechanisms that depend on the working memory (Van der Beek, Van der Ven, Kroesbergen, & Leseman, 2017). Many students become anxious when it comes to mathematics, as the subject area leaves very little room for interpretation. A solution to a problem is either correct or incorrect, which amplifies anxiety, which impairs the working memory system that is needed for problem-solving skills (Van der Beek et al., 2017). Algebra I is the entry-level mathematics course in high school, and is the first non-arithmetic math course that students encounter (E. Allensworth et al., 2009). This course is known to be the gatekeeper to high school graduation, because if students do not pass this requisite math course, the chance of them graduating from high school is highly unlikely (J. B. Heppen et al., 2016; Stein, Kaufman, Sherman, & Hillen, 2011). If students fail to master the skills and content-knowledge associated with the algebra I course, their chances of accessing and succeeding in their upper-level math courses that are required for high school graduation decreases, and their path to becoming a high school dropout increases (Snipes & Finkelstein, 2015). Often, students who fail their algebra I course are placed back into another algebra I course as a second attempt to earn the credit, but this is not an effective approach to remediation (Nomi & Allensworth, 2013). Sixty-eight percent of students who earned below a grade of a C during their first

attempt in the algebra I class, also earned below a C grade during their second attempt (Snipes & Finkelstein, 2015). This exemplifies that this intervention approach is not effective.

Algebra I is the one course that provides a ninth-grade student with the minimum entrance requirement needed for admission to a four-year postsecondary institution (C. Stone, 1998). Most ninth graders take algebra I as their first mathematics course in their four-year high school sequence. Those who are more proficient in mathematics may have taken algebra I in seventh or eighth grade, putting them at a greater advantage compared to their less proficient peers (Stein et al., 2011). If a student does not pass algebra I, then his or her chances of graduating on time with his or her graduating class decrease, without some sort of immediate intervention or credit recovery (J. Heppen & Sorensen, 2014). If students successfully complete their algebra I course, then they are more likely to take other higher-level mathematics courses, which in turn leads to higher scores on standardized achievement assessments (Telese, 2000). Because the attainment of a high school diploma requires a student to achieve a certain number of mathematics credits with algebra I being the first prerequisite course, high school graduation becomes a great challenge for many who lack the skills required to successfully accomplish this expectation (E. Allensworth et al., 2009). Not passing algebra I is only one of many reasons why students drop out of high school or don't graduate on time with their cohorts.

The algebra I course has also been identified as an equity and civil rights issue, due to it being considered the gateway to higher mathematics courses, which leads to greater post-secondary opportunities in high paying technical fields (Stein et al., 2011).

When students enter high school below grade-level proficiency in mathematics, they are often placed in remedial courses such as pre-algebra, which do not count toward their required mathematics credits for graduation (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). This is viewed by critics as a perpetuation of inequitable educational opportunities for students, as they are placed in lower-level courses based on their proficiency levels, which are influenced by other socioeconomic factors that contribute to their deficits in academic ability (C. Stone, 1998). Many students enter high school with deficit skills in math, and fall into a situation where they are unable to pass algebra I (E. Allensworth et al., 2009; Nomi, 2012; Snipes & Finkelstein, 2015). Because there is a national effort to graduate all students to be college and career ready, there remains a heavy mathematics sequence, which is a challenge for the majority of high school students (Chaney et al., 1997; Nomi, 2012). Students quickly fall off-track for graduation during their ninth grade year, because they don't have the skills to pass their foundational high school mathematics course, algebra I (Nomi, 2012). This is a civil rights issue, as students who struggle the most in school are often poor and working class students, and students of color (Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1999; Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Entwisle, Alexander, & Steffel Olson, 1997; Mayer & Jencks, 1989; Quinn et al., 2016; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). If these students aren't able to build their skills and knowledge while in elementary and middle school, then they will struggle to achieve in high school, and become at-risk for dropping out (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Hoffer, 1992; Kieffer et al., 2014; McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Research suggests that a stronger focus on supporting students' mathematics skills during their middle school years will result in more successful outcomes during their high school years (Snipes &

Finkelstein, 2015). This substantiates the need for middle schools and high schools to work together to ensure a strong alignment in mathematical content and skills, and instructional practices, in order to better support students for successful outcomes in their high school mathematics courses.

In an effort to better prepare students for college and career readiness, some states have increased their graduation requirements in the area of mathematics (Chaney et al., 1997). This has impacted graduation rates, as many students lack the skills and confidence required to pass upper-level mathematics and science courses (Van der Beek et al., 2017). The state of New Mexico is one of 15 states to increase their graduation requirements in the area of mathematics resulting in increased dropout rates and a decrease in graduation rates (Dounay Zinth, 2007). New Mexico's high school graduation rates remain steady at around 70 percent, in comparison to the national average of 81 percent, consistently ranking in the fifth percentile nationally (Bussey et al., 2016). Compared to the national average of 18 percent, 28 percent of New Mexico high school students do not graduate on time (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). Many states, including Alaska, California, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, Washington, and Wisconsin only require two mathematics courses that do not include the algebra II course requirement (Dounay Zinth, 2007). The majority of states require algebra I, but only 18 states require algebra II (Dounay Zinth, 2007). While the algebra I course is considered to be the gateway course to high school success, the algebra II course is considered to be the gateway course to college and career success (Wallach, 2008). In 2011, researcher, Anthony Carnevale, determined that there was a very weak causal relationship between the algebra II course and postsecondary and

employment success (Hoffman, 2013). Many educators and non-educators have also questioned whether the algebra II requirement is valuable for the majority of students who graduate from high school, or if there are other mathematics courses, such as financial literacy, that would be more useful in students' postsecondary experiences (Hoffman, 2013). The sequence of mathematics courses is also highly dependent on students having the prerequisite skills in order to pass the courses. Increasing the number of mathematics credit requirements for graduation, and requiring the rigorous algebra II course, jeopardizes students' ability to graduate on time with their designated cohorts, because the majority of students do not have the minimal mathematics proficiency skills to successfully pass algebra II (Stein et al., 2011). This is problematic, especially in a state like New Mexico, which maintains a high rate of poverty, and a low rate of high school completion (F. Nathan & Fisher, 2017). Until all stakeholders focus on mechanisms to decrease the highly concentrated areas of poverty within the state of New Mexico, growth in academic achievement rates and graduation rates are likely to remain low due to the life challenges that families in poverty experience on a daily basis (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016; W. Wilson, 2010; W. J. Wilson, 1990, 2012).

High School is High Stakes—New Mexico High School Graduation Requirements

The United States is experiencing a dropout crisis, and urban school districts are experiencing the greatest impact with an average of 50 percent of students dropping out of school and not receiving a diploma (Curran Neild et al., 2008). Due to all the added stress of transition, responsibility, accountability, and not having the level of academic skill needed to be successful in ninth grade classes, students are placed in remedial courses, become truant due to disengagement or other factors, fail their classes, and

eventually drop out of school (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). When students transition to high school, the level of personal accountability is heightened by criteria outlined in high school graduation requirements. Primary requirements include students having to earn academic credits in the areas of: English Language Arts, mathematics, science, social studies, language, and career tech, and passing high school exit exams to demonstrate academic competency (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Until students enter high school for the first time, they did not have to earn academic credits, and not being proficient in reading and mathematics did not prohibit them from advancing to the next grade level. This is a pivotal juncture in the K-12 public education system, as graduation requirements dictate the courses that students take, and the courses that students take affect their academic achievement (Chaney et al., 1997; Hoffman, 2013; Murnane, 2013). In the past, graduation requirements were minimal and focused primarily on a student's ability to earn passing grades, to demonstrate positive behavior, and to maintain regular attendance (Jacob, 2001). Today, with the increase in accountability measures for students, graduation exams have become a primary tool to determine whether or not students have the academic skill and competency to earn a high school diploma (Hoffman, 2013). Graduation exams have become more rigorous throughout the past two decades, which puts added pressure on students to study and master specific skills and content knowledge (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013). Some states adopt alternative paths to graduation for students who are unable to pass the high school graduation exams, but for the states that don't, up to 23 percent of 12th grade students end up dropping out of school (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013). This is an important consideration for states, as not all students are good test-takers, and there could be other means to demonstrate competency

besides through a standardized test (Jacob, 2001). If the goal of public education is to produce citizens who will positively contribute to the greater good of society, then using a single mechanism that only assesses students' proficiency in reading and mathematics only contributes to a one-size-fits all society, which does not equate to success.

In the state of New Mexico, state legislators and the New Mexico Public Education Department, create policy and regulation that requires all students to meet specific graduation requirements in order to be awarded with a high school diploma of excellence. These requirements are necessary to ensure that the diploma is tied to specific criteria to certify its standardization and legitimacy, but it is difficult to create a one-size-fits-all diploma, as not all students come to school with the same resources, skill base, knowledge, ability, beliefs, confidence, determination, and post-secondary goals (Thurlow et al., 2009). Education policy drives the initiatives behind the efforts of secondary school reform and multi-year strategic planning to include ways to prevent students in the ninth grade from dropping out of school; however, the details are ambiguous as to how districts and schools are to improve with mandates that are often unfunded (F. Nathan & Fisher, 2017). When decisions are made at the state level, and policy is created or amended, school leaders are expected to make sure that their students in each graduation cohort meet the outlined requirements for that specific cohort. This is complex, as students, especially in high poverty schools, are often more transient, and difficult to track and align with specific cohorts, making it difficult to ensure all students' needs and graduation prerequisites are being met each school year (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Santillano, Jabbar, & Harris, 2016). When students get to high school, many fail to earn all of their required credits during their

ninth grade year, which immediately places them off-track for graduation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Caballero, S., Forrer, K., and Herman, P. (2006) from the Legislative Education Study Committee Work Group outline concerns surrounding graduation requirements and high school redesign.

> During its November 2006 meeting, the Legislative Education Study Committee heard presentations on a number of issues concerning College/Workplace Readiness and High School Redesign, including high school diploma options, graduation requirements for public schools, a systems-wide approach to redesigning high schools, and factors influencing student success. The main focus of the subgroups was whether to change the graduation requirements and diploma options for New Mexico high school students to increase the rigor of the high school program to ensure college/workplace readiness. (Caballero, Forrer, & Herman, p. 8)

Some students want to graduate from high school and attend prestigious Ivy League schools, some want to attend state universities, others want to get their basics completed at their local community colleges, some want to enlist in the military, and others want to immediately join the workforce. These different trajectories require different preparation and systems of support. It is important to uphold the standardization of the diploma, but differentiated paths could be developed beyond the general diploma for those wanting to attend 4-year colleges and universities that don't include one-size-fits-all requirements.

The implication of frequent changes and modifications of high school graduation requirements adds great strain to school leaders to ensure compliance and on-track progress for students, yet strive for continued student success, given minimal resources and decreasing annual budgets (Murnane, 2013). Working within the public educational setting is to be soldier-like—to follow in the order of the troops, to remain subordinate at all times, and to produce positive results with so many convoluted expectations, regulations, and policies (Ravitch, 2016). Every time a new governor is inducted, there

seems to be more and more changes in graduation requirements to include reform efforts to increase graduation and proficiency rates (Caballero et al., 2006). It is a do more with less expectation that permeates the walls of every classroom and creates cultures of defeat and hopelessness in many schools. Every few years in the state of New Mexico, there are increases in the requirements for high school graduation to include: credit hours, demonstrations of academic competency, English learner and special education services compliance, additional interim assessment requirements, and an increase in expectations for college and career to include a requirement that every student must take a minimum of one honors, AP, or dual credit course before they can qualify for graduation (Caballero et al., 2006). These types of changes pose many challenges for students to be able to succeed, especially if they are English learners or if they require exceptional student services (L. A. Maxwell, 2012). It is controversial to increase graduation requirements to include adding more math and science classes, more advanced classes, and more career technical classes (Chaney et al., 1997; Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2008). The concern is that by increasing the number of academic credits required to graduate from high school, those students already struggling will disengage entirely, decide against attending college, and instead, will drop out of school (Wallach, 2008). Instead of basing decisions on the theory that increasing graduation requirements will better prepare students for college and careers, policy makers should consider engaging in conversations with educational leaders and teachers about how to increase the academic rigor, relevance, and student engagement within every classroom to create quality instruction for every student (Elmore, 2012). More does not equate to better.

It is easy for students to fall off-track for graduation if the adults in their schools and within the public education system are not paying attention, or don't have early warning indicator systems in place, to ensure monitoring of all students' progress toward graduation (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; L. A. Maxwell, 2012; Stuit et al., 2016). Constant changes in high school graduation requirements at the state level make it that much more critical for school leaders, and leadership and wellness teams, to create systems for all students to receive the attention they deserve both academically, socially, and emotionally so they don't fall off-track for graduation with their designated cohort, become discouraged, and eventually drop out of high school.

Academic Credit Hours

The New Mexico Public Education Department's mission is to get high schools to graduate all students prepared for college and careers (Nelson, Adams, Groat, Kempema, & Vaughn, 2013). This is a positive thing; however, it is not an easy task, as all students are different and have different needs and aspirations. To achieve this mission of college and career readiness, academic course requirements have increased over the years. In the state of New Mexico, all students, regardless of ability, are required to complete 24 credit hours within four years of high school in order to achieve a high school diploma of excellence ("NMSA 22-13-1.1. Graduation requirements," n.d.). Those 24 credit hours consist of four credits of English Language Arts, four credits of mathematics, three credits of science, three and one half credits of social studies, one credit of physical education, one half credit of health education, one credit of a foreign language or career technical course, and seven and one half credits of elective courses ("NMSA 22-13-1.1.

Graduation requirements," n.d.). The sizeable academic credit requirements did not always exist (Plank et al., 2008). When there is a transfer of leadership from one New Mexico Governor to the next, high school graduation requirements often change or increase.

Prior to the entering 9th grade cohort in 2005-2006, students were only required to take three mathematics and two science courses ("NMSA 22-13-1.1. Graduation requirements," n.d.). Subsequently, the requirements increased in math to four math credits to include algebra II or higher, three science credits to include two with lab components, and an additional half-credit in social studies to capture New Mexico history ("NMSA 22-13-1.1. Graduation requirements," n.d.). There is usually an external motivation for these increases. For example, the state may find it difficult to fill critical technical positions, so they increase mathematics and science credits as a graduation requirement in an effort to expose and engage students in more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) focused courses to better prepare them for jobs and professions in these high demand areas. The drawback with this type of change is that not all technical jobs require a college degree. Chaney, Burgdorf, & Atash (1997) state that the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data show a strong relationship between course-taking and student achievement, with each additional year of college-preparatory course-taking being associated with an 18-point increase in NAEP mathematical scores. With the NAEP test being the longest-standing assessment, this statement alone is enough to make policymakers want to increase math credit requirements for students in high school with the objective to increase test scores and proficiency rates for all students. Something that they don't consider, however, is that

even though this policy may indicate a positive impact for some students, it does not have that same impact for all students, especially those students whose socioeconomic status strata is lower (Parker et al., 2016). In fact, it is stated that these hefty mathematics requirements can actually cause harm to those students who are unable to pass these upper-level math courses such as algebra II, eventually causing them to have a negative self-image, and ultimately compromising their ability to graduate with a diploma (Chaney et al., 1997; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; G. Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). This is an example of how good intentions can have unintended consequences. Because of this, New Mexico state policymakers and educators are questioning whether the traditional algebra II course is necessary, or if different math courses that serve a wider range of future careers, should be a graduation requirement (Hoffman, 2013). Most would agree that more students could benefit more from taking a financial literacy course as a math requirement instead of algebra II, as it is more applicable and relevant to real-world situations. Hoffman (2013), in her journal *What it Takes to Complete High School*, examines this algebra II phenomenon. The debate on algebra II dates at least from 2011 when Anthony Carnevale, the researcher who established the correlation between algebra II and postsecondary and employment success, asserted that the causal link is very weak and other math choices might be more useful than algebra II. There is very little research available that supports the value of a student taking algebra II, unless he or she is going to college to focus on a STEM-based degree and profession (Holopainen, Taipale, & Savolainen, 2017). Because of this, the algebra II requirement currently acts as a barrier to higher education access that further perpetuates disparities

between students who come from lower-income families and those from more affluent families.

In 2009, another unfunded mandate from the New Mexico Public Education Department was created that required all students to take a minimum of one Advanced Placement course, honors course, dual credit course, or a distance-learning course in order to graduate from high school (Balas et al., 2015). The intent with this requirement was to improve education through increased rigor and relevancy to improve students' ability to succeed in post-secondary opportunities in college and careers. This type of policy is considered to be an unfunded mandate by school leaders and teachers (Ravitch, 2013). It is yet another challenge that schools must work though to make sure that students receive access to this requirement, so they can graduate. A major issue with this specific policy is the juxtaposition that teachers and school leaders struggle with surrounding rigor and relevance and a watered-down curriculum to meet the needs of those far below grade-level.

Graduation Exams

Student assessment has become a huge nuisance in the public school system (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013). Required assessments and demonstration of competency at the high school level are not only challenging to implement logistically, but are also difficult for many students to pass with proficiency if they come from low income households, are English language learners, or who receive special education services (Jacob, 2001). Students used to have to demonstrate competency in order to graduate from high school by taking the New Mexico Competency Examination (Center on Education Policy, 2010). This assessment was normed at 8th grade reading and

mathematics standards, so the exam changed to the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment (NMSBA), which was normed at 11th grade reading and mathematics standards, and deemed a more rigorous assessment (Center on Education Policy, 2010). These exams were administered paper/pencil and its implementation and administration was dependent on human efficacy and efficiency. Then, with the state adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam became the preferred graduation exam (Nelson et al., 2013). Because of frequent changes in New Mexico's state graduation exams, it is difficult to assess the achievement and growth of students longitudinally, as the assessment changes every three-to-five years. Once a baseline is established with one high school graduation assessment, it changes, which makes much of the data futile, as schools and districts are comparing one set of data to a completely different set, when analyzing their students' achievement data.

Changes in graduation requirements are not often felt at the state level until the effects become visual and vocal through the media. When the PARCC exam was first implemented in the state of New Mexico, students demonstrated their frustrations by organizing walkouts and anti-testing rallies outside the state capitol building to vocalize their disapproval of how much time was designated to test-taking throughout their school year ("Students statewide walkout in protest of new tests. Here's everything you need to know and the schools where that is happening," 2015). Their message was heard loud and clear, as it gained media attention across the nation. Students, teachers, principals, and families all agreed with the same argument that the PARCC exam took too much time to administer, yet the results weren't available until the following school year, which

made the test just that, a test—not a true assessment with timely results to be able to use as a tool to help students and teachers improve (Contreras, 2015). Because of the increased number of students who opted-out of the test, and the chaos surrounding the student walkouts in the media, the state and PED scaled back on the number of PARCC testing administrations from two to one, maintaining the argument that they are working to decrease the required amount of testing taking place in schools (Burgess, 2017).

The newest PARCC testing requirements require students to attempt the test a minimum of three times before any type of alternative demonstration of competency may be used, and it is also required to be taken on the computer ("Frequently asked questions about PARCC," n.d.). The challenge that school leaders face when it comes to having every student take the English Language Arts and mathematics PARCC tests digitally, is that many schools do not have enough computers for every student, and not all students can type quickly for the extended response compositions that are required ("Technology skills for computer-based assessment," n.d.). Because of the lack of computers, the scheduling for students becomes complex and chunks of time are robbed from instruction so that all students can test. Jacob (2001) expresses that these tests are not only ineffective, but raise dropout rates, sacrifice higher-order thinking skills, and adversely affect students of color. High stakes tests bring much anxiety and fear to school communities, especially school communities that battle poverty (Bempechat et al., 1999; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013; Jacob, 2001). If the state wanted to provide students with a more aligned path toward success in college and careers, they could make ACT and/or SAT the state exit exams, as these are national proficiency exams that are utilized for college entrance. Institutions of higher education do not use students' PARCC scores for

college entrance—colleges use scores from the ACT (American College Testing) and the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test). Jacob (2001) states that graduation tests have no appreciable effect on the probability of dropping out for the average student, but they increase the probability of dropping out among the lowest ability students. This suggests that policymakers would be well advised to rethink current graduation test policies. If these tests have adverse effects on most students' progress toward graduation, then the state really needs to rethink a better approach for students to demonstrate competency in reading and mathematics, as it contradicts their objective to increase graduation rates through a one-size-fits-all modality.

Not All High Schools Are Created Equal—Characteristics of Title I Schools

In New Mexico, out of 877 public schools in the K-12 system, 782, or 89 percent of schools, are categorized as Title I schools (Nelson et al., 2013). The objective of Title I federal funding is to help support children from disadvantaged families to meet the same high academic standards as their non-disadvantaged peers, by allocating additional resources to support academic growth and achievement (McFarland et al., 2017). To qualify as a Title I school, and receive additional federal funding to support the academic achievement of low-income students, a minimum of 75 percent of the families within the school must have an annual income of $24,250.00 for a family of four (Le Tendre, 1996; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Families of students who attend Title I schools tend to lack basic fundamental resources, which impact their students' success in school such as: a high school diploma, full-time employment, health insurance, and access to preschool for their children (Le Tendre, 1996). School leaders and teachers who work in Title I schools work to provide equitable opportunities for all children, but without

additional funding and resources such as Title I funding, this is an all but impossible task (Le Tendre, 1996). This is a critical aspect to consider when it comes to how schools are graded by their state's Public Education Departments on their students' academic performance on standardized tests. In the state of New Mexico, each public school is given a letter grade (A-F) by the New Mexico Public Education Department based on: 1) If students are performing on grade level in reading and mathematics, 2) If the entire school is making academic progress, 3) Improvement of higher-performing students, 4) Improvement of lowest-performing students, 5) An opportunity to learn survey given to students and families that questions whether or not their school is a good place to attend and learn, 6) Graduation rates (high schools only), 7) College and career readiness measures (high schools only), and 8) Bonus points for reducing truancy, promoting extracurricular activities, engaging families, and using technology ("NMPED School Grading," n.d.). To use the same criteria to compare a Title I high school to a non-Title I high school is not a viable, or equitable approach, as not all high schools are created equal (Ravitch, 2016).

New Mexico Factors that Impact Student Achievement

New Mexico is a charming state with picturesque landscapes and a strong historical and cultural relevance that outshines most states throughout the country. It is a large, rural state, and its economy is fueled by tourism (Bussey et al., 2016). Known for its popular southwestern cuisine and its pueblos of indigenous peoples and Native art, New Mexico is an illustrious tourist attraction, yet it is crippled by its high rate of poverty and dismal educational outcomes. Nearly one in five New Mexicans is living in poverty and the percentage continues to increase each year (Balas et al., 2015). This has a direct

impact on student achievement, because if students don't have their basic needs met at home, then they will not be able to focus on their academics in school, resulting in negative educational outcomes (Adiele & Abraham, 2013). Payne (1996) outlines characteristics that surface with adults and students who come from poverty that include coming from single-parent households, having to depend on public transportation, and surviving paycheck-to paycheck. She explains that families often come from generational poverty where poverty has been a way of life for more than two generations, rather than situational poverty, which is temporary (Payne, 1996).

In the state of New Mexico (see Figure 6), an average of 20 percent of individuals are living in poverty in comparison to an average of 14 percent nationally (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

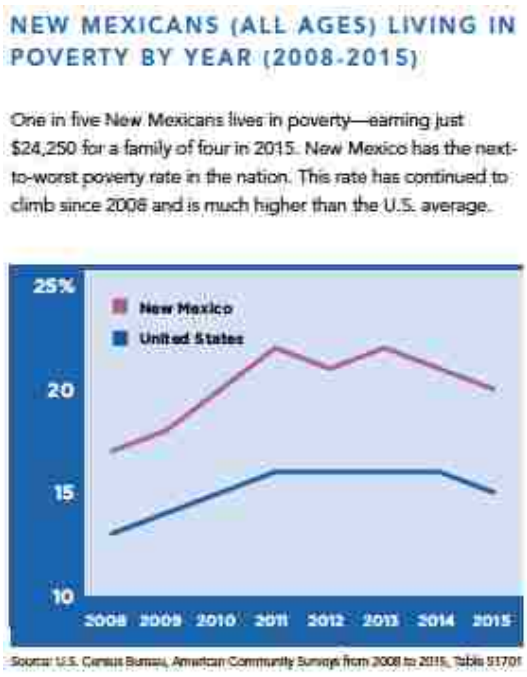

Figure 6. Percentage of New Mexicans (all ages), compared to United States average, living in poverty from 2008-2015 (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

When it comes to the percentage of children living in poverty in the state of New Mexico (see Figure 7), an average of 28 percent of children are living in poverty in comparison to an average of 20 percent nationally (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). According to Payne (1996), generational poverty is difficult to overcome, and is often the most influential variable that prevents students from succeeding in school.

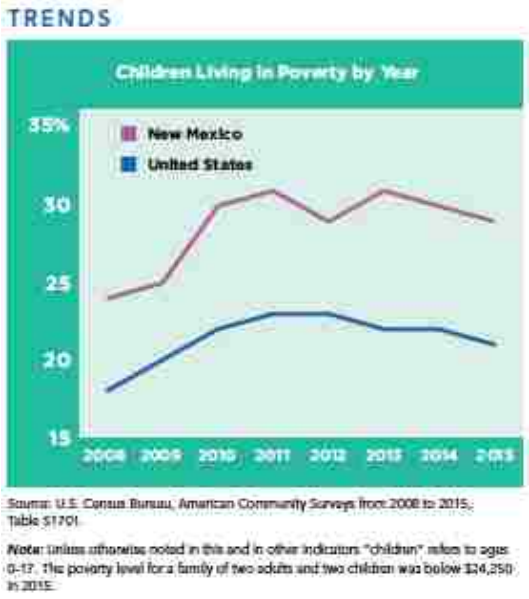

Figure 7. Percentage of New Mexican children living in poverty, compared to United States average, (The poverty level is $24,250 for a family of four) from 2008-2015 (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

In New Mexico, 59 percent of students are Hispanic, 25 percent are Non-Hispanic (White), 10 percent are Native American, 2 percent are Black or African American, 1 percent are Asian, and 3 percent are categorized in the Other Races category (see Figure 8) (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). Students in New Mexico who identify as Hispanic tend not to perform as well academically as their Non-Hispanic (White) peers (Bachelor, 1991; Coleman et al., 1966; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder Jr., 2001; Quinn et al., 2016). Because the majority (59 percent) of the student population in New

Mexico identifies as Hispanic, it is evident that there is a greater challenge for New Mexico teachers to increase student achievement with this large population.

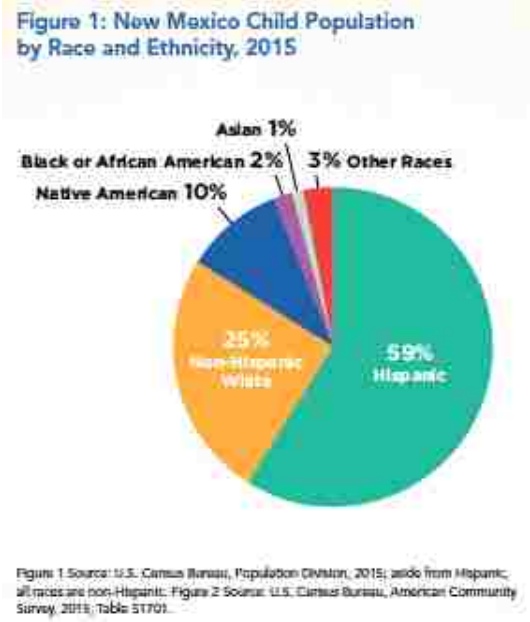

Figure 8. Breakdown of the child population in New Mexico by race and ethnicity (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

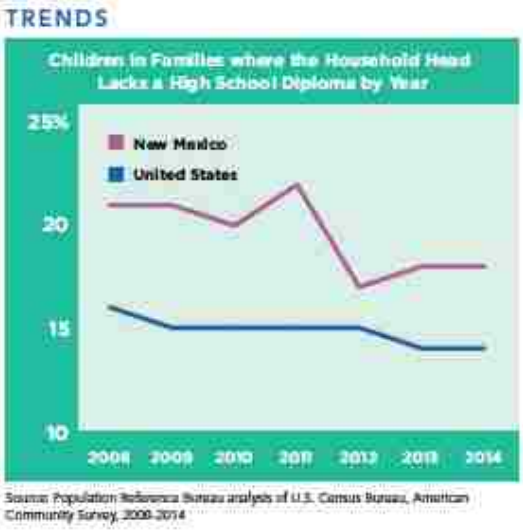

Figure 9. Percentage of New Mexican children living in families where the head-of-household does not have a high school diploma (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

In New Mexico, between 18 and 22 percent of children are living in families where the head-of-household does not have a high school diploma (see Figure 9 above) (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). Between 40 and 45 percent of New Mexico children live in single-parent households (see Figure 10 below) (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

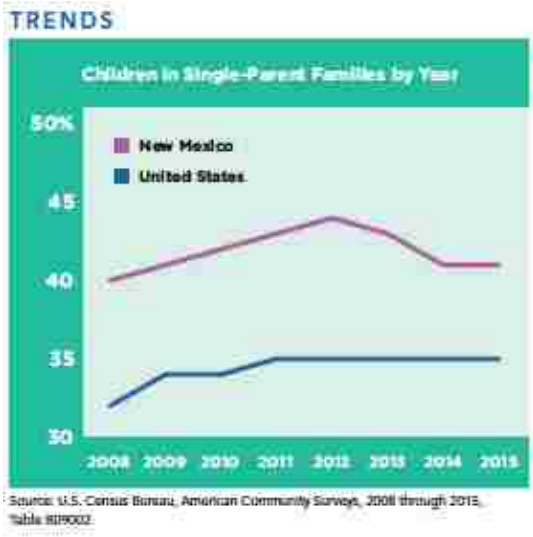

Figure 10. Percentage of New Mexican children living in single-parent households (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

Between 30 and 36 percent of New Mexico children live in households where not a single parent has full-time, year-round employment (see Figure 11) (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016), which equates to instability in the household, a lack of basic needs, and a lack of health insurance.

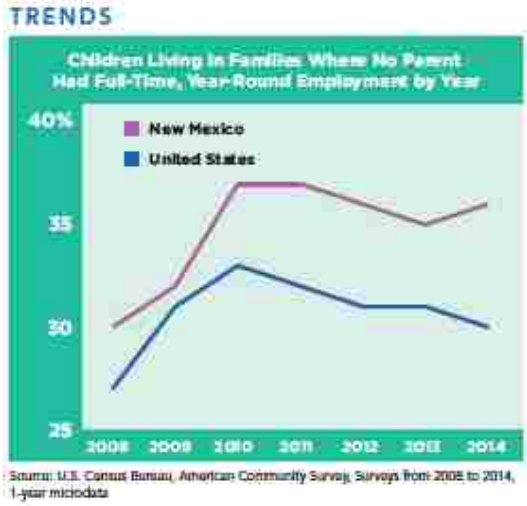

Figure 11. Percentage of New Mexican children living in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

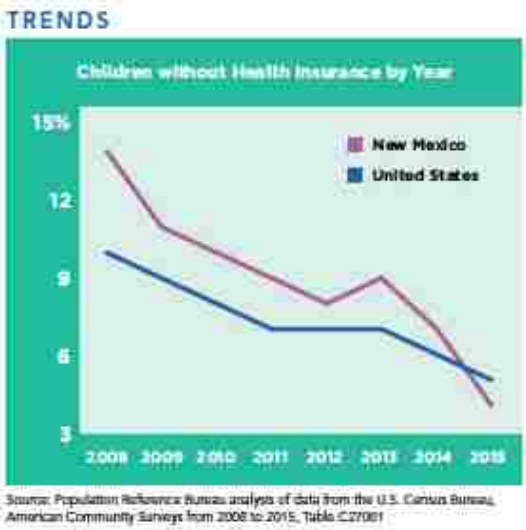

Figure 12. Percentage of New Mexican children living without health insurance (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

If parents do not have full-time employment, then a lack of access to health insurance becomes the norm, which impacts how students perform in school (see Figure 12). If students aren't healthy, then they struggle to learn in school (Adiele & Abraham, 2013; Francis & Kritsonis, 2006).

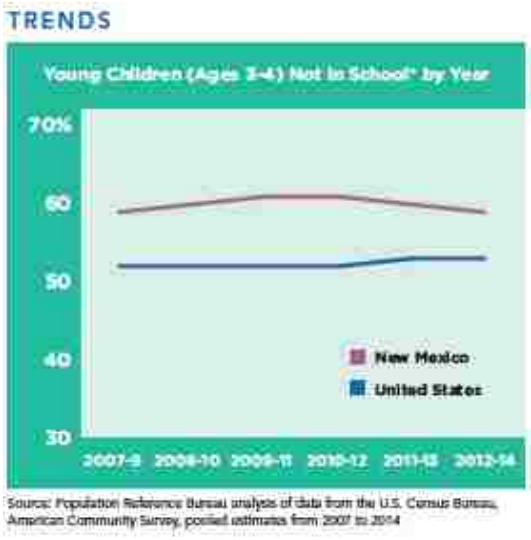

Figure 13. Percentage of New Mexican children not enrolled in preschool (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

Another issue that influences students' performance in school is access to preschool. In New Mexico, an average of 60 percent of students ages three and four are not enrolled in a preschool program (see Figure 13), which negatively affects their cognitive, social, and emotional development compared to their peers who are able to attend preschool (Dumais, 2005; Entwisle et al., 1997).

The impact of colonialism, poverty, and changes in technology and the economy have spurred educational reform in the state of New Mexico, as it continues to struggle to compete nationally when it comes to achievement rates in reading and mathematics, and high school graduation rates (Bachelor, 1991; Balas et al., 2015; F. Nathan & Fisher, 2017; Nelson et al., 2013; Nott, 2016). Figure 14 displays a comparison of New Mexico students, and the national average of 4th graders who score below grade-level proficiency in reading, and 8th graders who score below grade-level proficiency in mathematics, from the year 2007 to 2015. It is apparent that in the state of New Mexico, 75-80 percent of students are performing below grade-level proficiency on the 4th grade National

Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) test for reading, and 75-85 percent of students are performing below grade-level proficiency on the 8th grade NAEP test in mathematics. These data are indicative of how students in New Mexico struggle on their paths toward high school graduation. Not being proficient in reading and mathematics makes it difficult for students to pass their classes in order to earn academic credits, advance to upper grade levels, and pass their high school exit exams (Murnane, 2013). Unlike Smarter Balance, or The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests, the NAEP test is the most reliable test when it comes to analyzing student achievement data longitudinally, as it has been used to measure reading and mathematics proficiency rates from students throughout the United States since 1969 (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

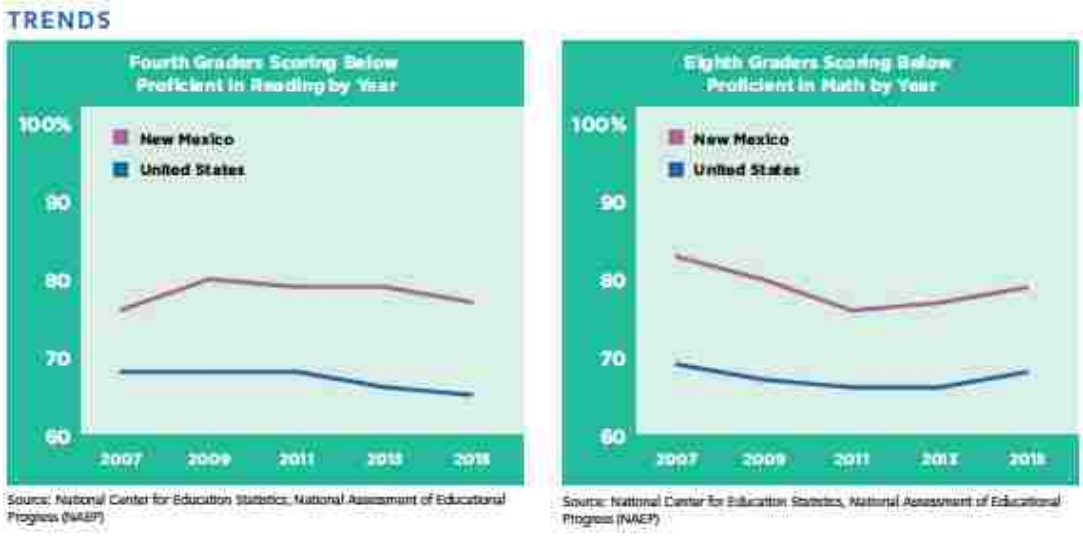

Figure 14. Percentage of 4th grade students scoring below proficient in reading, and percentage of 8th grade students scoring below proficient in mathematics in the state of New Mexico, compared to United States average, from 2007-1015 (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

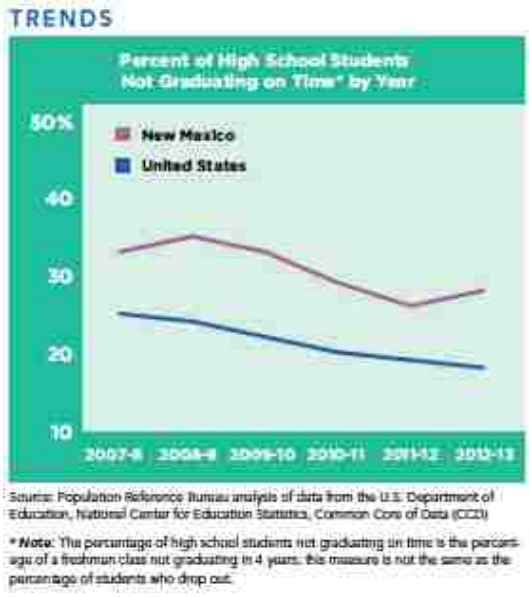

Figure 15. Percentage of high school students not graduating on time (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016).

Based on this information, the trajectory for students to become proficient in reading and mathematics by the time they enter high school is highly improbable, which results in dismal achievement and graduation outcomes for our students in the state of New Mexico (see Figure 15). Until the state of New Mexico initiates stronger efforts to battle poverty, then student achievement in the public school system is likely to continue to follow a path of mediocrity (Nott, 2016).

Poverty

Humans have an innate desire to fix what is considered, in subjectivity, to be broken. There is a fog of pessimism that exists within our public educational system that forces constant evaluation of the efficacy of systems, programs, curricula, schools, leaders, teachers, and students. The greatest travesty that exists in our society is that people are quick to blame schooling and educators for student outcomes, regardless of external factors that are not within educators' locust of control, such as poverty (Ravitch,

2013). Instead of providing additional supports to schools with high rates of poverty to try to level the playing field for all students to experience success, policy makers rush to intervene with punitive measures such as teacher evaluation, supplemental programming for reading and mathematics intervention, and at the extreme spectrum, school closure (Ravitch, 2016).

Every day, people work toward the goal of achieving better living and working situations, opportunity for themselves and their families, and the understanding that their daily contributions to society are meaningful and beneficial to the greater good of humanity. Where struggle exists, hope is the catalyst for progress and possibility (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). There is something deep within people to strive for better circumstances in some, if not all, aspects of their lives. Hope is what keeps people focused on working toward that betterment with a belief that it is achievable. Education is a known change agent to better social and fiscal outcomes; however, there is not an equitable playing field to achieve these strata of educational attainment, because poverty exists, and it is rarely addressed (Levine, 2006). When sociologist and researcher, James Coleman, wrote *Equality of Educational Opportunity* in 1966, much attention was focused on his findings. He outlined the extreme inequities in education throughout the nation and magnified patterns of poverty, access, and segregation (Coleman et al., 1966). The irony is that there has not been much progress from 1966 to 2017 in terms of how our society has addressed poverty and its effects on the educational outcomes of students and the communities where they reside (Quinn et al., 2016). The main objective of public schools in our society is to provide opportunity to all students by developing mental skills and imparting knowledge (Coleman et al., 1966). This emphasizes that our

public schools are instrumental, especially in communities with concentrated populations of low social capital (Bass & Faircloth, 2013). A specific issue that continues to impact the educational outcomes of our society without resolution is poverty.

There are many reasons why ninth-grade students do not earn all their academic credits during their ninth-grade year, and much is attributed to factors such as: lack of family support, the need to work, negative peer influences, and disciplinary policies in schools (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). When it comes to education in America, there is always someone to blame for the newest identified crisis according to educational reformers. Is there a crisis? Yes. Is it in education? No. Public education is a reflection of society, and is only failing as a result of the concentrated poverty and racial segregation that continues to perpetuate within society (Ravitch, 2013). There is a continued social crisis in our nation that encompasses politics and economics, and the outcomes surrounding education, are the result of this crisis. A critical element of this nation in crisis is its economic divide (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Huang & Zhu, 2012; Parker et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2016; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Our country is divided—there are those who struggle to achieve and those who achieve without struggle. Poverty is real and exists within many communities, but it is rarely addressed, because of the belief that America is the land of opportunity (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004). There is a belief that anyone, regardless of social strata, can achieve if they choose to achieve. That carries some truth to it; however, it avoids detailing the opportunity gap that lies within the inequitable situations and the challenges that face the majority in regards to the effort it takes to truly achieve in this land of opportunity (Coleman et al., 1966). There is little detail about the major

discrepancy in the compromise of each group. Anyone can eventually achieve anything they put their minds to, but the time and effort that it takes is differentiated. Earning a high school diploma in four years for one individual may take another individual six years based on their living circumstance (Barrington & Hendricks, 2001). Each individual can achieve the same goal, but it takes longer for one, due to the gap in living circumstances and the level of poverty within their local neighborhood (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991). Equality does not equate to equity (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Public schools are important and they work well for the majority of students (F. Nathan & Fisher, 2017); however, the reason why some schools and school districts continue to produce low test scores and low graduation rates is due to the concentration of poverty and racial minorities (Ravitch, 2013).

Poverty adversely effects all within our country, because it does not discriminate (Bishaw & Benson, 2017). The United States has become more individualistic and self-righteous, which often paralyzes our ability to function as a community for the betterment of our country as a whole (Putnum, 2000). There are those who have their basic needs met and those do not. Poverty becomes even more exaggerated, because we are splintered when it comes to our political belief systems. Because so much time and money is spent on creating policy to oust an opposing ideal, the true work of humanism, growth, and unity in our United States of America gets blurred, and progress is no longer about the progress of our United States of America, but rather, the focus of progress shifts to the achievement of the individual or specialized group (D. Stone, 2012). Education is only one victim of this schizophrenic social atmosphere, but it is highlighted, because it directly affects people's living circumstances in a democratic

society, and their advantage platform for opportunity (Dewey, 2007). Education is at the mercy of the chosen political party in office, and because of this, there is never consistency in policy, which creates lack of longitudinal data to inform us as to whether or not efforts on the educational front are truly effective. From President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation, to President Barack Obama's Race to the Top legislation, America is beginning to see the results of two punitive initiatives that were put in place to chokehold educators into submission and early retirement (Ravitch, 2016). Politics, and their involvement in educational reform, convolute the purpose of education with semantics and measures of accountability, instead of focusing on those who truly have the power to reform, the teachers in the classrooms who work with students every day. In *My Pedagogic Creed* Dewey (1897) states,

> I believe that it is the business of everyone interested in education to insist upon the school as the primary and most effective interest of social progress and reform in order that society may be awakened to realize what the school stands for, and aroused to the necessity of endowing the educator with sufficient equipment properly to perform his task (p. 17).

Dewey (1897) suggests that we give our teachers the means necessary to educate our students with the knowledge and skills they need for the social progress we desire. Ravitch (2013) believes that education reformers relied strongly on the relationship between school and society, but now believes that there is a bipartisan consensus when it comes to educational reform in our country. This is why the true educational reformers, teachers and school leaders, keep their focus away from external efforts that they have no control over, and maintain their energy and focus on what really matters, supporting the social, emotional, physical, and mental growth and development of their students to become positive, active, and productive contributors to our society (Johnson, 1991;

Kelly, 2009; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009; Witkow, 2009). If poverty has continued to be the constant barrier to progress within our country, and if we consider education to be a mechanism to rid of poverty, we should invest in high quality public schools for all students regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status.

The achievement gap in our country is a societal gap; it is not school based. School, unfortunately, is where it manifests. The gap is a symptom that far exceeds the reach of the school into the realms of society, economics, and politics. Schools can be part of the solution to leverage they playing field for students, but they cannot fix poverty and racial isolation, yet that is to what they are being held accountable (Ravitch, 2013). Politicians are not educators, yet they create educational policy, and unfortunately, it is considered acceptable. No individual would approve of a politician telling a doctor what to do during surgery so why is this behavior accepted in education? Teachers are the true reformers. They were in 1966, and they continue to be our soldiers on the front lines, working hard to support their students and protect them from negligent and punitive policy and reform.

There has been a great focus on how to improve education, yet poverty is never a part of the conversation. Any reform at the national level creates frameworks from which to work, and there are many great resources in our country to support effective teaching and learning, but the measures enacted to hold educators accountable are nonsensical and are only meant to penalize and demoralize (Ravitch, 2016). Accountability is a tool, and it is not a bad tool, if all the correct components are in place. In order to hold anyone accountable for something, they must be given clear objectives, proper training, and adequate resources (Johnson, 2007). Unfortunately, public schools, being a reflection of

the communities in which they reside, are not afforded these basic necessities, and yet, they are being held accountable for the levels of poverty within their communities, to which they have no control (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Mayer & Jencks, 1989; Quinn et al., 2016; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). This is a crisis. According to Coleman (1966), teachers are more likely to prefer to teach Anglo-Saxon students; all-white students; children from white-collar and professional homes; and high-ability students, because they perform better, and poverty is never a part of the conversation. Teachers want to be able to teach students the curriculum, instead of having to drudge through issues that are out of their control, such as poverty. It is easier to teach students from more affluent families, as they do not require as much academic remediation, and social/emotional support, as do students who come from families of low socio-economic backgrounds (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). This is even more heightened, as more states are tying students' test scores to teachers' evaluations. The average achievement scores of White students, and students who come from more affluent households, are above those of nearly all other ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Coleman et al., 1966). Because of this, teachers are more apt to want to teach in schools where their students' test scores will reflect more positively than negatively in their evaluations.

Schools cannot improve until the communities where they reside improve (Ravitch, 2013). Until poverty is a focal point of the conversation between politicians and educators, inequities and segregation will persist, as they have throughout the decades.

Poor and Working Class, and Students of Color, Most-at-Risk of Dropping Out

Racial segregation is frequently observed and researched when it comes to comparing public schools and public school districts, but income segregation is also a trend that is prompted by income inequalities within communities (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). When it comes to segregation in America, race becomes the immediate focus; however, research has demonstrated that the stratification of economic class, not race, has a greater influence when it comes to social conflict (W. J. Wilson, 2012). The economy in the United States is morphing into the shape of an hourglass with those families in higher income brackets doing increasingly better, families in lower income brackets doing increasingly worse, and a dwindling middle class (Entwisle et al., 1997). Many social issues arise from the inequities triggered by racial injustices, which are closely related to economic inequalities (W. J. Wilson, 1990). The argument that racial minority students struggle to escape from poverty is relevant, but it is ignorant to assume that race is the premise of their struggle, because students who come from poor neighborhoods are almost all Black or Hispanic (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Mayer & Jencks, 1989; W. Wilson, 2010). Since the 1960s, social scientists have stressed the importance of a family's socioeconomic status as an influence on student academic achievement (Coleman et al., 1966). It does not take much research to understand why poor and working class students, who are also primarily students of color, are most at-risk for dropping out of school. Any student who comes from a family of low socioeconomic status (SES), faces challenges every day that interfere with how to meet their basic needs based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Levine, 2006). If students do not have their physiological, safety, and social needs met, then those areas of deficit are going to be

their foci, not academic achievement in school (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Doll & Hess, 2001; Francis & Kritsonis, 2006). Entwisle et al. (1997), state that there is a strong correlation between families' socioeconomic status and student achievement and dropout rates, as those students who come from impoverished backgrounds fail to graduate from high school at greater rates than that of their better-off classmates.

The students most at-risk of dropping out of school are students classified as minority, underperforming in reading and mathematics, English language learners, having behavioral or emotional disengagement from school, and those who live in high-poverty neighborhoods (Balfanz et al., 2007). Often, students who come from poor and working class living conditions drop out of school due to situations that require them to get a full-time job, or to become a caregiver to a sick or handicap family member (Koenig, 2011). Low-income youth are at particular risk for educational challenges such as grade retention, referrals to special education services, referrals to behavioral support services, and dropping out of school (Benner & Mistry, 2007). These factors highly impact students' ability to achieve, and their significant influence on student achievement, places a great amount of pressure on teachers and principals within their schools (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997). Teachers and leaders work tirelessly to engage all students during the school year, but they face a great obstacle when it comes to the summer months. Students who come from situations of poverty experience minimal cognitive growth during the summer months, where they are no longer provided with the resources supplied by schools—how much students learn over the summer is directly impacted by their family socioeconomic status (Entwisle et al., 1997; Vera et al., 2016). This is highly discouraging to educators, as it makes their work during the school year

seem ineffectual. This is the challenge of school leaders, educators, and many other social institutions—how to get students' needs met that are not being met outside the school, so they can focus on building students' self-esteem to enhance academic achievement (Adiele & Abraham, 2013).

Students who lack proficiency of the English language are also at-risk for dropping out, as they struggle to not only understand content, but are constantly trying to gain mastery of the language in which they are taught and tested every year (Callahan, 2005; Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; I. M. Umansky, 2016). Doll and Hess (2001) highlight those who primarily fall into the hands of the dropout pipeline due to social, political, and educational inequities.

> Race and culture-linked inequities in the rates of high school completion are among the most important social dilemmas faced by modern American leaders. The effects of not completing school fall disproportionately on the shoulders of underrepresented groups including the poor, members of ethnic minorities, and those speaking English as a second language (pp. 351-352).

Because the majority of students who are English learners from Latin American countries come from families with low SES (Quinn et al., 2016), the struggle that teachers and leaders experience to educate all students is compounded by also having to provide supports for English language development.

There continues to be a perception from middle and upper class families and educators that students of color with lower SES (socioeconomic status), and their families, do not place value on academic achievement, because of their patterns of underperformance and lack of family engagement within schools (Dumais, 2005). This, fortunately, is just a perception, assumed by those who are not confronted with the same challenges. Many students who come from situations of poverty are often truant due to

the lack of stability in their households (Flannery, Frank, & McGrath Kato, 2012; Monk & Ibrahim, 1984; Strand & Granlund, 2014). Many students end up dropping out of school due to the economic position of their families, especially if they are from single-parent households (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, 1991; Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). Another issue that students with low SES encounter is frequently changing schools. Thirty-one percent of students have changed schools two or more times between the first and eighth grade (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Family attributes contribute to student mobility, which in turn, contribute to achievement disparities in students who frequently switch schools, compared to their peers who remain in a single school (Dauter & Fuller, 2016). Moving from school-to-school is disruptive to a student's educational experience, and the frustration of falling behind and becoming disengaged, thwarts them to a path of dropping out of school.

Teachers and principals can also have an adverse effect on their students by lowering their expectations resulting in negative outcomes (Benner & Mistry, 2007; Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Rist, 2000). The trend, unfortunately, is that low-performing schools in lower SES neighborhoods are more difficult to fill with highly qualified teachers and principals, as the work involved to raise achievement is amplified by the work that needs to be done to meet the needs of students that are not being met in the home (Simon & Moore Johnson, 2013). When low performing schools are filled with teachers who maintain low expectations for student achievement, the students within these schools eventually begin to perceive themselves as low-performing and only perform to their teachers' expectations (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Rist, 2000). The average minority pupil's achievement may suffer more in a school of low quality than

might the average white pupil's (Coleman et al., 1966). If teachers believe that students' academic achievement and potential are limited by their SES, then they often maintain minimal motivation to research ways to overcome the stigma (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008). When staffing schools, it is important to place highly effective teachers and principals in lower-performing schools, to ensure high expectations for all students to achieve academic success (Rist, 2000). Unfortunately, this is not a common practice, as teachers do not tend to choose to work in schools where they will have to work harder for the same pay as their colleagues in other schools without the same challenges (Simon & Moore Johnson, 2013).

Scholar, author, professor, and social justice advocate, William Julius Wilson (1990), believes that the majority of the issues that plague disadvantaged families in America can be alleviated by economic reform that focuses on the planning and promotion of full-time employment and economic growth of all social classes. If individuals do not have a minimum of a high school diploma and full-time work, then there will be an absence of health insurance and benefits in the household, and they will be unable to contribute to the growth and stability of their families and the economy.

Pull-Out and Push-Out Factors that Increase Drop Out Rates

Many circumstances exist that push and pull students out of the public school system to include: inflexible school policies, peer pressure, a lack of motivation, academic challenges, lack of relationships to teachers, the need to get a job to help pay bills, getting pregnant, a death in the family, failing grades, and feeling overwhelmed (Koenig, 2011). The reasons why students opt out of school are both based on the individual, as well as the institution (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Inflexible

school policies, especially policies surrounding discipline, truancy, and retention, act as the push-out agents for students choosing to drop out of the school system (Rumberger, 2011). If students believe that the adults in their schools don't empathize with their life challenges, and are not willing to work with them to experience successful outcomes in school, then they quickly begin to disengage from the schooling process (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Push-out factors are more influential on students in the ninth and tenth grades, while pull-out factors affect students more from the eleventh and twelfth grades (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Pull-out factors affect students most when students are faced with cost-benefit economic interests that influence them to opt out of school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). A study by Stearns and Glennie (2006) found that the population with the highest dropout rate in the state of North Carolina from the1996-1997 school year was ninth-grade male minorities; these males were primarily black and were frequently involved in the progressive discipline process, which placed them on a path to drop out due to them missing so much school and falling behind on their schoolwork. This information can be used to implement preventative measures to engage all students, but more importantly, this particular subset, in the public school system.

Another push-out factor that prevent students from progressing in the public school system is grade retention (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Dawson, 1998; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002; Owings & Magilaro, 1998). If students do not demonstrate academic and/or social/emotional progress in school, then their teachers may decide to retain them (Jimerson et al., 2002). Even though the rationale for grade retention is meant to better support students' growth and achievement by providing the additional support of another

academic school year, it often results in negative academic and social outcomes for students (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016). Research regarding grade retention has demonstrated that retaining students does not improve nor strengthen their academic achievement (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016); in fact, retained students demonstrate lower grades, lower test scores, and increased behavioral problems that that of their non-retained peers (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016; Meisels & Liaw, 1993). This type of school-based push-out practice should be reconsidered, due to its adverse effect on academics, and social-emotional student growth and achievement.

Teacher and Principal Turnover

Consistency, and the development of strong and trusting relationships between students and their teachers and school leaders, are foundational to student success (Khalkhali, Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013; Worrell & Hale, 2001). The social, emotional, economic, and academic challenges that Title I high school teachers and leaders experience on a daily basis is often the reason why there is such high turnover in these types of schools, which prevents these types of schools from creating strong cultures of care and community, which adversely affects students' educational outcomes (Kraft, Mainell, & Shen-Wei Yee, 2016). Many teachers who are new to the teaching profession are often given the most challenging positions, because their colleagues with more tenure prefer to teach higher-level courses with older students (Kraft et al., 2016). More specifically, it is challenging to staff teacher positions in the ninth-grade, because these classes often have the highest enrollments and the most challenges when it comes to classroom management. This is problematic, because the ninth-grade is the most critical year for students and they require strong teachers to help them to successfully advance to

the tenth grade (Curran Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008). Because of this, schools that experience high teacher and leader turnover continuously struggle to improve student achievement (Travers & Christiansen, 2010).

Title I schools struggle to keep highly qualified teachers for extended periods of time, and instead, are staffed with more alternatively licensed teachers and substitute teachers, due to their nature of being more challenging due to the low student socioeconomic demographic that they serve (Simon & Moore Johnson, 2013). The objective of alternative teacher licensure programs is that they give individuals with college degrees in specific subject areas, the opportunity to become teachers through an accelerated track; however, it is alternatively licensed teachers who often leave the teaching profession more often than that of traditionally certified teachers (Redding & Smith, 2016). It is also important to recognize that even though the teaching profession is considered to be an honorable professional career that requires a college degree, it is often associated with low pay and a lack of respect, which deters individuals from pursuing a degree in education (Curran Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008; D'Amico, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kraft et al., 2016; Lortie, 1975, 1986; Simon & Moore Johnson, 2013). This contributes to the decreasing availability of highly qualified teachers in our country resulting in teacher shortages, and ultimately, decreases in student success and achievement (Johnson, 2007). Just like any other new-to-profession candidate in the professional workforce, new teachers require substantial support and guidance, and if they are provided with strong mentors during their first year, they tend to stay in the teaching profession longer than those who don't have mentors (Roth Leon, 2014). This provides that if schools and districts provide all new teachers with strong

mentor teachers to support their success and tenure in the profession, then they will be more likely to remain in the teaching profession.

Academic Tracking Factors that Influence Ninth-Grade Completion in Title I High Schools: Choice Education Versus Compliance Education

Academic tracking at the high school level appears to be a viable mechanism to organize and teach students based on homogeneous grouping, but instead, it leads to segregation, and illuminates academic and non-academic inequalities that lead to unequal results for students (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Bernt Karlson, 2015; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995). When students transition to ninth grade, they are aligned with specific academic tracks based on their levels of academic skill and English language acquisition. Academic tracking in the public school system may be invisible to the human eye, but when analyzed on paper, these tracks are visibly inequitable, and the students within them, are provided with inequitable academic resources, resulting in inequitable academic experiences and outcomes (Gamoran, 1992; Hallinan, 1991; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, Köller, & Baumert, 2006). There tends to be an uneven distribution of students in academic tracks. There are more students enrolled in lower-performing academic tracks than that of higher-performing academic tracks, and there are more low-income and minority students in the low-performing tracks for non-college bound students (Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Corbett Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008). Unfortunately, much of this is due to federal and state accountability and compliance laws surrounding English learners and students with special needs. The public school system replicates a sorting machine that sorts students into programs and pathways of study that are ability-based (Somers et al., 2009). This is

an injustice to many students who are very capable of being successful in rigorous college preparatory work, if provided with appropriate resources and supports (Corbett Burris et al., 2008). Students who are academically proficient or advanced, get to experience a "choice-based" educational experience that is characterized by students being able to choose school courses such as honors, Advanced Placement, and dual credit each school year, while students who are classified as being English learners and/or students with special needs, get to experience a "compliance-based" educational experience that forces them into remedial academic courses and English acquisition courses based on federal and state law . When students are placed in academically advanced ability tracks, they experience higher achievement and growth, whereas students who are placed in academic tracks that restrict their access to a rigorous curriculum and highly qualified teachers, they experience lower achievement (Corbett Burris et al., 2008). Classes that are associated with lower achieving students often have larger enrollments of poor and minority students and their teachers are often less experienced (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). Title I schools often maintain a larger number of inexperienced teachers than non-Title I schools (Kalogrides, Loeb, & Béteille, 2012). This impacts student achievement, as new teachers are often forced to teach the most difficult grade level that has the largest class sizes, the ninth grade (Curran Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008).

Most public school mission statements demonstrate that they promote diversity and are inclusive of all students, but this is not always what is put into action. Our society was founded upon a stratified system that continues to perpetuate social inequities (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Social class and structures within society are critical variables

when it comes to resources within our society, and who has access to them (Levine, 2006). Our forefathers signed the Bill of Rights as a means to put forth a good effort to open the doors for all who strove for, and who continue to strive for, freedom and opportunity; however, it didn't guarantee to what measure. Apple (1995) believes that through a complex process of social and academic labeling, schools play a fundamental role in distributing different kinds of knowledge and dispositions to different kinds and classes of students, which eventually segregate students so much that they eventually find their way out of the everyday functioning of the institution. Because these students internalize these labels, many become disciplinary distractions in their classes and act out, due to their being physically, mentally, and socially isolated from the rest of their peers (Gage, Larson, Sugai, & Chafouleas, 2016). An important part of a child's school environment is not the physical facilities of the school, the curriculum, nor the teachers—it is the child's peers (Coleman et al., 1966). If students are placed in situations where their self-esteem is threatened, their academic performance will be negatively impacted (Alves-Martins, Peixoto, Gouveia-Pereira, Amaral, & Pedro, 2002).

Regardless of students' abilities and levels of cultural capital, they could all be afforded a rigorous, relevant, and rich education within our public school system whether or not they choose to attend college after they graduate from high school (Duke, 2015). There is something to be said about intention and delivery; what we intend as agents within the school system is not always what is delivered. It is important to educate all children, and to rid of the stratified program hierarchies that exist within the public school system.

The Standardized Structure of Schooling—The Factory Model

Education is considered to be the great equalizer when it comes to inequities that perpetuate within society (Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). Students are told that if they graduate from high school with their diploma, then they will be afforded more opportunities than their peers without a diploma (Amos, 2008). This is true—more education provides more access and opportunity in society. Students are also told that if they attend and graduate from college, then regardless of who they are, or where they are from, they will be able to compete equally, and have equal opportunity in society, in relation to that of the dominant culture (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). This ideology is optimistic. Unfortunately, this is not always consistent with reality. Education is ubiquitous, while schooling is intentional (Goodlad et al., 2004). The public school system was developed to produce a workforce that could meet the needs of the economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Because the United States is a country founded upon industrialism and capitalist ideals, public schools are a system within society that are a catalyst to reproduce the established strata of socioeconomic classes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This is no different within schools. Within schools, students are educated based on their levels of knowledge, skills, and obedience (Durkheim, 2002). In the early nineteenth century, the intention of formalized schooling was to extend learning beyond what was provided by the family unit to better meet the growing needs of society (Goodlad et al., 2004). The reproduction of positions within society takes the form of a factory model where students are sorted and trained according to the needs of society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The schooling process reinforces complacency, servility, and a culture of neglect that contributes to social, economic, and political deterioration

(Goodlad et al., 2004). While students learn from their surroundings every day, how schools are structured influence what they learn and how they learn. Systemic violence within schools is created by the unintentional consequences of policies and procedures created by well-intentioned schoolteachers and leaders (Benbenishty, Avi Astor, Roziner, & Wrabel, 2016; Flannery et al., 2012; Ross Epp & Watkinson, 1996). According to Bowles and Gintis (1976), public schools legitimize inequalities in society by reinforcing patterns of social class by rewarding and promoting students who are socially and academically capable into positions of power, and by creating a subordinate population who demonstrate deficits. When students are categorized as not capable or compliant within established schooling structures, the blame is deflected onto students, not the school or families, which forces students to remove themselves and suffer the lasting consequences of an incomplete education (Ross Epp & Watkinson, 1996).

Since the inception of the one-room schoolhouse, the public school system has transformed into a system that educates students in different school environments based on their age and grade-level: elementary, middle, and high school (Graham, 2005). Transitions between elementary, middle, and high schools is a by-product of the American schooling model that was established as a reform effort in the mid-nineteenth century with the decline of the one-room schoolhouse (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Within the school system, students are also transitioned into different academic tracks based on their cognitive abilities and levels of English language acquisition (Christle et al., 2007). Students' abilities and disabilities are realized in elementary school when they are assessed on standardized tests and compared to their peers. Based on their academic levels, they are provided with different learning opportunities that are inequitable in

nature, and even detrimental to academic growth and progress in school (Archbald & Keleher, 2008). This continues into their middle and high school years, where they develop a belief that a pathway to graduation is unattainable, and eventually drop out of school (L. A. Maxwell, 2012). This structure perpetuates inequities within schools, and eventually, within society.

English Learners and Students with Exceptionalities

Often times, educational policy is created with good intention, but results in harmful outcomes. Four federal policies that create unintentional consequences for students are the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975. These federal laws were established to ensure all students would receive resources and systems of support to access the general curriculum, and not be discriminated against, based on physical ability, cognitive ability, or level of English language acquisition. On the macro level, these policies were enacted to effectuate positive outcomes for two populations of students: students with special needs and students who are not proficient in the English language. On the micro level, these policies create challenges that often pigeonhole students into courses that limit their educational choice and segregate them from their general education peers (McGee, 2011; H. M. Umansky, 2016; I. M. Umansky, 2016). No student should reach high school without having access to college and career exploration, as schools ought to be preparing all students for how they see themselves beyond their high school years (Bass and Faircloth, 2013). When students are identified and placed in special education and or English language development programming, they are then required by federal law to

take specific support courses, which often prevents them from taking advanced courses or engaging career technical electives (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; P. Gándara, 2010; P. Gándara & Orfield, 2012). These policies also create challenges for school leaders, as it is often difficult to find highly qualified teachers who are certified to teach special education and English language development courses (P. Gándara, 2016; Johnson, 2007; Simon & Moore Johnson, 2013). In many schools, academic tracking of students identified as English learners, and students with special needs, becomes a compliance issue, rather than an effort to meet students' needs (Callahan, 2005; Gamoran, 1993; Gamoran et al., 1995; I. M. Umansky, 2016).

Students with learning disabilities, and students who are English language learners, are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school than their peers if they are not provided with the right supports, resources, and interventions (P. C. Gándara & Aldana, 2014; P. Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; G. Hickman et al., 2008). Students with specific learning disabilities, and students who are English learners, often struggle to grasp content and skills, which puts them on a path where they fall behind, cannot catch up, become overwhelmed and frustrated, and eventually disengage from school (Koenig, 2011). Students with learning disabilities are at a greater risk of dropping out of school due to inadequate preparation for high school, post-secondary opportunities, and life (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). According to Goodlad, Mantel-Bromley, & Goodlad (2004), "The well-being of a total culture requires education for all, without exclusivity on the basis of caste…Whatever the medium intended for educating, the provision of total inclusion is a moral imperative in a democracy" (p. 7).

Being classified as an English learner (EL) student, or a student with special needs, results in stigmatization and may create barriers to educational opportunity (H. M. Umansky, 2016). English learners and students with special needs oftentimes experience barriers when they try to gain access to the general core curriculum, to academically advanced programming, and to support systems and resources that some of their more affluent peers have (Gamoran, 1992; Gamoran et al., 1995; H. M. Umansky, 2016; I. M. Umansky, 2016). English language learners and students with special needs are often forced into programs that promote rote learning methodologies and are often placed in remedial and "sheltered" classes that make them feel obsolete and they fall behind (Callahan, 2005). Most of these students are not placed on college preparatory pathways, because they are labeled as low-achievers based on the fact that they are not fluent in English or because they have a learning disability (H. M. Umansky, 2016). ELs, and students with special needs, tend to be an overrepresented population in remedial courses, and an underrepresented population in advanced courses, at the high school level (I. M. Umansky, 2016; McGee, 2011). Research indicates that quality of instruction for English learners is a greater indicator for success than English language proficiency (Callahan, 2005). This supports the need for more inclusionary models for EL students, and students with special needs, where they are not tracked into lower-level courses, but rather, given the opportunity to access more highly qualified and highly effective teachers in upper-level courses. George Theoharis (2009) supports the removal of school structures that prohibit some students the ability to access the general curriculum. To create a more inclusive high school for all students, Theoharis (2009) recommends four strategies: 1) Eliminate pullout/separate programs, 2) increase academic rigor and access

to educational opportunities, 3) increase student learning time, and 4) increase accountability systems for the achievement of all students.

Reading and Mathematics Proficiency—Social Promotion Without Proficiency

Elementary and middle school teachers consider many variables when it comes to whether or not to advance a student to the next grade level such as: grades, behavior, and attendance. Students are often socially promoted to the next grade level with the understanding from parents and teachers that the student is in the process of developing physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively, and if provided with adequate supports and resources, will succeed at the next grade level (Meisels & Liaw, 1993). When this happens, students fall further behind in reading and mathematics proficiency, and academic disengagement is heightened (Holopainen et al., 2017). Students who struggle in reading and mathematics during their elementary years, continue to struggle during their secondary years, because course content becomes more complex, resulting in lower academic achievement (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Also, 80 percent of students who experience difficulties in reading, also experience difficulties in mathematics, due to the same cognitive demand required of each content area (Holopainen et al., 2017).

When students enter their ninth grade year, accountability increases, as they are required to pass all courses required for graduation, as well as demonstrate proficiency in reading and mathematics through their graduation examinations (Curran Neild et al., 2008). Many students demonstrate a decline in academic performance, which is referred to as the ninth grade shock, as students are not used to the level of personal accountability required of high school students such as: earning credit-bearing courses, getting to school/class on time, submitting all assignments, meeting deadlines, and working with

their school counselors to ensure they are enrolled in the correct classes for graduation (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). If students are not able to demonstrate competency/proficiency in reading and mathematics during their ninth grade year, the likelihood of them graduating from high school dramatically decreases (Bornsheuer et al., 2011).

Cultural Capital, Resistance, and Grit Factors that Influence Ninth-Grade Completion in Title I Schools

Students enter high school with different levels of academic skill, will, and cultural capital (Swartz, 1997) that contribute to their outcomes of success or failure in high school. Some students successfully transition to the ninth grade and remain on-track for graduation, but others quickly fall off-track, contributing to the ever-stigmatizing phenomena, the high school dropout rate (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The structure of the K-12 educational system consists of push-out variables that contribute to students' failure in the educational setting such as suspension and other exclusionary practices (Rumberger, 2011; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Zirkel & Pollack, 2016), but students' family structures, and the social and academic expectations that parents have for their children, also contribute to their success or failure in the public school system (Cavanagh et al., 2006). The culture of the household greatly influences how children perform in school, as parents act as strong role models in the socialization of their children (Cavanagh et al., 2006; Davis-Kean, 2005; Eccles Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982; Lawrence, 2016; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). If parents maintain high academic and behavioral expectations of their children, then their children are more likely to experience successful outcomes in school resulting in higher grades and higher

test scores on standardized tests (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Family settings, and parental expectations, also contribute to the levels of grit that students have to achieve long-term academic and social goals (Muenks, Wigfield, Seung Yang, & O'Neal, 2017). Therefore, school communities should focus on engaging families as stronger partners, as it is their messaging and expectations that greatly contribute to students' academic performance (skill) and self-determination (will) in the schooling process.

Cultural Capital and Habitus—Capacity and Opportunity

Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, identifies two inequalities that exist in the field of education: cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1967; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dumais, 2002). He defines cultural capital as the level of resources that one has in relation to cultural awareness, verbal facility, educational credentials, aesthetic preferences, and information about the school system (Swartz, 1997). Habitus, is defined by Bourdieu as individuals' dispositions, actions that individuals take, and how individuals carry themselves, that derive from the social class experiences and socialization that occur in families and peer groups (Swartz, 1997). According to Bourdieu, the public education system it is a mechanism that contributes to the social reproduction of the dominant upper class by rewarding those who attend with an already strong establishment of cultural capital and habitus, leaving those in the lower classes with little hope for social mobility and achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dumais, 2002). Children who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are only exposed to adults who have not achieved a high school diploma or college education, internalize the belief that they are not able to achieve, which result in actions such as becoming truant, frequently getting suspended from school, not completing

school assignments, and ultimately, not graduating from high school (Dumais, 2005). Schools are not neutral institutions, but instead, are institutions that perpetuate inequities by catering to the preferences, attitudes, and behaviors of the dominant class, which creates exclusionary practices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Skiba et al., 2016; Swartz, 1997). Being that Title I high schools are enrolled with more than 80 percent of students who come from situations of poverty, it is apparent why these schools struggle to keep students engaged and hopeful that their educational attainment will contribute to an increase in their cultural capital.

Students' family situations and compositions are what establish their levels of cultural capital. The resources that families are able to provide to their children such as access to books, computers, and other cultural experiences, are also important indicators that influence students' levels of cultural capital (Dumais, 2005). Minority students who come from families who experience poverty and welfare on a daily basis are less likely to finish high school, but students who come from families where the mother works and contributes to the family income, experience higher rates of high school completion (Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991; New Mexico Voices for Children, 2016). This puts students at a disadvantage if their mothers do not work outside of the household. Students of Mexican-origin are an especially vulnerable group in the K-12 public education system, as they experience increased situations of poverty, discrimination, negative stereotypes, and school systems that have been developed for the success of other, non-Latino based, ethnic groups (P. Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, & Abarca-Mortensen, 2008). High school dropout is especially prominent with students who are of Mexican-origin, even if their parents have high

educational aspirations for their children (P. Gándara, 2010; P. Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; Plunkett et al., 2008). Being that New Mexico is comprised of a large population of Mexican-origin Hispanic families, it is crucial to create early interventions of support in primary grades, to maintain strong engagement of these students throughout secondary grades, so they do not drop out.

Resistance Behaviors within the School Environment

Before studying the function of resistance behaviors in the school setting, it is important to outline the framework of the specific types of resistance that exist. Critical race theorists, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) define three different types of resistant behaviors that occur amongst individuals within a school environment: self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance. These types of resistance behaviors all exist under circumstances that are usually motivated by the subordination of certain races, by opposing dominant ideologies, by acting on a vision for social justice, by acts of isolation into remedial programs, and by unequal distribution of knowledge and resources (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). These concepts are not only identifiable amongst the student body, but also amongst the faculty and administration of an educational institution. All these agents together form a cyclical pattern of resistance that is continuous and often never interrupted. Human agency is a concept that Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) have coined as the skills and confidence to act in advocacy on one's behalf. These two theorists identify the term human agency as a necessity in any form of resistance. If individuals cannot identify the oppressive conditions in which they occupy, and do not have the motivation to act against them, then they have no human agency.

The first resistance behavior, self-defeating resistance, is thought to be the dominant of the three within a school setting, and refers to students who may have some critique of their oppressive social conditions, but are not motivated by an interest in social justice (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Being unmotivated to act on circumstances of oppression could be that the individual is either too uneducated to rightfully defend what is being verbally or physically deconstructed, or he or she is not willing to take on the battle by risking what cultural capital he or she believes he or she does have. This is clearly identifiable when individuals are the victims of oppressive behaviors from other individuals within the school setting, but still choose to associate or interact with these oppressors. Students, for example, who are criticized by their peers for the way they dress, speak, or physically look, are complying with self-defeating resistance. They understand that what is occurring is oppressive, yet no action is taken to defend themselves. In this respect, this non-reaction is itself resistance and oppressive. It is almost taking the shape of conformity, because instead of breaking the cycle of insults and degrading comments by defending themselves along with others who fall into victim to these criticisms, students choose to allow these actions to take place without any counteraction or defense.

Another example of self-defeating resistance takes place when a student sits passively in a classroom where a teacher segregates students, or pays more attention to certain students based upon their ability or race, and the student does not inquire about the reasoning behind the segregation; he or she just identifies it, accepts it, and continues on with the routine (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This form of resistance seems to be one of the most destructive in that the passive student is allowing for the

reproduction of oppressive behaviors to continue without interrupting them. An example of this type of resistance behavior is a student who drops out of school, criticizes the schooling system, yet is in fact engaging in behavior that is self-defeating by the action of dropping out. By dropping out, he or she is only contributing to the problem instead of trying to transform the oppressiveness.

School teachers and leaders also participate in this form of resistance when they become very critical of the social and political ideals of the school in which they work, yet they do not voice their opinion, look for adequate reasoning, and continue to expose themselves to these conflicting ideals without acting upon them (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). If teachers' ideologies do not harmonize with their students' ideologies, then resistance on part of the teachers takes place. They resist the acts of motivating, connecting, and caring about what their students are receiving along the lines of a quality education. Students pick up on these contrasting ideologies and acts of resistance from their teachers, and either conform to these ideologies, or they choose to deviate from the social norm knowing the risks they are taking in possibly isolating themselves from the rest of those who easily submit. These students identify that their culture, class, race, and ability are being dominated by oppressive ideologies, yet, they do not advocate for themselves because they feel powerless. This powerlessness is just one component amongst a list of others including: fear, lack of academic ability, isolation, destructive criticism, and ignorant labeling that have pushed students into a state of opposition to authoritarian ideology.

The second form of resistance outlined by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) is conformist resistance. This type of resistance is the oppositional behavior of students

who are motivated by a need for social justice yet hold no critique of the systems of oppression (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The individuals that display this type of resistance can be identified as those who have a clear understanding of oppressive circumstances and have a strong sense of social justice, but go about attaining justice by means that only creatively postpone the problem, instead of dealing with the causes, and eliminating them immediately. An example of this type of resistance would be immigrant students who are against oppressive immigration laws, yet do nothing to let their voices be heard.

The last of the three types of resistance outlined by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) is transformational resistance. This form of resistance is the only one of the three that has the potential to actually create social change, as the individuals who display this type of resistance are those who are able to critique oppressive behaviors and situations, and also act against these behaviors and situations with a strong desire for social justice. To examine this form of resistance, one must look at the individuals who have awareness of oppressive environments or circumstances, and who are willing to act on these oppressive apparatuses for social justice. In contrast to conformist resistors, an example of transformational resistors are those students who are not only against oppressive immigration laws, but protest the rights of immigrants by not purchasing anything from our economy, and by not attending school or work on certain days observed by the immigrant population and their advocates. They are letting their views, voices, and presence be heard as an act to resist oppressive behaviors and situations in society.

Individuals in the school environment (students, teachers, and administrators) also partake in transformational resistance by identifying actions that foster segregation,

isolation, racism, sexism, etc., and by taking action against these oppressive elements (Lapayese, 2005). An example of this is schoolteachers and leaders who act against oppressive systems, structures, cultures, behaviors and curricula within school settings. Many teachers will in fact comment on the fact that students are the ones who are the victims of the school environment by being mandated to comply with the curricula and social values of their school's culture (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Students are many times put in the position of having to comply with the system, or be pushed out (Santillano et al., 2016). Because of this, teachers often take major risks in losing their positions or reputations, because they know that their resistance is for the greater good of their students.

While examining the resistance patterns within a school, it is important to identify that resistance occurs through the transaction of verbal, behavioral, and ideological conflicts that are ultimately created in the communities in which a school resides. One must take into consideration the socioeconomics, majority and minority groups along with their relations to one another, the culture, the natural environment, the job market, as well as the overall economic factors of a community before an accurate analysis of the educational institutions within it can be determined. It is also important to note that there can be multiple schools within a community that project different environments; this can be largely due to each school's location within that community as well as the dynamics of the dominant and subordinate populations within each area.

Grit and Perseverance in the School Setting

In the schooling process, it has been realized that the grades that teachers give students reflect more than just academic subject knowledge and cognitive ability; they

also reflect students' levels of responsibility, compliance, effort, and determination (Klapp Lekholm & Cliffordson, 2008). This is why many students graduate from high school with their required academic credits, but cannot pass their state graduation exams, and must demonstrate their academic competency through alternative methods approved by their states' Public Education Departments (Jacob, 2001). The national high school graduation rate average is always much higher than that of the national proficiency rates in reading and mathematics, due to non-academic characteristics such as grit and perseverance (Murnane, 2013). The saying, where there is a will, there is a way, reflects this phenomenon. Many students enter high school below grade level proficiency in reading and mathematics (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). This is problematic, as the pressure for schoolteachers and leaders to give students the skills and knowledge to be able to pass their graduation exams in four years, is unrealistic. If states did not have alternative demonstrations of competency, and instead, all students had to pass their high school graduation exams in order to graduate with a high school diploma, then our country's graduation rate would be much lower, but more aligned, with our country's proficiency rates in reading and mathematics. The reason students continue to graduate, regardless of their cognitive abilities, is due to a personality trait called grit (Laursen, 2015).

Grit is a personality trait defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), and is associated with the Big Five Factors (Troncone, Drammis, & Labella, 2014). The Big Five Factors are personality traits that consist of: conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and extraversion (Troncone et al., 2014). Grit is a personality trait that grows from the inside out through high levels of interest, practice, purpose, and hope

(Duckworth, 2016). According to Duckworth and Quinn (2009), grit is different than other personality traits in that it is more heavily weighted on the stamina that individuals possess to sustain both effort and interest in projects and goals that take months, or longer, to complete—even in the absence of positive feedback. Individuals' academic ability and skill alone are not enough to bring about success in any situation; they must be combined with grit behaviors for true sustainable achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit comes from a combination of genetic and environmental factors, which means that grit can be developed in students through the influence of environmental factors (McGlynn & Kelly, 2017). This is an important idea for schoolteachers and leaders to focus on when it comes to measuring and growing grit within their students. A 12-item scale was developed by Duckworth et al. (2007) to measure individuals' levels of grit on a 5-point scale with 1 being "extremely low grit" and 5 being "extremely high grit." This grit scale is a tool to be combined with other variables to predict individuals' potential levels of achievement.

Predictors of academic achievement are on a continuum with cognitive measures on one end such as intelligence and skill, and non-cognitive measures on the other end such as personality traits and socioeconomic status (Hakimi, Hejazi, & Gholamali Lavasani, 2011). According to Dweck (2006), when students transition to middle and high school educational settings, the school work gets harder, the teaching becomes less personalized, and there is a drop in students' grades; however, due to the power of a growth mindset and grit, not everyone's grades suffer equally. In a study by (Huang & Zhu, 2012), students with lower socioeconomic status who perceived themselves as having higher levels of grit, and a disciplined school environment, were more likely to

achieve at higher levels than their non-gritty peers. This study suggests that addressing school climate and students' levels of grit can improve student achievement in high school settings. When students graduate from high school without being proficient in reading and mathematics, it is their high levels of grit that propel them on a path toward their long-term goal of high school graduation and post-secondary opportunity and success. A single focus on academic competencies is an insufficient way to prepare students for successful outcomes in an increasingly complex world (Laursen, 2015). Until educational policies and school reform efforts place more emphasis on non-cognitive traits as strong contributing variables to students' potential to achieve, standardized tests will continue to result in low scores, and high school graduation rates will continue to decrease, or remain stagnant.

Literature Implications for Proposing this Study

The purpose of this case study is to answer the following research questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade *completers* and *non-completers* perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

This study contributes to the current literature surrounding the challenges that students experience during the ninth-grade, by adding how academic track placement, and levels of students' skill and will, also contribute to their completion, or non-

completion, of the ninth grade. There is a large literature focus on the factors that contribute to students' success or failure during their ninth grade year, but there is not a strong literature base that combines how school constructs, and students' levels of academic skill and will, contribute to their success or failure during their ninth grade year. The identification of the five academic tracks that quietly reside in the K-12 public education system, and the influence that they have on students' academic success and achievement within the public school system, is important to inform current and future educational policy and reform efforts. By identifying the constructs that segregate and perpetuate inequities in our public school settings, schoolteachers and leaders may begin to deconstruct those systems and ideologies that contribute to the stigmatization of our students, that inevitably contribute to our country's high school dropout rate.

Summary

Dropping out of high school is not an event, but rather, a process of failure experienced by students from the beginning of their academic career (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Kieffer et al., 2014; McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Because it is a process of disengagement that begins in the primary years of students' K-12 educational experiences, it makes it that much more critical for school districts to begin implementing engagement initiatives, and to develop early interventions, so students remain engaged and experience multiple successful outcomes by the time they enter their high school years. By determining how ninth-grade students' academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will influence successful ninth-grade completion, teachers and school leaders will be better informed as to how to quickly intervene to allocate resources, and

build systems of support, to encourage all students to persevere in the ninth grade and continue on a successful path toward graduation.

Chapter Three: Research Design

"In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context."—Robert Yin

Introduction

This research study is a single qualitative case study that focuses on a ninth-grade cohort of students in a Title I high school in the state of New Mexico. This chapter includes the following sections: (1) Purpose of the Study and Research Questions, (2) Mode of Inquiry and Rationale, (3) Role of the Researcher, (4) Research Site, (5) Sample, (6) Research Paradigms, (7) Conceptual Framework, (8) Data Collection Methods: Research Question Order, (9) Data Analysis Procedures, (10) Reliability and Validity, (11) Limitations, (12) Human Subjects Protection, and (13) Summary.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Every year, students struggle to pass the ninth-grade in order to remain on-track for graduation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Schoolteachers and administrators strategize each year regarding ways to engage their incoming ninth-grade cohorts, how to provide them with a safe and positive learning environment with support systems, and to keep them on-track for graduation. A large population of Hope High School's students continue to advance to the next grade level each year, instead of dropping out of school, even though their proficiency rates in reading and mathematics demonstrate only incremental growth. Some may argue that students should only advance to the next grade level if they are able to demonstrate grade-level proficiency in reading and mathematics; however, there are other proficiencies that students demonstrate such as: will and self-determination, resiliency, persistence, responsibility, and citizenship that schoolteachers

and administrators also consider in a student's promotion to the next grade level (Khalkhali et al., 2013). Graduation rates across the country would experience a great decline if proficiency in reading and mathematics were the only proficiencies that teachers and administrators measured based on one high school graduation exam such as the PARCC exam. Given that each state has the autonomy to adopt its own high school graduation exam, the degree of proficiency in reading and mathematics varies from one state to the next, which in turn creates inconsistencies throughout the country. Because of this achievement variability, it is important to explore the proficiencies and attributes of each student beyond the results on their high school graduation exam. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of academic track placement, and students' levels of skill and will, on one cohort of ninth-graders on their path toward high school graduation by addressing the following three research questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade *completers* and *non-completers* perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

Mode of Inquiry and Rationale

This study is a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) that was conducted using a qualitative mode of inquiry that incorporated quantitative data such as: numerical data, percentages, and frequencies. It was a single-bounded case that focused on one

issue (successful completion of the ninth grade), one unit of analysis (one cohort of ninth-grade students), sub-units of analysis (students grouped in academic tracks and skill/will quadrants), at one school site, within a timeframe of one school year. Using a qualitative mode of inquiry for this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the events, situations, experiences, and actions that the participants have experienced in their home lives and schooling, that created meaning and perspective (J. A. Maxwell, 2005). This inquiry approach was necessary in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of ninth-grade students' will and determination on their ability to advance to the next grade level, and eventually graduate from high school, without achieving grade-level proficiency in reading and mathematics (according to the PARCC and EOC exams). Because students in New Mexico struggle to achieve due to low socioeconomic conditions (Nott, 2016), it was not enough to pursue this research quantitatively, as there was more to this story than just the numbers, as to why students continue to graduate from this particular high school given their constant academic and socioeconomic struggles. There is a large body of research on high school graduates and dropouts; however, previous research has mostly focused on key variables as predictors to measure students' success in high school, such as: grades, attendance, and academic proficiency levels (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; Lemon & Watson, 2011; L. A. Maxwell, 2012). This case study will add to this body of literature by not only analyzing students' academic factors, but also their levels of will, and the academic tracks to which they are assigned, when it comes to successfully completing the ninth-grade. Even though there is a large national body of research surrounding high school graduates and dropouts, there is minimal research regarding student placement in

academic tracks, as well as their persistence and academic achievement, within the state of New Mexico. The intent of this research was to determine how academic track placement, and students' levels of skill and will, influenced successful ninth-grade completion at Hope High School by utilizing the following research methods:

- Document Analysis (Academic Records)
- Use of Surveys/Questionnaires
- Face-to-Face, Semi-Structured Interviews (Analysis of Coded Themes)

Role of the Researcher

My role within this study was emic—where I interacted with the participants, and collected and analyzed the data that they provided through questionnaire responses and interviews (Creswell, 2013), regarding their educational perspectives and experiences from Kindergarten through their ninth-grade year. I was previously principal of the school site for five years, but transitioned into an administrative position within the school district throughout the duration of this study. I acknowledge that even though I was formerly affiliated with this school site, I was able to remain impartial in the collection and analysis of the data, because I did not have a relationship or association with the participants in the ninth-grade cohort. This was the first time that I met and introduced myself to them. I did not introduce myself to them as a former principal of Hope High School, but rather, as an educational researcher who was interested in learning more about how their life situations and schooling experiences have influenced their educational outcomes thus far.

Research Site

The research site for this case study was one Title I public high school, with an enrollment of 1389 students and 150 school personnel, in a medium-sized city in New Mexico. The school is located in an area of town that is more affordable for lower to middle-income families. As a result, the school's enrollment increases each year due to the continued population growth in the surrounding areas of the school.

Sample

The purposeful sample for this study consisted of (n=235) ninth-graders from the cohort (n=340) who assented, and whose parents and guardians consented, to participate in this study. The entire ninth-grade cohort of students (n=340) was eligible to participate in this study because they were identified as current ninth-graders who were projected to graduate in May of 2021. These students' ages ranged from 14-15. The gender breakdown of the sample (n=235) consisted of 115 males and 120 females. This sample was representative of the entire school's population of 1389 students. The ninth-grade sample consisted of 214 students who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 10 students who identified as White or Caucasian, three students who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, four students who identified as Black or African American, and four students who identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. This entire sample qualified for free lunch, because more than 85 percent of the entire school's population was identified as having a low socio-economic status, which qualified it as a Title I school.

Research Paradigms

The research paradigms used for this study were the philosophical positions of social constructivism and transformativism (Creswell, 2013). The goal of social constructivism in research is to gain as much of the participants' views and perspective regarding how they create meaning of the world around them (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), "In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (p. 24). This was important to this study, as were the participants' perspectives that were needed to better understand how their backgrounds and life experiences have influenced, and continue to influence, their academic performance (skill), and determination (will), in school.

The transformative paradigm outlines the social and power relationships within society that influence outcomes for marginalized groups of individuals (Creswell, 2013). This paradigm was important to this study, as there are social and power implications regarding academic tracking in the public school system, specifically when it comes to students who are aligned with compliance-based education tracks such as English learner Education, Special Education, or a combination of the two. Federal policy and school reform initiatives such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Race to the Top Grant Program of 2009, and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 require students identified as English learners, and students with exceptionalities, to be enrolled in programs-of-study that force them to take classes in order for their schools to be considered compliant. Even though the intention is to ensure these particular students are in these programs and courses to better support

their academic needs, they often predispose them to segregation within their schools that negatively affect their sense of belonging, which in turn, can lead to student disengagement and dropping out of school.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (see Figure 16) demonstrates the process I used to identify students as being on-track or off-track for successful ninth-grade completion based on key variables at the end of the school year. All ninth-grade students were studied to determine how their academic track placement, and levels of skill and will, contributed to their successful completion, or non-completion, of the ninth-grade. Previous research on student success in high school is often measured by the strength of correlational relationship of specific variables such as: grades, attendance rates, and suspension rates (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; L. A. Maxwell, 2012). There is minimal research that considers the relationship of students' ninth-grade experience based on their academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will. The conceptual framework illustrates the order in which the following three research questions were addressed:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade *completers* and *non-completers* perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

Figure 16. Conceptual framework that illustrates the process in which the three research questions will be addressed.

Data Collection Methods: Research Question Order

Before any data were collected for this study, I submitted my research proposal to the University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board for approval (see Appendix A). Next, I submitted my research proposal to Hope High School's principal, and the school district leadership, for their support and approval. Finally, I met with all four ninth-grade advisory teachers to present my research proposal, and to create a schedule to present the research study to all ninth-graders (n=340) to distribute and collect the student assent forms and parent/guardian consent forms, and to administer the two questionnaires.

Due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), when I initially met with students, I provided student assent forms (approved by the University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board) to sign if they chose to participate, and parent/guardian consent forms (approved by the University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board) were sent home with each student so that their parents/guardians were able to review and sign if they chose to allow their student to participate. Both forms were made available in both English and Spanish. The students returned the forms to their ninth-grade advisory teacher if they chose to participate in this research study. Secondary forms were made available to students who lost or misplaced their original assent or consent forms. I collected all student assent forms and all parent/guardian consent forms prior to any data collection, by working with each of the four teachers who taught a ninth-grade advisory course that all ninth-graders were required to take for elective credit. Participation in this study was completely voluntary, so the final sample size was established when students signed their assent forms, and returned their

parent/guardian consent forms. Because many of these students and their parents/guardians spoke English as a second language, I had a certified translator translate the recruitment script, the student assent form, the parent-guardian consent form, the digital questionnaire, and the student interview questions. All students were informed verbally and in writing that they had the opportunity to withdrawal their intent to participate at any time throughout the study without repercussion.

The organization of data collection for this study was sequential and guided by my three research questions. Research-question order is an organizational pattern that is often used in dissertations to outline the methodology in relation to the order of the research questions (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013). Before any data was collected from the school's principal or students, I first established a final sample (n=235) based on the number of assent and consent forms I received from the students in the ninth-grade cohort (n=340).

Research Question #1:

How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?

My first research question focused on the number of students who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and the number of those who did not, based on their academic track placement.

Figure 17. Successful completion or non-completion of the ninth grade based on participants' placement in one of each of the five academic tracks.

To answer research question number one, I worked with the school's principal to obtain all ninth-grade students' quick lookup reports from the school's student information system that identified students' academic track placement based on the courses in which they were enrolled. Based on the information on the students' individual quick lookup reports, I created a master dataset that was saved electronically on a password-protected computer with the following columns:

- Student Participation Number
- Academic Track

The column labeled "Student Participation Number" was used to identify each participant by a sequential, random number, and the column labeled "Academic Track" outlined to which academic track each participant was assigned. I maintained a secure and confidential spreadsheet that outlined participants' numbers with their names and student ID numbers for accuracy and record keeping; however, students' identities were not identifiable in the master dataset, in order to maintain confidentiality. First, I created a contingency table that outlined the number and percentage of ninth-grade students from the entire cohort (n-340), as well as from the sample (n=235) who aligned with each of the five academic tracks to compare their distributions and to determine if the

distributions were relatively reflective of one another for accuracy of analysis (see Appendix B). I then created an additional contingency table that populated the total number of students from the entire ninth-grade cohort, as well as the participants from the sample, into each academic track who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and those who did not, and analyzed the distributions to determine implications for policy and practice (see Appendix C).

Research Question #2:

How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?

My second research question focused on the number of students who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and the number of those who did not, based on their levels of skill and will.

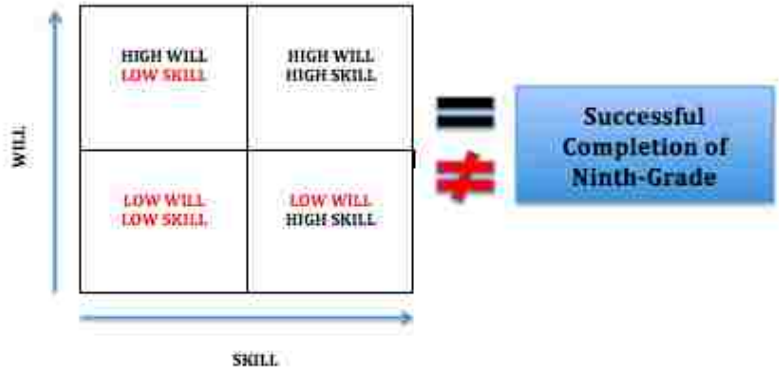

Figure 18. Successful completion or non-completion of the ninth grade based on participants' levels of skill and will.

To answer research question number two, I added the following columns to the master dataset:

- Cumulative Grade-Point-Average ($\geq$ 3.0)
- NWEA MAP Reading Proficiency (Yes/No)

- NWEA MAP Mathematics Proficiency (Yes/No)
- Academic Credits Earned (≥6 Credits)

I first worked with the school's principal to obtain a report that identified how many academic credits each participant earned, another report that outlined each participant's cumulative grade-point-average, a third report that determined each participant's level of proficiency in reading, and a final report that determined each participant's level of proficiency in mathematics. I added the data from each of the four reports into my master dataset. I used the following determinants to characterize whether a participant had high skill or low skill:

- **High Skill**: ≥3.0 GPA, and ≥ Proficient in NWEA MAP Reading and/or Mathematics Test Scores
- **Low Skill**: < 3.0 GPA, and < Proficient in NWEA MAP Reading and/or Mathematics Test Scores

Based on these criteria, the following column was added to the master dataset:

- Level of Skill (High/Low) (Based on Cumulative GPA of 3.0 or Higher, and NWEA/MAP Reading Proficiency and/or NWEA/MAP Mathematics Proficiency)

Next, to determine participants' levels of will, I used a questionnaire developed by the American Institutes for Research in collaboration with Columbia University, the Self-Determination Scale (See Appendix D). Dr. Dennis E. Mithaug, creator of the instrument and professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote a letter granting permission to the general public to download and use this instrument (see Appendix E). I administered the questionnaire face-to-face, in paper/pencil format and it was made available to participants in both English and Spanish. Participants were able to

choose which language in which they preferred to receive, and answer questions, on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made up of 24 multiple-choice questions, and three open-ended questions. The questionnaire was comprised of four different sections: 1) Things I Do, 2) How I Feel, 3) What Happens at School, and 4) What Happens at Home. The three open-ended questions were: 1) Give an example of a goal you are working on., 2) What are you doing to reach this goal?, and 3) How well are you doing in reaching this goal? After the participants answered the questions from the questionnaire, I then demonstrated for them how to chart their results to determine whether each participant had high will[5] or low will[6]. A total of 14 students completed the questionnaire in Spanish. I worked one-on-one with the Spanish-speaking students, with the assistance of their bilingual peers, to chart their results. I used the following determinants to characterize whether a participant had high will or low will:

- **High Will**: ≥66.6 percent on AIR Self-Determination Scale
- **Low Will**: <66.6 percent on AIR Self-Determination Scale

Based on these criteria, the following column was added to the master dataset:

- Level of Will (High/Low) (Based on AIR Self-Determination Scale)

After collecting all the necessary data to determine participants'' levels of skill and will, I then categorized each participant from the sample into one of the four quadrants in the Skill/Will Matrix, a paradigm taken from a business and management coaching model (Landsberg, 1996). The Skill/Will Matrix, developed by leadership

[5] High will is determined in this study to be a student who scores >=66.6% on the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale.

[6] Low will is determined in this study to be a student who scores <66.6% on the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale.

coach and executive, Max Landsberg, categorizes employees into four areas: those with high skill/high will, high skill/low will, low skill/high will, and low skill/low will. By using this coaching model framework with students, my intent was to explore a possible new educational paradigm to identify specific characteristics that students embody to help school administrators advise and direct their students toward successful ninth-grade completion, and eventually, high school graduation. The four coaching strategies used for each of the four skill/will quadrants is as follows:

1. High Will/High Skill: *Delegate (Trust; Give additional responsibilities; Praise and endorse; Give accountability; Collaborate on decisions)*
2. High Will/Low Skill: *Advise and Excite (Teach and train; Identify constraints; Provide guidance or a mentor; Praise and endorse)*
3. Low Will/High Skill: *Motivate and Guide (Identify motivators; Praise and endorse; Motivate)*
4. Low Will/Low Skill: Direct *(Teach and train; Encourage the heart; Identify motivators; Endorse and praise; Provide guidance or a mentor; Be patient)*

Based on these criteria, the following column was added to the master dataset:

- Skill/Will Quadrant
    - High Skill/High Will
    - High Skill/Low Will
    - Low Skill/High Will
    - Low Skill/Low Will

I then created a contingency table (see Appendix F) with the number of participants from each skill/will quadrant who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and those who did not, and analyzed the distributions to determine implications for policy and practice.

Research Question #3:

What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

My third research question focused on what ninth-grade *completers*[7] and *non-completers*[8] perceived to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and remain on-track for graduation. I administered a digital questionnaire titled (*Factors That Influence Ninth-Grade Success*) that I developed (see Appendix G) to all participants within the ninth-grade cohort (n=235). The participant questionnaire was made up of 56 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions regarding factors that impact ninth-grade success (see Appendix H for digital questionnaire results). The three open-ended questions asked for the participants' recommendations for what their principal, teachers, and they (participants) could do to best support their paths toward successful ninth-grade completion, and ultimately, high school graduation. I piloted this questionnaire with a group of 234 ninth-graders when I was the principal at Hope High School two years ago. I did this to inform my leadership team, teachers, and me as to how to best support our

[7] Completers are students who finish the ninth grade with a minimum of six academic credits.

[8] Non-Completers are students who do not finish the ninth grade with a minimum of six academic credits.

ninth-graders on their high school journey, and how to identify areas of need where we could reallocate resources and adjust systems of support. From piloting the questionnaire two years ago, I learned that many students took personal responsibility for their academic standing in school. Many stated that they wanted to graduate from high school, and that their teachers and principals regularly encouraged them to do their best, but that they lacked personal motivation.

For this study, I administered this same questionnaire to the participants via a Google Form in their ninth-grade advisory classes. Their ninth-grade advisory teachers entered the Google Form access code in the Google Classroom of each class, so that the participants were able to log into their Google Classroom on their Chrome books and access the link to the Google Form to complete the questionnaire.

After participants completed the questionnaire, I distributed assent forms, and parent/guardian consent forms, for participants who were willing to also participate in a face-to-face interview (see Appendix I for student interview questions). Once participants returned their student assent and parent/guardian consent forms to their ninth-grade advisory teachers, I established a sub-sample to conduct face-to-face interviews. From that sub-sample, I established a stratified, randomized sample of ninth-grade *completers*, and *non-completers*, from each skill/will quadrant (n=16). I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with these 16 participants to better understand their narratives and experiences surrounding their educational, social, and home life experiences. It was important in this study to interview these participants, because barriers to educational success are more than just responses on a questionnaire, and participants' stories should be told.

Data Analysis Procedures

Research Question #1:

How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?

To answer research question number one, I categorized the entire cohort of ninth-graders (n=340), as well as the sample of participants (n=235), into one of the five academic tracks identified within in the public school system to determine the distribution of the cohort in comparison to the sample. By doing this I was able to establish whether or not the sample was an accurate representation of the entire ninth-grade cohort for purposes of analyses. They were assigned to each track based on whether they *chose* to be in advanced courses or general education courses, or if they were *assigned* to one of the three bottom strata due to state and federal compliance based on their need for English language acquisition or academic support through an individualized education plan (IEP).

Table 3

Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks That Provide Some Students with a Choice-Based Education, and Others with a Compliance-Based Education

Five Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks
Tier 1: Advanced Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 2: General Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 3: English Learner Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 4: Special Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 5: English Learner and Special Education Track *(Compliance)*

I then created a contingency table that populated the entire cohort of ninth-graders (n=340), as well as the sample (n=235) into the five academic tracks to be able to analyze the number of ninth-grade *completers* (students who earned ≥ 6 academic credits at the end of their ninth-grade school year), and *non-completers* (students who earned < 6 academic credits at the end of their ninth-grade school year), in each track. By conducting this contingency table analysis, I was able to analyze the distributions to determine if there were implications for policy and practice amongst the *choice-based* academic tracks and the *compliance-based* academic tracks. This helped to determine if the compliance-based academic tracks (English Learner; Special Education; and English Learner and Special Education), were actually supporting students to succeed in school, as were the intentions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975.

Research Question #2:

How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?

To address research question number two, I created another contingency table that populated the entire sample (n=235) into the four skill/will quadrants to be able to analyze the number of ninth-grade *completers*, and *non-completers*, in each quadrant. By conducting this contingency table analysis, I was able to determine the variation between the four quadrants, as to which ones had the most ninth-grade *completers*, and *non-completers*.

Research Question #3:

What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

To answer research question number three, I administered a researcher-created, digital questionnaire titled (*Factors That Influence Ninth-Grade Success*) to the entire sample (n=235). The students in this particular school had their own Chrome books that had been provided to them by the school, as it was a one-to-one device school, due to a technology bond that was passed in their city. Once the participants completed the questionnaire, I analyzed the results by identifying emerging themes from both the multiple-choice answers, as well as from the three open-ended questions. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that this sample experienced to successfully complete the ninth-grade, I also created a stratified, randomized sample of (n=16) participants to conduct semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed within one week to ensure accuracy. I utilized a transcription service, Rev, to transcribe the interviews. I then met with each interviewee to review the transcribed interview to member-check that they agreed with the accuracy of the interview. After the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and member-checked, I analyzed and coded them by documenting emerging themes regarding support factors and challenges that the participants experienced in the K-12 public education system that supported or hindered their ability to successfully complete their ninth grade school year.

Reliability and Validity

Two important characteristics to a study are its reliability and validity (Pyrczak & Bruce, 2011). Reliability is the consistency of a measure's results and validity verifies that the measure actually measures what it is designed to measure (Pyrczak & Bruce, 2011). According to Creswell, there are eight validation procedures that a researcher should use when conducting qualitative research:

1. **Prolonged engagement and persistent observation:** I attended and graduated from this school from 1994-1998. I also worked at this school site as a teacher for six years, from 2004-2010, and as a principal for six years, from 2011-2017. I worked closely each day with students, teachers, and families to gain a strong understanding of the school culture, as well as the culture within the community where the school resides. For this study, I worked closely with the sample (n=235) for three months (March-May/contingent on IRB approval) to introduce the study, obtain acceptance/permission to participate, and to facilitate and administer the AIR Self-Determination Scale questionnaire and the questionnaire I developed. I also worked closely with the sub-sample (n=16) of participants for four months (May-August) to conduct interviews and member-check (Creswell, 2013) to determine credibility of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions.
2. **Triangulation:** For this study, I used multiple data sources to corroborate the evidence (Creswell, 2013). I analyzed participants' academic data reports, two separate questionnaires, and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to identify emerging themes.

3. **Peer debriefing:** Throughout the study, I worked with my dissertation chair, dissertation committee members, and colleagues, to review and verify the themes from my data analysis procedures.
4. **Negative case analysis:** I worked closely with my dissertation chair to analyze and report negative or disconfirming evidence that emerges from the data (Creswell, 2013).
5. **Clarifying researcher bias:** Due to my experience as a high school teacher and principal, I was conscious of my subjectivity, biases, and assumptions surrounding the public school system. Even though it was impossible to deal with issues of bias by eliminating the researcher's beliefs or theories (J. A. Maxwell, 2005), I committed to be diligent in my efforts to collect and analyze the data with an objective lens, member-check with the participants, and peer debrief with my dissertation chair throughout the duration of data collection and analysis.
6. **Member checks:** After the data were collected from the participants from both questionnaire instruments (AIR Self-Determination Scale questionnaire and the questionnaire I developed), I verified the information with the participants. I also conducted member-checks during the interview process to ensure accuracy of the interview transcripts.
7. **Rich, thick description:** Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I thoughtfully and thoroughly documented detailed descriptions of the setting and participants so that readers could determine whether the findings could be transferred to other settings due to shared characteristics (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and researcher-reflection notes were

documented after each interview to document thoughts, themes, and emergent questions.

8. **External audit:** I utilized my dissertation chair, the members of my dissertation committee, and professional colleagues in the field of education and business to serve as external auditors for my study. I asked them to review the study to determine alignment of the research questions, research instruments, data, and findings, and to provide critical feedback. I then made necessary adjustments to the study to increase reliability.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were as follows:

1. The students in this study all receive free breakfast and lunch as part of the school's Title I status, so this variable may influence their daily attendance, which in turn, impacts their academic achievement in school. The generalization of this study is limited, as not all high schools receive Title I funding.
2. Ninety-one percent of the students in this study identify as Hispanic/Latino. The results from this study may or may not be generalizable to other ninth-grade cohorts with different ethnic compositions.
3. This was a single-instrumental bounded case study, which did not allow for cross-case analyses of other ninth-grade cohorts within the same school, nor with ninth-grade cohorts from other schools, in the state of New Mexico with similar demographics.
4. Due to the large sample (n=235), only a stratified, randomized sample from each of the skill/will quadrants was selected to participate in face-to-face, semi-

structured interviews (n=16), which limited the opportunity for all participants to share their life and schooling experiences.

5. The face-to-face, semi-structured interviews took place during the last three weeks of the school year, which made it difficult to access all of the participants during scheduled times that did not interfere with their classes.

Human Subjects Protection

This research was conducted with the approval from the University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board, Human Research Protection Office, IRB protocol 1197320-1. A letter of support from the New Mexico School District, a letter of support from the school's principal, the permission letter to use the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale Questionnaire, the student assent form to voluntarily choose to participate in the study, and the parent/guardian consent form to allow their student to participate in the study were approved under IRB protocol 1197320-1. All participants' information was confidential, and was stored in a locked safe. Electronic records were saved on a password-protected computer. I used pseudonyms (fictitious names) to protect the confidentiality of the school and the participants. If published, results/findings will be presented in summary form only using numerical representations, not names. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names or personally identifiable information were not provided in the audio recording for the interviews. I worked with the transcription service, Rev, to assign a unique identification name/number to each participant for the transcription of the audio recordings. All audio files were secured in a safe at my home. Only I had access to the audio files. Individual audio files were deleted after transcription. I will keep one master audio file in my possession for five years, but

it will not contain any identifiable information. When the research study was complete, I followed protocol to maintain all documents in my safe. All files and documents will be destroyed in five years.

Summary

The objective of this study was to learn more about why some students successfully pass the ninth-grade, while others do not. Because the ninth-grade is considered to be a critical transition year for students, as an average of 40 percent of ninth-grade students fail to advance to the tenth grade each year (Herlihy, 2007; Johnston & Williamson, 2011; Nomi & Allensworth, 2013; Roderick et al., 2014), it is critical for schoolteachers, principals, district administrators, and community leaders and politicians to work to together to strategize how to reduce the negative factors that have an adverse effect on ninth-grade student success. This chapter discussed the purpose and research questions of the study, the mode of inquiry and rationale, the research paradigms, the role of the researcher, the research site and sample, the conceptual framework, the data collection methods and analysis procedures, the measures taken to ensure reliability and validity, the limitations, and approval from the University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board Human Research Protection Office as to how the human subjects with be protected throughout the study.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

"Analyzing text and multiple other forms of data presents a challenging task for qualitative researchers. Deciding how to represent the data in tables, matrices, and narrative form adds to the challenge. Often qualitative researchers equate data analysis with approaches for analyzing text and image data. The process of analysis is much more."—John W. Creswell

Introduction

The ninth grade is the most critical year of students' high school years, as the transition to high school is the leakiest of junctures in the education K-12 pipeline (Herlihy, 2007). Of all the grade-level transitions that take place in high school, promotion rates from the ninth-grade to the tenth-grade continue to be lowest of all (Johnston & Williamson, 2011). As many as 40 percent of ninth grade students fail to earn enough academic credits to successfully advance to the tenth grade (Herlihy, 2007). This is even more problematic in Title I schools, as 40 percent of students drop out of high school after the ninth grade versus 27 percent in low-poverty schools (Johnston & Williamson, 2011). Ninth-graders are confronted with many challenges including: acclimating to a new school environment, meeting new principals, teachers, and peers, following new rules and expectations, and the need to achieve academic credits and minimum state exam scores to adhere to outlined graduation requirements. A major issue that plagues public high schools across America includes how to prevent students from dropping out, or falling off-track toward graduation in the ninth grade—also known as the ninth grade bulge (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Curran Neild et al., 2008).

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of academic track placement, and students' levels of skill and will, on one cohort of ninth-graders, on their path toward high school graduation, by addressing the following three research questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

This chapter gives a descriptive overview of one sample of ninth-grade students in one Title I high school in New Mexico, Hope High School[9]. This chapter also provides an analysis of how this sample of students' academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will influenced their successful completion, or non-completion, of the ninth grade. I conducted this research as a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), because this particular high school continues to demonstrate increases in graduation rate data, student achievement data, and college and career readiness indicators, regardless of the low socioeconomic factors that challenge its efforts to provide its students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in college, careers, and life. Given the steady growth and achievement in this school, regardless of the high rate of poverty that challenges its students, teachers, and leaders on a daily basis, it is important to understand how students' levels of will and determination contribute to this culture of success, regardless of their levels of proficiency in reading and mathematics.

I conducted this study using a qualitative mode of inquiry that incorporated quantitative data such as: numerical data, percentages, and frequencies. It is a single-

[9] The name of the high school is changed to protect the identity of the city and the school.

bounded case that focuses on one issue (successful completion of the ninth grade), one unit of analysis (one cohort of ninth-grade students), sub-units of analysis (students grouped in academic tracks and skill/will quadrants), at one school site, within a timeframe of one school year. Using a qualitative mode of inquiry for this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the events, situations, experiences, and actions that the participants have experienced at home and at school, that have created meaning and perspective for them (J. A. Maxwell, 2005). This inquiry approach is necessary in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of ninth-grade students' will and determination on their ability to advance to the tenth grade, and eventually graduate from high school, without achieving grade-level proficiency in reading and mathematics (according to the PARCC and EOC exams). Ninth graders are the focus of the study, because it is during the ninth-grade year when the greatest number of students decide to drop out of school (Curran Neild et al., 2008; Khalkhali et al., 2013; L. A. Maxwell, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Somers et al., 2009; Wexler et al., 2015; Yowell, 2002). How students are able to successfully navigate the public education system is dependent on their academic track placement, their level of skill, and their level of will, which are the three foci of this study.

This chapter includes the following sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Research Paradigms and Conceptual Framework, (3) Description of the School (4) Demographic Information of the Sample, (5) Data Narrative of the Sample, (6) Presentation of the Findings for Research Question #1, Research Question #2, and Research Question #3, and (7) Summary.

Research Paradigms and Conceptual Framework

I framed this case study using two research paradigms:

- Social Constructivism
- Transformativism

The goal of social constructivism in research is to gain as much of the participants' views and perspective regarding how they create meaning of the world around them (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), "In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (p. 24). The transformative paradigm outlines the social and power relationships within society that influence outcomes for marginalized groups of individuals (Creswell, 2013).

I analyzed ninth-grade students' progress toward successful ninth-grade completion by examining the how students' academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will, influenced their ability to successfully complete the ninth-grade.

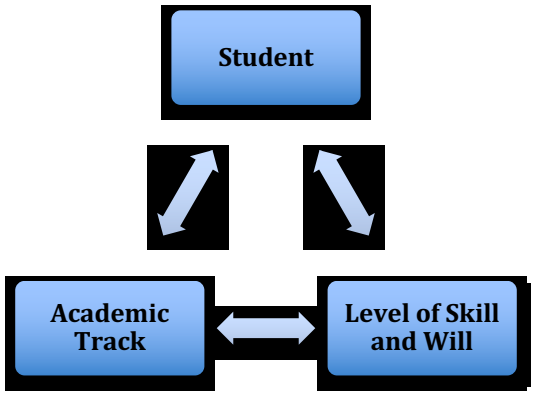

Figure 19. The relationship between students, their academic track, and their levels of skill and will.

I analyzed the progress of each student in the ninth-grade cohort based on whether or not they completed the ninth-grade based on their academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will, at the end of their ninth-grade year.

The conceptual framework (see Figure 20 below) demonstrates the process as to how students were identified as being on-track or off-track for successful ninth-grade completion based on key variables at the end of the school year. Each student was examined through each of the two lenses to determine how their academic track (lens one), and levels of skill and will (lens two) contributed to their success, or lack thereof, during their ninth grade school year. My first research question analyzed how many students successfully completed the ninth-grade based on their academic track placement. My second research question analyzed how many students successfully completed the ninth-grade based on their levels of skill and will. My third question addressed what ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceived to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and remain on-track for graduation. This information was based on a questionnaire that was given to all ninth-graders in the cohort that provided greater insight into their home life situations, their perceptions of school, and their own academic progress. I also conducted 16 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a stratified randomized sample from each of the four, skill/will matrix quadrants[10]. Research regarding student success in high school is often measured by the strength of correlational relationship of specific variables such as: grades, attendance rates, and suspension rates (E. M. Allensworth, Nagaoka, & Johnson,

[10] Skill/Will Quadrants: The skill/will matrix, developed by leadership coach and executive, Max Landsberg (1996), is a paradigm taken from a business and management coaching model that categorizes employees into four areas: those with high skill/high will, high skill/low will, low skill/high will, and low skill/low will.

2018). There is minimal research that considers the relationship of students' ninth-grade experiences based on their academic tracks, their levels of skill and will, and their reflections on their lives and schooling experiences.

Figure 20. Conceptual framework that illustrates the process in which the three research questions were addressed.

Description of the School

Hope High School is a Title I high school located on the south side of a medium-sized city in the state of New Mexico. It has an enrollment of 1389 students and 150 school personnel members. It is considered the heart of its south-side community where many generations of students have attended; many of these students have graduated, but others have fallen short of meeting the requirements to achieve this milestone—the high school diploma. The school's demographics have dramatically shifted over the course of the past 15 years with an increase in South American and Central American immigrant families moving into the surrounding neighborhoods, as the south side of the city has provided for more affordable housing options. The school's enrollment has steadily increased each year from an average of 900 students in 2000, to 1389 students in 2018. The district has had to rezone the district to designate more of the city's students to the other high school in town to alleviate the overcrowding that has continued to occur each year at Hope High School. The school's enrollment of students whose first language is English has declined since the school opened, and there has been an increase in the number of students whose primary language is Spanish, with the increase of South American and Central American immigrant families moving into the school zone. The school has also experienced phases of construction projects to increase the number of classrooms, to expand the cafeteria, and to create a more expansive and secure front entrance for enhanced safety and security.

The New Mexico Public Education Department has worked to create a scope of accountability measures for students, teachers, and schools that are all heavily reliant upon student achievement data, which often becomes a great challenge for Title I schools

with high poverty, truancy, and teacher and principal turnover ("NMPED School Grading," n.d.). According to these regulations, students are required to pass a total of 24 academic credits; pass their state graduation exams (PARCC[11]/NMSBA[12]/EOC[13]) in reading, mathematics, science, writing, and social studies; take an honors, Advanced Placement, dual credit, or distance learning course; and must be trained in CPR in order to graduate from high school. Teachers are given state evaluations that consist of: student achievement data (35 percent), observations (40 percent), planning and preparation (15 percent), attendance (five percent), and student surveys (five percent). Based on the results of the scores in these categories, teachers are rated as: ineffective, minimally effective, effective, highly effective, or exemplary. Teachers who teach in Title I schools are often challenged with lower evaluation ratings than their colleagues who teach at non-Title I schools, which results in frustration and high turnover. Schools are given school report cards based on students' current standing on academic proficiency (30 points); school improvement (10 points); improvement of higher-performing students (10 points); improvement of lowest-performing students (10 points); students' opportunity to learn surveys (eight points); graduation rates (17 points); and college and career readiness indicators (15 points).

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[11] PARCC: The PARCC exams (Partnership for Readiness in College and Careers) are graduation exams in reading and mathematics where students must achieve scores of proficient "4" or advanced "5" in order to graduate with a New Mexico Diploma of Excellence.

[12] NMSBA: The NMSBA exam (New Mexico Standards Based Assessment) is a graduation exam in science where students must achieve a score that is higher than the state approved cut score in order to graduate with a New Mexico Diploma of Excellence.

[13] EOC: The EOC exams (End-of Course) are graduation exams in writing and social studies where students must achieve a score that is higher than the state approved cut score in order to graduate with a New Mexico Diploma of Excellence.

Figure 21 presents Hope High School's school report card for the 2017 school year. Out of 100 possible points, they earned 59.93 points, which is 5.07 points away from earning a school grade of a B.

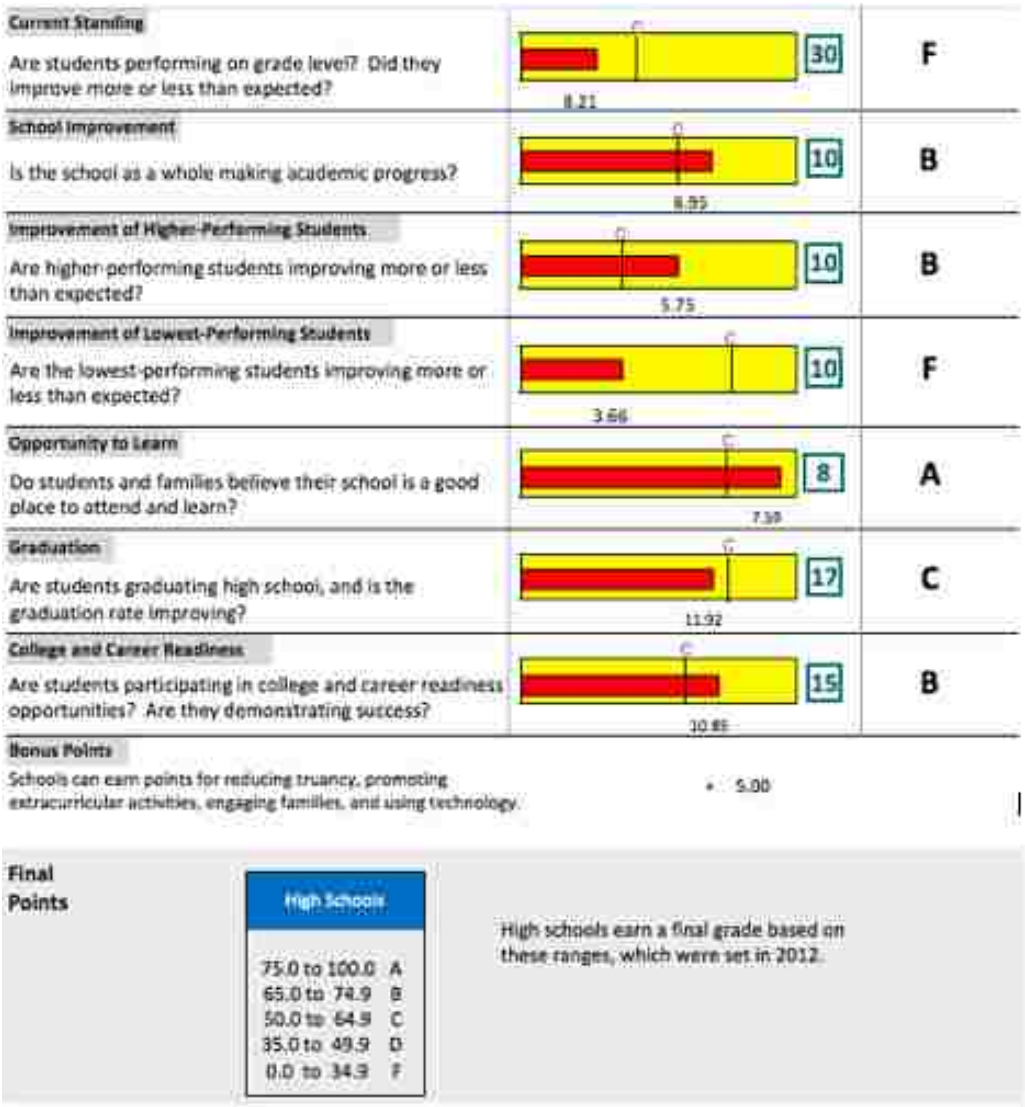

Figure 21. Hope High School's 2017 school year report card displaying the measurements and scores for each category ("NM Public Education Department School Grading," n.d.).

The school and district have struggled historically in their efforts to increase Hope High School's graduation rates, attendance rates, as well as student achievement rates in

reading and mathematics. Since the implementation of the New Mexico Public Education Department's school report card accountability system, Hope High School has received a school report card grade of a C during some years, and a D school during other years based on school wide student academic growth, students' opportunity to learn, graduation rates, and college and career readiness indicators.

Figure 22 presents Hope High School's school report card grades from the 2014 school year to the 2017 school year.

Figure 22. Hope High School's school report card grades from 2014 to 2017 ("NM Public Education Department School Grading," n.d.).

Other schools within the state that have comparable demographics to Hope High School have struggled to achieve a letter grade higher than a D, where Hope High School has frequently come within five to 10 points of receiving a letter grade of a B.

The school that was once considered the city's high school of choice for families during its first 10 years due to its innovative and competitive academics, athletics, and arts programming, changed with the shift in student demographics and designation as a Title I school; however, in the past five years, it has maintained steady increases in graduation rates, attendance rates, and student achievement rates.

Figure 23 reflects Hope High School's gradual increase in graduation rates from 59.7 percent during the 2009 school year to 72.5 percent during the 2016 school year.

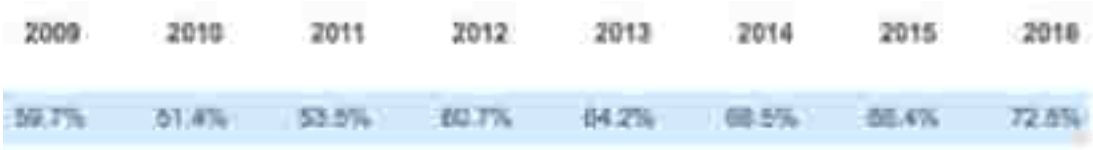

Figure 23. Hope High School's graduation rates from 2009 to 2017 ("NM Public Education Department District Report Card," n.d.).

Figure 24 establishes how Hope High School's attendance rates increased from 89.2 percent in the 2012-2013 school year to 93 percent during the 2016-2017 school year.

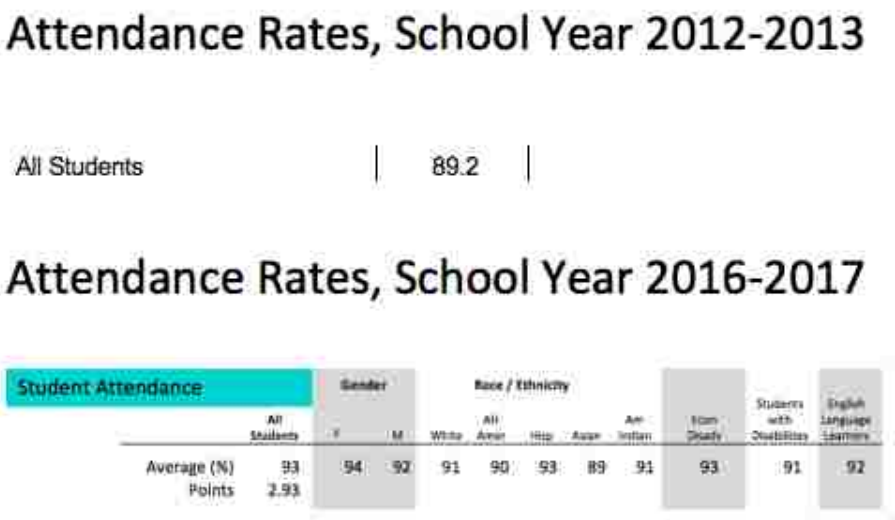

Figure 24. Hope High School's 2012-2013 school year attendance rate and 2016-2017 school year attendance rate ("NM Public Education Department School Grades," n.d.).

Student achievement rates have showed incremental growth in the areas of reading and mathematics. During the 2014 school year, the state of New Mexico changed its high school graduation exam from the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (NMSBA), which was aligned to the New Mexico State Standards, to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers Assessment (PARCC),

which is aligned to the Common Core State Standards. The PARCC exam proved to be a more rigorous exam for students.

Figure 25 presents Hope High School's PARCC assessment reading and mathematics proficiencies of all 11th graders from the 2014-2015 school year to the 2016-2017 school year. Reading proficiency remained at 24 percent of students scoring proficient or advanced in 2015 and 2017, but there was a 6 percent decline in proficiency in 2016 with only 18 percent scoring proficient or advanced. Mathematics proficiency has increased incrementally with only 3 percent of 11th graders demonstrating proficiency in the PARCC assessment to 5 percent during the 2016-2017 school year.

School History Student performance over time can show the success of interventions and school reform. Students who score Proficient or Advanced are considered to be performing at grade level.

		All Students	Gender		Race / Ethnicity					Econ Disadv	Students with Disabilities	English Language Learners
			F	M	White	Afr Amer	Hisp	Asian	Am Indian			
Reading Proficiency	2017 (%)	24	34	13	39	-	22	-	≤20	22	9	9
	2016 (%)	18	26	10	33	-	17	-	18	18	3	3
	2015 (%)	24	31	18	43	-	23	-	-	24	5	3
Math Proficiency	2017 (%)	5	5	4	7	-	4	-	≤20	4	6	2
	2016 (%)	2	2	3	7	-	2	-	10	2	4	1
	2015 (%)	3	2	3	8	-	<2	-	-	2	4	<2

Figure 25. Hope High School's reading and mathematics proficiency rates from the 2015 school year to the 2017 school year ("NM Public Education Department School Grades," n.d.).

As the school has continued on its upward trajectory, the number of families opting to transfer their students out of Hope High School has decreased. This particular high school has continued to demonstrate increases in graduation rate data, student achievement data, and college and career readiness indicators over the past seven years, regardless of the low socioeconomic factors that have challenged its efforts to provide its

students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in college, careers, and life. Because research has demonstrated a direct correlation between socioeconomic status and student achievement (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Entwisle et al., 1997; Huang & Zhu, 2012; Quinn et al., 2016), it is important to learn more about why students at this school have continued to persist, and not drop out, even though they lack proficiency in reading, mathematics, science, writing, and social studies as measured by the state high school graduation exams (PARCC, NMSBA, and EOC).

Demographic Information of the Sample

The purposeful sample for this study consisted of (n=235) ninth-graders from the cohort (n=340) who assented, and whose parents and guardians consented, to participate in this study for a total participation rate of 69.1 percent. The entire ninth-grade cohort of students (n=340) was eligible to participate in this study because they were identified as current ninth-graders who were projected to graduate in May of 2021. These students' ages ranged from 14-15. The gender breakdown of the sample (n=235) consisted of 115 males (48.9 percent) and 120 females (51.1 percent). The ninth-grade sample consisted of 214 students who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 10 students who identified as White or Caucasian, three students who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, four students who identified as Black or African American, and four students who identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. This sample's gender and ethnic distributions were representative of the entire school's population of 1389 students. Because this school is a designated Title I school, all students qualify for free breakfast and lunch.

Data Narrative of the Sample

To learn more about the sample of ninth-grade participants (n=235), I administered a questionnaire via a Google Form that inquired about their experiences at home and at school that influenced their academic progress during their first year in high school. Below are tables and figures that reflect their experiences. Table 4 reflects that the majority of participants had more of a positive experience in elementary school and during their ninth-grade year of high school, whereas in middle school, the majority had more of an average experience. It is important to observe that there is a drop in participants' positive experiences from elementary school to middle school by a 12.2 percentage point difference, then a rise in participants' positive experiences from middle school to their ninth-grade year by a 15.8 percentage point difference. This sample of participants attended three feeder middle schools—one was a 6th-8th grade middle school model, and the other two were K-8th grade school models. The majority came from the 6th-8th grade school.

Table 4

Percentages of How Ninth-Grade Participants (n=235) Rated Their Elementary, Middle School, and Ninth-Grade Experiences

	POSITIVE	AVERAGE	NEGATIVE
Student's Elementary School Experience	50.4%	44.4%	5.2%
Student's Middle School Experience	38.2%	53.2%	8.6%
Student's Ninth-Grade Experience	54%	41.3%	4.7%

Figure 26 displays the participants' responses from the digital questionnaire (positive, negative, average), when asked about their overall ninth-grade experience.

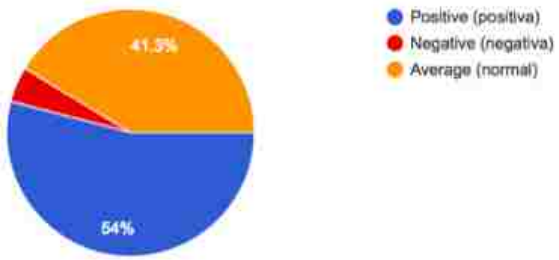

Figure 26. How ninth-grade participants (n=235) rated their overall ninth-grade experience.

More than half of the sample (54 percent/127 participants), had a positive experience, 41.3 percent/97 participants rated their experience as average, and 4.7 percent/11 participants rated their experience as negative.

Figure 27 shows that the majority of the sample (85.9 percent) enjoyed their ninth-grade classes.

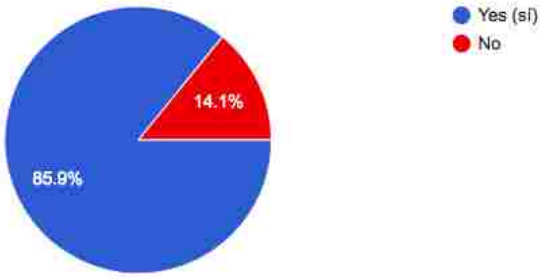

Figure 27. Participants who enjoyed, or did not enjoy, their ninth-grade classes.

Figure 28 displays how often participants were absent from school. 27.7 percent stated that they were never absent from school, 71.9 percent expressed that they missed 0-5 days per month, and 13.2 percent said that they missed more than six days per month. Figure 29 demonstrates the reasons why they missed school. The majority of the sample,

73.9 percent, indicated that they missed school due to being sick. When asked if they felt their absenteeism had a negative effect on their success in school (Figure 30), 65.1 percent specified that it did, and 34.9 percent suggested that it did not.

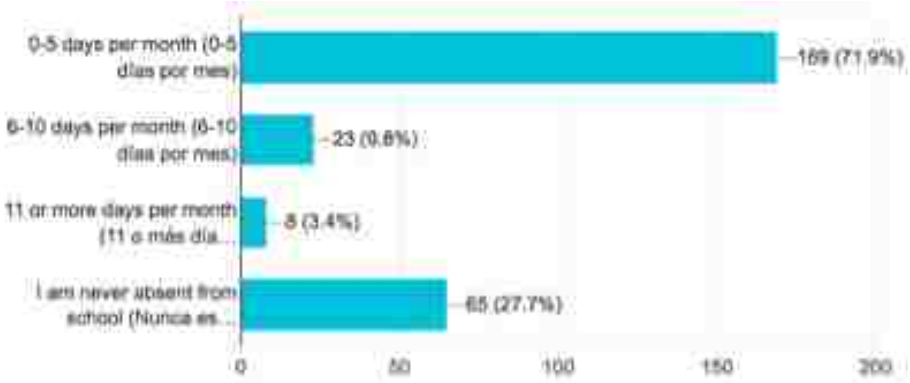

Figure 28. How often participants (n=235) are absent from school.

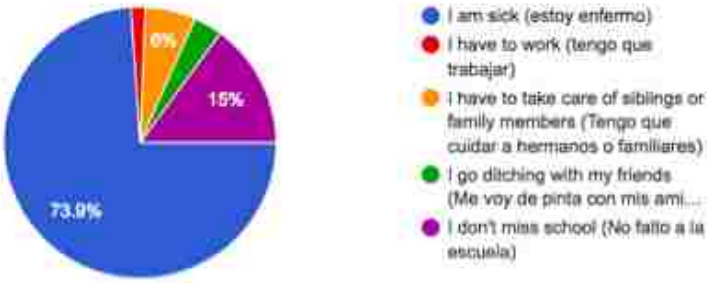

Figure 29. Reasons why participants are absent from school.

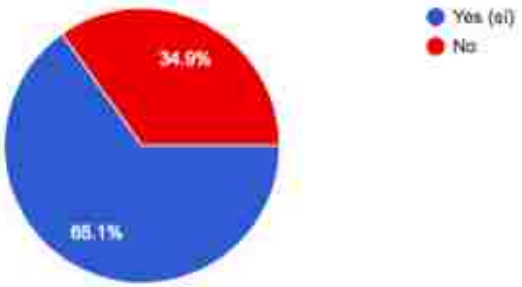

Figure 30. Percentage of ninth-grade participants who believe that their absenteeism had a negative effect on their success in school.

When surveyed, 37 percent of the participants stated that their first language was English, and 63 percent stated that their first language was Spanish. In Figure 31 below, the participants in the sample identified the English Language Arts (ELA) class in which they were enrolled for their ninth-grade school year. Based on the distribution, 86 percent were enrolled in a regular or Honors ELA class, whereas 14 percent were enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class.

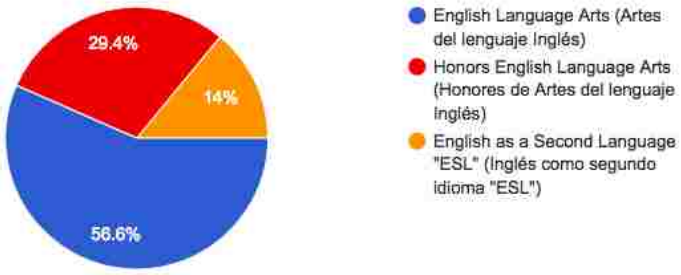

Figure 31. Percentages of ninth-grade participants (n=235) in regular English Language Arts class, in an Honors ELA class, and in an English as a Second Language class.

Information regarding graduation requirements is not usually disseminated to students prior to their entrance to high school, nor to their families, which contributes to students quickly falling off-track for grade-level promotion during their ninth-grade year. It is during this first year of high school where ninth-grade students either remain on-track, or fall off-track, for graduation. A substantial graduation requirement that students should know prior to entering high school is how many academic credits they must earn in order to graduate on-time. Figure 32 below illustrates that only 67.5 percent of this study's sample knows how many academic credits they need to graduate from high school (24 credits), while 32.5 percent do not know how many credits they need.

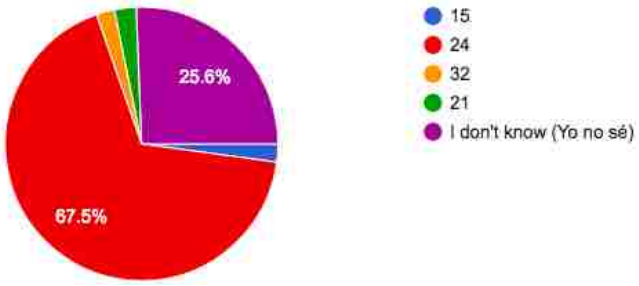

Figure 32. Percentage of ninth-grade participants in the sample (n=235) who know, and who do not know, how many academic credits they need in order to graduate from high school.

In Table 5 below, the participants answered multiple questions that were related to if they were the first in their family to attend high school, if they would be the first in their family to graduate from high school, if they had used cigarettes/drugs/alcohol, and if they had been in or out-of-school suspended. There was a large percentage of students who had experienced being in-school suspended in comparison to out-of-school suspended. I asked the principal about the results of this question, and she informed me that this was due to their tardy policy. She explained that if a student is late to class, then she/he is not allowed to disrupt class, but is to stay in the in-school suspension room and do homework until their next class begins. She stated that tardiness was one of the teachers' greatest complaints at Hope High School due to the constant disruption of tardy students, and so they implemented this policy, which increased their in-school suspension percentage.

Table 5

Percentages of the Experiences of Ninth-Grade Participants' (n=235) In and Out of School that have Influenced Their Academic Progress During Their Ninth-Grade School Year

	YES	**NO**
Student Is the First in Her/His Family to Attend High School	11.1%	88.9%
Student Will Be the First in Her/His Family to Graduate from High School	21.7%	78.3%
Student Has Used Cigarettes	7.7%	92.3%
Student Has Used Drugs	11.5%	88.5%
Student Has Used Alcohol	19.1%	80.9%
Student Has Been In-School Suspended	43.8%	56.2%
Student Has Been Out-of-School Suspended	15.7%	84.3%

Overall, 95.3 percent of this sample of ninth-grade participants (n=235) has experienced an average to positive ninth-grade school year; $\leq$ 21.7 percent will be the first in their families to attend and/or graduate from high school; 91.9 percent have a quiet place to do homework at home; only 6.8 percent have to work to help pay bills for the household; 15.7 percent have been out-of-school suspended; > 80 percent have not engaged in the use of cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol; 85.5 percent feel safe at school; and it is important to $\geq$ 89.9 percent of participants and their families that they graduate from high school with a diploma of excellence.

Presentation of the Findings

Research Question #1:

How can academic tracks affect successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?

To address research question number one, I first developed a contingency table to categorize all the students from the entire ninth-grade cohort (n=340), as well as all the participants from the sample (n=235), into one of the five academic tracks to determine the distribution of the cohort in comparison to the sample (see Table 6). Then I created another contingency table to display the total number and percentage of students from the entire ninth-grade cohort, as well as the participants from the sample, from each of the academic tracks according to whether or not they completed ≥6 of their ninth-grade academic credits (see Table 7).

To begin to address research question number one, I worked with Hope High School's principal to review students' course schedules to identify their academic track placements based on the courses in which they were enrolled. I then categorized participants into one of the five academic tracks identified within the public school system (see Table 6). Assignment to each choice-based or compliance-based academic track consisted of participants *choosing* to be in advanced or general education courses, or being *assigned* to one of the three compliance-based academic tracks due to state and federal regulations established for students in need of English language acquisition and/or academic support through an individualized education plan (IEP).

Table 6

Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks That Provide Some Students with a Choice-Based Educational Experience, and Others with a Compliance-Based Educational Experience

Five Tiers of Public School Academic Tracks
Tier 1: Advanced Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 2: General Education Track *(Choice)*
Tier 3: English Learner Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 4: Special Education Track *(Compliance)*
Tier 5: English Learner and Special Education Track *(Compliance)*

Table 7 presents the total number and percentage of students from the entire cohort (n=340), as well as from the sample (n=235), assigned to each academic track.

Table 7

Number and Percentage of Ninth-Grade Students from the Entire Cohort (n=340), and from the Sample (n=235) Who Are Designated in Each of the Five Academic Tracks

	Total Number	Total Percentage
Advanced Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	105	31%
Advanced Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	70	30%
General Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	121	36%
General Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	86	36%
English Learner Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	74	22%
English Learner Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	54	23%
Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	20	6%
Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	14	6%
English Learner and Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	20	6%
English Learner and Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	11	5%

The academic tracks with the greatest representation were the general and advanced education tracks with ≥30 percent representation, and the academic tracks with the least amount of representation were the special education, and the English learner and special education tracks with ≤6 percent representation. The English learner academic track maintained an average of ≤23 percent. It is clear from the data presented in Table 7 that the sample (n=235) is reflective of the entire ninth-grade cohort (n=340) with a maximum difference of one percentage point, which establishes more accuracy, reliability, and validity within the analyses of the sample.

I then developed a contingency table to determine the total number and percentage of students in each of the five academic tracks from the entire ninth-grade cohort (n=340) in comparison to the sample (n=235), who successfully completed, and who did not complete, their ninth-grade year with ≥ 6 academic credits. At the end of the 2017-2018 school year, students were identified as *completers* if they earned ≥ 6 academic credits, or *non-completers* if they earned < 6 academic credits. According to Table 8, 266 of 340 ninth-grade students from the cohort (78 percent) earned enough academic credits to be promoted to the tenth grade, while 74 students (22 percent) did not. In comparison to the entire cohort, 200 participants from the sample (85 percent) successfully completed the ninth-grade, while 35 participants (15 percent) did not. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the percentage of ninth graders who earn enough credits to promote to the tenth grade ranges from 57.9 percent to 72.6 percent (Carr, 2017; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; US Department of Education, 2008). The total number of students from the cohort, as well as the participants in this sample, who successfully completed the ninth grade exceeds this

statistic with a ninth grade promotion rate of 78 percent for the cohort and 85 percent for the sample.

To determine which academic tracks had the most and least amount of students successfully promote to the tenth-grade, I conducted a contingency table analysis to analyze the distributions in each of the tracks. When comparing the sample's percentage of *completers* and *non-completers* from each of the five academic tracks, the advanced academic track had the highest percentage of *completers* (93 percent) in comparison to *non-completers* (7 percent). The general education and the English learner education tracks reflected a similar percentage of *completers* (84-85 percent) and *non-completer*s (15-16 percent). The special education track reflected 79 percent *completers* and 21 percent *non-completers*. The academic track that demonstrated the least amount of participants successfully promoting to the tenth-grade was the English learner and special education track with 55 percent *completers* and 45 percent *non-completers*.

Table 8 below presents the total number and percentage of students from the entire cohort (n=340), as well as from the sample (n=235), who identified as *completers* and *non-completers* from each academic track.

Table 8

Contingency Table of the Total Number and Percentage of Completers and Non-Completers Based on Their Academic Track Placement

	Ninth-Grade Completer	**Ninth-Grade Non-Completer**
Advanced Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	98 (93%)	7 (7%)
Advanced Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	65 (93%)	5 (7%)
General Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	90 (74%)	31 (26%)
General Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	72 (84%)	14 (16%)
English Learner Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	53 (72%)	21 (28%)
English Learner Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	46 (85%)	8 (15%)
Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	16 (80%)	4 (20%)
Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	11(79%)	3 (21%)
English Learner and Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	9 (45%)	11 (55%)
English Learner and Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	6 (55%)	5 (45%)

Research Question #2:

How can students' levels of skill and will affect their completion of the ninth-grade?

To answer research question number two, I created a contingency table of the number of participants (n=235) in each of the skill/will quadrants according to whether or not they completed, or did not complete, ≥6 of their ninth-grade academic credits. Then, I analyzed emergent themes from participants' responses from questions from the digital questionnaire and questions from the student interviews that aligned with participants' levels of skill and will.

To begin to answer research question number two, I first categorized all participants into one of the four-skill/will quadrants to determine the distribution of the sample. The four skill/will quadrants are as follows:

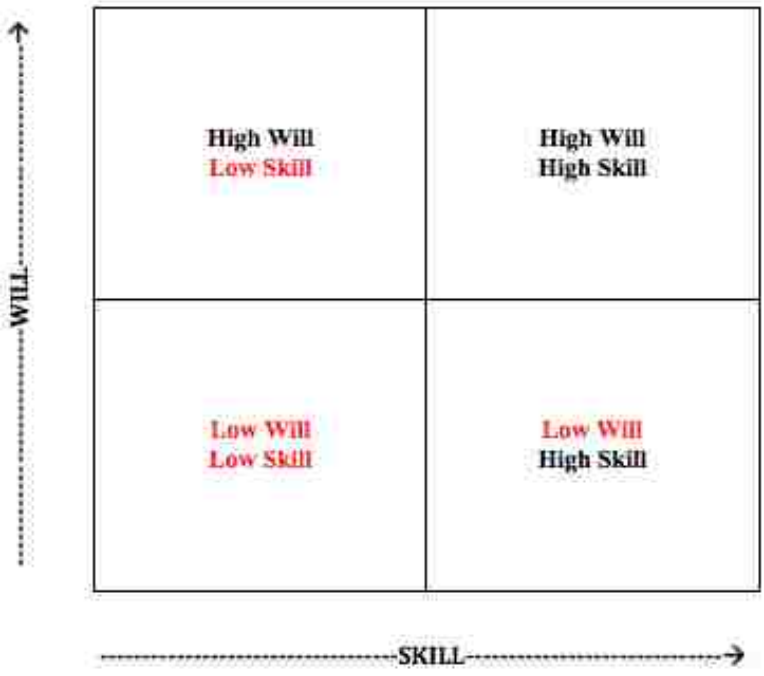

Figure 33. Max Landsberg's Skill/Will Matrix that determines in which quadrant individuals function primarily based on their levels of skill and will.

Table 9 below presents a distribution of the total number of participants from the sample (n=235) based on their skill/will quadrant, and whether or not they successfully completed the ninth-grade by earning ≥6 of their ninth-grade academic credits. The total number of participants who successfully completed the ninth-grade was 200. That is 85 percent of the sample, which means that 35 participants (15 percent) did not earn enough academic credits to be promoted to the tenth grade.

Table 9

Contingency Table of the Total Number and Percentage of Ninth-Grade Completers, and Non-Completers, Based on Their Skill/Will Quadrant

	High Skill High Will	**High Skill Low Will**	**Low Skill High Will**	**Low Skill Low Will**	**Total 9th Grade Participants (n=235)**
9th Grade Completer	97 (98%)	6 (60%)	90 (88%)	7 (29%)	200 (85%)
9th Grade Non-Completer	2 (2%)	4 (40%)	12 (12%)	17 (71%)	35 (15%)

The two quadrants with the greatest number of participants was the *high skill/high will* quadrant with a total of 99 identified participants (42 percent of the sample), and the *low skill/high will* quadrant with a total of 102 identified participants (43 percent of the sample). In the *high skill/high will* quadrant (n=99), 97 were categorized as *completers* and two were categorized as *non-completers*. In the *low skill/high will* quadrant (n=102),

90 were categorized as *completers* and 12 were categorized as *non-completers*. The data presented in Table 9 show that the two quadrants with the largest number of participants who successfully completed the ninth-grade are the two quadrants with participants who were characterized as having *high will*. The *high skill/low will* quadrant had a total of ten participants. Six of the participants completed the ninth grade, but four did not—this means that will/determination was a major factor for these students to not successfully pass the ninth grade, as they demonstrated that they had the academic skill capability to pass their classes. The *low skill/low will* quadrant had a total of 24 identified participants. Of those, only seven successfully completed the ninth grade, while 17 did not. This group had the largest number and percentage of students not successfully pass the ninth-grade. This is due to this group of participants not having the academic skill, or will/determination, to earn all their academic credits to promote to the tenth grade. This establishes that students' levels of will are a noteworthy variable, regardless of their levels of skill, when it comes to successfully promoting to the tenth grade with this particular sample.

Research Question #3:

What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

To address research question number three, I developed a skill/will chart (see Figure 11) that outlined the total number of participants that aligned with each skill/will quadrant. I then took a stratified random sample of *completers* and *non-completers* from each skill/will quadrant (two *completers* and two *non-completers* from each quadrant) to interview for a total of 16 interviews. Because there were only two high will/high skill *non-completers*, this became a limitation that established the number of participants that would be interviewed as *completers* and *non-completers* from each skill/will quadrant. Then, I analyzed emergent themes from participants' responses from questions from the digital questionnaire, and questions from the student interviews, that aligned with what *completers* and *non-completers* perceived to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation.

To begin to address research question number three, I first administered a researcher-developed questionnaire titled (*Factors That Influence Ninth-Grade Success*), made up of 56 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions regarding factors that impact ninth-grade success. This questionnaire not only asked questions that reflected participants' home and schooling experiences during their ninth-grade year, but also questions regarding their self-perceived levels of academic skill and will/determination. This questionnaire was piloted with a ninth-grade cohort of similar

size two years before to support the reliability and validity of the instrument prior to its use in this study. After the participants completed the digital questionnaire, I then developed a skill/will chart (see Figure 33) that illustrated each skill/will quadrant, the total number of participants identified in each quadrant, the total number of *completers* (light green) and *non-completers* (yellow) from each skill/will quadrant, and the names (pseudonyms) and identifier numbers of two randomly selected *completers* and *non-completers* from each quadrant to be interviewed.

Figure 34. A chart of the random sample of completers (light green) and non-completers (yellow) from each of the skill/will quadrants to conduct semi-structured interviews (pseudonyms used for confidentiality of participants).

After I randomly selected the participants from each skill/will quadrant to be interviewed, I asked them if they were willing to participate in face-to-face interviews. All accepted the invitation and submitted to me signed assent letters, and signed consent letters from their parents/guardians. I then set up interview dates and times with each participant and conducted the interviews. All interviews were recorded, transcribed within one week, and member-checked by each participant to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were done by the transcription service, Rev.

A total of 235 participants completed the digital questionnaire and 16 participants engaged with me in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality of the participants during the interview process. After all the interviews were transcribed and member-checked, I then read, coded, and analyzed emergent themes from the participants' responses from the researcher-developed digital questionnaire (*Factors That Influence Ninth-Grade Success*) and student interviews, based on support factors and challenges they encountered throughout their ninth-grade year. This was important in order to gain a qualitative perspective in regard to their overall ninth-grade experience, and what/who supported them, or what/who hindered their progress, during their ninth-grade year.

Support Factors During *Completers'* and *Non-Completers'* Ninth-Grade Year

Upon completion of reading, coding and analyzing the 16 transcribed interviews of the participants identified as *completers* and *non-completers*, the themes of support factors that emerged were similar amongst the two groups. There were four themes that transpired from the digital questionnaire and student interviews in regard to support

factors that helped participants to experience success during their ninth-grade school year.

The four themes are listed below:

1. Minimal out-of-school obligations.
2. Motivation to make their families proud.
3. Caring and supportive teachers and principal.
4. Feelings of safety within the school environment.

Minimal Out-of-School Obligations.

Table 10 presents information regarding participants having minimal out-of-school obligations that prohibited them from achieving passing grades.

Table 10

Percentages of Ninth-Grade Participants (n=235) Who Have Out-of-School Obligations

	YES	**NO**
Students Have to Watch Siblings After School	26%	74%
Students Have to Work to Help Pay Household Bills	6.8%	93.2%
Students Involved in Athletics or Activities	45.5%	54.5%

During the interviews, when asked if they had other obligations that kept them from doing their home/schoolwork, the *completers* and *non-completers* replied as follows:

"No. Not really."—Carlos Martinez Carrillo

"Um no, I go home, do my homework, um, take care of the baby for a little while so my auntie can rest. And then, I'll like to go outside or something. Then come back in, just take a shower and go to bed. My nephew, he's pretty...you give him a phone and he'll be fine, and I can do my homework in peace."—Anna Montoya

"And um, I usually start my home ... Well no, actually eat, and then I do my homework, and then I, sometimes I help around the house like to clean, and then I just watch T.V."—Bernardo Gallegos

"No. Um, yeah, not really, no."—Katherine Alas

"Um. Sometimes taking care of my niece and nephew. They live with my sister, but she works, so I help her watch them in the evenings sometimes."—Alejandra Saldivar

"Not really, my mom's tired most of the time, she has a very hard job, and it takes a toll on her, so I usually make food for myself, and if she asks me usually my uncle or her even, sometimes my cousins who live with us. But it never really takes ... It doesn't really get in the way. I usually do a lot more stuff before I start on my homework, but I am still able to get it done."—Emily Pacheco

"Um, no. My parents would ask me if I have homework. And I would say yes or no."—Javier Crespin Montijo

"Um, I'm kinda like a janitor. I clean trashes out of the state building. Um, sometimes when I don't do my job on Friday, I'll do it Sunday. And then, that's one thing. But I could do my homework, I usually do it."—Marcus Romero

Motivation to Make Their Families Proud.

Table 11 depicts that a significant percentage of participants and their families feel that graduating from high school is very important, a minimal percentage of

participants and their families feel that graduating from high school is somewhat important, and no participants nor families believe that graduating from high school is not important.

Table 11

Percentages of How Important Graduating from High School is to Ninth-Grade Participants (n=235) and to Their Families

	VERY IMPORTANT	**SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT**	**NOT IMPORTANT**
How Important is it to Student to Graduate?	89.9%	11.1%	0%
How Important is it to Student's Family that She/He Graduates	94.9%	5.1%	0%

During the interviews, the *completers* and *non-completers* emphasized in their stories how much they wanted to graduate from high school and be successful in life so that they could make their families proud. They responded as follows:

"Mm I think like, school in my life is a big thing, like, it's my main priority at the moment because I'm only, like, a freshman so it's like my parents don't want me to get a job yet or anything so they want me to focus on school. So, it's like ... It's just, like, my main priority. In my family, my uncle has been the only one to get a diploma and ... pursue his career that he's always wanted. So, I feel like if I do it, my family be proud of me as well."—Anna Montoya

"Um, school is a big role for me because it would make ... Well, if I graduate it would make my parents really proud of me and stuff. And role ... the role in school for me is to get an education, which is really big for my family and stuff, so it's really important for me."—Aron Luevano

"My dad is always telling me that he wants to see me graduate and wants to see me with like a good job, and like, a good life and stuff. So, he's always really like helped me out and pushed me to do good things. I really wanna graduate, and like get a really good job, and like help my mom and my dad and stuff. Like when they get sick or something. And help 'em out."—Carlos Martinez Carrillo

"Ah. Just- (Pause) Making my parents happy, and like- because I'm the- I'm the youngest in the family, and like I have big a- big sister and a brother that are already through college and working, and I just think I just wanna follow them and make my parents proud."—Alejandra Saldivar

"Graduating from high school is important to me and is equally important to them, I know they'll be proud of me even if I don't. But they know I can do it, and they really do support me whenever I need something, they take me to the doc if I get sick immediately because they know how important it is for me to graduate so I can make a better life for myself because they struggle a lot."—Bernardo Gallegos

"I want be in is a mechanical engineer, all my, all my uncles, my mom, and parent, yeah, are all helping me, they want me to graduate, and keep going with my school, go to college. And I, like, it's my decision, like I think yes, I have to do it, but I have, they have to be part me. Uh, my family is gonna be proud of me, because they, my mom didn't attend to college."—Fabian Francisco

"I want to pass. My parents want me to pass or graduate. But I- I kinda start losing focus and I kinda don't pay attention to it and I start realizing at the end. I want to make my parents proud that I am graduating someday."—Vidal Dominguez

"Graduating from high school means a lot to me because I know it would make my mom proud and well, both of my parents and I'll be able to get the job I want. It's 'cause there's only been, like, one ... Like, my uncle that's graduated from it, so I think it means a lot to them."—Abigail Griego

"Motivated, I feel motivated to do well, to make my parents proud. I want to show them that I'm getting somewhere in life, and that I'm not gonna be that kind of person who has to depend on others to succeed."—Katherine Alas

"Graduating from high school is like my number one thing to do 'cause they, my parents, when they were younger, they had to drop out to help their family. So, they want me to graduate. I want to do it for them to make them proud."—Marcus Romero

"I don't wanna be the one from my family that doesn't graduate. And, I wanna like, make my parents proud, and make myself proud too. Well, it's like really important to them, because like, they always think that we can do it, so if we don't do it, they're gonna be like 'How? We have always supported you in everything.'"—Valeria Aros Mejia

Caring and Supportive Teachers and Principal.

In the student questionnaire that was administered, participants responded to whether or not they knew their principal, whether or not they knew their counselor, if their teachers and principal were supportive and encouraging, and if they believed their school maintained high expectations for behavior and academics. The data represented in

Table 12 demonstrates that participants feel encouraged and supported within Hope High School, as >88.9 percent of participants feel that the adults within the school building are supportive of their academic success, and that there are high expectations for student behavior and academics. Table 12 also illustrates that >94 percent of participants know who their principal is; however only 58.3 percent know who their school counselor is, which can be problematic, as the school counselor plays an important role in students' academic scheduling and advisement, as well as social and emotional well-being.

Table 12

Percentages of Participants (n=235) Who Know Their Principal and Counselor, Who Feel That Their Teachers and Principals Are Supportive, and That Their School Maintains High Expectations for Behavior and Academics

	YES	**NO**
Student Knows Her/His Principal	94.8%	5.2%
Student Knows Her/His School Counselor	58.3%	41.7%
Students Feel That Their Teachers Support and Encourage Them to Do Well in School	94.5%	5.5%
Students Feel That Their Principals Provide Supports for Them to Be Successful	97%	3%
Students Feel That Their School Has High Expectations for Behavior and Academics	88.9%	11.1%

Below are responses from *completers* and *non-completers* when asked to describe their ninth-grade high school experience. Their responses indicate that they had caring and supportive teachers who had a positive influence on their ninth-grade experience:

"I enjoyed my ninth-grade year because of the amazing teachers."

"I have great teachers who are really good."

"The teachers are nice and know how to explain things to help me improve my grades."

"My teachers are really kind to me."

"The teachers are very caring."

"I like my ninth-grade classes because I have cool teachers."

"My teachers help me at a level that I can understand."

"My teachers are willing to make sure that I understand and will succeed in my education."

"The teachers help me learn."

"The teachers are good and are very supportive."

"The teachers help me to learn."

"The teachers are nice."

"I enjoyed my ninth-grade classes because the teachers made my classes easy to understand."

One student in particular went into great detail in her response in regard to whether or not she enjoyed her ninth-grade classes. She took the time to describe each of her teachers in great detail in response to whether or not she enjoyed her ninth-grade classes:

I like my 9th grade classes because of the people and teachers I get to work with. I only have 1 or 2 friends in each class, but they're really really close friends. My teachers are also some of the most understanding teachers that I have ever met. For example, my first period teacher doesn't go too hard on me with work when I miss class or am late because he understands the situation I am in. My second period teacher lets me express myself as I wish when it comes to how artistic I want to be, and when I am struggling to finish a piece of art on time, she gives me time to work on it outside of class. My 3rd period teacher is a goof. He is so funny and he's a lot of fun to be around. When I am not feeling well, he doesn't push me too hard. And on a regular basis he does push me to my limits. He helps me better my stamina and shape all because he approaches all of the exercises with a positive attitude. My 4th period teacher helps all of his students keep up with the work. He minds them when they're missing something, and when most of the class is behind, he gives us time to catch up. My 5th period teacher has one of the brightest souls I have ever met. No matter how busy and difficult her day has been, she always keeps a smile on her face and is so patient with us. She's a great vibe to be around. My 6th period teacher is also really nice. I know I can go to her with any problem, both in or outside of school. My 7th period teacher is by far the nicest, most patient person I have ever met. She answers our emails with questions about the work no matter how late it is. In her class it is JUST about passing. She makes learning and reading so much fun.

Below are responses from some of the *completers* and *non-completers* when asked what their principal could do to better support their high school experience:

"Nothing."

"Nothing, because she is doing amazing."

"I think the principal is doing everything to improve the high school and I like how this high school is."

"My principal is already doing a good job but should improve on helping the students who are not academically successful."

"She could motivate students more on not giving up and being successful."

"She can give us more time to eat, because the line gets full and we don't have time to enjoy our meals."

"I think she already helps to improve my high school experience."

"I honestly think she is doing great."

"I think what the principal is doing is good enough."

"Nothing. She is doing a great job."

"I think she is doing a great job and I love the construction. It makes the school look nice."

"She encourages us to do our best and that is enough to make me feel great."

"What she has been doing is enough. I am not sure what else she could do."

"She can work to provide more pathways and electives."

"She can be more involved with the freshmen class."

"Stay supportive and make school more fun."

"I believe that our principal is doing everything she can to improve our high school experience."

"Honestly, I think what she does is enough for me to improve my high school experience."

The data and responses from the digital questionnaire, and the participants' responses from the interviews, reaffirms the theme of caring and supportive teachers and principal, and that the participants believe that their teachers and principal worked hard to give them a successful ninth-grade experience.

Feelings of Safety Within the School Environment.

Table 13 presents information regarding if the participants felt safe within their school environment. According to the data, 85.5 percent felt safe at school, less than 43 percent experienced any type of bullying, and 83.7 percent felt that there was at least one adult they could go to in the school if they needed help.

Table 13

Percentages of Ninth-Grade Participants (n=235) Who Feel Safe Within the School Environment

	YES	**NO**
Student Feels Safe at School	85.5%	14.5%
Student Has Experienced Being Bullied	42.1%	57.9%
Student Feels That There Is at Least One Adult She/He Can Go to for Help	83.7%	16.3%

Figure 35 presents how safe participants felt as school on a scale from one to four (one being *not safe*, two being *somewhat safe*, three being *safe*, and four being *very safe*).

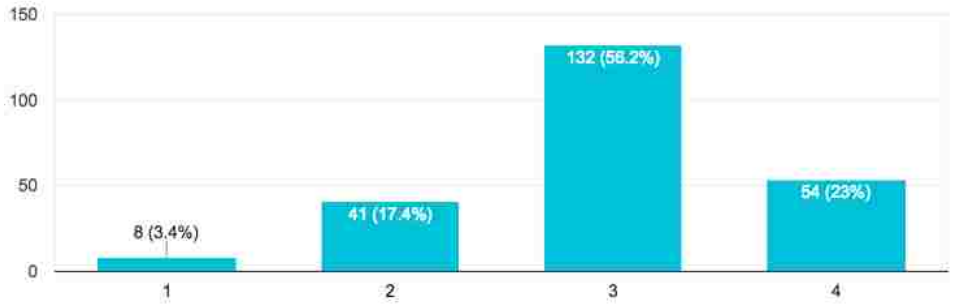

Figure 35. A scale of how safe participants felt at school.

Based on the participants' responses, 23 percent felt *very safe*, 56.2 percent felt *safe*, 17.4 percent felt *somewhat safe*, and 3.4 percent *did not feel safe*. Overall, a substantial percentage of participants from the sample (79.2 percent) felt safe or very safe while at school.

Challenge During *Completers'* Ninth-Grade Year

There was one prominent theme that resonated from the digital questionnaire and student interviews in regard to challenges that *completers* experienced that interfered with them fully enjoying their ninth-grade school year. The theme is listed below:

1. Boredom in classes due to lack of hands-on activities and projects.

Below are responses from some of the *completers* in regard to their feelings of boredom in their classes:

"I do enjoy my classes, but they are often boring and not challenging. Some classes were really boring and not fun, because they did not have hands-on learning."—Fabian Francisco

"The classes are relatively easy. I enjoyed my classes because they were easy, which made my first year of high school not so intimidating."—Katherine Alas

"My classes were easy to pass, so after a while, the classes got boring."—Bernardo Gallegos

"Most of the time we aren't doing anything fun or interesting. I feel like I am not being challenged enough in class."—Emily Pacheco

"I didn't enjoy them, because they are not the classes that I chose, but overall, my ninth-grade classes were simple, probably because it was only my first year of high school."—Carlos Martinez Carrillo

"The reason why I like my ninth-grade courses is because they are easy."—Aron Luevano

Challenge During *Non-Completers'* Ninth-Grade Year

There were two prominent themes that emerged from the digital questionnaire and student interviews in regard to challenges that *non-completers* experienced that interfered with them successfully promoting to the tenth-grade. The two themes are listed below:

1. Getting easily distracted by peers.
2. Lack of effort in classes.

When asked what have been their greatest obstacles or challenges to successfully passing their ninth-grade classes, participants stated:

"My biggest challenges would probably be that, like, I get distracted quickly. So, I've had to like, overcome that and, like, I've just been listening to music sometimes when I'm doing my work, so I don't, like, start talking to people, so that's my biggest obstacle that people like to talk to me (laughs). Yeah, I've lost a lot of friends in, like, I've changed friend groups recently and like, I feel that it's better for me because the friends

that I've had before we're always so negative and, like, always be talking about people and I just don't like that, so I've been, like, switching groups."—Anna Montoya

"Actually, like friends, like I feel like my friends distract me a lot. Like with around them, I'm like goofy, or like I don't do my work because, that we like talk. And, and, and I mostly I can't like, I can't focus that good."—Abigail Griego

"It's usually just my lack of motivation…and procrastination. I get confused and just looking around, I'll start watching the TV."—Daniel Ortiaga

"Well, not focusing enough, not working hard too. I actually think it's myself because I just realize at the end. I realize at the end, wow I didn't try hard. I'm going to try to ... try hard ... try harder even next time. I needed to get my grades up and work hard to be successful in life."—Vidal Dominguez

"Not doing all my work became overwhelming with all my classes. I need to come to school more and do all my work. I need to pay attention more in class and put more effort."—Javier Crespin Montijo

"When my sister got in a car accident I kinda got like sad and stopped doing homework and all that. I realized when it was too late that I needed to get my grades up to be able to pass my classes."—Marcus Romero

"So right now, I'm trying to catch up but like, like also I'm gonna go back to first semester, so like one of the reasons why I didn't come to school is just that the pressure was hitting me and so I was like, like I don't wanna do this no more and I was like wait what's the point, but like right now I've been positive lately which I liked because its helping me a lot to go like, because like maybe, every morning I wake up with (Random grumble) then my mom is like screaming at me because like before she would try to yell

out my name to get up, but then now she like telling me to get up and I was like alright, then she gave me a couple of minutes, and like I'll get up."—Thomas Gonzales

"Mm, sometimes it's been like people I've hanged out with. Some like they've haven't helped me in anything."—Josephina Inez Gomez

Challenge During *Completers'* and *Non-Completers* Ninth-Grade Year

There was one prominent theme that resonated from the digital questionnaire and student interviews in regard to a challenge that *completers* and *non-completers* experienced that interfered with them feeling successful during their ninth-grade school year. The theme is listed below:

1. Subject-area: Mathematics.

Figure 36 presents information regarding whether participants were enrolled in algebra I, geometry, or algebra II during their ninth-grade year. According to the data, 75.7 percent were enrolled in algebra I, 24.3 percent were enrolled in geometry, and zero percent were enrolled in algebra II.

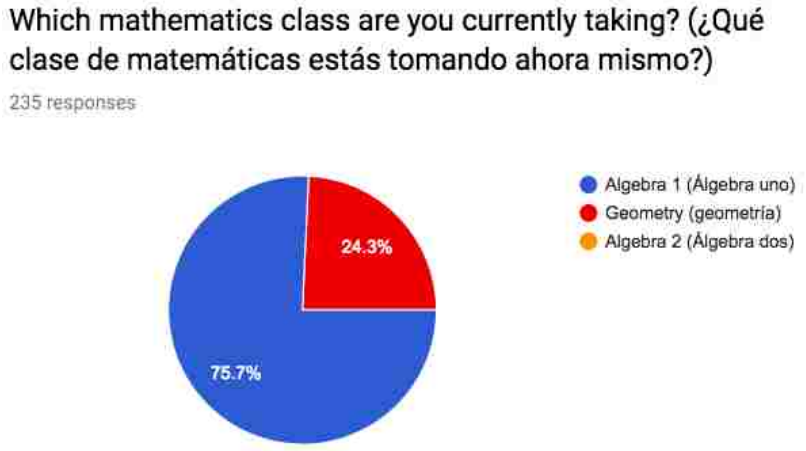

Figure 36. Percentages of participants enrolled in algebra I, geometry, and algebra II.

Figure 37 presents information regarding the distribution of participants' least favorite ninth-grade course. According to the data, mathematics the least favorite course

for 32.3 percent of this sample, followed by 20 percent whose least favorite course was science. These are both STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) related subject-areas that are heavily weighted in college and career success.

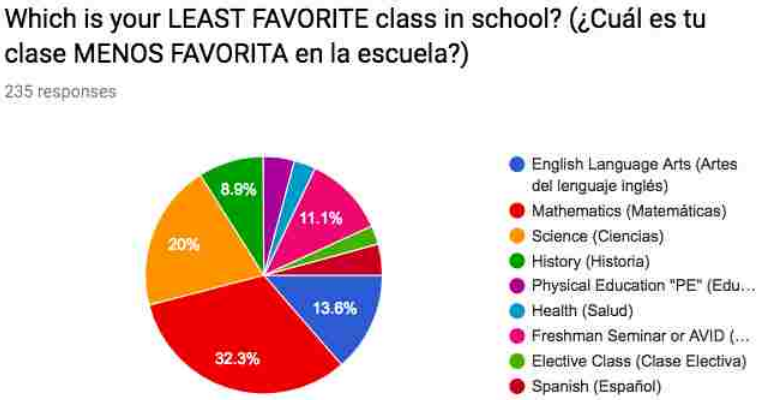

Figure 37. Breakdown of participants' least favorite ninth-grade course.

Figure 38 demonstrates the reasoning as to why participants chose their least favorite course. According to the data, 77.6 percent of this sample's reasoning for choosing their least favorite ninth-grade course was due to not liking the subject area, and 22.4 percent felt that their teacher did not support them to feel successful.

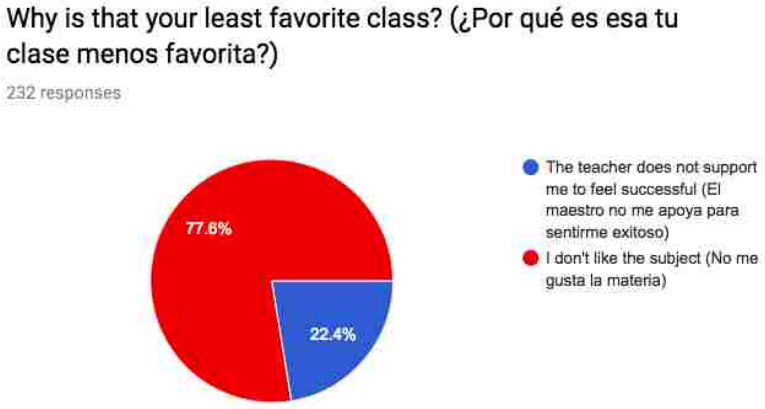

Figure 38. Participants' reasoning for their least favorite ninth-grade course.

Below are responses from some of the *completers* and *non-completers* in reference to their feelings regarding their mathematics classes:

"Because in ... Like I said, some of the subjects I would struggle like in Math, and I wouldn't really get to, um, make myself push more, which I need to do and practice more." –Aron Luevano

"Like, in some classes I do and like um, some I don't ... Like in math I kind of do need more help. But, like, like, in English or seminar classes, like no."—Alejandra Saldivar

"*Um, I sometimes struggle in math."—Carlos Martinez Carrillo*

"*Um, I didn't have quite the same experience with past math teachers that I do with this year's math teacher and it took a lot getting used to, and I am passing but it was a lot harder to learn and catch up because of the way he teaches differently."—Emily Pacheco*

"I have always struggled in math."—Katherine Alas

"I had a teacher in middle school who told me I'm not gonna be a good student because I don't follow exactly what she says, like I do sometimes my math problems differently than others, and she would always tell me that I wouldn't be a successful student because of that."—Daniel Ortiaga

"I don't understand math and I don't understand the way my teacher talks. I don't understand right and I fall behind and feel dumb."—Javier Crespin Montijo

"Um, math. Like, that's where I struggled."—Josephina Inez Gomez

"Uh, I struggled in math, as growing up I didn't have good math teachers. And one of those years was the year with the long term sub."—Marcus Romero

"I struggle the most in math."—Vidal Dominguez

Summary

This study was a single instrumental case study that analyzed the results of my three research questions to better understand why the students at Hope High School continue to persist through high school, regardless of the levels of poverty that challenge the school community on a daily basis. This chapter analyzed the data that was derived from my three research questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?
2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

For research question number one, key findings indicate that the general education track had the highest number of students within the track (n=86), followed by the advanced education track (n=70), the English learner education track (n=54), the special education track (n=14), and finally the English learner and special education track (n=11). When observing the ninth-grade completion and non-completion rates of each academic track, the three academic tracks with the highest percentage rate for ninth-grade completion were the advanced education track (93 percent), the general education track (84 percent), and the English learner education track (85 percent). The other two education tracks had the lowest ninth-grade completion rates: the special education track (79 percent) and the English learner and special education track (55 percent). This shows

that the greatest percentages of students who are not successfully completing the ninth-grade are those from the English learner and special education track. This is one of the three compliance-based education tracks that aligns with state compliance regulations for English learners as well as federal compliance regulations for special education students. The English learner and special education academic track is a double compliance-based track that is in place to provide students with the most support to be successful in school (both funded by state "English learner" and federal "special education" funds), yet this track has the highest percentage of students not successfully promoting to the tenth grade. This also indicates that the policies and practices aligned with placing students into this academic track may not be achieving the outcomes for which they originally intended.

When analyzing the number of students rather than the percentages, the general education track had the highest number of *completers* (n=72), as well as *non-completers* (n=14) compared to the other four academic tracks that each maintained $\leq$ 8 non-completers (57 percent difference). Students in the general education track are often considered to be students in the academic "middle" who often do not get the attention of school teachers, principals, and support staff, as they are not in need of additional language acquisition and/or academic supports. This makes it more common for general education students to fall through the cracks of the public education system, as they are not on anyone's radar for support or intervention.

For research question number two, key findings suggest that students' levels of will are a more substantive variable than students' levels of skill when it comes to students successfully promoting to the tenth grade. This is based on the two quadrants with the largest number of participants who successfully completed the ninth-grade—the

high skill/high will quadrant and the *low skill/high will* quadrant. The *high skill/low will* quadrant had a total of ten participants. Six of the participants completed the ninth grade, but four did not—this means that will/determination was a major factor for these students to not successfully pass the ninth grade, as they demonstrated that they had the academic skill capability to pass their classes. The *low skill/low will* quadrant had a total of 24 identified participants. Of those, only seven successfully completed the ninth grade, while 17 did not. This group had the largest number and percentage of students not successfully pass the ninth-grade. This is due to this group of participants not having the academic skill, or will/determination, to earn all their academic credits to promote to the tenth grade. This establishes that students' levels of will are a substantive variable, regardless of their levels of skill, when it comes to successfully promoting to the tenth grade with this particular sample.

For research question number three, key findings from the digital questionnaire and the 16 face-to-face interviews demonstrate that *completers* and *non-completers* expressed similar support factors that helped them to experience success during their ninth-grade school year:

1. Minimal out-of-school obligations.
2. Motivation to graduate to make their families proud.
3. Caring and supportive teachers and principal.
4. Feelings of safety within the school.

When analyzing the challenges that *completers* and *non-completers* experienced, different themes emerged with each group. *Completers* expressed boredom due to lack of rigor and hands-on activities and projects as a challenge that prevented them from

performing optimally during their ninth-grade school year; *Non-completers* experienced being easily distracted by peers, and not working hard enough in their classes, as to why they did not successfully promote to the tenth grade; and *completers* and *non-completers* expressed the subject area of mathematics as their most challenging course to successfully completing the ninth-grade.

Chapter Five will provide a summary of the study, discuss the findings, provide specific implications for future practice, suggest recommendations for further research, and end with concluding remarks.

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings, Discussion, and Recommendations

"Creating Schools that enable all children to learn requires the development of systems that enable all educators and schools to learn. At heart, this is a capacity-building enterprise leveraged by clear, meaningful learning goals and intelligent, reciprocal accountability systems that guarantee skillful teaching in well-designed, adequately resourced schools for all learners. It is not only possible but imperative that America close the achievement gap among its children by addressing the yawning opportunity gap that denies these fundamental rights."—Linda Darling-Hammond

This final chapter of the dissertation provides a summary of the study; it reviews the research findings and what the findings reveal about the participants and the school culture at Hope High School; it discusses the implications for future practice in supporting ninth-grade students to successfully be promoted to the tenth grade; and it presents recommendations for future research regarding how to prevent ninth-graders from falling off-track for graduation, before, and during, their ninth-grade year.

Problem Statement

When students enter their ninth-grade year, they may or may not be proficient in literacy or numeracy, yet accountability lies with district and school leaders to develop strategic plans to get students up to grade-level proficiency within four years in order to graduate with their designated cohorts with strong academic and technical 21st century skills. In many cases, this expectation is unrealistic, as many students enter high school substantially below grade-level proficiency due to poverty and inequitable access to a high quality education. In 2015, 35 percent of students entered the ninth grade rated proficient or advanced in reading, and 33 percent entered the ninth-grade rated proficient or advanced in mathematics (McFarland et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the expectation of proficient academic performance for all students is outlined through federal policy and school reform initiatives such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968,

the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Race to the Top Grant Program of 2009, and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. These policies require students identified as English learners, and students with exceptionalities, to be enrolled in programs-of-study that force them to take classes in order for their schools to be considered compliant. Even though the intention is to ensure these particular students are in these programs and courses to better support their academic needs, they often predispose them to segregation within their schools that negatively affect their sense of belonging, which in turn, can lead to student disengagement and dropping out of school. Compounding this challenge is the exterior layer of social and economic dilemmas that students face beyond the school walls, yet bring with them each day, to their quest to achieve an education which will pave their way to a brighter future. The United States spends an exorbitant amount of energy discussing the achievement gap; however, there exists minimal discourse surrounding the opportunity gap within our country that creates inequitable access to basic educational resources (Coleman et al., 1966; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Yussen et al., 2016). Politicians and school reformers maintain sharp focus on how to improve the public school system every year with new mandates, high accountability measures, grant opportunities, and initiatives, but they largely fail to address the deeply rooted social and economic attributes of each community that shape and directly influence the public schools located within them. This may be because social reformation is beyond their scope of work, but it may also be because they lack the understanding of how greatly socioeconomic issues directly impact student achievement (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997; Entwisle et al., 1997; Quinn et al., 2016). This case study focused on one cohort of ninth-

grade students at one Title I high school in New Mexico, Hope High School[14], that continues to demonstrate increases in graduation rate data, student achievement data, and college and career readiness indicators, notwithstanding the low socioeconomic factors that challenge its efforts to provide its students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in college, careers, and life. Given the continued growth and achievement in this school, regardless of the high rate of poverty that challenges its students, teachers, and leaders on a daily basis, it is important to study how students' levels of will and determination contribute to this culture of success. Does graduating every student college and career ready mean that it is the responsibility of the public school system to ensure all students graduate with high skill and high will? Do those students with high skill/low will, and those students with low skill/high will, not deserve to graduate just because they have not found a way to conform to this American standardizing mechanism called the public high school? How students are successfully able to navigate the public education system is dependent on their academic track, their level of skill, and their level of will, which were the three foci of this study.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of academic track placement, and students' levels of skill and will, on one cohort of ninth-graders on their path toward high school graduation by addressing the following three research questions:

1. How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?

[14] The name of the high school is changed to protect the identity of the city and the school.

2. How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?
3. What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The conceptual framework (see Figure 39) demonstrates the process I used to identify students as being on-track or off-track for successful ninth-grade completion based on key variables at the end of the school year. All ninth-grade students were studied to determine how their academic track placement, and levels of skill and will, contributed to their successful completion, or non-completion, of the ninth-grade. Previous research on student success in high school is often measured by the strength of correlational relationship of specific variables such as: grades, attendance rates, and suspension rates (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; L. A. Maxwell, 2012). There is only a combination of multiple research studies that consider the relationship of students' ninth-grade experience based on their academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will.

Figure 39. Conceptual framework that illustrates the process in which the three research questions will be addressed.

My first research question focused on the number of students who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and the number of those who did not, based on their academic track placement.

Figure 40. Successful completion or non-completion of the ninth grade based on participants' placement in one of each of the five academic tracks.

I created a contingency table that outlined the number and percentage of ninth-grade students from the entire cohort (n-340), as well as from the sample (n=235) who aligned with each of the five academic tracks to compare their distributions and to determine if the distributions were relatively reflective of one another for accuracy of analysis (see Appendix B). I then created an additional contingency table that populated the total number of students from the entire ninth-grade cohort, as well as the participants from the sample, into each academic track who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and those who did not, and analyzed the distributions to determine implications for policy and practice (see Appendix C).

My second research question focused on the number of students who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and the number of those who did not, based on their levels of skill and will.

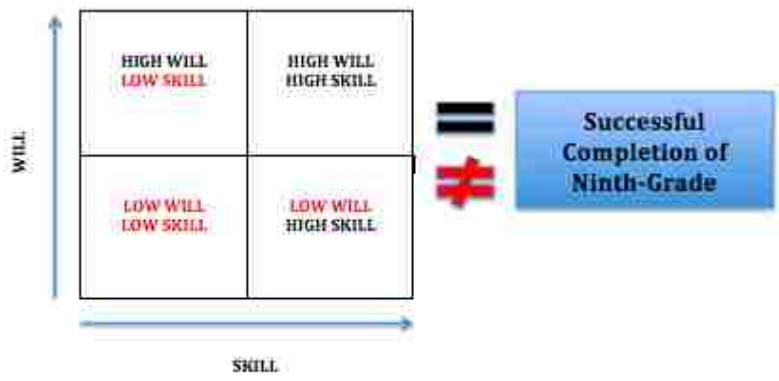

Figure 41. Successful completion or non-completion of the ninth grade based on participants' levels of skill and will.

I used the following determinants to characterize whether a participant had high skill or low skill:

- **High Skill**: ≥3.0 GPA, and ≥ Proficient in NWEA MAP Reading and/or Mathematics Test Scores
- **Low Skill**: < 3.0 GPA, and < Proficient in NWEA MAP Reading and/or Mathematics Test Scores

To determine participants' levels of will, I used a questionnaire developed by the American Institutes for Research in collaboration with Columbia University, the Self-Determination Scale (See Appendix D). Dr. Dennis E. Mithaug, creator of the instrument and professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote a letter granting permission to the general public to download and use this instrument (see Appendix E). I administered the questionnaire face-to-face, in paper/pencil format and it was made available to participants in both English and Spanish. Participants were able to choose which language in which they preferred to receive, and answer questions, on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made up of 24 multiple-choice questions, and three

open-ended questions. I used the following determinants to characterize whether a participant had high will or low will:

- **High Will**: ≥66.6 percent on AIR Self-Determination Scale
- **Low Will**: <66.6 percent on AIR Self-Determination Scale

After collecting all the necessary data to determine participants'' levels of skill and will, I then categorized each participant from the sample into one of the four quadrants in the Skill/Will Matrix, a paradigm taken from a business and management coaching model (Landsberg, 1996). The Skill/Will Matrix, developed by leadership coach and executive, Max Landsberg, categorizes employees into four areas: those with high skill/high will, high skill/low will, low skill/high will, and low skill/low will. I then created a contingency table (see Appendix F) with the number of participants from each skill/will quadrant who successfully completed the ninth-grade, and those who did not, and analyzed the distributions to determine implications for policy and practice.

My third research question focused on what ninth-grade *completers*[15] and *non-completers*[16] perceived to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade and remain on-track for graduation. I administered a digital questionnaire titled (*Factors That Influence Ninth-Grade Success*) that I developed (see Appendix G) to all participants within the ninth-grade cohort (n=235). The participant questionnaire was made up of 56 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions regarding factors that impact ninth-grade success (see

[15] Completers are students who finish the ninth grade with a minimum of six academic credits.

[16] Non-Completers are students who do not finish the ninth grade with a minimum of six academic credits.

Appendix H for digital questionnaire results). The three open-ended questions asked for the participants' recommendations for what their principal, teachers, and they (participants) could do to best support their paths toward successful ninth-grade completion, and ultimately, high school graduation. After participants completed the questionnaire, I distributed assent forms, and parent/guardian consent forms, for participants who were willing to also participate in a face-to-face interview. I established a sub-sample to conduct face-to-face interviews from the students who returned their assent and consent forms. From that sub-sample, I established a stratified, randomized sample of ninth-grade *completers*, and *non-completers*, from each skill/will quadrant (n=16). I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with these 16 participants to better understand their narratives and experiences surrounding their educational, social, and home life experiences.

Findings

Research Question #1:

How can academic track placement impact successful completion of the ninth-grade, for one cohort of students in one New Mexico, Title I high school?

- The distribution of students in the five academic tracks from the sample (n=235) is reflective of the distribution of students in the five academic tracks from the entire ninth-grade cohort (n=340), by ≤1 percent.
- The General Education Track (n=86) and the Advanced Education Track (n=70) had the highest enrollment numbers from the entire sample (n=235).
- The Advanced Education, General Education, and English Learner Education Tracks had the highest ninth-grade completion rates at ≥84 percent.

- Students in the Special Education Track had a 79 percent ninth-grade completion rate.
- Students in the English Learner and Special Education Track had the lowest ninth-grade completion rate at 55 percent.
- The General Education Track had the highest number of *completers* (n=72) and *non-completers* (n=14), as it was the education track with the highest enrollment (n=86).

Research Question #2:

How can students' levels of skill and will influence their completion of the ninth-grade?

- The two Skill/Will Quadrants with the largest number of participants who successfully completed the ninth grade were the *high skill/high will* quadrant (n=97/99) and the *low skill/high will* quadrant (n=90/102). These are the two *high will* quadrants, which suggests that students' levels of will are a more important variable than students' levels of skill when it comes to students successfully promoting to the tenth grade.
- The *high skill/low will* quadrant had a total of ten participants. Six of the participants completed the ninth grade, but four did not—this suggests that will/determination was a major factor for these students to not successfully pass the ninth grade, as they demonstrated that they had the academic skill capability to pass their classes.
- The *low skill/low will* quadrant had a total of 24 identified participants. Of those, only seven successfully completed the ninth grade, while 17 did not. This group

had the largest number and percentage of students not successfully pass the ninth-grade. This suggests that this group of participants did not have the academic skill, or will/determination, to earn all their academic credits to promote to the tenth grade.

- These data establish that students' levels of will are an important variable, regardless of their levels of skill, when it comes to successfully promoting to the tenth grade with this particular sample.

Research Question #3:

What do ninth-grade completers and non-completers perceive to be the most significant support factors and challenges to successfully advance to the tenth-grade, and thus remain on-track for graduation?

- Key findings from the digital questionnaire and the 16 face-to-face interviews demonstrate that *completers* and *non-completers* expressed similar support factors that helped them to experience success during their ninth-grade school year:
    - Minimal out-of-school obligations.
    - Motivation to make their families proud.
    - Caring and supportive teachers and principal.
    - Feelings of safety within the school.
- *Completers* expressed boredom as a challenge that prevented them from performing optimally during their ninth-grade school year.
- *Non-completers* experienced being easily distracted by friends, and not working hard enough in their classes, as to why they did not successfully promote to the tenth grade.

- *Completers and Non-completers* identified mathematics as an area of struggle due to their dislike of the subject area.

Discussion

This case study contributes to existing literature in that it provides a more focused and intentional concentration on ninth-grade success factors in one Title I school that has continued to grow and achieve in their graduation and achievement rates each year, regardless of the negative implications that are associated with its Title I designation. The ninth grade is a critical year for students, especially in Title I schools (high poverty), as nationally, 40 percent of ninth-graders do not earn enough credits to promote to the tenth grade (Johnston & Williamson, 2011; McFarland et al., 2017). With this particular sample of ninth graders (n=235) at Hope High School, only 15 percent (n=35) did not earn enough academic credits to promote to the tenth grade (six out of seven academic credits). Out of the entire ninth-grade cohort, 22 percent (n=74) did not promote to the tenth grade. This demonstrates that the ninth-grade students at Hope High School are successfully promoting to the tenth grade at a greater percentage (78 percent) than the national statistic (60 percent) (Johnston & Williamson, 2011; McFarland et al., 2017). When analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data within this case study, it is clear that students at Hope High School are demonstrating greater success in passing the ninth grade when placed in *choice-based* academic tracks (Advanced and General) rather than *compliance-based*; the students characterized as having high will, regardless of their levels of skill, are succeeding more than their peers who exhibit low will, regardless of their levels of skill; 94 percent of students know who their principal is and believe that she, as well as their teachers, are providing necessary supports to ensure they have a safe

environment and a high quality education; and 90 percent feel that it is very important to them to graduate with a high school diploma to make their families proud and to have a successful life.

Academic Tracking

The public school system was developed from a capitalist lens to support and reproduce the agricultural, industrial, and professional needs of a growing society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Durkheim, 2002; Gamoran, 1992; Goodlad et al., 2004; Graham, 2005; Swartz, 1997). The research regarding the effects of academic tracking in schools suggest that schools that don't provide all students with equitable access to the general curriculum, and to more advanced and rigorous courses, place students at a disadvantage, which places them at-risk of not promoting to the next grade level (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Bernt Karlson, 2015; Corbett Burris et al., 2008; Gamoran, 1992, 1993; Gamoran et al., 1995; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Trautwein et al., 2006).

The findings from my first research question are consistent with previous literature regarding academic track placement and social reproduction, as the data demonstrate that more students are successfully promoting to the tenth-grade when they are in the *choice-based* education tracks: 1) Advanced and 2) General, rather than *compliance-based* education tracks: 1) English Learner, 2) Special Education, and 3) English Learner and Special Education. Students who do not have equitable access to a rigorous and relevant curriculum are more likely to disengage from the schooling process, and eventually drop out (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Elmore, 2012; Ravitch, 2016; Rumberger, 2011). Even though the intent of the *compliance-based* education

tracks is to provide more supports in English language development and/or academic skill to students who have been identified as not proficient, students in this sample are not successfully promoting to the next grade level at the same percentage as their peers in the non-*compliance-based* educational tracks. Even more, the English learner and special education academic track is a double *compliance-based* track that is in place to provide students with the most support to be successful in school (funded by both state Title III and federal IDEA funds), yet this track has the highest percentage of students not successfully promoting to the tenth grade. This suggests that the policies and practices aligned with placing students into this particular academic track may not be achieving the outcomes for which they originally intended. This also indicates that as a public education system, we need to consider rigor over remediation, when evaluating students' language and academic skill deficits, as the students in this sample demonstrated greater success when they were exposed to a more rigorous and relevant educational experience in the *choice-based* education tracks (Corbett Burris et al., 2008; Elmore, 2012; Horne, Rachal, & Shelley, 2012). By requiring some students to take courses that advanced and general education peers do not have to take due to language or learning deficits places them at a greater disadvantage than their peers to successfully promote to the next grade level (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Bernt Karlson, 2015; Corbett Burris et al., 2008; Gamoran, 1992; Mackenzie, 2005; I. M. Umansky, 2016).

Students' Levels of Skill and Will

Students' levels of skill often prohibit them from experiencing successful outcomes in school, but if they have high levels of will and determination, they can persevere (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Dweck, 2007; Khalkhali et al.,

2013; Somers et al., 2009). The findings from my second research question suggest that students' levels of will are a greater indicator of successful ninth-grade completion than academic skill (GPA and math and/or reading proficiency), as the two high will quadrants had the highest percentage of students successfully complete the ninth-grade (93 percent), compared to the two low will quadrants (38 percent). These findings are also consistent with previous research that indicates that students with high levels will/grit/determination are more likely to succeed when faced with academic challenges than that of their peers with low will/grit/determination (Barile, 2014; Duckworth, 2016; Huang & Zhu, 2012; Laursen, 2015; McGlynn & Kelly, 2017). In my interactions with the students in this sample (n=235), it was evident through their responses from the questionnaires and the one-on-one interviews that they maintained strong aspirations to pass the ninth grade, and eventually graduate from high school with a diploma of excellence, regardless of their levels academic skill and English language development. Grade-point-average (GPA), one of the two variables used in this study to measure students' levels of skill, is a stronger predictor of high school graduation than that of test scores, coursework, or background characteristics (E. M. Allensworth et al., 2018; G. P. Hickman et al., 2017; L. A. Maxwell, 2012). This contradicts the rationale of current state policies, including those within the state of New Mexico, that require students to pass high school graduation exams (PARCC and EOCs) in order to assert that they are college and career ready. High school graduation exams should be but one indicator of academic capability, not the primary indicator. There should be a greater focus on students' GPA to predict successful ninth-grade completion, and ultimately, high school graduation. There is clear evidence in this case study that even though students' levels of skill are not as high as

their levels of will, they are still persisting through their ninth-grade year to successfully promote to the tenth grade.

Support Factors and Challenges to Complete the Ninth Grade

School leaders struggle to meet students' needs beyond the walls of the school building, but they can foster caring and student-centered learning environments with high academic and social expectations with committed adults, so that students feel the support they may not be receiving outside of school (Adams, Olsen, & Ware, 2017; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Godderd, Miller, Larson, & Goddard, 2010; L. F. Nathan, 2017). The findings from my third research question suggest that the ninth-grade students in this study, regardless if they successfully achieved the academic credit requirements to promote to the tenth grade (≥6 academic credits), experienced the same systems of support in Hope High School during their ninth-grade year. They experienced minimal obligations outside of school that interfered with their ability to be successful in school; they felt that their school environment was safe and fostered high academic and behavioral expectations for its students; they expressed that their teachers and principals cared about them and were supportive of them; and the majority of the sample felt motivated to graduate to make their families proud and to have a good life. The findings also suggest that both completers and non-completers want to experience engaging, rigorous, project-based learning in all their classes to prevent them from getting bored, getting distracted by friends, and by procrastinating assignment completion.

These findings support the assertion that the first priority of a school principal is to foster an environment where students and teachers feel safe, cared for, and are intellectually challenged and engaged (Adams et al., 2017; Benbenishty et al., 2016; Deal

& Peterson, 1999; Gage et al., 2016; Godderd et al., 2010; Kopischke Smith, Connolly, & Pryseski, 2014; Weinstein et al., 1991; Worrell & Hale, 2001). With effective and consistent instructional methodologies, ongoing teacher professional development, and level of teacher educational attainment, the classroom becomes the venue of greatest impact for positive student outcomes regardless of a student's background (Wenglinsky, 2001). It has been argued that school environment, climate, and culture have very little to do with whether a student successfully graduates from high school on time (Caldas & Bankston III, 1997). (Christle et al., 2007) reinforce this idea when they explain that the relationship between school experiences and dropout has rarely been considered. This may be the case, but the actuality is that someone needs to be held accountable for students' lack of academic success, and unfortunately, that always falls on the shoulders of the schools. Even though school climate and culture may not be statistically significant in predicting student success and high school completion, there are systems of belief and specific strategies that schools and districts can employ to guide students toward successfully completing high school (E. Allensworth, 2013; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; Jensen, 2013; Stuit et al., 2016; Travers & Christiansen, 2010). If a student does not feel safe, then he or she will avoid school at all costs, causing him or her to fail classes and eventually drop out. Creating a space where students and staff feel safe and cared for, where they are comfortable taking risks, where they are able and willing to build their sense of self, and where every child, regardless of ability, is held to high standards, is the foundation to keeping kids in school—the rest are building blocks.

Significant systems of support to keep students engaged in the schooling process include: a welcoming school environment, a highly effective school leader, the development of systems and structures to facilitate individual student needs, a focus on positive adult and student relationships, high academic and behavioral expectations for all students; a culture of respect, fairness, and care, and positive communication and messaging (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Kopischke Smith et al., 2014; Worrell & Hale, 2001). If we pull ourselves out of the school setting and place ourselves in the setting of a restaurant, we will avoid the restaurant if we see that it is dirty, if the service is subpar, and if the food is cold and undercooked. The same goes for a school. If the school is not well-kept and falling apart, if the adults in the school don't care about student outcomes, and if the expectations of the students are low, then it will not benefit the growth and academic and social success of any student, preventing him or her from graduating from high school on time. The findings from this study imply that the climate and culture of this school was a support factor that impacted students' ninth-grade experience, as 85 percent felt safe within their school environment, and more than 90 percent felt that their principals and teachers cared about them and supported them. Therefore, the findings from this study determine that the physical, social/emotional, and academic environments of high schools do influence students' experiences in school, especially in communities and schools that experience high levels of poverty.

Implications for Future Practice

Based on the findings from the data, it clear that students want to experience successful outcomes in high school, as they have the determination/will to graduate from high school, but some do not have the cultural capital (Swartz, 1997) to understand and

navigate the public education system. Based on the findings from this study, there are clear levers of change that can be implemented in Title I schools to improve the success rate of ninth-grade students promoting to the tenth grade. Based on the findings, I have developed following theories of action that school leaders could employ to support all students toward successful ninth-grade completion, and ultimately, high school graduation:

- If schoolteachers and leaders work to welcome and engage families in the educational process and inform students and families about graduation requirements and college and career requirements and opportunities prior to students entering high school, students will be less likely to drop out of school, as most students want to graduate from high school to make their families proud. They can do this by investing in communication systems that offer multilingual options to encourage inclusivity of families regardless of their native language. District leaders can also develop multilingual brochures and pamphlets that outline high school graduation requirements, college and career requirements and opportunities, and other soft-skills and character attributes expected of all students that can be distributed to all students/families each year (K-12). This can ensure that students/families are frequently exposed to this information, which can improve family engagement. Schools (K-12) can also regularly host high school readiness nights, college and career nights, and financial literacy nights for students/families to engage them with guidance counselors and college and career professionals.

- If schoolteachers and leaders focus on building strong relationships with all students within their buildings, and on creating school cultures of safety and high academic and behavioral expectations for learning, students will be less likely to drop out of school. They can do this by establishing school wide academic and behavioral expectations that are taught, visible in all classrooms and hallways, and referred to often. Principals and teachers need to know who their kids are. This doesn't mean by name, although knowing students' names does help to engage them; knowing their kids means knowing the data associated with them to include their academic levels of proficiency, their English language acquisition needs, their attendance rates, their grades, and their behaviors. High school principals can also work to engage and monitor ninth graders by developing a freshman elective course that all ninth graders take that focuses on high school readiness strategies such as time management, goal setting, college and career exploration, social/emotional awareness, team building, literacy and numeracy practice, collaborative learning groups, and weekly grade and attendance monitoring. The teachers of these courses can create strong bonds with their students and hold them accountable for their social and academic actions while working with principals to develop interventions. This is not an easy task, as there is an abundance of information; however, once all this information is aggregated, then principals can begin to create early warning intervention systems.
- If schoolteachers and leaders focus on multi-tiered systems of support for students with language and/or academic skill deficits early on, then these students will be

less likely placed in *compliance-based* education tracks that don't expose them to rigor and relevance, and can prevent them from successfully graduating from high school. They can do this by identifying key Tier I[17] and Tier II[18] school wide academic and behavioral interventions to support students' academic and behavioral needs prior to engaging students in the Special Education evaluation process.

- If schoolteachers and leaders focus on relevance, rigor, and hands-on project-based learning as expectations in all classrooms regardless of the subject area or grade-level, students will be less likely to drop out of school. They can do this by ensuring that all curriculum and instruction is aligned by core content area and grade-level. They can also work to develop common course syllabi, curriculum guides/maps, lesson plans, and common formative assessments to ensure all students are receiving equitable access to the general curriculum (grade-level standards and benchmarks), regardless of who their teacher is. Within the curriculum guides, there can be an emphasis on rigor and relevance by identifying project-based assignments that involve depth-of-knowledge with real-world application.
- If schoolteachers and leaders assess students' levels of skill and will each year, and align them within one of the four Skill/Will Quadrants, then they could approach students' needs with focused coaching and intervention strategies that

[17] Tier I: Core academic and behavioral program that is provided to all students within a school setting.
[18] Tier II: Additional intervention that is provided to students who are not demonstrating success in the Tier I setting. This is more focused intervention (small group, one-on-one,) to provide students with additional resources and supports to demonstrate success in the Tier I setting.

can foster growth with every student. They can do this by first collecting students' GPA (grade-point-average) and interim assessment scores in reading and math to determine their levels of skill, then give students a will/determination questionnaire that is research-based to determine their levels of will. Once this is complete, then they can evaluate the data and assign students to one of the four skill/will quadrants to better understand how to coach and intervene with each student.

- If schoolteachers and leaders create early-warning indicator systems to monitor all students' progress toward graduation, and develop immediate plans for intervention and support if students begin to fall behind, students will be less likely to drop out of school. They can do this by developing a student wellness team comprised of the principal, counselors, social workers, the dean of students, the nurse, and teacher leaders. This team can to review all the school's available data, identify key indicators that are relevant to their school's population, use a research-based system to track and monitor students' progress, and meet weekly to identify students in most need of intervention. This can prevent students from falling through the cracks, eventually leading to disengagement from school. By developing student progress or early warning intervention systems, every student becomes real and equally important to the next. Principals and teachers having this information makes their work much more meaningful, and they can then be strategic when addressing the needs of each individual student, to keep them on-track toward graduation. Developing systems for students to be successful and learning environments where students can thrive is important, but just as

important as implementing them is how they are progress monitored and how all stakeholders are held accountable for the achievement of all students. (Elmore, 2012) maintains that in schools and districts with lower levels of student achievement, accountability measures can be used to be strategic and monitor improvement on every level. In order for schools to improve, their leaders and stakeholders need to work together toward common goals, monitor the progress toward those goals, and maintain accountability when those goals are not attained. After all, students' success is dependent on the functionality and productivity of these stakeholders.

The work in Title I schools needs to be focused and intentional when it comes to ensuring students experience successful transitions from the eighth grade to the ninth grade, and from the ninth grade to graduation day. There is no silver bullet; it takes strong leadership, focused intention, will/determination, high expectations, and persistence, every day.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on how schools work to prevent students from dropping out of school is not a new concept; however, research regarding student success in high school is often measured by the strength of correlational relationship of specific variables such as: grades, attendance rates, and suspension rates (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; Stuit et al., 2016). There is minimal research that considers the relationship of students' ninth-grade experiences based on their academic track placement, their levels of skill and will, and their reflections on their life and schooling experiences. There is also minimal research that is applicable to the state of New Mexico

regarding how to support students in the K-12 public education setting toward successful ninth-grade completion, and ultimately, high school graduation.

Based on the findings of this research study, the following are my recommendations for further research:

- It would be beneficial to extend and replicate the methodology of this research study to that of other grade levels within the same school, and/or other Title I high schools within the state of New Mexico to learn if the findings in this case study are unique, comparable, and replicable. This could provide insight to legislators, policy makers, and district and school leaders when it comes to policy development, such as the A-F School Grading System[19], that requires all schools and students to perform equally without being given differentiated systems of support, equitably allocated resources based on student demographics, students' language acquisition needs, and teacher professional development.
- It would be advantageous to study the efficacy of the co-teaching model in the high school setting, as the academic tracks with the least amount of successful ninth-grade *completers* were the tracks with students with special needs. The special education model that Hope High School implements is the co-teaching model (also known as inclusion). This is where the special education teacher works collaboratively with the content-area teacher to support all students, but especially those identified as having special needs. This is an ideal model for the

[19] The A-F School Grading System is a state system that provides every public school with an A-F letter grade based on multiple indicators such as: Current Standing (proficiency rates of students in reading and mathematics), School Improvement, Achievement of Highest Performing Students (top three quartiles), Achievement of Lowest Performing Students (lowest quartile), Opportunity to Learn, Graduation Rate, College and Career Readiness, and Bonus Points.

secondary level; however, not all schools implement the model with fidelity where both teachers co-lesson plan, co-teach, and co-assist. Due to a lack of collaborative time for the two teachers to co-lesson plan, the special education teacher is often utilized to assist, and not necessarily co-teach.

- There is research on how academic skill variables affect students' success in school, and there is research on how will/determination variables affect students' success in school; however, the research is separate, not combined (Chambers Cantrell, Almasi, Carter, & Rintamaa, 2013; Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Holopainen et al., 2017; Khalkhali et al., 2013; Laursen, 2015; McGlynn & Kelly, 2017; Trautwein et al., 2006; Van der Beek et al., 2017). More research that examines academic skill and will factors on students' success in the K-12 public education system is needed to support the work of teachers and school leaders to keep students on track for graduation.
- Many of the students in this study's sample expressed that they struggled with mathematics, and that it was their least favorite course. Even though most students take algebra I during their ninth-grade school year, they will eventually have to take algebra II in order to graduate with a New Mexico diploma of excellence; therefore, it is important to discuss the relevance of the algebra II course. New Mexico is one of a few states that requires the algebra II course to graduate from high school (Bachelor, 1991; Balas et al., 2015; Caballero et al., 2006; Center on Education Policy, 2010; Nelson et al., 2013). It is argued that this course is a benchmark measurement of rigor and college and career readiness; however, others have argued that it is only beneficial for those students who are

pursuing courses of study in the areas of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) (Nomi, 2012; Snipes & Finkelstein, 2015; Stein et al., 2011; Telese, 2000). Because algebra I and algebra II are among two of the most failed courses in high school, which prevents many students from graduating on time with their designated graduation cohorts, it would be beneficial for the state of New Mexico to consider other mathematical courses such as Financial Literacy, rather than algebra II, to provide our graduates with a strong foundation in financial awareness and planning for their futures.

Conclusion

The public school system is built on the postulation that all students enter high school at grade-level proficiency in reading and math, and that they all come from home situations that foster their growth as students (Adiele & Abraham, 2013; E. M. Allensworth et al., 2018; Ross Epp & Watkinson, 1996). Because this is not a realistic supposition, there needs to be additional supports and resources allocated to Title I schools for students to be able to achieve their diploma on time with their graduating class. Additional supports are not meant to decrease expectations, but to create systems of support to assist those with greater challenges than others. Not every student is going to attend college—this does not mean that they will not succeed in life, so we need to cease from expecting every student to complete a lone path to receiving a high school diploma. A high quality public education is a civil right of every student regardless of who they are, and from where they come. School leaders, along with the New Mexico Public Education Department, have an obligation to uphold this expectation by ensuring

that policy and regulation do not impede the work of school communities to successfully graduate students with the skills and characteristics they need to be successful in life.

This research study not only addressed the three research questions that I proposed, but it also fueled my intention to continue to research why some students succeed, while others do not, in our public education system. Because education is ubiquitous, we as educators and school leaders must be intentional with the systems and constructs that we create, support, and propagate within our public school system to ensure all students have equitable resources and opportunities to graduate from high school with college and/or career choices. I used Social Constructivism and Transformativism (Creswell, 2013) as the two research paradigms to frame my research, because they were foundational approaches when working with this marginalized group of participants. These participants not only make meaning of the world in which they live, but they also strive to make their families proud by breaking societal barriers, by graduating from high school, and by living a successful life (according to their definition of success). By listening to their stories and perspectives, I now have an even greater understanding as to how to important it is for our teachers and school leaders to foster strong relationships with students if we want them to succeed, and to never give up on a single student, regardless of how difficult the situation may be. School leaders need to foster environments built upon hope, determination, intentionality, and social justice in order for students to be resilient to actions that cause dehumanization within the public education system (Freire, 2002). School is something that students feel they *have* to do, instead of something they *want* to do. This emphasizes the importance of a school leader to model hopefulness in the face of struggle, and to build a strong school community of

collective thought and action, so that any restriction may be overcome, and any limit may be eliminated for students (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). If school leaders worked to increase the number of ninth-grade students to successfully advance to the tenth grade by educating them on graduation requirements, and by monitoring their academic progress, then there would be dramatic increases in graduation rates three years later (Roderick et al., 2014). This emphasizes the importance of school leaders establishing effective strategies to support students' transition to high school, to inform students before high school regarding graduation requirements (academic credits and high school graduation exams), and to monitor students' academic progress throughout their ninth grade year and beyond through the use of early warning indicator systems (E. Allensworth, 2013) and student success teams of teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Dropping out of high school is not an event, but rather, a process of failure experienced by students from the beginning of their academic career (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Kieffer et al., 2014; McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Because it is a process of disengagement that begins in the primary years of students' K-12 educational experiences, it makes it that much more critical for school districts to begin implementing early warning indicator systems, engagement initiatives, and to develop early interventions, so students remain engaged and experience multiple successful outcomes by the time they enter their high school years (E. Allensworth, 2013; J. B. Heppen & Bowles Therriault, 2009; L. A. Maxwell, 2012; Stuit et al., 2016). By determining how ninth-grade students' academic track placement, and their levels of skill and will influence successful ninth-grade completion, teachers and school leaders will be better informed as to how to quickly intervene to allocate resources, and build systems of

support, to encourage all students to persevere in the ninth grade, and continue on a successful path toward graduation. With this research, I intend to provide school leaders in Title I schools with the tools to replicate this approach to determine students' academic track placement, and levels of skill and will early on, so that approaches to early intervention may take place to prevent students from early disengagement, and from dropping out of high school. All students want to experience successful outcomes. It is our obligatory duty as educators and leaders to provide the constructs within our public education system for *every student* to grow and thrive, regardless of his or her social position in our society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Letter of Approval from the Institutional Review Board

OFFICE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

DATE:	April 4, 2018
IRB #:	04318
IRBNet ID & TITLE:	[1197320-1] Drop In or Drop Out: A Case Study on the Effects of Academic Tracks, and Levels of Student Skill and Will, on Successful Ninth-Grade Completion
PI OF RECORD:	Arlie Woodrum, Ed.D
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
BOARD DECISION:	APPROVED
EFFECTIVE DATE:	April 4, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE:	
RISK LEVEL:	Minimal Risk
PROJECT STATUS:	Active - Open to Enrollment

DOCUMENTS:

- Advertisement - Recruitment Script (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Application Form - Project Info (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Child Assent - Assent Interview English (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Child Assent - Assent Interview Spanish (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Child Assent - Assent Survey Spanish (UPDATED: 03/24/2018)
- Child Assent - Assent Survey English (UPDATED: 03/24/2018)
- Consent Form - Consent Parent Survey English (UPDATED: 03/24/2018)
- Consent Form - Consent Parent Interview Spanish (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Consent Form - Consent Parent Interview English (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Consent Form - Consent Parent Survey Spanish (UPDATED: 03/24/2018)
- CV/Resume - CV Woodrum (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)
- Letter - LDS Capital High School (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)
- Letter - Self-Determination Questionnaire Permission to Use (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)
- Other - Dissertation Proposal Approval Form (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Other - Translation Certification Form (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Other - Scientific Validity (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Other - Self-Determination Questionnaire User Guide (UPDATED: 03/6/2018)
- Other - Project Team (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)

- Protocol - Protocol (UPDATED: 03/24/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Factors That Influence Ninth-Grade Success Questionnaire English and Spanish (UPDATED: 03/7/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Interview Questions Spanish (UPDATED: 03/6/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Interview Questions English (UPDATED: 03/6/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Self-Determination Student Questionnaire Spanish (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Self-Determination Student Questionnaire English (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)
- Training/Certification - COI NIH Wilson-Segura (UPDATED: 03/7/2018)
- Training/Certification - CITI Woodrum (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)
- Training/Certification - CITI Wilson-Segura (UPDATED: 03/4/2018)

Thank you for your New Project submission. The UNM IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an acceptable risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks to participants have been minimized. **This project is not covered by UNM's Federalwide Assurance (FWA) and will not receive federal funding.**

The IRB has determined the following:

- Informed consent must be obtained and documentation is required for this project. To obtain and document consent, use only approved consent document(s).
- FERPA applies to this project and signed permission is required.
- Children may be involved as participants in this project under Subpart D 404 and permission from one parent/guardian is required and signature is required.
- Child Assent must be obtained and documentation of assent is required for this project. To obtain and document assent, use only the approved and stamped assent document(s).

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission and does not apply should any changes be made to this research. If changes are being considered, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to submit an amendment to this project and receive IRB approval prior to implementing the changes. A change in the research may disqualify this research from the current review category. **If federal funding will be sought for this project, an amendment must be submitted so that the project can be reviewed under relevant federal regulations.**

All reportable events must be promptly reported to the UNM IRB, including: UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to participants or others, SERIOUS or UNEXPECTED adverse events, NONCOMPLIANCE issues, and participant COMPLAINTS.

If an expiration date is noted above, a continuing review or closure submission is due no later than 30 days before the expiration date. **It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to apply for continuing review or closure and receive approval for the duration of this project.** If the IRB approval for this project expires, all research related activities must stop and further action will be required by the IRB.

Please use the appropriate reporting forms and procedures to request amendments, continuing review, closure, and reporting of events for this project. Refer to the OIRB website for forms and guidance on submissions.

Please note that all IRB records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the closure of this project.

The Office of the IRB can be contacted through: mail at MSC02 1666, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001; phone at 505.277.2644; email at [illegible]; or in-person at 1805 Sigma Chi Rd. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87106. You can also visit the OIRB website at [illegible].

APPENDIX B

Contingency Table Comparative Analysis of the Distribution of Ninth-Graders Based on Their Academic Track (Cohort and Sample)

	Total Number	Total Percentage
Advanced Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	105	31%
Advanced Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	70	30%
General Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	121	36%
General Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	86	37%
English Learner Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	74	22%
English Learner Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	54	23%
Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	20	6%
Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	14	6%
English Learner and Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	20	6%
English Learner and Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	11	5%

APPENDIX C

Contingency Table Comparative Analysis of Ninth-Grade Completers and Non-Completers Based on Their Academic Track (Cohort and Sample)

	Ninth-Grade Completer	Ninth-Grade Non-Completer
Advanced Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	98 (93%)	7 (7%)
Advanced Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	65 (93%)	5 (7%)
General Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	90 (74%)	31 (26%)
General Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	72 (84%)	14 (16%)
English Learner Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	53 (72%)	21 (28%)
English Learner Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	46 (85%)	8 (15%)
Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	16 (80%)	4 (20%)
Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	11(79%)	3 (21%)
English Learner and Special Education Track (Entire 9th Grade Cohort)	9 (45%)	11 (55%)
English Learner and Special Education Track (9th Grade Sample)	6 (55%)	5 (45%)

APPENDIX D

AIR Self-Determination Scale Assessment

AIR Self-Determination Scale©

STUDENT FORM

Student's Name _____ Date_____

School Name_____ Your Grade_____

Your Date of Birth_____
Month Day Year

HOW TO FILL OUT THIS FORM

Please answer these questions about how you go about getting what you want or need. This may occur at school, or after school, or it could be related to your friends, your family, or a job or hobby you have.

This is not a Test. There are no right or wrong answers. The questions will help you learn about what you do well and where you may need help.

Goal You may not be sure what some of the words in the questions mean. For example, the word goal is used a lot. A goal is something you want to get or achieve, either now or next week or in the distant future, like when you are an adult. You can have many different kinds of goals. You could have a goal that has to do with school (like getting a good grade on a test or graduating from high school). You could have a goal of saving money to buy something (a new iPod® or new sneakers), or doing better in sports (getting on the basketball team). Each person's goals are different because each person has different things that they want or need or that they are good at.

Plan Another word that is used in some of the questions is plan. A plan is the way you decide to meet your goal, or the steps you need to take in order to get what you want or need. Like goals, you can have many different kinds of plans. An example of a plan to meet the goal of getting on the basketball team would be: to get better by shooting more baskets at home after school, to play basketball with friends on the weekend, to listen to the coach when the team practices, and to watch the pros play basketball on TV.

The AIR Self-Determination Scale was developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), in collaboration with Teachers College, Columbia University, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), under Cooperative Agreement HO23J200005

HOW TO MARK YOUR ANSWERS

EXAMPLE QUESTION:

I check for errors after completing a project.

EXAMPLE ANSWER:

Circle the number of the answer which tells what you are most like:
(Circle **ONLY ONE** number).

1 **Never**.....student **never** checks for errors.

2 **Almost Never**.....student **almost never** checks for errors.

3 **Sometimes**.....student **sometimes** checks for errors.

4 **Almost Always**.....student **almost always** checks for errors.

5 **Always**.....student **always** checks for errors.

REMEMBER

There are NO right or wrong answers.	This will not affect your grade. So please think about each question carefully before you circle your answer.

THINGS I DO

1. I know what I need, what I like, and what I'm good at.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
2. I set goals to get what I want or need. I think about what I am good at when I do this.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
			Things I Do – Total Items 1 + 2		
3. I figure out how to meet my goals. I make plans and decide what I should do.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
4. I begin working on my plans to meet my goals as soon as possible.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
			Things I Do – Total Items 3 + 4		
5. I check how I'm doing when I'm working on my plan. If I need to, I ask others what they think of how I'm doing.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
6. If my plan doesn't work, I try another one to meet my goals.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
			Things I Do – Total Items 5 + 6		

Please go on to the next page ⇒

HOW I FEEL

1. I feel good about what I like, what I want, and what I need to do.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
2. I believe that I can set goals to get what I want.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
			How I Feel – Total Items 1 + 2		
3. I like to make plans to meet my goals.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
4. I like to begin working on my plans right away.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
			How I Feel – Total Items 3 + 4		
5. I like to check on how well I'm doing in meeting my goals.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
6. I am willing to try another way if it helps me to meet my goals.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
			How I Feel – Total Items 5 + 6		

Please go on to the next page ➡

WHAT HAPPENS AT SCHOOL

1. People at school listen to me when I talk about what I want, what I need, or what I'm good at.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
2. People at school let me know that I can set my own goals to get what I want or need.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
				What Happens at School – Total Items 1 + 2	
3. At school, I have learned how to make plans to meet my goals and to feel good about them.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
4. People at school encourage me to start working on my plans right away.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
				What Happens at School – Total Items 3 + 4	
5. I have someone at school who can tell me if I am meeting my goals.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
6. People at school understand when I have to change my plan to meet my goals. They offer advice and encourage me when I'm doing this.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
				What Happens at School – Total Items 5 + 6	

Please go on to the next page ⇒

WHAT HAPPENS AT HOME

1. People at home listen to me when I talk about what I want, what I need, or what I'm good at.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
2. People at home let me know that I can set my own goals to get what I want or need.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
				What Happens at Home – Total Items 1 + 2	
3. At home, I have learned how to make plans to meet my goals and to feel good about them.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
4. People at home encourage me to start working on my plans right away.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
				What Happens at Home – Total Items 3 + 4	
5. I have someone at home who can tell me if I am meeting my goals.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
6. People at home understand when I have to change my plan to meet my goals. They offer advice and encourage me when I'm doing this.	Never ☐ 1	Almost Never ☐ 2	Sometimes ☐ 3	Almost Always ☐ 4	Always ☐ 5
				What Happens at Home – Total Items 5 + 6	

Please go on to the next page ⇒

PLEASE WRITE YOUR ANWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS...

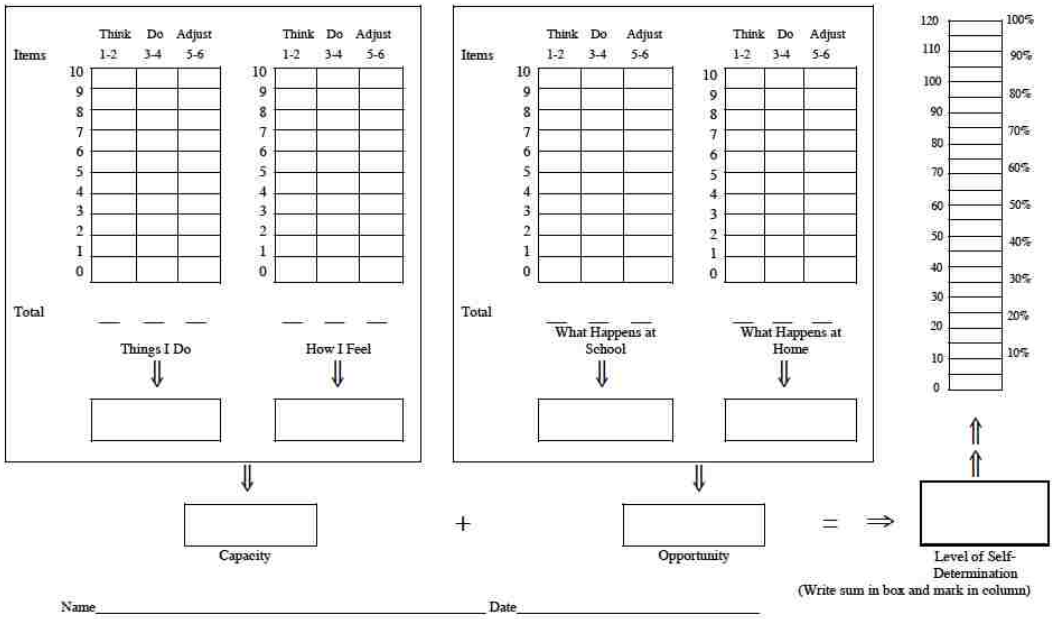
Give an example of a goal you are working on.

What are you doing to reach this goal?

How well are you doing in reaching this goal?

THANK YOU!

The AIR Self-Determination Profile
Student Form



Name_____ Date_____

APPENDIX E

Permission Letter to Download and Use the AIR Self-Determination Scale Assessment Tool

TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK NEW YORK 10027

DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

James Martin, Ph.D.
The University of Oklahoma
Zarrow Endowed Professor of Special Education
Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment
Carpenter Hall, Room 111
840 Asp Ave.
Norman, OK 73019

January 30, 2006

Dear Dr. Martin,

I am pleased that you can make the AIR assessments and User Guide available for download from your OU website. This will provide a valuable service to schools across the country.

You have my permission to place the AIR Educator, Parent, and Student assessment tools on the Zarrow Center web site for free downloading. You also have my permission to place the AIR User Guide on your web site for free downloading

Respectfully,

Dennis E. Mithaug, Ph.D.
Professor

APPENDIX F

Contingency Table Analysis of the Number of Ninth-Grade Completers, and Non-Completers, Based on Their Skill/Will Quadrant

	High Skill High Will	High Skill Low Will	Low Skill High Will	Low Skill Low Will	Total 9th Grade Participants (n=235)
9th Grade Completer	97 (98%)	6 (60%)	90 (88%)	7 (29%)	200 (85%)
9th Grade Non-Completer	2 (2%)	4 (40%)	12 (12%)	17 (71%)	35 (15%)

APPENDIX G

Researcher-Developed Questionnaire

Factors That Impact Ninth-Grade Success (Factores que afectan el éxito del noveno grado)

*This questionnaire is part of a research study to learn how to better support ninth-graders on their learning and schooling experiences toward graduation. As a current ninth-grader, your feedback and participation is very important. Your responses will help inform your current school leaders, so they may work to provide you with the best possible high school experience, so you can successfully graduate on time with your class, the Class of 2021. Thank you so much. We value your time, feedback, and thoughtful participation in this study.

*Este cuestionario es parte de un estudio de investigación para aprender cómo apoyar mejor a los estudiantes de noveno grado en sus experiencias de aprendizaje y escolarización para la graduación. Como estudiante actual de noveno grado, sus comentarios y participación son muy importantes. Sus respuestas ayudarán a informar a sus líderes escolares actuales, de modo que puedan trabajar para brindarle la mejor experiencia posible en la escuela secundaria, para que pueda graduarse a tiempo con éxito en su clase, la Clase del 2021. Muchas gracias. Valoramos su tiempo, comentarios y participación cuidadosa en este estudio.

Your email address (**cwilson-segura@sfps.k12.nm.us**) will be recorded when you submit this form. Not **cwilson-segura**? Sign out
* Required

1. **What is your gender? (¿Cuál es su género?)** *
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ Female (Hembra)
   - ◯ Male (Masculino)

2. **What is your ethnicity? (¿Cuál es tu etnia?)** *
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ White (Blanco)
   - ◯ Hispanic/Latino (Hispano/Latino)
   - ◯ American Indian or Alaska Native (Indio americano o nativo de Alaska)
   - ◯ Black or African American (Negro o afroamericano)
   - ◯ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (Nativo de Hawai u otra isla del Pacifico)

3. **Is English your first language? (¿Es Inglés su lengua materna?)** *
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ Yes (sí)
   - ◯ No
   - ◯ Other: _____

4. **Are you the first in your family to attend high school? (¿Eres el primero en tu familia en asistir a la escuela secundaria?)** *
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ Yes (sí)
   - ◯ No

5. **Are you the first in your family who will graduate from high school? (¿Eres el primero en tu familia que se graduará de la escuela secundaria?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

6. **Do your parents live together in the same house? (¿Tus padres viven juntos en la misma casa?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

7. **How many siblings do you have? (¿Cuántos hermanos tiene usted?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0
- ◯ 1
- ◯ 2
- ◯ 3 or more (3 o más)

8. **How do you get to and from school? (¿Cómo se llega y sale de la escuela?)** *
Check all that apply.

- ☐ I walk to school (yo camino)
- ☐ I ride the bus (yo viajo en bus)
- ☐ I get a ride to school from a family member or friend (me lleva de la familia o amigos)

9. **Do you have a quiet place at home to do your homework? (¿Tienes un lugar tranquilo en casa para hacer tu tarea?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

10. **Do you have to watch your siblings after school? (¿Tienes que ver a tus hermanos después de la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

11. **Do you have to work to help your family pay bills? (¿Tienes que trabajar para ayudar a tu familia a pagar las cuentas?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

12. **How was your elementary experience? (¿Cómo fue tu experiencia elemental?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Positive (positivo)
- Negative (negativo)
- Average (promedio)

13. **How was your middle school experience? (¿Cómo fue tu experiencia en la escuela secundaria?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Positive (positivo)
- Negative (negativo)
- Average (promedio)

14. **How has your ninth-grade experience been this school year? (¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia de noveno grado este año escolar?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Positive (positivo)
- Negative (negativo)
- Average (promedio)

15. **Do you know who your principal is? (¿Sabes quién es tu director?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

16. **Do you know who your counselor is? (¿Sabes quién es tu consejero?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

17. **Which mathematics class are you currently taking? (¿Qué clase de matemáticas estás tomando actualmente?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Algebra 1 (Álgebra uno)
- Geometry (geometría)
- Algebra 2 (Álgebra dos)

18. **Which English Language Arts class are you currently taking? (¿Qué clase de artes del idioma inglés está tomando actualmente?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ English Language Arts (Artes del lenguaje Inglés)
- ◯ Honors English Language Arts (Honores de Artes del lenguaje Inglés)
- ◯ Honores de Artes del Lenguaje Inglés)
- ◯ English as a Second Language "ESL" (Inglés como segundo idioma "ESL")

19. **Are you currently taking an Honors or Advanced Placement "AP" class? (¿Actualmente tomas una clase de Honores o de Colocación Avanzada "AP"?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

20. **Did you receive an "F" during your first semester of ninth-grade? (¿Recibió una "F" durante el primer semestre de noveno grado?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

21. **What grades do you usually get in school? (¿Qué notas o grados usualmente recibes en la escuela?)** *
Check all that apply.

- ☐ As
- ☐ As and Bs
- ☐ As and Bs and Cs
- ☐ Cs and Ds
- ☐ Ds and Fs

22. **Do you enjoy your ninth-grade classes? (¿Disfrutas tus clases de noveno grado?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

23. **Why do you, or why don't you, enjoy your ninth-grade classes? Please explain. (¿Por qué, o por qué no, disfrutas tus clases de noveno grado? Por favor explique.)** *

24. **Which is your FAVORITE class in school? (¿Cuál es tu clase FAVORITE en la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- English Language Arts (Artes del lenguaje Inglés)
- Mathematics (Matemáticas)
- Science (Ciencia)
- History (Historia)
- Physical Education "PE" (Educación Física "PE")
- Health (Salud)
- Freshman Seminar or AVID (Seminario de primer año o AVID)
- Elective Class (Clase Electiva)
- Spanish (Español)

25. **Why is that your favorite class? (¿Por qué es esa tu clase favorita?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- The teacher supports me to feel successful (El maestro me apoya para sentirme exitoso)
- I like the subject (Me gusta el tema)

26. **Which is your LEAST FAVORITE class in school? (¿Cuál es tu clase de MENOS FAVORITO en la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- English Language Arts (Artes del lenguaje inglés)
- Mathematics (Matemáticas)
- Science (Ciencia)
- History (Historia)
- Physical Education "PE" (Educación Física "PE")
- Health (Salud)
- Freshman Seminar or AVID (Seminario de primer año o AVID)
- Elective Class (Clase Electiva)
- Spanish (Español)

27. **Why is that your least favorite class? (¿Por qué es esa tu clase menos favorita?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- The teacher does not support me to feel successful (El maestro no me apoya para sentirme exitoso)
- I don't like the subject (No me gusta el tema)

28. **How many credits you need to graduate from high school? (¿Cuántos créditos necesitas para graduarte de la escuela secundaria?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- 15
- 24
- 32
- 21
- I don't know (Yo no se)

29. **Have you ever received an award in school for attendance, academics, or behavior? (¿Alguna vez recibió un premio en la escuela por asistencia, estudios o comportamiento?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

30. **Do you know how to check your grades and attendance online on PowerSchool? (¿Sabes cómo verificar tus calificaciones y asistencia en línea en PowerSchool?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

31. **How often do you check your grades and attendance online on PowerSchool? (¿Con qué frecuencia revisa sus calificaciones y asistencia en línea en PowerSchool?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Once per day (Una vez al día)
- Once per week (Una vez al semana)
- Once per month (Una vez al mes)
- I never check my grades or attendance (Nunca controlo mis calificaciones o asistencia)

32. **Have you ever been in-school suspended from school (ISS)? (¿Alguna vez has estado suspendido de la escuela (ISS) en la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

33. **Have you ever been out-of-school suspended from school (OSS)? (¿Alguna vez has estado fuera de la escuela suspendido de la escuela (OSS)?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

34. **How often are you absent from school? (¿Con qué frecuencia estás ausente de la escuela?)** *
Check all that apply.

- [ ] 0-5 days per month (0-5 días por mes)
- [ ] 6-10 days per month (6-10 días por mes)
- [ ] 11 or more days per month (11 o más días por mes)
- [ ] I am never absent from school (Nunca estoy ausente de la escuela)

35. **Do you feel your absenteeism affects your success in school? (¿Sientes que tu ausentismo afecta tu éxito en la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

36. **What is the main reason why you miss school? (¿Cuál es la razón principal por la que extrañas la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ I am sick (estoy enfermo)
- ◯ I have to work (tengo que trabajar)
- ◯ I have to take care of siblings or family members (Tengo que cuidar a hermanos o familiares)
- ◯ I go ditching with my friends (Voy a abandonar con mis amigos)
- ◯ I don't miss school (No echo de menos la escuela)

37. **Have you ever smoked cigarettes? (¿Alguna vez ha fumado cigarrillos?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

38. **Have you ever used drugs? (¿Alguna vez has usado drogas?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

39. **Have you ever used alcohol? (¿Alguna vez has usado alcohol?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

40. **Are you involved in sports/athletics or other activities before or after school? (¿Está involucrado en deportes / atletismo u otras actividades antes o después de la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

41. **Do you feel safe at your school? (¿Te sientes seguro en tu escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

42. **On a scale from 1-4, how safe do you feel at school? (¿En una escala de 1 a 4, ¿qué tan seguro te sientes en la escuela?)** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not safe at all (No es seguro en absoluto)					Very safe (Muy seguro)

43. **Have you ever been bullied? (¿Has sido acosado alguna vez?)**
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

44. **If you have been bullied, to whom did you tell? (¿Si has sido intimidado, ¿a quién le dijiste?)**
Mark only one oval.

- My parents (Mis padres)
- My friends (Mis amigos)
- My principal (Mi principal)
- Dean of Students (Decano de Estudiantes)
- My counselor (Mi consejero)
- My teacher (Mi profesor)
- I didn't tell anyone (No le dije a nadie)
- I have never been bullied (Nunca me han intimidado)

45. **If you have a problem, do you feel that there is at least one adult at your school that you can go to for help? (¿Si tiene un problema, ¿cree que hay al menos un adulto en su escuela al que puede acudir en busca de ayuda?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

46. **If you don't feel safe at school, who do you go to for help? (Si no te sientes seguro en la escuela, ¿a quién acudes en busca de ayuda?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Principal (My principal (Mi principal))
- Dean of Students (Decano de Estudiantes)
- My counselor (Mi consejero)
- My teacher (Mi profesor)
- Security Officer (Oficial de seguridad)

47. **Do your teachers support and encourage you to pass all your classes and do well in school? (¿Sus maestros lo apoyan y lo alientan a aprobar todas sus clases y le va bien en la escuela?)** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

48. **Do you feel that your principals are providing supports for you to be a successful high school student? (¿Sientes que tus directores te brindan apoyo para que seas un estudiante exitoso de secundaria?)** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

49. **Do you feel that your teachers are providing supports and skills for you to be a successful high school student? (¿Sientes que tus maestros te proporcionan apoyos y habilidades para que seas un alumno exitoso de secundaria?)** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

50. **Does your school have high expectations when it comes to behavior, academics, and getting good grades? (¿Su escuela tiene altas expectativas cuando se trata de comportamiento, académicos y obtener buenas calificaciones?)** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

51. **Do you feel your school provides you with the academic skills you need to graduate on time with your class? (¿Sientes que tu escuela te proporciona las habilidades académicas que necesitas para graduarte a tiempo con tu clase?)** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes (sí)
- ◯ No

52. **On a scale from 1 to 4, how much do you like school? (En una escala de 1 a 4, ¿cuánto te gusta la escuela?)** *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
I hate school (odio la escuela)	◯	◯	◯	◯	I love school (me encanta el colegio)

53. **How important is it to YOU to graduate from high school? (¿Qué tan importante es para USTED graduarse de la escuela secundaria?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Very Important (Muy importante)
- Somewhat important (Algo importante)
- Not Important (No importante)

54. **How important is it to YOUR FAMILY that you graduate from high school? (¿Qué tan importante es para SU FAMILIA que se gradúe de la escuela secundaria?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Very Important (Muy importante)
- Somewhat important (Algo importante)
- Not Important (No importante)

55. **On a scale from 1-4, how determined are you to graduate on time with your class? (En una escala de 1 a 4, ¿qué tan determinado está para graduarse a tiempo con su clase?)** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
I don't care if I graduate (No me importa si me gradúo)					Very determined (Muy determinado)

56. **What are your plans after you graduate from high school? (¿Cuáles son tus planes después de graduarte de la escuela secundaria?)** *
Mark only one oval.

- Go to a college or university (Ir a un colegio o universidad)
- Get a job (Consigue un trabajo)
- Go to college and get a job (Ve a la universidad y consigue un trabajo)
- Enlist in the United States Military (Aliste en el ejército de los Estados Unidos)
- I don't know (Yo no se)

57. **What could your principal do to improve your high school experience? (Please respond in complete sentences). (¿Qué podría hacer su director para mejorar su experiencia en la escuela secundaria? (Por favor responda en oraciones completas).)** *

58. **What could your teachers do to improve your high school experience? (Please respond in complete sentences). (¿Qué podrían hacer tus maestros para mejorar tu experiencia en la escuela secundaria? (Por favor responda en oraciones completas).)** *

59. **What could YOU do to improve your high school experience? (Please respond in complete sentences). (¿Qué podrías hacer para mejorar tu experiencia en la escuela secundaria? (Por favor responda en oraciones completas).)** *

60. **Are you willing to be interviewed for this study? (¿Estás dispuesto a ser entrevistado para este estudio?)** *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes (sí)
- No

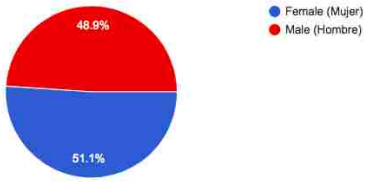
61. **If you are willing to be interviewed for this study, please type your school ID number in the space below. Thank you! (Si desea ser entrevistado para este estudio, escriba su número de identificación de la escuela en el espacio a continuación. ¡Gracias!)**

APPENDIX H

Researcher-Developed Questionnaire Results

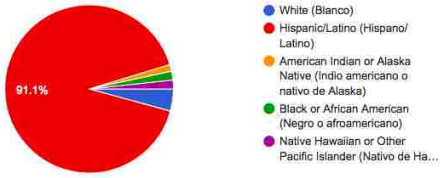
What is your gender? (¿Cuál es tu género?)

235 responses



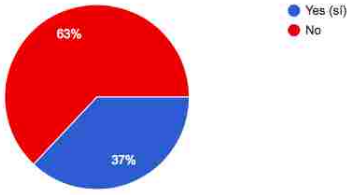
What is your ethnicity? (¿Cuál es tu etnia?)

235 responses



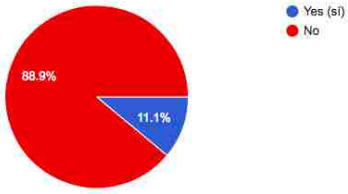
Is English your first language? (¿Es inglés tu lengua materna?)

235 responses



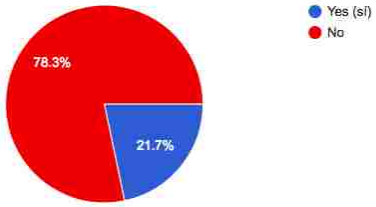
Are you the first in your family to attend high school? (¿Eres el primero en tu familia en asistir a la escuela secundaria (preparatoria)?)

235 responses



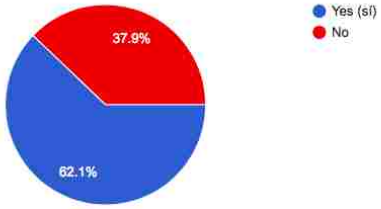
Are you the first in your family who will graduate from high school? (¿Eres el primero en tu familia que se graduará de la escuela secundaria (preparatoria)?)

235 responses



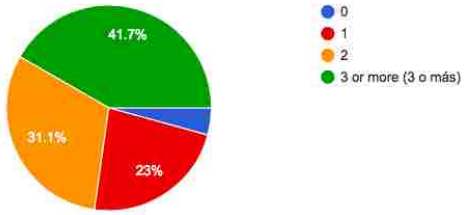
Do your parents live together in the same house? (¿Tus padres viven juntos en la misma casa?)

235 responses



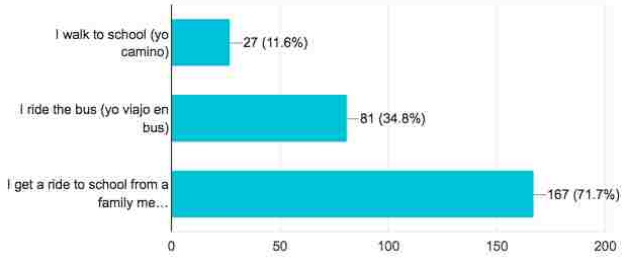
How many siblings do you have? (¿Cuántos hermanos o hermanas tienes?)

235 responses



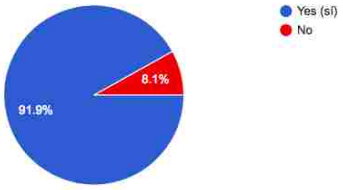
How do you get to and from school? (¿Cómo vas a la escuela y regresas a casa?)

233 responses



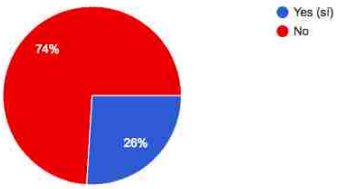
Do you have a quiet place at home to do your homework? (¿Tienes un lugar tranquilo en casa para hacer tu tarea?)

235 responses



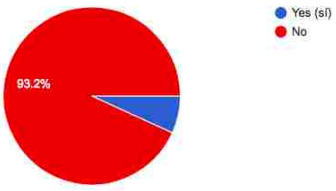
Do you have to watch your siblings after school? (¿Tienes que cuidar a tus hermanos o hermanas después de la escuela?)

235 responses



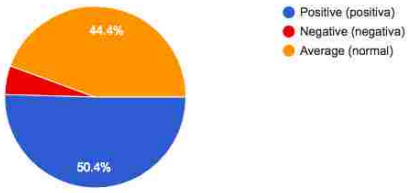
Do you have to work to help your family pay bills? (¿Tienes que trabajar para ayudar a tu familia a pagar las cuentas?)

235 responses



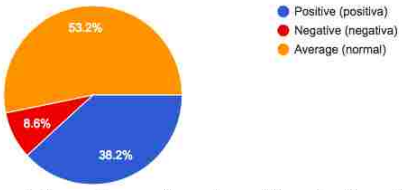
How was your elementary experience? (¿Cómo fue tu experiencia en la escuela primaria?)

232 responses



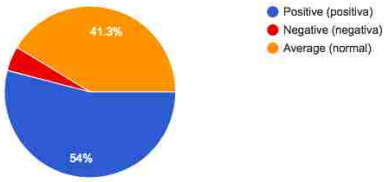
How was your middle school experience? (¿Cómo fue tu experiencia en la escuela media (grados 7 y 8)?)

233 responses



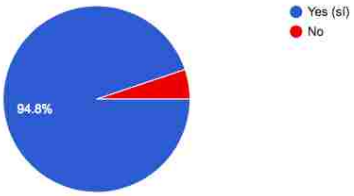
How has your ninth-grade experience been this school year? (¿Cómo ha sido tu experiencia de noveno grado este año escolar?)

235 responses



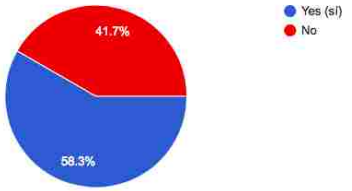
Do you know who your principal is? (¿Sabes quién es tu director(a)?)

233 responses



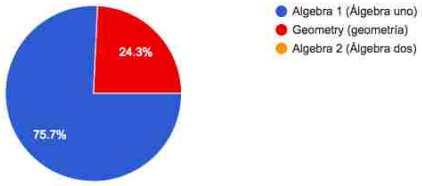
Do you know who your counselor is? (¿Sabes quién es tu consejero(a)?)

235 responses



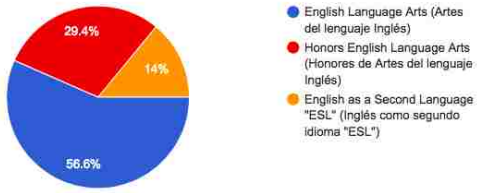
Which mathematics class are you currently taking? (¿Qué clase de matemáticas estás tomando ahora mismo?)

235 responses



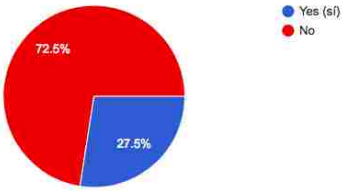
Which English Language Arts class are you currently taking? (¿Qué clase de inglés estás tomando ahora mismo?)

235 responses



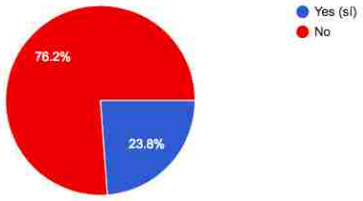
Are you currently taking an Honors or Advanced Placement "AP" class? (¿Estás tomando ahora mismo una clase de Honores o alguna clase avanzada "AP"?)

233 responses



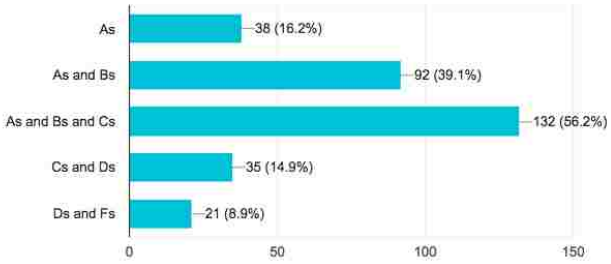
Did you receive an "F" during your first semester of ninth-grade? (¿Recibiste alguna "F" durante el primer semestre de noveno grado?)

235 responses



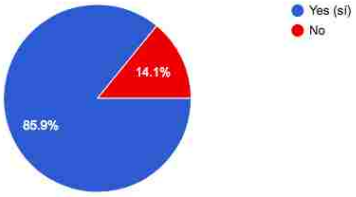
What grades do you usually get in school? (¿Qué notas o grados usualmente recibes en la escuela?)

235 responses



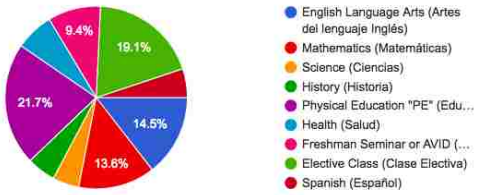
Do you enjoy your ninth-grade classes? (¿Te gustan tus clases de noveno grado?)

234 responses



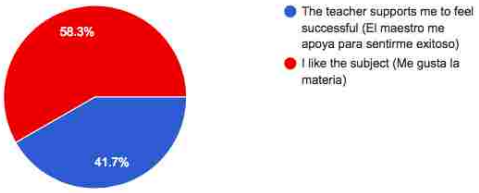
Which is your FAVORITE class in school? (¿Cuál es tu clase FAVORITA en la escuela?)

235 responses



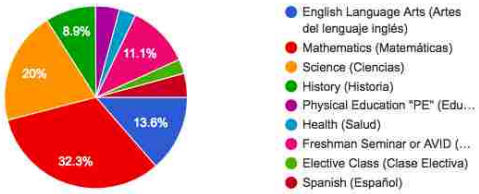
Why is that your favorite class? (¿Por qué es esa tu clase favorita?)

235 responses



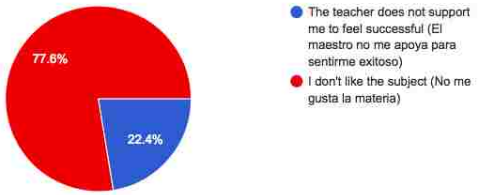
Which is your LEAST FAVORITE class in school? (¿Cuál es tu clase MENOS FAVORITA en la escuela?)

235 responses



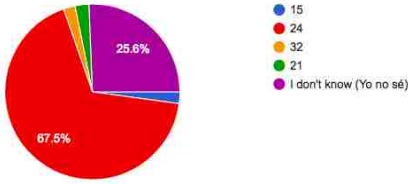
Why is that your least favorite class? (¿Por qué es esa tu clase menos favorita?)

232 responses



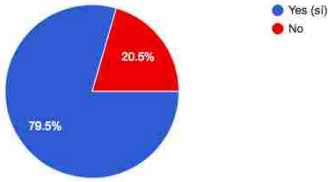
How many credits you need to graduate from high school? (¿Cuántos créditos necesitas para graduarte de la escuela secundaria (preparatoria)?)

234 responses



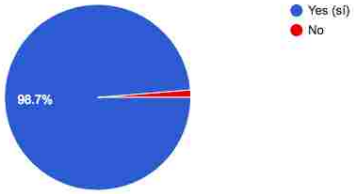
Have you ever received an award in school for attendance, academics, or behavior? (¿Alguna vez has recibido un premio en la escuela por asistencia, estudios o comportamiento?)

234 responses



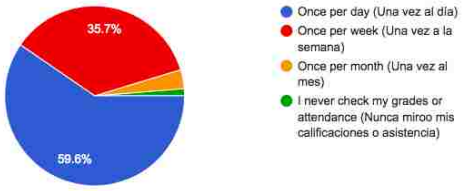
Do you know how to check your grades and attendance online on PowerSchool? (¿Sabes cómo revisar tus calificaciones y asistencia en línea en PowerSchool?)

235 responses



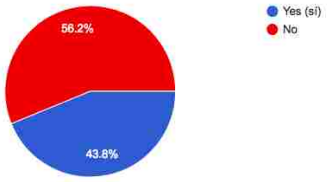
How often do you check your grades and attendance online on PowerSchool? (¿Con qué frecuencia revisas tus calificaciones y asistencia en línea en PowerSchool?)

235 responses



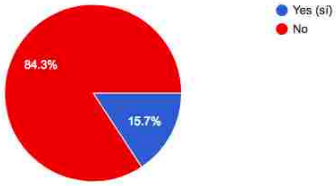
Have you ever been in-school suspended from school (ISS)? (¿Alguna vez has estado suspendido (ISS) en la escuela?)

235 responses



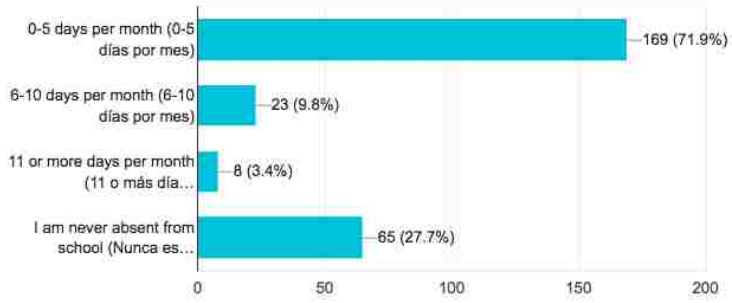
Have you ever been out-of-school suspended from school (OSS)? (¿Alguna vez has estado suspendido fuera de la escuela (OSS)?)

235 responses



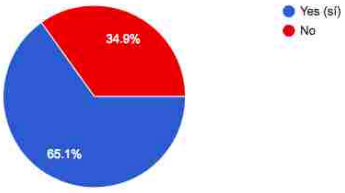
How often are you absent from school? (¿Con qué frecuencia estás ausente de la escuela?)

235 responses



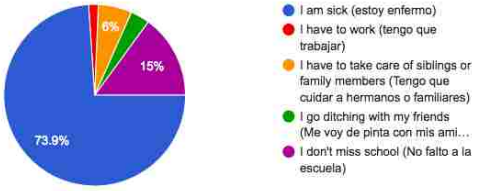
Do you feel your absenteeism affects your success in school? (¿Sientes que tus faltas de asistencia afectan tu éxito en la escuela?)

235 responses



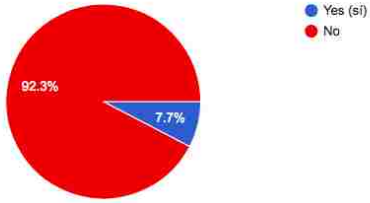
What is the main reason why you miss school? (¿Cuál es la razón principal por la que faltas a la escuela?)

234 responses



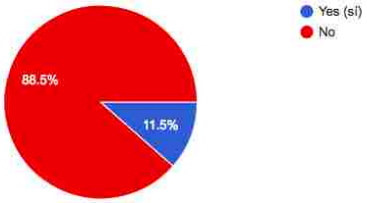
Have you ever smoked cigarettes? (¿Alguna vez has fumado cigarrillos?)

235 responses



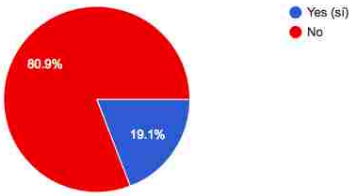
Have you ever used drugs? (¿Alguna vez has usado drogas?)

235 responses



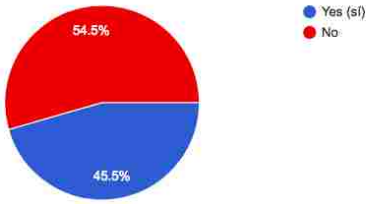
Have you ever used alcohol? (¿Alguna vez has tomado alcohol?)

235 responses



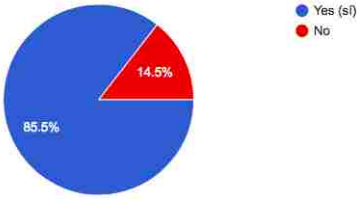
Are you involved in sports/athletics or other activities before or after school? (¿Participas en deportes / atletismo u otras actividades antes o después de la escuela?)

235 responses



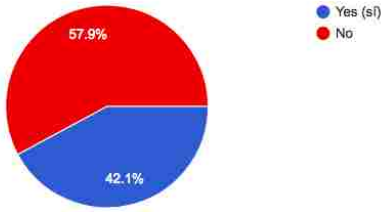
Do you feel safe at your school? (¿Te sientes seguro en tu escuela?)

235 responses



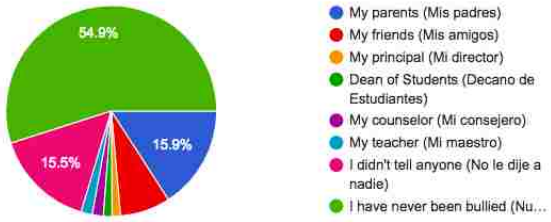
Have you ever been bullied? (¿Has sufrido acoso o intimidación alguna vez?)

235 responses



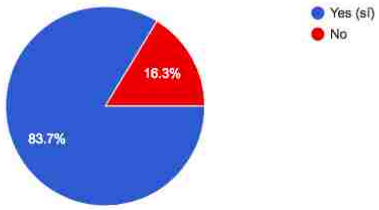
If you have been bullied, to whom did you tell? (¿Si has sufrido acoso o intimidación, ¿a quién le dijiste?)

233 responses



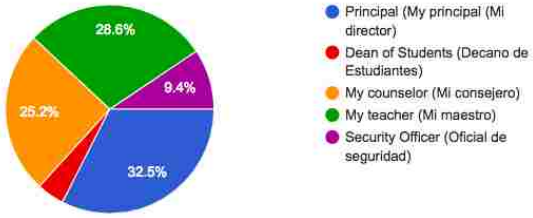
If you have a problem, do you feel that there is at least one adult at your school that you can go to for help? (¿Si tienes un problema, ¿crees que hay al menos un adulto en la escuela al que puedes acudir en busca de ayuda?)

233 responses



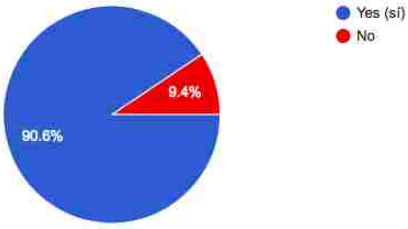
If you don't feel safe at school, who do you go to for help? (Si no te sientes seguro en la escuela, ¿a quién acudes en busca de ayuda?)

234 responses



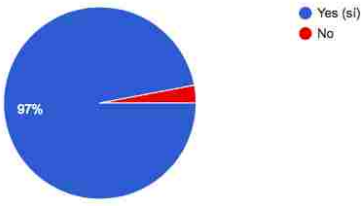
Do your teachers support and encourage you to pass all your classes and do well in school? (¿Tus maestros te apoyan y te animan a pasar todas tus clases y a que te vaya bien en la escuela?)

235 responses



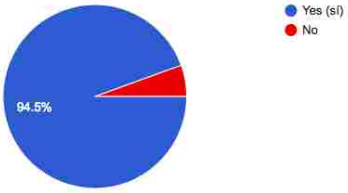
Do you feel that your principals are providing supports for you to be a successful high school student? (¿Sientes que tus directores te brindan el apoyo necesario para que puedas tener éxito en la escuela?)

234 responses



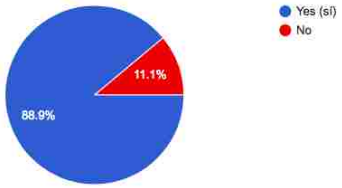
Do you feel that your teachers are providing supports and skills for you to be a successful high school student? (¿Sientes que tus maestros te proporcionan el apoyo y las habilidades que necesitas para tener éxito en la escuela?)

235 responses



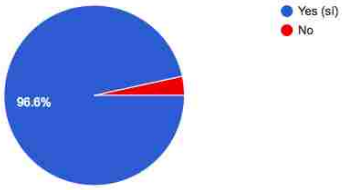
Does your school have high expectations when it comes to behavior, academics, and getting good grades? (¿Crees que tu escuela tiene altas expectativas cuando se trata de comportamiento, estudios académicos y obtener buenas calificaciones?)

235 responses



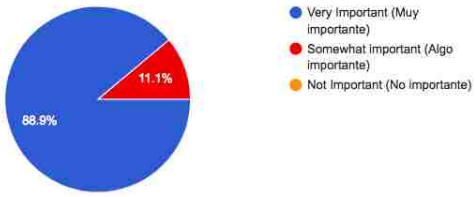
Do you feel your school provides you with the academic skills you need to graduate on time with your class? (¿Sientes que tu escuela te proporciona las habilidades académicas que necesitas para graduarte a tiempo con tu clase?)

234 responses



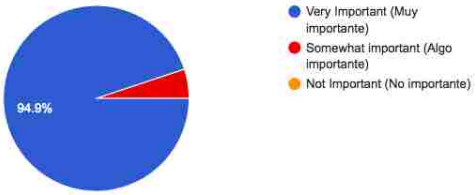
How important is it to YOU to graduate from high school? (¿Qué tan importante es para TI graduarte de la escuela secundaria (preparatoria)?)

235 responses



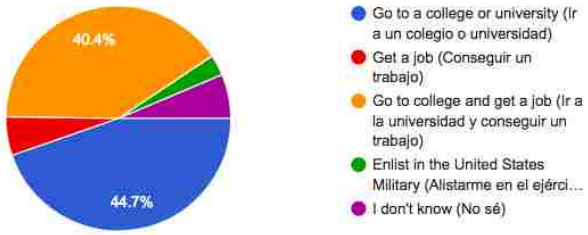
How important is it to YOUR FAMILY that you graduate from high school? (¿Qué tan importante es para TU FAMILIA que te gradúes de la escuela secundaria (preparatoria)?)

235 responses



What are your plans after you graduate from high school? (¿Cuáles son tus planes después de graduarte de la escuela secundaria (preparatoria)?)

235 responses



APPENDIX I

Semi-Structured Student Interview Questions

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Students will be interviewed to understand their narratives and experiences surrounding their educational experiences. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews are important in this study, because barriers to educational success are more than a response on a questionnaire, and students' lived experiences and stories need to be told. A stratified randomized sample of ninth-grade completers and non-completers will be interviewed from each of the four Skill/Will quadrants:

- Quadrant #1: High Will / Low Skill
- Quadrant #2 High Will / High Skill
- Quadrant #3: Low Will / Low Skill
- Quadrant #4: Low Will / High Skill

Academic Track-Based Questions:

1. What role does school play in your life? How would you describe yourself as a student?
2. Describe positive and negative experiences from your elementary school years, from your middle school years, and from your ninth-grade year.
3. Do you believe that teachers play a strong role in your success as a student? Why or why not? What qualities do your best teachers have in common? What qualities do your least-effective teachers have?
4. Is English your first language? If not, at what level has this impacted you in passing your classes?
5. Do you have a learning disability/IEP? If so, how has it impacted your schooling experience?
6. Have you ever been told that you were not capable of being a successful student? Please explain.

7. Do you feel the classes you took this year supported your learning and growth as a ninth-grader? Why or why not?
8. In which subject areas do you feel successful? In which subject areas do you struggle?

Skill and Will-Based Questions:

1. On a scale from 1 to 4, how would you rate how easy it is to pass your classes?

1	2	3	4
Easy	Somewhat Easy	Challenging	Too Difficult To Try

2. What type of grades do you usually receive in school?
3. When you struggle in a class, what do you do?
4. Do you feel you need extra support in school to be able to pass your classes?
5. What do you do after school? What do you do during the weekends? Do you have other obligations that keep you from doing your homework?
6. Do you know what the requirements are to graduate from high school?
7. Explain what graduating from high school means to you. What do you think it means to your family?
8. What have been your greatest obstacles (self, home life, friends, teachers, other) to passing all your ninth-grade classes? Did you have any major events happen in or outside of school that affected your ability to get passing grades in school?
9. On a scale from 1-5 (1=not determined at all; 5=super determined), how would you rate your level of will (self-determination) when it comes to graduating from high school?
10. What can the adults do within your school to better support you toward graduation?
11. What are your goals after high school graduation?