Changing the Narrative on High School Dropout: An Ethnography of a Nontraditional School

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Leadership & Policy Studies

December 12, 2020

Nashville, Tennessee

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To Big Mama and Granny—

thank you for paving the way

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the financial support of Vanderbilt University, Peabody College Department of Leadership and Policy Studies. I am especially grateful to all of those whom I have had the pleasure to work with during this project. Each of the members of my Dissertation Committee provided invaluable input on shaping and developing this study. I would especially like to thank my co-chairs Drs. Joanne Golann and Claire Smrekar for their guidance and advice every step of the way on this study. They both provided direction to help me create a meaningful and impactful study.

I would also like to recognize my family members, the ones I was born with and those I've added along the way, who have walked through this journey with me. Mommy, Daddy, Top, Victoria and Naki, thank you for being my cornerstone. To my extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins and godparents—thank you for surrounding me with love and support. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to recognize the best friends a person could ever hope for. Maya, Brittany, Jeff, Dalayna and Christy, thank you for always being there to offer support and for filling my life with joy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"What is the culturally deprived child *doing* in school? What is wrong with the victim? In pursuing this logic, no one remembers to ask questions about the collapsing buildings and torn textbooks; the frightened, insensitive teachers; the six additional desks in the room . . . the relentless segregation . . . the irrelevant curriculum . . . the insulting history book . . . we are encouraged to confine our attention to the child and to dwell on all his alleged defects."
–William Ryan (Ryan, 1971, p. 4)

High school dropout is a widely studied trend that impacts millions of students each year. In 2017, 5.4% of all students or 2.1 million students dropped out as defined by the number of students aged 16-24 who were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school credential (diploma or GED) (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). A report by Burrus and Roberts (2012) found that the dropout rate in 2010 was higher among high school seniors than any other grade. Specifically, students who are overage and under credit, or have not earned the appropriate number of credits given their age and intended grade, are the most likely to drop out (Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2012). In 2017, American Indian/Alaska Native and Latinx students experienced the highest rate of dropout at 10.1% and 8.2%, respectively; students who identify as Black, two or more races and white fall in the middle at 6.5%, 4.5%, and 4.3%; while Pacific Islander and Asian students experienced the lowest rate of dropout at 3.9% and 2.1%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). High rates of dropout are concerning on a microeconomic level because without a high school diploma, people tend to experience worse health outcomes, higher likelihood of incarceration, and lower wages (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Christenson et al., 2000). These individual-level outcomes also result in high costs on a macroeconomic level through lost revenues and welfare, crime prevention, and unemployment programs (Christenson et al., 2000).

Dropout prevention has received a lot of attention in recent education research but these reports rarely include the perspectives and lived experiences of students (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Finn & Owings, 2006). This study makes a novel contribution by including the perspective and lived experiences of students who attend a nontraditional high school to better understand what factors keep students who are most likely to dropout motivated to complete high school. First, I examine students' beliefs, identities, and conditions or contexts that impact their academic success and influence their decision to persist in high school. Second, this study explores school structures and supports that moderate the effects of individual, social, and environmental risk factors and help students be resilient. This dissertation study is motivated by an assumption that student insight can inform policy and practices through a better understanding of factors that students attribute to their academic success and challenges during a pivotal point in their school journey. This is important for research on dropout because it can add to the body of knowledge regarding reasons that students choose to remain in high school and illuminate practices that lower the dropout rate.

I conducted an ethnographic study that included interviews with a small group of students, teachers and school staff members and field observations in a non-traditional public high school for one academic year to understand why and how this school promotes completion for students who may otherwise have dropped out of school. In particular, I attend to how students describe the in-school and out-of-school factors that influenced their prior academic trajectories, and examine the school structures and practices at the non-traditional school that moderate these risk factors. The non-traditional school is a small school that serves approximately 135 students and offers personalized academic support, college and career readiness resources and social services.

Significance of Study

The ethnographic design of this study amplifies student voice in research to inform how students' experiences both in and out of school influence their persistence to graduation. Three widely cited ethnographic works that focus on student voice and experiences as they relate to high school persistence, are *Framing Dropouts* by Michelle Fine (1991), *Educational Opportunity in an Urban American High School: A Cultural Analysis* by Patrick James McQuillan (1998) and *Ain't No Making It* by Jay MacLeod (2009). Each of these researchers note the value and benefit of capturing lived experiences and student voice. Similarly, this study seeks to understand, from the students' perspective, why and how different school-related and personal factors support or impede students' academic persistence. I reviewed the theoretical frameworks, methodologies and findings from these studies because similar to this ethnography, these studies incorporate students' lived experiences in understanding dropout in urban high schools. I also identify gaps in the findings that I address with this study.

Michelle Fine's (1991) *Framing Dropouts* is an ethnographic study of a large traditional high school that has a dropout rate of greater than 60% and primarily serves students from low-income and working-class families. Her goal is to "unearth those institutional policies and practices that enable, obscure, and legitimate the mass exodus" of low-income urban students of color from high school (p. 8). Through observations in classrooms and school events and interviews with teachers, students, and families, she learns about educational, social, and economic critiques that prompt students to drop out. For example, she meets students who are caretakers for their parents and who have children, so they are unable to manage both home responsibilities and school responsibilities, while others have been suspended so many times that

they choose to stop attending school. She draws from critical educational theory, defined by Carr and Kemmis (2003) as a way to critique and change education, and activist politics to understand how some schools, even when well-intentioned, create inequitable outcomes because they are unable to meet the continuum of needs of low-income students. Fine states, "Literature focuses on students who flee, not the schools they flee from" (p. 22). Like Fine, in this study, I seek to understand factors that influence students to flee or disengage from school and factors that help students persist in school even when facing adverse events. I extend on Fine's work by focusing on a non-traditional school that implements many of Fine's recommendations, including providing coordinated social services that meet the needs of low-income students.

In *Educational Opportunity in an Urban American High School: A Cultural Analysis*, McQuillan (1998) conducts a five-year ethnographic study in an urban high school, Russell High, to inform how educational opportunity in America is understood. He conducts a cultural analysis using data from interviews, observations, two reform initiatives, a student protest, school assemblies, and local media to understand the academic culture at Russell High. McQuillan finds that students at Russell High resist the curriculum, teachers lower their standards and discipline is prioritized over academics. From his findings, he determines that collective beliefs and values of the school community, rather than individual effort, have the greatest impact on educational opportunity. Some of McQuillan's suggestions for urban school reform include smaller schools, an extended school year and giving students more power and responsibility. The nontraditional school I am studying implements the previously listed recommendations and strives to maintain positive school-wide beliefs regarding graduating. This study seeks to understand how or if these factors make a difference for students' outcomes.

Finally, in *Ain't No Making It*, MacLeod (2009) seeks to understand how educational expectations differ among a group of Black (Brothers) and white (Hallway Hangers) boys that live in the same housing project and attend the same school. Through interviews and observations, MacLeod learns that the Brothers have high aspirations for the future and attribute any lack of success to personal inadequacy, while the Hallway Hangers believe that the social class they were born into will limit them to unskilled, unrewarding work in the future. Contrary to the dominant ideology that American society is open and the main barriers to success are personal, he finds that structural constraints resulted in members of both groups working low-skill, low-income jobs. MacLeod's ethnography provides a unique perspective because it is one of few ethnographies that finds that a group of low-income, Black students have high educational goals and aspirations. I build on this work by paying careful attention to the strengths that marginalized groups have instead of focusing solely on risk factors and negative outcomes. This study also builds on MacLeod's work by seeking to understand additional factors that influence students' beliefs regarding completing high school.

Fine's (1991), McQuillan's (1998), and MacLeod's (2009) works provide in-depth descriptions of schools with low graduation rates and suggest important policy recommendations. However, instead of focusing on student failure in urban high schools, this study provides a counternarrative by focusing on factors that help students be resilient and *persist to graduation* in a non-traditional high school despite adversity. A counternarrative is a method originated within Critical Race Theory of using personal narratives and stories to convey experiential knowledge that is often not validated by a dominant culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matsuda et al., 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). While I do not use Critical Race Theory as a guiding framework for this study, this dissertation is designed to amplify voices and

stories from a marginalized group--thus I refer to it as a counternarrative. This study examines what happens when students who have attended under-resourced urban high schools are offered support and resources through a non-traditional high school program that is designed to help them remain engaged in high school and ultimately graduate.

This study has two aims: first, to capture and consider students' perceptions of risk factors that contribute to their disengagement from school, and second, to identify promotive factors that contribute to their engaging in a non-traditional school. Current work on high school dropout rarely uses a lens of resilience or includes students' perspective to give depth of understanding to nuanced reasons students engage or disengage from school. This work is intended to expand the extant research literature by informing how schools, among other factors, can support or impede engagement. This study challenges the underlying assumptions of earlier works on dropout that pervasive beliefs and values regarding education, or the racial demographics or cultural differences of students and staff, especially in urban high schools, are the root of negative educational outcomes (Griffin, 2002). Deficit-based studies on dropout tend to attribute academic failures to parents, home environments, and student beliefs about education (e.g., Battin-Pearson et al., 1997). These studies of early high school departure do not place as much focus on understanding how and why it may be difficult for some students to be successful in a traditional school setting. This study seeks to understand how a non-traditional school setting might mitigate the negative effects of risk factors and help students persist in high school. Students benefit by having their voices heard and allowing their experiences to inform research in a way that might positively shape policies on dropout prevention.

Research Questions

The school that was selected for this study is designed to help students who are behind in credits graduate. Students who attend this school are within eight credits of graduating and although studies have shown that this is the most likely time students will drop out, these students persist (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). My research questions are as follows:

1. How does school culture and structure contribute to students' disengagement from their (previous) traditional high school?
2. How does school culture and structure influence students' resilience in a non-traditional high school?

It is important to define resilience theory, risk factors and promotive factors as this study is built around these concepts. Resilience refers to ways that people overcome and positively adapt to risk factors (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Risk factors are predictors of an undesirable outcome, including obstacles, trauma and hostile or toxic environments (Garmezy, 1971). Promotive factors are factors that mitigate the negative effects of risk factors on outcomes (Sameroff, 1999). I borrow from Finn's (1989) participation-identification conceptual model of school withdrawal to define student engagement and disengagement. In this model, engagement refers to a student's sense of belonging, perceived worth of school and participation at school. Participation includes in-class and extracurricular activities and meeting requirements. Disengagement is signaled through low or absent participation. I define these concepts in greater detail in the literature review section.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review considers prior research that has been conducted on high school dropout, nontraditional schools, and resilience theory. Regarding dropout, I review studies on the school and individual-related influential factors that influence dropout and briefly discuss prevention programs. I review different non-traditional school models that are designed to support students who are at risk for school failure. Finally, I outline resilience theory as a framework for studying and understanding how promotive factors can mitigate the effects of risk factors and result in positive outcomes.

High School Dropout

In this section, I discuss school and individual-related factors that are associated with high rates of high school dropout and prevention programs that have been designed and implemented to reduce the rate of high school dropout. This study contributes to this literature by incorporating student voice regarding school-related factors that positively or negatively influenced students' engagement with school, and by using ethnographic observations to examine how schools can mitigate risk factors and promote student engagement and resilience.

School-related factors

A study by Kennelly and Monrad (2007) finds that school-level factors are better indicators of dropout than fixed characteristics such as race, poverty status and gender (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Student engagement, which is impacted by both individual-level factors such as identification with school or social bonding and school factors such as teacher quality,

classroom management and school culture, is a predictor of school completion among racial minority students from low-income families (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Finn & Rock, 1997; Lehr et al., 2003; Koedel, 2008). I study each of the previously listed factors in this dissertation using qualitative methods to understand how they relate to school culture. Other predictive factors of dropout that can be indicative as early as middle school are low grades in core subjects, poor attendance and being withheld a grade (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Finn (1989) also finds that students who participate in school-relevant activities such as in-class discussions and extracurricular activities are more likely to complete high school.

Another major school-related factor associated with dropout is the student's history of disciplinary infractions. High rates of suspensions are correlated with disengagement and dropout, especially when students perceive policies as unfair (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; McNeal & Dunbar, 2010). Being suspended at least once increases the likelihood of dropping out of school by nearly 77.5%, and suspensions are a stronger predictor of dropout than either grade point average or socioeconomic status (Suh & Suh, 2007). This may increasingly be a reason for students' decision to drop out as many schools are imposing harsher sanctions on students for minor disruptive behavior, such as tardiness, absences and noncompliance (e.g., Gonzalez, 2012). A study using data that tracked Texas seventh grade students found that 31% of students with disciplinary actions were held back at least once and 10% dropped out of school—as compared to 5% and 2%, respectively, of students who had not received disciplinary actions (Fabelo et al., 2011). Suspension may also contribute to academic disengagement because when students are suspended, they also have less access to educational and counseling services (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). This

dissertation focuses on a non-traditional school that approaches education and connecting with students in a different way.

Individual-related factors

A seminal study on dropout compared the adequacy of five theories: *general deviance* such as misbehaving in class and sexual involvement, *deviant affiliation* such as bonding to antisocial peers, *school socialization* such as low school bonding, *poor family socialization* including low parental educational expectations and parents' lack of education, and *structural constraints* such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status as early predictors of dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997). Many studies on high school dropout test these theories or conceptualize similar theories. For example, Hupfeld (2010) finds that dropout is typically understood as a process of gradual disengagement including not feeling motivated to work hard, having to get a job, becoming a parent or having to care for a family member, rather than the result of a single event. I interview students who have faced each of the previously listed situations to better understand how the factors impacted their education trajectory. Other individual-level factors that occur in the classroom and are indicative of engagement include behaving in class, liking school, being interested in classes and showing a willingness to learn (Archambault et al., 2009). I ask students about their attitudes and beliefs towards school to gain insight on how relevant these factors are in their own words. Finally, students who have high classroom attendance, arrive on time, complete assignments and participate in extracurriculars are more likely than their peers to complete high school (Finn & Owings, 2006).

Many earlier works define dropping out as a long-term process of academic disengagement, and thus have sought to identify early predictors of dropout. Using quantitative data from Baltimore City Public Schools, Alexander and colleagues (1997) conducted logistic

regression analyses to determine which of the following factors were early predictors of dropout: family context including family stressors, parents' attitudes and values, and parents' socialization practices; children's personal resources including attitudes toward self and school and engagement behavior; and school experiences such as achievement patterns and track placements. They found that all of these factors had statistically significant impacts except parents' socialization practices. Other studies, however, have found that students in two-parent homes are more likely to stay engaged in and graduate from high school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger et al., 1990). While there is mixed quantitative evidence on the impact of family context on graduating, in this dissertation, I use qualitative data to explore how family context contributes to or hinders school completion.

A limitation of studies that focus on individual-level factors is that very little attention is given to school-level factors that impact student achievement and resilience in schools. It is important to also focus on school-related factors that contribute to a student's decision to drop out, because while race, socioeconomic status and family context are correlated with dropout, those factors are not causal, nor easily malleable. This study contributes to this body of research by recognizing ways in which personal factors can serve as risk factors, while also looking at the role that schools play in students' engagement and disengagement.

Prevention Programs

With an increased understanding of individual- and school-level factors that predict or contribute to dropout, many prevention programs have been developed to attempt to curtail the rate of high school dropout. Dropout prevention programs tend to focus on improving student engagement and attendance, personalizing education and tailoring services to help address the academic, social, and personal problems affecting students (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). In a

review of 45 dropout intervention programs, Lehr and colleagues (2003) found that about 71% of interventions included a personal/affective focus on factors such as classes and retreats to improve self-esteem and individual counseling and about half of the interventions had an academic focus and provided special academic courses or tutoring. Credit recovery and summer school are also two standard dropout prevention programs (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Other less common interventions include developing family outreach programs, changing the school structure through smaller class sizes, implementing a school-within-a-school model and adopting a work-focus through vocational training programs (Lehr et al., 2003). The non-traditional school that I studied in this dissertation incorporates many of these elements—personalized academic attention, small class sizes, counseling, credit recovery, and summer school.

Positive school culture, including positive relationships between teachers and students, is a promotive factor that can keep students academically engaged. Microeconomic studies in education have shown that school-related factors such as smaller class sizes, personalized settings and individual learning plans have resulted in lower dropout rates (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Student engagement can be positively impacted through reducing the student-teacher ratio and having highly qualified teachers in core classes (Koedel, 2008; Finn et al., 2005).

Alternative school discipline models including restorative justice, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) that rely less on punitive discipline measures also have a positive impact on dropout rates (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Skiba et al., 2012). Additionally, wraparound social services in schools, including counseling and assistance with housing and food provisions, can help mitigate the effects of home and environmental risk factors that can lead to students' decision to drop out (Fries et al., 2012). Most of these findings are from quantitative studies that use large scale datasets. This

qualitative study adds depth to these findings by understanding from the student perspective, how and why these factors impact educational outcomes and persistence within the context of a non-traditional school designed specifically to enhance students' access to these preventative mechanisms.

Non-Traditional Schools

Schools that offer a learning experience that is different from traditional high schools by incorporating many of the previously listed preventative mechanisms, with the explicit goal of keeping students academically engaged, are often known as non-traditional or alternative schools. "Alternative schools are defined by the fact that they tend to serve students who are at risk for school failure within the traditional educational system" (Lehr, Tan & Ysseldyke, 2009, p. 19). Studying non-traditional schools contributes to the literature on dropout, because they offer services that address many of the previously cited reasons for why students typically drop out of high school. Characteristics of alternative schools "such as individualized flexible programs with high expectations, an emphasis on care and concern, and small school size are considered to be key dropout prevention strategies" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 16).

"Alternative schools" is typically used as an umbrella term for a variety of school types that do not follow the traditional school model, but common features that can be found in most alternative schools include small class sizes, online classes, flexible class schedules, and additional resources to address students' mental, emotional, and social needs (Lange & Sletten, 2002). In the literature, "alternative schools" and "non-traditional schools" are typically used interchangeably, but in the school district that this study is situated in, "alternative schools" typically enroll students who have been assigned a long-term suspension or expelled from their traditional school, while "non-traditional" schools offer specialized supports and services for

students with different learning needs [site website, 2019]. Non-traditional schools provide a pathway for students with learning difficulties and those who have had their education disrupted to earn their high school diploma. By meeting the diverse needs of students, those who have struggled to be successful in a traditional school setting are supported in their goal of obtaining a high school diploma. Potential drawbacks of attending a non-traditional or alternative school include fewer elective or higher track classes, lack of extracurricular activities, and not being seen as competitive by colleges.

Open Schools were developed in the late 1960s and emphasized autonomy in education. These are often recognized as the first alternative education models. These schools were closed in the 1970s due to backlash for not being structured enough, but this model led to the creation of many other non-traditional school models including "Schools without Walls" that emphasize community-based learning, "Schools within a School" to attempt to create small communities within a large high school, "Multicultural Schools" that integrate culture and ethnicity into curriculum, "Continuation Schools" for students who have fallen behind due to life circumstances, and "Magnet Schools" which developed to promote racial integration, among others (Lange & Sletten, 2002). By the 1980s, most alternative education models focused on teaching students a basic set of skills, rather than collective decision making as open schools promoted (Raywid, 1981).

Today there is a wide variety of alternative school models, but Raywid (1994) offers a useful schema that succinctly defines different types of alternative schools. Type I schools which he refers to as choice schools emphasize different types of curricula that attract students. An example of this would be a STEM magnet school that students and families choose to enroll in because of an interest in having a STEM curriculum. Type II alternative schools are available for

students who have been suspended or expelled. These are typically seen as a "last chance" opportunity to obtain a high school diploma. An example of this would be a small, district school that students are sent to during long-term suspensions or expulsions from their traditional high school following a zero-tolerance infraction. Type III alternative schools are schools that offer remedial academic support and specialized support for social emotional issues. Using Raywid's classification system, the non-traditional school in this study is a Type III alternative school. The non-traditional school in this study focuses on providing personalized academic support in small class settings, college and career readiness resources and connects students to social services when needed.

While there are empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of non-traditional schools, with such a wide variety of types of non-traditional schools and missions of these schools, the measures vary. Studies have found empirical evidence for the effectiveness of non-traditional or alternative schools using measures including credits earned, achievement test scores and students' attitudes towards school (Sinclair et al., 2005; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Dupper, 2008). Using a large scale, multi-site random assignment research design, Kemple and Snipes (2005) found that career academies—a school within a school design that includes small learning communities and personalized learning environments—reduced dropout rates by 11 percentage points, increased attendance rate by 6 percentage points and increased number of students who earned enough credits to meet district graduation requirements by 14 percentage points. Another study using an experimental research design to examine the effectiveness of a school model that emphasized continuous assessment of indicators of student engagement (attendance, suspensions, grades and credits) and connecting students with individualized support program staff, family members and community workers found that students in this

program were significantly less likely to drop out and have poor attendance (Sinclair et al., 2005). Similarly, a study of an alternative school using a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest group design found that students who participated in the program were significantly more likely to earn the credits needed to graduate and enter a postgraduate education program (Franklin et al., 2007). These empirical studies provide evidence for the effectiveness of some types of alternative school models and this dissertation builds on these studies to understand how alternative schooling models may be able to help prevent dropout. The ethnographic research design allows me to understand how and why an alternative school model contributes to school completion. The ethnographic design of this study will allow me to hear school members' voices and observe their interactions, but is limited in generalizability in ways that empirical studies are not.

Resilience Theory

Dropout is typically understood through deficit-based explanations such as academic disengagement, general deviance and family and environmental context. While students face the previously listed risk factors both inside and outside of school, protective and promotive factors can help mitigate the negative effects and help them remain engaged academically. Thus, I use resilience theory as a framework to understand students' experiences from a strengths-based perspective and to understand how differences in school settings might influence their level of engagement.

Resilience theory provides a framework for studying and understanding how people overcome and positively adapt to risk factors (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Resilience theory focuses on three key components: a positive outcome of interest, risk factors that threaten the positive outcome and strengths and protective factors that can bring about a positive outcome or

reduce or avoid a negative outcome (Yates & Masten, 2004; Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). Therefore, resilience should not be understood as a single occurrence or dichotomous trait that an individual either does or does not have, but should include all three factors listed previously: risk, protective factor and an outcome. Resilience can occur through innate abilities and motivations and with assistance from others. Commonly studied outcomes are mental health, substance use, violent behavior and sexual behavior. Resilience research is able to be used in the development of strengths-based interventions because it focuses on promoting positive factors rather than reducing risks or perceived deficits in children. The concept of risk and resilience originated in the medical field, but education researchers adapted the theory to better understand how the effect of risk factors can be mitigated to improve educational outcomes.

To further define features of resilience theory, risk factors, or predictors of an undesirable outcome, have been studied for children in numerous contexts including family violence, attendance at under-resourced schools, maltreatment and poverty, among others. Researchers recognized that for most children, as the level of risk exposure increased, they faced increasingly negative outcomes; however, some children, despite the accumulation of risk factors, fared well and had positive outcomes. Researchers realized other factors must be at play which led to the study of protective and promotive factors (Yates & Masten, 2004). Garmezy (1983) identified moderating factors as "protective factors," because they protect against the effects of risk factors but others argued that these factors are important even when risk exposure is not present (Rutter, 1987; Stouthhamer-Loeber et al., 1993). Therefore, the term "promotive factors," rather than "protective factors," is often used to refer to positive factors that may occur in the absence of risk factors (Sameroff, 1999). Promotive factors can be identified as assets, or factors within the individual, or resources that are external to the individual (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Garmezy (1971) pioneered research on resilience and found that to reduce risk and promote resilience, one must focus on the individual, the family and the community, because three factors tend to determine how resilient a child is: (1) their intelligence and temperament, (2) the amount of familial support and (3) external support from non-family members and institutions. Intelligence is seen as a promotive factor for children, because it leads to increased rewards in school and higher school attachment, which then reduces likelihood of antisocial behavior (Condley, 2006; Kandel et al., 1988). Other individual-level factors that are associated with resilience include coping skills, identity, self-efficacy and orientation to the future (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2013). Research has found that familial support is a promotive factor through studies showing that children who have warm relationships with their parents have higher social competence and are less likely to abuse substances (Kauffman et al., 1979; Fleming et al., 2002; Rende & Plomin, 1993). Finally, external support such as a supportive school community can serve as a promotive factor through the development of problem-solving and self-control skills, offering the opportunity for relationships with caring adults and making various resources available (Yates & Masten, 2004; Finn & Rock, 1997). An example of how school can serve as a promotive factor is a research study that found children with higher levels of academic achievement and school attachment practiced less risky sexual behaviors (Paul et al., 2000). This study considers individual, family and community factors in order to give a holistic view of how different forces shape students' educational persistence. I ask about each of these factors during interviews with students. In this dissertation, I pay particular attention to the third factor that Garmezy (1971) lists as determining how resilient a child is: external support from non-family members and institutions, because I want to understand how schools can contribute to increasing student engagement.

There are three conceptual models—compensatory, protective and challenge—that explain how promotive factors can mitigate the effects of risk factors and result in resilience. A *compensatory* model refers to a process in which a promotive factor counteracts risk exposure through an independent and opposite effect on an outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). An example of this was found in a study on youth violence that showed children with violent peers (risk factor) were more likely to commit acts of violence, but having a supportive mother (promotive factor) predicted fewer fights (Zimmerman, Steinman, & Rowe, 1998). A *protective* model refers to a process in which a promotive factor moderates the negative effects of risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). An example of a protective model was found in a study on physiological stress in which stress was reduced in children who reported active coping (Sandler et al, 1994). Protective models can be further broken down to protective-stabilizing or protective-reactive (Luther et al., 2000). A protective-stabilizing model refers to instances when a protective factor neutralizes the effect of a risk factor, whereas a protective-reactive model refers to instances when a protective factor reduces, but does not remove the effects of a risk factor. The third model, a *challenge* model, refers to a process in which moderate exposure to a risk factor helps a person develop coping mechanisms and skills that help them overcome subsequent exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The theory behind this model is too little stress will hinder a person's ability to develop coping mechanisms, but too much stress is overwhelming. An appropriate amount of stress, such as a student being involved in extracurricular activities, however, may help them develop a higher level of competency or responsibility. This model has not been tested in depth, but Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) theorize that this may be a way that risk factors promote resilience. This study is shaped around compensatory and protective factors, such as school supports that do not remove, but can counteract risk factors. I also look at ways

that the challenge model might be in place as students who have faced risk factors have developed motivation and a sense of responsibility around their education.

While there is a wealth of research on negative outcomes for students facing adverse events, resilience theory provides an interesting perspective by recognizing the risk factors, but also acknowledging the ways that protective factors can improve outcomes. An ecological model of embedded systems illustrates that children develop in the context of their family, peers and school systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Masten, 2003). For students facing adverse events, mentoring relationships with supportive, encouraging adults serve as promotive factors because they have positive impacts against negative peer influences and parental mental health issues, and promote educational attainment (Zimmerman et al., 2002; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Hurd et al., 2012). Resilience theory can also provide nuance to studies that label being a racial minority a risk. An example is a study showing that positive racial identity can actually serve as a moderating factor between experiencing racial discrimination and subsequent violent behavior (Caldwell et al., 2004).

Schools are able to serve as both a protective and promotive factor when they provide warm, supportive relationships, orderly environments, positive climate and high expectations (Wang & Gordon, 2012). Schools also provide food, mental and physical health care and access to social services to students who need support. Resilience is particularly important when understanding a student's decision to persist or drop out of high school. A qualitative study conducted in Canada found that some common differences between a group of resilient students who completed high school and students who dropped out of high school were: resilient students used their own internal resources, asked for help when needed, established and maintained positive relationships with friends and teachers and had supportive people to rely on when facing

hardships (Lessard et al., 2014). Resilience theory builds on theories of self-efficacy and self-determination and helps explain the role that students' motivation and belief of ability to succeed plays in their academic success (Hupfeld, 2010). To help develop self-efficacy and self-determination as promotive factors, effective schools can help students build confidence, develop cognitive abilities, communicate the importance of education for reaching future goals, develop students' problem-solving skills, teach stress management and offer caring, safe and supportive environments (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Hupfeld, 2010). Studies show that a sense of self-determination keeps students engaged and contributes to resilience in the face of hardships (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

A limitation of studies using resilience theory as a framework is that most studies are quantitative and only focus on one risk factor and one outcome, but in reality, children often face various risk factors simultaneously and have multiple protective factors that may change the trajectory from risk exposure to outcome. The qualitative nature of this project allows me to explore various factors that impact student persistence in school and how the factors interact with each other. Conducting an ethnography in a non-traditional school to understand students' perspective of resilience while working towards a high school diploma is a gap in the literature that this project intends to fill.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter includes an outline of how this study was conducted, including the data collection procedures. I describe the study site, how interviews and observations were conducted and the source of descriptive data that is used in this study.

Outline of Study

This is an ethnographic study following a small group of students who were overage and behind in credits before they transferred to a nontraditional school that is designed to meet students' needs and help them graduate. The goal of this study is to better understand factors that promote student resilience in high school. An ethnography is a study in which a researcher observes society from the point of view of participants to provide an in-depth description of a society or culture (Fetterman, 1998). Ethnographies involve the researcher emerging themselves in a setting and can include data collection through observation, interviews and focus groups (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Similar to Fine's (2009) study on dropout, I conducted observations throughout the school and talked to various school community members including students, teachers and administrative staff. My role as a participant was as an observer, where my identity as a researcher was known and I was able to shadow students through their school day (Descombe, 2014). This method allowed me to observe students at the nontraditional school setting while also being able to obtain consent from participants. I chose to conduct an ethnographic study so that I could observe students in the school setting as they interacted with different academic and social supports.

Data Collection

This section includes information on the study site that was chosen, the process of collecting data through interviews and observations and how descriptive data were gathered.

Study Site

This study is situated in a non-traditional high school that is located in a large urban school district in the South. A national non-profit organization builds, maintains and finances the property, while the provision of education remains the responsibility of the school district. This non-profit has provided space for 35 schools in 15 states—each school sharing the goal of supporting students who are at risk of dropping out. As a whole, the network of schools has maintained a 90 percent graduation rate. These schools provide personalized support that is needed for students to earn their diplomas and specifically seek to support students who "struggle to connect with material in a traditional classroom or school because of homelessness, bullying, serious illness, parenthood, supporting their families, or other challenging personal circumstances" [site website, 2019]. These non-traditional schools are considered public schools meaning they are governed by the school district they are situated in and must meet district and state requirements. This non-traditional school serves students who are 17-21 years old, were behind in credits at their traditional high school and are in pursuit of a high school diploma. They define themselves as "a small learning community" with "small class sizes; individualized, accelerated, and flexible learning plans; and traditional and blended learning environments" [site website, 2019]. The support staff at this school includes a school counselor, graduation coach and an exceptional education coordinator.

I selected this school because it is the only stand-alone non-traditional high school in the district, so the principal at this school is able to accept students with discipline records. I wanted

to be able to recruit participants with a history of discipline incidents since that is a well-documented indicator of dropout. I met with the principals of the other non-traditional schools in the district and learned that they tend not to admit many students with histories of disciplinary infractions. Although this is not an official policy of the school or district, those principals said that because their schools share a building with other companies, they must abide by stricter rules. For example, one non-traditional school is housed inside a mall and if a student is banned from the mall for fighting or shoplifting during a break or even the weekend, that student would have to get special permission to be allowed back onto the property. To minimize the risk of a student's behavior causing conflicts with the larger companies that the schools share a building with, those principals typically refer students with long histories of discipline problems to the non-traditional school I chose for this study. As the school I chose is housed in what was a vacant high school building, instead of another company's building, students do not have to abide by another organization's rules.

The district contains approximately 150 schools and total student enrollment is approximately 85,000. Most of the students who attend the non-traditional school transfer from one of four public high schools in the district—three traditional and one transitional school—which I refer to as "feeder schools." The transitional school is designed to help students earn the credits they need to transfer to be eligible to enroll in one of the non-traditional schools. Similar to many alternative schools, students are not able to graduate from the transitional school, so they typically transfer to one of the non-traditional schools to earn their last few credits and receive a diploma. Students usually transfer to the non-traditional school that is geographically the closest to their zoned high school. Table 1 includes basic demographic information about the

non-traditional and feeder schools from the most updated, publicly available data on the state and school district's websites.

Table 1.

Non-Traditional and Feeder School Demographics

	Enrollment (2015)	% Black, Latinx or Native American (2015)	% Econ. Disad. (2015)	%English Learners (2015)	% Students with Disabilities (2015)	Average ACT Score (2017)	Suspension Rate (2018)	Completion Rate (2019)
Non-traditional school	**146**	**67**	**79**	**6**	**10**	**16**	**4**	**84**
Feeder #1 (Transitional)	78	90	74	4	35	--	29	--
Feeder #2	724	84	78	1	22	16	21	89
Feeder #3	1158	59	55	2	12	20	16	83
Feeder #4	1111	46	68	6	15	19	14	77
Average of feeder schools	768	70	74	3	21	18	20	83
District	85,000	68	47	16	13	19	10	80

Note. Demographics according to the most current data from the site's state website. Economically disadvantaged defined by the school district as students who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The state accountability model calculates graduation rate by percent of students who complete high school in four years plus one summer. Since the nontraditional school caters to students who are overage and under credit, their graduation rate as calculated by the state and district measurement (completing high school in four years and one summer) is a misleading 67%. When calculating their completion rate based on students who enroll at the school and graduate, their completion rate is 84%. Therefore, although the nontraditional school accepts students who are statistically the most likely to drop out, they have a graduation rate that is higher than the average of the feeder schools' and higher than the district average graduation rates. Similar to graduation rate, the reported attendance rate at the nontraditional school is impacted by the students' previous school. For example, if a student was chronically absent at

their previous school, that label carries over and is reported in the nontraditional school's record of student attendance.

Students become familiar with this non-traditional school option through recommendations from school administrators and school counselors after being identified as being unlikely to graduate on time based on credit hours. The non-traditional school relies heavily on guidance departments at traditional schools and the transitional school to identify and refer students that they think would be a good fit. Once students are identified, the principal and guidance counselor from the non-traditional school will go to those schools to meet prospective students, give a presentation about the procedures and policies and invite them to apply. The application can be found on the school's website and asks for contact information, age, last school attended, whether they are currently enrolled in school, why they are applying, what qualities they want in a teacher, why they think the school would be a good fit for them, language they first learned to speak and language spoken at home. After students apply, the principal of the non-traditional school also requests their transcript and behavior and discipline records. Finally, students are required to come in for an interview, so the school can learn more about the student and tell the student more about how the school is structured. The principal said that by the time a student is invited in for an interview, they have already decided that they are likely going to be a good fit, so it is more for the student to see if they think the school is a good fit. Although these students are motivated to apply and attend a non-traditional school, they are still susceptible to drop out given their risk factors.

To be eligible to attend the nontraditional school, students must be within eight credits of graduating unless there are extenuating circumstances. Students missing up to 10 credits have been admitted in those cases. If students have more than eight credits remaining, they often

enroll in the transitional school that is listed in Table 1 before transferring to the non-traditional school. The current enrollment averages around 135 students, but students are able to graduate at any point during the school year once they have earned the 22 credits required by the state for graduation. Students can earn one credit every four weeks because they attend two 2.5-hour long classes each day. If a student enrolls at the beginning of the school year, they are able to complete the eight credits within the school year.

The school day lasts from 8:30 a.m.- 2:15 p.m. Students have their morning class from 8:30 a.m.-11:00 a.m., lunch from 11:00 a.m.-11:45 a.m. and then their afternoon class from 11:45 a.m.-2:15 p.m. The school year is broken up into eight terms, with each term lasting approximately 20 days. There is also an optional summer term. If students complete the required coursework, they can earn up to one credit in a term (a half credit in each of the two courses they are enrolled in). A typical schedule for a student who enrolls at the beginning of the school year and has eight credits to earn (English IV, Trigonometry, Chemistry, U.S. History, Government, Economics, Spanish and Credit Recovery for a class failed at a previous school) might look like the following table.

Table 2

Example Student School Year Schedule

	Morning Class	**Afternoon Class**
Term 1	English IV	Economics
Term 2	English IV	Economics
Term 3	Chemistry	U.S. History
Term 4	Chemistry	U.S. History
Term 5	Government	Trigonometry
Term 6	Government	Trigonometry
Term 7	Credit Recovery	Spanish
Term 8	Credit Recovery	Spanish

Data Analysis

For this ethnography, I interviewed and observed six students who were behind in credits at their previous school. I was given access to observe students throughout the day: during classes, transition periods and lunch. I introduced myself and this study at a faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year, so that teachers would know why I was observing their classes regularly. I had to sign in at the front office each time I visited, but after being buzzed in by the security guard, I was free to walk around, observe classes and talk to students. Staff members only asked where I was going at the beginning of the year when they could tell I was having trouble finding the classroom or student I was looking for. Once I was able to navigate around the school and knew where to find students, staff never asked where I was going.

Qualitative research is often criticized by quantitative researchers for not having representative samples or generalizable findings (Small, 2009). Instead of viewing the six students I interviewed as a representative sample of a population, understanding this as a set of six cases of students would more accurately explain why I am including this number of students (Small, 2009). Using case study logic as proposed by Yin (2002), I included new cases as long as they provided more depth and clarity regarding how promotive factors can moderate the effects of various risk factors and result in positive outcomes until I reached saturation. I spoke to staff members about reasons that students fall behind in credits and the students that I interviewed faced the most prominent issues: multiple suspensions, family problems, raising children, mental health concerns and lack of interest in school. Purposive sampling is a nonrandom method of choosing participants based on qualities they possess (Etikan et al., 2016). I used a purposive sampling method in which I recruited a heterogeneous sample of students that are representative of various reasons students fall behind in credits, racially diverse and balanced on gender. The exclusion criteria were any students who were likely to graduate before the second semester because I wanted to ensure I was able to interview and observe students while they were still eligible to be enrolled at the non-traditional school. While choosing to interview students who chose to enroll at the non-traditional school to understand disengagement and engagement with school could seem like potential selection bias at the outset, selecting students in this position was actually crucial in answering the research question. If these students were intrinsically motivated to do well in school, but somehow fell behind in credits, I wanted to understand what factors contributed to their disengagement and why they remained engaged at the non-traditional school.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of students' perspective on risk and promotive factors. I interviewed each student three times and each of the three interviews had a specific focus so that I ensured I was gathering multiple perspectives of similar topics. The interview guides can be found in Appendix A. The first interview allowed me to understand the participants' biographical information and life history to be able to place their experiences within a larger context. The second interview focused on asking for concrete details about experiences in different schools and their feelings, motives and behaviors. In the third interview, questions were designed so that participants could reflect on the meanings of their experiences and reasons for their actions or feelings. I also interviewed three teachers, the guidance counselor and the principal from the non-traditional school using semi-structured interviews. I chose to interview teachers who had previously taught in a traditional public school so that they could provide insight on the different school settings and what promotive factors are present in each. Interviewing the principals, teachers and counselors also provided insight into whether there was congruence in what factors the students and staff understand as important to academic success. All interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. In addition to formal interviews, I regularly spoke to students and teachers who were not highlighted in this study but provided additional insights. Finally, I interviewed guidance counselors from two of the feeder schools to understand differences and similarities in school culture and structure. The findings from these interviews are found in Appendix D.

Using Nvivo software, I coded the interviews and observations based on a modified grounded theory coding approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) conceptualized grounded theory coding as discovering theory through data. Grounded theory coding begins with individual cases, which lead to conceptual categories that then lend themselves to a theoretical analysis (Charmaz,

2006). While I used grounded theory techniques for my analysis, I did not enter the field without any preconceptions, as is common with this approach. The resilience theory framework informed my interview guides, observation protocols, grounded theory approach and the coding, because I focused on factors during observations and interviews that might contribute to or hinder students' ability to complete school. I paid particular attention to mitigated and unmitigated risk factors and promotive factors. However, I did not use predetermined codes and I followed the iterative process of data collection and data analysis used in grounded theory. I coded field notes each day after I completed observations to help frame what I would observe during my next visit to the school. I coded the first round of student and staff interviews using line-by-line coding and then used focused coding for subsequent rounds allowing me to develop a theory (Charmaz, 2006). I revised the interview protocols (Appendix A) to address gaps in my findings after the first two rounds of interviews, so that I could be sure I addressed gaps in my findings. I wrote analytic memos on my findings after each round of interviews which helped me reflect on what I was learning and note when themes emerged. Many of the analytic memos ultimately became the focus of my findings chapters.

In addition to interviews, I also conducted weekly classroom and school observations to better understand the school context and triangulate the data I gathered in interviews. The observation guide can be found in Appendix B. Observations provide an opportunity for researchers to "listen, watch, and record" what participants do in specific education settings (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 20). I conducted observations three times a week for half of the school day, alternating between observing during the first half of the day and the second half of the day. Most of the school visits were to observe the students I interviewed, while other visits were for general observations around the school. My primary focus was instructional time, but I

also observed transitions between classes and lunch time because those times provided insight on risk or promotive factors that participants identified. I always arrived in class at the beginning of the class period so that it would not be a disruption and usually stayed throughout the entire class period. During observations, I took field notes to help me recall details later as I interpreted and analyzed my findings (Emerson et al., 1995). I typed and coded my handwritten field notes after each day that I completed school observations.

I initially planned for interviews and observations to take place from August 2019 through May 2020, because conducting an ethnography for the entire school year would allow me to observe the school during each term that school was in session. However, the school district closed from mid-March through the end of the school year in response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Due to schools closing, I conducted my final interviews and check-ins with students, the school principal and feeder school guidance counselors via Zoom, a video conference platform. During my last time talking to each student I asked about their future plans and conducted member checking by summarizing my findings and asking students if I accurately captured their experiences.

I received approval from Vanderbilt's Institutional Review Board, the school district's Department of Research, Assessment and Evaluation and the non-traditional school's principal to conduct this study.

Positionality Statement

I identify as Black, as a woman and as queer. Even with the understanding that I am Black, I was occasionally challenged on "how Black" I was by my Black peers. With two military parents, I moved every 2-3 years while growing up—from coast to coast and many places in between. I never stayed in one place long enough to pick up an accent or the regional

slang. I took honors classes. I had white friends. My parents are upper middle class. All of this went against some of my Black peers' ideas of what it means to be Black, but I always knew that how I spoke or dressed did not take away from my Blackness. I knew that being Black was more multifaceted than people typically think. I have family members that live in housing projects and some that live in wealthy suburbs. I have cousins that I played with as children that are in medical school now and some that are in prison. Because I know each of their stories, when people try to understand others' experiences from a deficit-based perspective, it comes across as lacking understanding of the complexity of systems of oppression that people live in. This mindset has impacted my research agenda by causing me to want to push back against deficit-based explanations of academic failures and the dominant narrative that Black students are somehow deficient and we need to find one solution to "fix" them rather than fix the systematic issues and prepare teachers to be more culturally responsive teachers in order to address differences in academic achievement.

I have spent much of my life navigating spaces that were built for heterosexual white males to dominate. The intersection of my identities is not always understood or valued and that shaped how I approached this study. I have experienced what it feels like for people to take only a small piece of my identity or story to arrive at a false assumption or hurtful stereotype, so while this study is about understanding students' persistence to graduation, I also wanted to understand as much of their complex identities as I could. A major piece of the story on students' academic trajectories is left out if voices of the people and communities being studied are not included. This knowledge in addition to my social work training influenced how I navigated relationships with students because I knew the importance of allowing them to open up in their own time, being a regular presence and asking questions in a way that promoted conversation.

My positionality creates a bias in which I naturally tend to look more at systems of oppression based on race, gender and sexual orientation to explain differences in life outcomes than individual agency and autonomy. To address this bias, I interviewed different stakeholders to get multiple perspectives of risk factors and promotive factors. I also highlight students' voices as they discuss their experiences but note the instances where it would be important to do future qualitative studies to further explore and triangulate findings.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL SCHOOL

This chapter describes different aspects of the non-traditional school and the participants from this study. The "Physical Layout of the School" section is a written tour of the school building and how the classrooms are set up. The "Instructional Time" section outlines how different types of classes are conducted. The "Staff Profiles" section gives brief biographies of the principal, counselor and teachers that I interviewed for this study. Finally, the "Student Profiles" section gives background information about the students that I interviewed and observed for this ethnography.

Physical Layout of the School

The non-traditional school is housed in a large red brick building that used to be a traditional high school. While the architecture of the school matches what is expected of any large, older urban high school building, the school was built to house more students than are currently enrolled, so many of the classrooms are larger than what is needed and spaces are used for unique purposes. For example, the principal, both guidance counselors and ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher each have a classroom that has been converted into an office.

The school has one entrance for students and visitors. To gain entry, everyone must be buzzed in by the security guard who sits behind the desk. There is a lobby with old couches and posters welcoming visitors to the school. To the right is a glass window with a ledge that holds the sign in and out sheets for visitors and students who arrive late or leave early. The security guard who buzzes people in sits at a desk on the other side of the glass. The glass also allows people to see into the front office. Once the security guard clears them, she buzzes them in

through a second set of locked doors. Once they walk through these doors, they find themselves in the main hallway of the school that stretches to the left and right. The school building is two stories and the second floor has an identical layout. Across from the front office there are profiles of each student printed on blue paper hanging on the wall. The profiles list which classes the student needs to complete in order to graduate and have stamps next to the classes they have completed so far to mark their progress.

Upon entering the downstairs math class, I noticed that the room was much bigger than needed for the six students who were sitting at desktop computers facing the walls along the perimeter of the room. Over half of the computers do not have students sitting at them. Each computer has yellow headphones and a calculator next to it. The older looking wooden furniture was mostly mismatched. There is very little decoration—the bulletin boards around the room have different color computer paper stapled on them. Each piece of paper has one of the following words and a definition: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The white board has writing from previous lessons on simplifying radicals and finding the slope of lines. The only constant sound is the air conditioner buzzing.

The English classroom is also on the first floor, but much brighter than the math classroom because it faces the side of the building with more sunlight and has the blinds open. The tables in this room are white and each one is surrounded by yellow plastic chairs. Each bulletin board is decorated with bright posters about language arts and grammar. There are two large leafy green plants in the room. The three bookshelves hold mostly modern young adult books like *Hunger Games*, *The Hate U Give* and *I am Malala*. In this classroom, there are

typically a few students on laptops, while a majority of students read hard copies of books. The whiteboard always has guiding questions from the book that students are reading and the date.

The Science classroom, also on the first floor, has science posters hanging on every wall including some about the periodic table, types of metal and parts of an atom. There is a four-foot tall, three-dimensional DNA structure in the front corner. The two large bookshelves hold chemistry and biology textbooks. There is a stack of colorful drawers next to a shelf holding science equipment. This room has the same self-management posters as the math classroom. Students often sit in pairs at the lab tables that face the front of the classroom. They typically have snacks and science equipment on the lab table in front of them.

There is a Spanish classroom on the first floor. The room is fairly bright with light wooden tables that match the wooden floors. There are posters with Spanish translations hanging up and large sheets of paper with timelines of U.S. wars and presidents. There is also a mirror hanging up with a quote underneath that said "Be the change you wish to see in the world." This is a self-paced class, so students are usually on their laptops and the room is normally quiet.

The credit recovery classroom is the final classroom on the first floor. This is the most decorated classroom in the building—there are three large colorful oriental rugs on the hardwood floor and a worn-out patterned couch with different color pillows. There are two large tables in the middle of the classroom with decoration, dictionaries and school supplies, lamps between each computer and a large lamp arcing over the teacher's desk. There is also a guitar, old mailboxes, a few stuffed animals and bird cages as decoration. One book shelf has a lot of decorative masks and another book shelf has classroom sets of different textbooks. The posters hanging around the classroom are mainly pop culture references like *Lost*, *Harry Potter* and *Marvel*. I learned later that these posters are from the teacher's deceased sons' bedroom. Most of

the wall, shelf and table space is decorated but because the room is large, it doesn't feel cluttered. One white board is covered in posters and above the board words have been printed out and colored that reads: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? -- Mary Oliver" the other is covered by the projector screen that always has different quotes like "I think I'll just be happy today" projected onto the wall.

There is also a student lounge and gym/auditorium on the first floor. The student lounge has books, board games, a television and numerous college flags. Right next to the student lounge is a room that looks like it was built to be an auditorium because there is a large stage running along one side of the room, but there is also a basketball goal on the opposite side of the room. Students often play basketball in this room during lunch. These areas are primarily used during lunch time. Students can choose to pick up school lunch in the student lounge or if they are 18 years old, they can leave to get lunch from a nearby fast food restaurant. Students are allowed to eat lunch anywhere in the building--they typically eat in the student lounge, the auditorium/gymnasium, the stairwell, outside on the front steps or upstairs in the math classroom. The principal regularly circulates in these different areas and asks how students are doing during lunch time. Some students spend most of their lunch time scrolling on their phones, while others sit in groups and have conversations.

There is an additional math classroom upstairs. This classroom is the largest classroom in the building. It is the same size as the auditorium on the floor below. Outdated signs on the door signal that it used to be a cafeteria (though it would be a small cafeteria). This room has blue carpet and computers on tables lining the walls. In this classroom, students always sit facing a computer, but sometimes they push the keyboard aside to work on worksheets. There are many

windows and fans. The walls are covered with colorful math posters on various topics. There are also posters with geometric pictures that students drew hanging around the room.

The Government/Economics classroom is the only other classroom upstairs. This classroom is decorated with past presidential candidate campaign posters. There is very little decoration other than the posters and a fake tree in the corner. This classroom does not have any computers. Only half of the lights are on and the window blinds are drawn so it's dim in the room. The teacher often uses the projector to go through PowerPoints. There are 5 circle tables around the room instead of desks. Students often sit in pairs at the round tables.

The principal, guidance counselor and college coach's offices are all upstairs. Each of these offices have a desk for the staff member to sit at, a table with chairs around it for meetings and couches. There is also a classroom that is used as flex space when it is not being used by the district social worker on her weekly visits.

Instructional Time

When I asked one of the teachers the biggest difference between this school and her previous school, she responded "So, you asked me what the difference was? We have the same kids, we just have them in a different setting." She is not only referring to the physical setting, but also the academic setting. This section illustrates how instructional time at the non-traditional school is conducted. Students learn through online classes, hybrid classes and teacher-led classes. Math and Credit Recovery are online, Science is hybrid, and English, Government, Economics and Personal Finance are teacher-led classes. Credit recovery courses are classes that students have attempted, but not received a passing grade

In online classes, like math and credit recovery, students primarily work on computers that line the walls. Students are usually working on different lessons, but are able to call the

teacher over to ask for help as needed. They usually need academic assistance with understanding the material, but occasionally students have technical difficulties that they ask teachers for help with. An example of a teacher helping multiple students at once occurred during a math class observation. A white male student called out to the teacher and said he did not understand how to solve a graphing problem. As she walked to get four different color markers and paper to draw out a diagram that would help answer his question, she stopped to answer a question about greatest common factors for the Black female she was walking past. Once she got the student started on graphing, she turned to the girl on the opposite side of her to answer a question about exponents.

I refer to classrooms where students do both online learning and have teacher-led lessons as hybrid classes. An example to illustrate how instruction works in a hybrid class is one science class period where one student was wearing headphones and working on a Biology lesson on his laptop while the teacher led a lesson in chemistry to the other students. The teacher listed topics that would be on their next test and gave them practice problems to work on in pairs. As the students worked through the practice problems, the teacher would circulate to make sure the student who was working on the computer also did not have any questions.

Finally, the non-traditional school also has teacher-led classes. An example of a teacher led class is Government. During one class period, the teacher told students that they would be reviewing their notes from the last class period and then taking a quiz. They reviewed the Declaration of Independence together and then took their quiz. After collecting the quizzes, the teacher pulled up a PowerPoint to begin the day's lesson. The teacher encouraged classroom conversations on each slide.

Staff Profiles

For this study, I interviewed staff members at the non-traditional school to better understand how they seek to shape the culture, structure and practices of the school. I included the principal and guidance counselor because these two staff members would have a unique perspective on how the school is designed and resources that students are offered given their job descriptions. I recruited teachers based on maximum variation sampling. I aimed to have teachers that taught online, hybrid and teacher-led classes and variation in race, gender, and number of years teaching. The only exclusion criteria were if teachers had not taught in another school prior to the non-traditional school as they would not have been able to provide answers to the comparison questions in the interview guide. I observed classrooms for two weeks before recruiting teachers so that I could include teachers who vary on teaching styles and student interactions. In their interviews I asked about their professional backgrounds to learn about their experience teaching, counseling or leading in different settings. I interviewed the principal (pseudonym Mrs. Patterson), guidance counselor (pseudonym Ms. Walton), Math teacher (pseudonym Dr. Edwards), English teacher (pseudonym Mrs. Jeffrey), and Social Studies teacher (pseudonym Mr. Jackson). I also include observations of staff members that I did not interview. Those participants are the Science teacher (pseudonym Mrs. Booker), security guard (pseudonym Mrs. Gills) and graduation coach (pseudonym Mrs. Branch). Finally, I interviewed two school counselors from feeder schools (pseudonyms Ms. Curtis and Mrs. Tavern). The list of participants and their demographics can be found in Appendix C.

The principal, Mrs. Patterson, is a tall white woman who is usually walking around the school interacting with teachers and students or doing classroom observations. When she is not walking around, she can usually be found in an upstairs classroom that has been converted into her office. She has been in education for 16 years. She was a middle school teacher and mentor

teacher, a high school literacy coach and assistant principal at a traditional high school prior to becoming the principal of the non-traditional school. At the time of the study, it was her second year as principal. She has a degree in administration and supervision, but said she did not seek out leadership roles. Instead, she was invited to apply for the assistant principal and principal positions. While the needs of the students at the non-traditional school are not more significant than students at other schools, she said they just have a higher concentration of kids that have significant needs for support and intervention. One of the things she is most proud of at the school is the "overwhelming sense of empathy that drives most of the teachers . . . and we promise students that we are going to do whatever (they) need to get (them) across the stage." This empathy is a trait she looks for when interviewing teachers. When interviewing teachers, she asks them to talk about a difficult student and how they experienced success with him or her. If they are not able to name a student and express how they supported them through a difficult time, she is hesitant about hiring them. When addressing discipline issues, she relies on her restorative practices training to try to understand why an issue is arising and how to find a solution. Her primary goal is always to keep students in school. She also does not suspend students for chronic absenteeism as many of the large, traditional schools do. Instead, she puts them on an attendance plan and addresses attendance concerns on a one-on-one basis.

Ms. Walton is an older white woman who usually has her hair pulled back in a ponytail. She regularly walks around the building, but when she is not searching for a student, she can be found in the front office or in the upstairs classroom that has been converted into her office. She was an English teacher for 16 years and has been a guidance counselor for 20 years. She has worked at the non-traditional school for seven years. She chose to go back to school for her Master's in counseling because she decided she did not want to spend the rest of her career in the

classroom, but did not want to work towards becoming a principal because she did not like the politics of being in that role. While she was a teacher, a student disclosed to her that she had been sexually assaulted and Ms. Walton felt helpless in how she was able to respond to this student and other students who had similar experiences. At the non-traditional school, she said she focuses primarily on acceptance and understanding that many of their students have "been damaged not only in their personal lives, but in their academic lives in some way." She spends time figuring out what the damage is and how to repair it. Because the non-traditional school does not have as big of a support staff as traditional schools, she said she has more responsibilities than she ever had at her previous schools. In addition to counseling students, she screens students for enrollment, inputs grades, plans for standardized tests, creates student schedules, communicates with teachers about student progress and plans school events. She said communicating with teachers is particularly important in helping keep teachers from becoming frustrated, because she is able to disclose things they need to know pertaining to the students' classroom success. She said she is more aware of students needs and better able to determine who needs crisis counseling in the smaller environment since she has less than 100 students, whereas in her previous school she had approximately 300 students. She also helps address attendance concerns by helping find ways to build student-teacher relationships. Students are also able to ask to come talk to her and teachers typically send the student without any questions.

Dr. Edwards is a short Black woman who is usually wearing dark purple rimmed glasses. She taught math for 12 years in a traditional high school prior to coming to the non-traditional school. This is her second year teaching at the non-traditional school. She was motivated to apply because her passion while teaching had always been helping and pushing students who were under-credited and watching them succeed. She worked with the credit recovery teacher to

help students who were behind in credits by sending out letters that included transcript details and creating a team composed of themselves, the executive principal, and the counselors to start new retention initiatives. She became the Dean of Instruction at that school and focused on systems to improve the graduation rate. With her passion towards helping students graduate, she felt like the non-traditional school would be a good fit. Students use online learning in her class and she walks around to answer questions as needed. She believes the small size of the classrooms makes the biggest difference because she is able to get to know and motivate students. She has some autonomy in how her lessons are taught. She chooses to use some materials from the previous math teacher, but redesigns some lessons or adds supplements to the lessons. Students are given assessments to determine their level of ability, so they can receive credit for skills they have already mastered. If many students stumble over the same part of an online assessment, she sometimes opts to give them a written assessment instead to see if presenting the material in a different way will be beneficial to students. She tries to make sure students do not stay stuck in the same place for too long, because then she said they often lose hope and motivation. Student learning is measured in her classroom through section assessments and a final exam. She said that even though students are working on computers in this setting, they are learning more and doing more work, because they are in the classroom for a concentrated amount of time and she is able to give individualized instruction.

Mrs. Jeffrey is a middle aged white and Chinese woman with a short, cropped haircut. She taught English for two years in another state before her wife's job caused them to relocate. She was burned out from teaching in her previous district which she said was "very conservative, Christian, Republican, probably 97% white," so when they first moved, she worked at a Whole Foods grocery store. She realized that teaching was her passion and that she just needed a

different environment, so she applied to the non-traditional school and has been teaching there for four years. She said the two biggest differences she has experienced while teaching at the larger, traditional school and the non-traditional school are meeting each students' academic needs and having an opportunity to build relationships with students. In the traditional school, she said she always had to "teach to the middle," so that left students who were advanced bored, but some students were still barely able to keep up. She is intentional about building relationships with students and gets to know them through doing ice breakers on the first day of school, giving them her cell phone number and having them write a personal essay. Students often come to her for academic, professional and personal advice. Mrs. Jeffrey also uses lessons to connect to students, because while she has to meet state standards, she is "given far more freedom" in deciding how to cover the standards. For example, the personal essay that students write is a way to gauge their writing ability and learn about students as individuals. She also chooses "high interest urban books" that she has found some of her students are able to relate to and then they discuss the books on both a literary and personal level. Students also have a writing element that culminates into a larger project at the end of each term. Their learning is assessed through daily assignments including text relevant questions and four longer writing assignments. One challenge that she faces while working with students at the non-traditional school is "being empathetic, but not letting it eat her up." She said she constantly thinks about white privilege and "how unfair the playing field is while trying to find ways to be an advocate." She defined her classroom management style as "very loose," saying that "unless you are harming yourself or someone else, probably everything is okay."

Mr. Jackson is a young white and Latino man who usually wears oversized, untucked button downs. He taught English at a large, traditional high school in the district for one year

prior to coming to the non-traditional school. He was in Teach for America, but left because that program did not allow him to switch schools, which he wanted to do. The year of the study was his first year at the non-traditional school and he taught Economics and Government. He was a political science major in college and always wanted to teach these subjects, but his previous school had a shortage of teachers so they placed him where he was needed. He applied for History and Government teaching positions at three different schools and the non-traditional school was where he landed the job. He said that because he knows these subjects better and the principal at the non-traditional school encourages autonomy, he can find creative ways of teaching and engaging with students. He lectures some, but also relies on debates and discussions to teach the material. He gives students a quiz every day to test mastery of topics and often includes information from past lessons to ensure they are retaining information. Mr. Jackson also said that his previous school had a lot of behavioral issues that negatively impacted the overall culture of the school and academics. He said many of the students that he taught or knew at his previous school actually attend the non-traditional school now and their behavior seems to have improved, which he attributes to the difference in environment. He enjoys teaching at this school, because "the culture is more conducive to learning . . . students are engaged and feed off each other's energy and enthusiasm." Early in the school year, he built in conversations to get to know students' personalities and help them feel comfortable talking to him and as the year went on, some students have started coming to class early or staying afterwards to talk to him. He said students have asked him for advice on how to address different situations in their lives from past sexual assault, a court case with their child's father or their experience with homelessness. He said he does not have many discipline issues in the classroom, so his classroom management mainly relies on redirecting students and asking them to stay focused on work if they get off

track. He designs each lesson to be engaging, but if he notices a student who is not engaged, he will ask them for examples or their opinion to bring them into the conversation.

Student Profiles

This section includes information on the six students that I interviewed and focused on during observations. Students were eligible for this study if they were at least 18 years old and needed enough credits to be enrolled for most of the school year. Students who were younger than 18 were not included because the principal advised me that obtaining consent forms from parents could be difficult given students' different living situations. I only included students who would be enrolled in the non-traditional school for most of the school year so that I could interview and observe over the course of the school year. I asked the principal for a list of students who would be a good fit for the study based on age and number of credits remaining. I conducted classroom observations for approximately one month before I began student interviews. During this time, I learned student names and was able to match students with the list of eligible students the principal provided. I recruited students based on maximum variation sampling. I wanted to be sure I had a fairly even mix of students based on race and gender expression. I was also sure to have students with different personalities—some who were outgoing, a few who were more reserved, some who interacted mostly with teachers and others that interacted mostly with peers. The pseudonyms for students included in this study are: Damion, Amari, Alex, Chase, Jaylen, and Angel. The list of participants and their demographics can be found in Appendix C. Damion, Amari, Alex and Chase each needed eight credits to graduate when they enrolled in the non-traditional school in August 2019. Jaylen needed six credits and enrolled in October 2019. Angel needed 10 credits and enrolled in March 2019 (the semester before this study began). She was able to transfer with more missing credits than the

non-traditional school typically accepts due to extenuating circumstances. At the beginning of the study, all of the students are 18 years old, except Alex who is 19 years old.

Damion is a 6'1" lean, muscular Black boy. He is often wearing a t-shirt or hoodie with the name of a boxing gym written across the top or wearing a matching fitted sweat suit. Prior to the non-traditional school, he attended a charter school that has recently been placed on academic probation. He fell behind in credits at the charter school because he said "the school environment was just too big and the school was too small for the number of kids that were at the school, so it was hard for (him) to focus." He did not really mind his grades falling, because his goal was just to complete his credits to earn his high school diploma. He is a boxer. As a kid, he began training with his dad who has won a Golden Gloves competition and he now trains at a local boxing gym. His parents always encouraged him to focus more on his academics, but he prioritized training and competing. Their message eventually got through and he realized that it would be beneficial to go to college and get a business degree so that he can either know how to manage and invest the money that he wins from boxing or if he gets injured, he would have a degree and be able to get a job to support a wife and kids in the future. With this realization, he decided to focus more on academics and knew that to get into college he would need to re-take some of his classes and do well in his remaining classes. He was not confident that he would be able to reach those goals at the charter school, so his mom encouraged him to apply to the non-traditional school. He usually hung out with a small group of boys during lunch time. During online class time, he always had on a pair of headphones while he did his work and occasionally a student sitting near him would start talking to him. If he started talking, he would usually stay off-task for a few minutes, but for the most part he stayed focused on his work. I have observed different instances where an entire section of students near him were off-task and having a

relatively loud conversation. but he kept his headphones on and continued working. He applied to college with a representative that visits the non-traditional school and would like to earn a college degree in business.

Amari is a short, heavyset Black girl who is often quiet and sitting by herself. She attended three high schools before the non-traditional school: a "no excuses" charter school for her ninth and tenth grade year, then a large, traditional high school her junior year, followed by the transitional school that often precedes enrollment in the non-traditional school. She fell behind in credits at the no-excuses charter school she attended because she was often suspended for minor infractions like talking in class. She explains that they were expected to be silent for a majority of the day, but she used to be outgoing and felt "that's a lot of pressure on a child. Making a child someone they're not." Her mom transferred her to a traditional high school, because she did not think the charter school was a good fit culture-wise for Amari. She enjoyed the traditional high school she attended afterwards, but was already too far behind in credits and thus would not have graduated on time. She planned on transferring to the non-traditional school, but needed to be within the eight-credit limit needed to be eligible, so she attended the transitional school to complete a few of her credits and then transferred to the non-traditional school. She has adjusted to the nontraditional school, but is working on becoming herself again. She said she just quit talking but is "trying to break (herself) out of that, talk to more people." She is willing to engage in conversations, giving thorough answers to interview questions or initiating conversations about current events with me. Amari also has two children--a one-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy. She said that did not impact her academics, because while she was on bedrest, a teacher from the charter school would come to her house after school and teach her the material and make sure she stayed caught up. Her mom watches her two children while

Amari and her two younger brothers go to school and then when she gets out of school, she watches her children and younger brother until her grandma gets off work. When her grandma gets home, her grandma watches the two babies and younger brothers while Amari goes to work at Pizza Hut. After she graduates, she plans on going to a community college for two years and then transferring to a four-year college to complete her degree in early childhood development.

Alex is a short, skinny white boy who is usually wearing an oversized hoodie and glasses and typically walking around or sitting in class by himself. He attended a private Christian school freshman through the beginning of junior year and then enrolled in an online school for the remainder of his junior year. His credits from the online school are not reflected on his record because he was not enrolled for the entire year and was unable to complete the work needed to earn the credits. He said he enrolled in the online school because he didn't get along well with students at the private school because he was "very socially awkward" and "struggled with social anxiety." He said he only had about three real friends over the years and the few others that he interacted with were extensions of those friends. Alex's dad struggled with a health condition for 11 years, but during his junior year, while enrolled in the online school, the illness got worse. During this year, Alex's mom also divorced his dad and moved to another state, so he became the caretaker for his dad. His dad was not able to walk very well on his own, so the caretaking proved to be demanding. Alex stopped working on his online school work for approximately a year, but after a year of caretaking, Alex's father passed away. Alex moved in with his neighbors and chose to enroll at the non-traditional school because he didn't want to "sit in school until (he) was 22 or something trying to earn all of (his) credits." He knew he wanted to get a diploma, rather than a GED, because there is a pay gap, jobs do not always look favorably at GEDs and he was not sure he would be eligible for all of the scholarships he wanted to apply for without a

diploma. He initially only enrolled at the non-traditional school with the hope of graduating, but he said the school has turned out to be more fun and engaging than he expected it to be. He points to being able to play concerts on his guitar during lunch, pajama day and special treats like chocolate chip pancakes as things that make the school fun. When he was not playing his guitar during lunch, he usually ate lunch in the guidance counselor's room. He described the students at the non-traditional school as kind. He also works part time at Captain D's, a fast food restaurant. After graduating, he plans on attending a flagship university in his home state using a state scholarship to study architecture.

Chase is an average height, slim white boy. He is usually seen walking around school in sagging skinny jeans, sneakers and a hat. He almost always had a group of people around him that he was cracking jokes with. He was originally born in Germany, but his parents adopted him as a baby and he has been living in the same city since coming to the United States. Chase attended the same private Christian school as Alex did in middle school, then went to a large traditional school in the district freshman through half of junior year before going to the transitional school that prepares students for the nontraditional school. During his freshman year he played on the junior varsity football team, but he was arrested (off campus) and spent the night in solitary confinement at a juvenile detention center. When he went to court, the judge ended up letting him off with a warning, but he was kicked off the team. During those years, Chase said he was more focused on popularity than academics and also got into a lot of fights at school. He was ultimately expelled for fighting. He realized after his sophomore year "I'm probably going to have to drop out to get a GED or go to an adult school, but then it kind of hit me that if I just work and stay focused, stay on track, that I can achieve anything." He decided to come to the non-traditional school so he could focus more on academics and has found it easier

to follow the school rules in this environment. He said he does not know of a fight happening since the school opened and that all of the students there are focused on academics and graduating, so it is easier for him to also focus on academics. He also did not feel embarrassed to ask questions in his classes. He wants to use a two-year scholarship provided by the state to get his Associate's degree and then plans on joining the Navy and entering the medical field. He enjoyed the non-traditional school and convinced many of his friends from the traditional high school to attend so they "can get focused and graduate."

Jaylen is a tall, broad Black boy who is usually wearing jeans, a sweater or letterman and a beanie. He is social and often near his friends, most of whom are girls. He attended a large traditional high school for three years before transferring to the non-traditional school. He was suspended twice back to back at the traditional school which caused him to miss exams and ultimately fail two courses. He would have had to attend summer school to make those credits up, so instead opted to apply for the non-traditional school. Jaylen's first suspension was for smelling like marijuana. His hands were swabbed and he had to take a drug test, both of which came back negative for marijuana. However, the school decided to suspend him for suspicion of smoking marijuana and he was ordered to take a drug class. The day he came back from that five-day suspension, he was standing near a fight that broke out. He was suspended for another five days for not breaking up the fight. His mother tried to appeal both of the suspensions, but the school directed her to the school board where the cases were pushed from person to person. She was not able to get in contact with someone who could help reverse the decision as he missed school for those ten days. Prior to these suspensions, Jaylen had never been suspended. He said, "I don't necessarily want to say they want to kick out Black students, but I saw that it was heavier punishments for something that the Black students did than when white students did.

These white students, they jumped a kid and they got to come back after a two-day suspension. These black kids, they didn't jump. It was just four kids fighting—like two and two—and they got expelled." His attendance was always good at his previous school—only missing a day when he was sick, but since attending the non-traditional school, he has missed three days because he was not able to find a ride. He always planned on graduating from high school, but never felt particularly attached to school. He went because that was what was expected of him and received average grades. Jaylen plans on attending a two-year college using a state scholarship, transferring to a four-year college to complete his Bachelor's and then joining the National Guard.

Angel is a short, skinny Latinx who has a short haircut and is often wearing an oversized button down and baggy pants. She attended one large traditional high school before transferring to the non-traditional school. She said she always had good grades before attending the traditional high school, but her grades dropped because she got in school and out of school suspensions too often. She got suspended for a number of different reasons, but largely points towards her mental health and discrimination from teachers based on her sexual orientation as reasons that she was suspended. She said she is learning to cope with anxiety, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Aside from being suspended many times, she said the school was too loud and there were too many people, so her anxiety would sometimes trigger a panic attack. She was placed on a 504 plan (a plan that ensures students who have disabilities receive the necessary accommodations) her junior year, but is frustrated because she said she has struggled with school her whole life and was just recently given this plan after falling behind in credits. She worked at two different fast food restaurants while she was attending the traditional high school and attempting to balance those responsibilities also contributed to her falling behind

in credits. A month after arriving at the non-traditional school, the school had a random search and they found a lighter and scale in her backpack. They confiscated both pieces of drug paraphernalia, but she was not suspended. Angel identifies as a lesbian and her mother is not accepting of her sexuality which causes conflict between the two of them. She often aims to get home around midnight after her mother is asleep or she sometimes chooses to spend the night at her sister's house to avoid having to see her mom. She said the non-traditional school made her like school for the first time in her life, because "it doesn't feel like jail" and is not so crowded. She plans on studying audio engineering after graduating from high school, because she said listening to, writing and producing music is the only time she "can be still." She visits a sound engineering college regularly to work on music with people who currently attend. She loves anything from classical music to indie rock and plays numerous instruments—her favorite is the piano. The saxophone and drums are her second and third favorites.

CHAPTER 5

SCHOOL CULTURE

Students and staff pointed to the positive and motivating school culture as one of the most transformative differences in students' persistence to graduation. This section discusses ways that students perceive the positive school culture and ways that teachers and staff intentionally build a positive school culture. Schools can be promotive factors when they have a positive climate and orderly environment expectations (Wang & Gordon, 2012). Students typically described an encouraging social climate, which I discuss in the section titled "Culture of Motivation." Students also pointed towards positive relationships with other students as a reason they feel comfortable at school and motivated to achieve. I discuss this in the section titled "Community of Support." Finally, through staff interviews and classroom observations, I noticed that the norm is for students to move around the classroom, call out for help and even leave the classroom as needed. I discuss the freedom that students are given in the non-traditional school in the section titled "Encouraging Individuality." In the "Adaptable Accountability" section, I discuss how teachers and staff use their discretion when responding to discipline issues and how the discipline policies contribute to holding students accountable, while maintaining a positive school culture. Together, the culture of motivation, community of support, encouragement of individual expression and adaptable accountability create a school culture that is vastly different from how most students and teachers described their previous schooling experiences in large traditional schools.

Culture of Motivation

Students and staff often described the school culture as open and accepting of students from all different backgrounds. There is very little conflict between students or between students and their teachers. The social climate is also impacted by students creating supportive friendships. Finally, some teachers and students refer to the school culture, which helps students unlearn anti-academic norms, as a culture of motivation. These factors that build a positive school culture allow the school to serve as a promotive factor that mitigates risk factors.

Perception of Positive Climate

Students often mentioned the difference in the social climate at their previous school and the non-traditional school. Students often used the term "drama" to describe conflicts or the climate of their previous schools. They compared students having drama at their previous school and students getting along well at the non-traditional school when asked what some of the differences between their previous school and the non-traditional school are. Ms. Walton, the guidance counselor, said:

> I think acceptance is really the biggest thing we do. Because these kids, a lot of them have been damaged not only in their personal lives, but in their academic lives in some way. I think larger schools are kind of a playground for bullying, not to use, overuse that term because I think it is sometimes, but teenagers can be very cruel and in a large environment, it is hard to keep a finger on that.

She said the school, especially herself as the guidance counselor, works hard to understand where the "damage" has occurred and how to repair it. One way that the non-traditional school tries to prevent conflict amongst students is by collecting their phones when they come into the building so they are not able to be on social media, which Ms. Walton noted is a common source of arguments. Ms. Walton said occasionally small conflicts that began outside of school make

their way to school. Mrs. Jeffrey, the teacher that describes her classroom management style as "loose," recalled one time when a female and male student were not getting along on the first day and asked her if they could step in the hall to talk about it. Mrs. Patterson, the principal, happened to be nearby, so Mrs. Jeffrey asked her to mediate the conversation while she continued leading the class. They had their conversation and then came back to the classroom and the conflict had been resolved.

Students also noted the difference in the intentional effort that teachers put forth. Chase, the student who was suspended for play fighting, mentioned that the overall positive climate of the non-traditional school pushes students towards success. He expressed this by saying:

> Not a lot of people are actually getting into any trouble. There's never been a fight here since the school was opened up in 2009. Never been a fight 'cause everybody's working and so focused on trying to achieve better academic progress so they can get their GPA higher and get to a better college or like prepare for life. That's what this school is for.

Chase also shared these norms with new students. For example, after winter vacation, there was an influx of new students. Before class got started one day, he was talking to two of the new students that had transferred from his previous school. He explained to them how well people get along and told them it's hard to explain the difference, but he thought they would really enjoy the non-traditional school. Chase was popular, outgoing and a leader in his previous school and the non-traditional school, but those traits manifested in different actions in the different school settings. In the school where the norm was to skip class and play fight, he seemed to initiate many of those actions, but when in a school that pushed academic achievement, he served as an unofficial ambassador for new students.

Similarly, Jaylen, the student who was suspended twice back-to-back, found the school climate to be positive and explained it by saying:

> I believe that most of the teachers who would work (at the traditional school) are there for the money and not there for the students. That's what I get the feel of. But here, I feel like these teachers don't even care about the paycheck. That their actual goal is wanting to help us have a better life in the future for ourselves and try and make it better.

While I will not speculate about what motivated Jaylen's former teachers in their profession based on this single quote, this quote is important, because it is Jaylen's perception of teacher motivation and that impacted his approach to school. He went on to explain that because he did not believe teachers really cared to be in the school, Jaylen never felt especially motivated to push himself in school. The students' perception that the non-traditional school has a positive climate is a promotive factor that leads to the positive outcome: student engagement.

Supportive Peer Relationships

Through observations, I noticed that most students had friendly interactions with each other and were usually excited to see each other. Some students, like Alex, the one who was a caretaker for his dad, are quieter, but still seemed comfortable in the setting and interacting with a few students. Alex didn't get along well with students at his previous school, because he said he is socially awkward and struggles with social anxiety. Even when he would try to interact with other students, he said they just wouldn't click. He had three friends that he really got along well with, but all of the people he interacted with were just friends of those friends. Because they "were the party type" and he preferred playing video games, Alex did not fit into the social cliques. Although he did not attend the non-traditional school for a change in social setting, he said he was pleasantly surprised to find that it was welcoming and that it had been uncomfortable

for him to attend a school with so many people and not feel like he could talk to any of them. He said it's easier to relate and interact with other students at the non-traditional school. He and Chase attended the same school in the past and he explained,

> I don't know whether it's because of what people had to go through to get here makes them more mature, or if it's because most people here just have a set goal. The people here are more tolerable than they were at (his private school). (Chase) agrees that the people at (private school) just weren't that great compared to people here.

Chase echoed this sentiment in an interview by saying at his previous traditional school, students were often worried about feeling judged and fitting in, but "Here it doesn't matter what you are or how you are, how you talk . . . you fit in perfectly with everybody 'cause nobody's got problems with anybody here. Everyone is focused on trying to graduate." Each student that I interviewed expressed in some way that they feel comfortable showing up to school being themselves without fear of being bullied and that they feel comfortable getting to know other students.

Amari, the student who is working on breaking out of the habit of being silent, said that this environment helps her be more social. She was naturally outgoing and talkative when she was younger, but after being reprimanded many times over the years at her charter and traditional schools for talking in class, she "just quit talking." She described this silencing as having to mature early. She said she now actively works opening up and talking to more people. During lunch time, she often had extensive conversations with me ranging from her best friend's relationship problems to the latest news story she watched about a kidnapping. She also sometimes laughed and talked with a small group of friends in the stairwell or in the student lounge during lunch.

The social setting is also fitting for students who do not want to engage in conversation as much. Students are able to keep to themselves without becoming a target for bullying or feeling out of place. Angel preferred the social setting in the smaller school setting, because it helped her manage her mental health. She said, “In (my previous school), people were too loud for me because of my anxiety, so I was very anti-(social). I would not talk. But then I would have a huge a** panic attack, because there were so many people.” The smaller class sizes and lower noise levels helped her feel more comfortable in the non-traditional school setting. In the classrooms where students take online classes, the only constant noise is usually the buzz of the air conditioner. If Angel did choose to engage in conversation, it was usually just with one person sitting at the computer next to her. During lunch, she often ate in the upstairs math classroom with a small group of her friends. Also, with the two-and-a-half-hour class blocks, the only transition times are before and after lunch, so she did not have to be surrounded by a lot of noise and movement throughout the day like she did in her previous school where she had five different transition times throughout the day. She said that she feels more at ease at this school which helps her focus on her school work.

The lack of time for social interactions does seem to be challenging for some students who are naturally more talkative. For example, during one observation, about an hour into class, a male student started trying to distract a female student that he was sitting next to. He leaned towards her and put his hand on the back of her chair. The teacher told him to stop touching her and focus on his work. He seemed to want attention, because he then started asking the teacher questions that she said he already knew the answer to. He grumbled that he doesn’t like math and she responded with “You’re holding yourself back. You can do it! Even if you don’t like it.” He continued fidgeting in his seat. A few minutes later he poked the girl sitting next to him on her

side. A few moments later he squeezed her side and kicked the wheels of her chair so she rolled a few inches over. She rolled herself back and continued to ignore him. The teacher could not see this interaction from where she is sitting helping another student. Approximately 10 minutes later, the girl started talking to him. While this was not the norm, students who are not socially engaged enough have managed to get their peers off track because they seem to need a social outlet. I highlight this example to show that while the peer relationships tend to be positive, the social setting that is created by having longer class periods and fewer times to socialize do not seem to work as well for students who are easily distracted or more talkative.

Relearning Academic Norms

Students expressed feeling less pressure to conform to anti-school norms, because the norms at the non-traditional school are different. Mr. Jackson, the Government and U.S. History teacher, also noticed this shift in focus on academics, saying, "I have many of the same students (from the previous school), but here they definitely act different because of the culture. It's a very, very different classroom culture for sure." He said in one single class he might have students from a private school and a low-performing public school or students that have always been in honors classes working alongside students who previously were not motivated to graduate, but overall students seemed to conform to the dominant culture which Mr. Jackson describes as a culture of motivation. The principal said that some students are highly motivated when they arrive, while others become more motivated after experiencing some success at the non-traditional school. The principal gave an example of a student whose previous counselor convinced her to come to the non-traditional school "as a last-ditch effort." That student cursed at Mrs. Patterson on her first day, but as the student started experiencing success, her attitude

completely changed. The students started motivating her peers and would even remind them to follow different school rules.

Many students said that it was the norm to misbehave at schools they attended prior to transferring, whether that was skipping class, fighting or doing drugs. During a lunch observation, I sat with a group of girls who talked about their previous school and one student said her Lyft would drop her off near the football field where she would meet up with friends to smoke marijuana in the morning. Afterwards, they would go buy snacks at the corner store before eventually going to class. She said they always showed up late and high and the school never said anything to them about it. Chase said there were similar countercultural norms at his previous, traditional high school. He said there were "like 10 fights in the first week of school." Fights would occur in the bathroom, locker room and outside and he said sometimes teachers and staff did not even know the fight occurred. He said he was also more interested in popularity than academic progress, so sometimes he would also fight for fun. Amari, the student who transferred from the "no-excuses" charter school to the large traditional school, said that at her traditional school, "they didn't really care what kids was doing. You'd be in a class, kids would just be sitting on their phone all day instead of doing they work, skipping class, walking around the hallways." These students' perception that staff did not care about their whereabouts and would not enforce rules influenced their approach to school, because they chose not to engage as much academically and felt free to break rules. They each stated that the norms are different in the non-traditional school because there are only two hallways, so people can always see where you are and with small class sizes, teachers are able to notice when students are missing. The lack of conflicts between students also leads to fewer altercations.

Another norm that is different in the non-traditional school is that students feel comfortable asking questions and supporting each other's academic achievements. Chase, the student who play fought a lot, and Damion, the student who focused more on boxing than academics, stated that at their previous schools they would sometimes be embarrassed to ask questions, because it wasn't cool to ask the teacher questions. Chase compared the school culture at the non-traditional school by saying: "It's not as easy to actually get the help you need (at the traditional school). You too worried about feeling judged by other people. You're worried about fitting in." Chase said he would refrain from asking his teachers questions, because it was not the cool thing to do.

Similarly, Damion said in his previous school, "If you had enough courage to ask the question, then you would get to talk. But a lot of students didn't really want to ask for questions because you're kind of more afraid of what other people are going to say." The culture at the non-traditional school, however, is that students regularly call the teacher over for help. Damion said he now asks for help when he needs it and, "With the actual help of an actual teacher and not having to feel like you're going to be judged or anything, you can get so much more achieved and you can work so much harder and get stuff done easier." I also observed him call the teacher over for help during numerous classroom observations.

Students even sometimes encourage their peers to ask questions when they can tell they are confused on a topic. During a science classroom observation, for example, Mrs. Booker was leading the class in reviewing a worksheet that students had completed as individuals. A Black female student named Kiara kept asking other students if they understood each question before they moved on as a group. Another Black female student who had recently enrolled in the non-traditional school started to ask a question and then stopped. The teacher asked her what her

question was, but the student said, “Nothing, never mind.” The student still looked like she did not understand and the teacher paused for a while, but the student did not finish her question. The teacher was about to move on and Kiara interjected with “Yes, but she had a question though,” and encouraged the girl to ask her question. The student then explained she was having trouble understanding how to find the molar mass and the teacher revisited the formula that was written on the board to explain it to her. These types of interactions were important because students were able to get academic assistance and new students got acclimated to the norms of the non-traditional school: it is acceptable to ask questions and teachers will take the time to address questions.

Students also celebrate each other’s academic achievements, which Chase, Damion and Jaylen said was not that case at their previous schools. An example of students celebrating each other’s success was during math class one day, a female student walked in smiling and a group of Black female students asked her what she was doing in that classroom, because she is normally in a different class at this time. She said she finished science credit and showed them the stamp on her blue progress card that hangs outside of the main office. Angel asked, “You finished? You got your stamp?!” The other student said yes and three girls gave her a high five. A similar instance happened in science class one day towards the end of a term when a Black male student confirmed with the teacher, Mrs. Booker, that he had completed all of his requirements, left to go to the office and came back into the room wearing a cap and gown. He asked the class how he looked. Everyone in the classroom cheered for him while he smiled and turned in a circle to show off the cap and gown. I learned that the school has a mid-year graduation ceremony and that he had just picked up his cap and gown. There were numerous instances of this throughout the school year when students received stamps on the blue progress

cards indicating that they had earned the credit. They would show other students and teachers and regularly be met with high-fives, hugs and cheers. In Science class one day, a student who only had one credit left to graduate exclaimed, “I’m fed up with all this school work! I’m ready to graduate.” Amari told her, “I’m so proud of y’all! Y’all my motivation!” The first girl said she’d never heard anything like that and started smiling. Amari said, “I’m serious. Seeing you all about to graduate lets me know that I can do it too.” The positive and pro-academic school climate serves as a promotive factor by building students’ confidence in asking for help when needed and encourages students to stay motivated through graduation.

Community of Support

There are many intentional ways that staff at the non-traditional school try to reach students on a personal level in order to build positive relationships with students. Teachers and staff often ask students about themselves through their initial interviews and classwork, use the curriculum to get to know students, create an open and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students and provide food for students. Students also mentioned that the positive relationships with teachers help them feel comfortable asking questions in the classroom and going to teachers when they need help with out-of-school factors. Having a supportive, encouraging relationship with an adult is a promotive factor that can counteract the effects of risk factors (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Students also expressed having improved attendance due to positive student-teacher relationships and demonstrated a willingness to approach teachers for help.

Nurturing Environment

Positive student-teacher relationships are an important component of school culture and serve as a promotive factor that helps keep students engaged and willing to ask for help as

needed. Ms. Walton, the guidance counselor, said relationships are the only thing that truly gets students to school. She encourages teachers to build relationships with students "because that connection they make in the classroom and on a personal level is what our kids have to have or we lose them." Teachers said that they also value these relationships and strive to build them. Dr. Edwards, the math teacher, said, "With the smallness, it is intimate, you can't help but know what is going on with them. There's always time." She said she doesn't know what makes her approachable, but at this school and her previous school, students often come to her to discuss their personal problems. She is an older woman and often refers to students as "Baby" instead of their name and gently redirects them when they are off-task. She said she taught at her previous school for a long time and because she often taught siblings and cousins of former students, her reputation had already been built. At the non-traditional school, she focuses on building rapport with students because she believes that it is a necessary foundation for teaching.

Jaylen, the student who was suspended twice in a row, said that he feels like staff at the non-traditional school started getting to know him the very first time they met him during the interview. He said:

> The interview was a lot of fun, because they took the time to actually get to know more about you than other schools really do. Other schools just give you a little piece of paper to write about yourself. Teachers never see that again. Here, the teachers take the time to get to know you and what your strengths and weaknesses are, and that's the reason that I really like it here. Because they figured out where I'm struggling and where I can improve.

Jaylen said that this let him know from the outset that he could talk to the staff at the school and they would be interested and willing to listen. This experience was vastly different from his

previous school, where even when he fought to try to tell his side of the story with both suspensions, the administration would not listen.

Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher who tries to get to know students through the curriculum, said that she tries to get to know students early on by having them write a personal essay on the first day of class. She also gives them her cell phone number and tells students she goes to bed around 9:00 p.m., but if they text her later than that, she will always respond the following day. She gets texts letting her know what is going on in their life or any obstacles that are keeping them from being successful academically. She chooses to share details about her own life (where she is from, hobbies and interesting facts) and she thinks that it is because of her openness that they feel safe to share.

Dr. Edwards said students share personal information often, even when she does not expect it. She said she goes to the same church as one of her students and was asking the student about her progress.

> (The student) said that her previous school wouldn't let her take English I and I said, "That ain't true." She done missed a year of school, you know, there's some more to the story. I kept asking her questions. Wasn't true. The child had lied. She quickly told me everything and then she starts telling me about being bullied and the next thing I know, she's suicidal and asks me not to tell her momma and I'm like, lord, how did this happen, I came to worship, you know?

Dr. Edwards failed out of college when she was younger and worked in customer service before going back to college and eventually going on to earn her doctorate of education. She jokingly said, "Maybe the key is they can smell my life's disappointment and that makes me approachable." She grew up and went to college in the same city that the non-traditional school

is in, so she said she thinks students reach out to her because she is able to relate to some of the things they are facing.

Teachers also regularly joke with and motivate students. In science class, the teacher managed to do both in a single conversation. A group of girls were talking about being ready to graduate and the teacher joined in the conversation and said she is proud of them. They told her not to cry at their graduation, but the teacher said she can't make any promises. They said "Yeah, we know. We know you!" The teacher then joked with the student about how crying will ruin her fake eyelashes, which is a running joke because the student always talks about having fake eyelashes. They laughed together. The teacher jokingly said "I'm going to see what I can do about you graduating—I like having you here." The girl replies, "You so childish!" Afterwards, they had a conversation about the importance of graduating and the teacher motivated her by telling her how well she was doing and that she knew she would finish all of her credits soon.

Connecting through Curriculum

Teachers also use their curriculum to get to know students and seem to lean on the mutual respect that they have built with students as a way to increase student engagement in the classroom. Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher, has students write a personal essay at the beginning of the class to gauge their writing level and to learn about them as an individual. She also intentionally chooses books that she thinks will resonate with her students based on topics and themes. She said, "I think that allows for more student engagement and then within that engagement, we can share personal things about our lives as it pops up in a book." For example, she chose to have the class read *Long Way Down*, a book composed of poems that tells a story about gun violence, because she said the topic is important at a policy level and in many of the students' everyday lives. It tells the story of a young man who is deciding whether to seek

revenge on his brother's killer. The book allows the class to discuss gun violence and losing a loved one which unfortunately resonates with many of the students either directly or indirectly. During one class period, she read aloud while students followed along and told students they can jump in and read if they want. Alex, the student who did not click easily with students in his previous school, and one other student volunteered to read aloud. Both students read quickly and accurately. The book mentioned that "the streets" have three rules: no crying, no snitching and always get revenge. That seemed to resonate with some students, because most of the students in the classroom either nodded or said "yeah" as the teacher read the rules aloud. Mrs. Jeffrey taught poetic devices while she read the book and students were engaged in the conversations, and cited some of their own personal experiences. Once they were done reading, she asked students to look for poetic devices they just learned. She points out an example of a simile in the book that compares a newborn baby and a gun. She asks them why that's interesting. They discuss a weapon that can take a life being compared to a new life. When Mrs. Jeffrey asked for an example of a homonym, students yelled over each other but finally settled on beef as meaning food and conflict. She asked for an example of an onomatopoeia and one girl said "Bang. Splash." Another student yells out "BOOM!" By choosing a text that was relevant to students, she is able to keep them engaged in conversations and their answers show that they are also learning the material that is being presented to them.

Sometimes Mrs. Jeffrey also tailors her curriculum for the day to support students who are not emotionally feeling up to working. She explained this process by saying:

> I start with just coming over and quietly having a conversation with them. "What's going on? Is something going on at home? Is something going on outside of work? Did something happen in the hall?" And if they don't want to talk about it, they will usually

> just say, “yeah, there's something going on, but I can't talk about it,” and then I might suggest like “Why don't you do some journaling so you can get some credit for English, but you can also get out what is bothering you?” And I’ll say, “If you want me to read it, I'll read it; if you don't want me to read it, I don't have to read it. You can write it to get it out and you can throw it away.” Or if we are doing group work for the day, instead of working with the group today, if you need to be by yourself, then I'll propose, “How about you find your favorite song, look up the lyrics, let's analyze what this song is really about?” You know, do something that has to do with English, but that also gives them some space to think through what they’re dealing with.

In these ways, Mrs. Jeffrey is able to connect with students through the curriculum and help create a community of support.

Dr. Edwards regularly relies on her relationship with students to keep them engaged for the entire two-and-a-half-hour period of online math classes. Near the end of one period, Alex, the student who works at Captain D’s, put his head down on the table and went to sleep. The teacher asked, “My number one math student wouldn’t be taking a nap, would he?” The principal, who Alex often eats lunch with, had just stepped inside the classroom to hand another student a paper and heard this interaction. She answered for Alex, saying, “He must’ve just been thinking REALLY hard on a math problem.” Alex smiled and said, “Yeah . . . that’s exactly what it was.” They all laughed and he opened a new program on his computer to start doing more work. Both the teacher and principal relied on the relationship they had built with Alex for a quick redirection. Shortly before the dismissal bell rang that day, a female student started to doze off and the teacher said, “We didn’t come this far to take a nap. Get up.” By saying we, she reinforced the idea that she is in it with them and there to help. The student focused back on her

work for the last few minutes. She said sometimes students also engage in deeper conversations about the material, not only personal problems they are facing. She said:

> As a teacher you have these embedded, unspoken beliefs that all students can learn, but I'm surprised at the ability level of so many of these kids. What really adds the sadness to the traditional school system is that for so many of the kids that are not successful in traditional schools, it's not because of intelligence. I have a strong group of really sharp kids that are pushing me. I have one young lady, I have to do my homework because she makes my head hurt because she moves so quickly. And she pulls out the best math talk out of me, and I'm teaching her about the unit circle like she needs to understand that it is the true meaning of life versus she needs to find the sine and the cosine is X and Y. So, she makes me take her into all these deep places and I catch myself, like, wait a minute, we don't need to do all that. So, I am surprised at the level of intelligence.

She said she really enjoys these conversations because her major in college was math and the subject has always been her passion. She also said that she appreciates that students at the non-traditional school seem to want to learn more than just the minimum that is required and engage with the teachers and the material.

Mr. Jackson, the Government and U.S. History teacher, said that he regularly learns details about his students' lives through lessons, because students will use personal examples when he is teaching government or economics. He said since he knows the subject that he is teaching really well, as opposed to when he was teaching English at his previous school, he is able to find creative ways to teach the material. He also has autonomy on how he teaches his classes, so he is able to find ways to engage students. He said, "There is a culture of actual learning . . . they get very engaged and they feed off each other's energy and enthusiasm. You

don't have a problem with instruction, like you can lecture a little bit, I barely lecture, but when I do, they are listening and they are writing notes." He said this especially happens when he plans for students to debate a topic that they may be familiar with.

In class one day, Mr. Jackson introduced the U.S. Constitution and to keep students engaged, he asked how it relates to their daily life. He began by saying that the purpose of government is to maintain order and then they discussed how sometimes that balance is hard to strike. He said he finds ways to help students think about how to apply the material to their daily lives so they engage with the material deeper than simple memorization. Mr. Jackson started the lesson by showing a cartoon about Colin Kaepernick and asked how amendments can apply to this. They said freedom of speech, but could not think of others. They walked through the first amendments in more detail and one student pointed out how the media was involved and named freedom of press. Another student said people also protested Nike for their support of Kaepernick and named the right to assemble. One student said, "We technically have freedom, but we're not really free. If the cop is beating up on us, we're free to tell them to stop, but that doesn't do anything. They keep beating up on you." He allowed students to stay on this topic briefly and said that it is a good segue to his next slide to keep them on topic. Mr. Jackson asked if protesters with a sign saying "All cops are bastards and some are rapists" would be allowed. They agreed it is allowed because it was not hurting anyone or putting them in danger. Next the teacher showed a picture of a KKK rally and asked if this event would be allowed. All of the students said no and one of the Black males in the class said "f**k no." Mr. Jackson does not mention cursing and asks them why they think it would not be allowed. This leads to a discussion about recent racist events that they have seen on the news and witnessed in person.

Teachers also regularly joke with students based on things they have learned about them over time. In Dr. Edwards' class, a female student who identifies as a lesbian told her that she was going to finish her writing at home. The teacher told her she can just finish her writing the following day since she gets off work late and said, "Don't stay up late on the phone with your friend." The student grinned and said "That's hard! She loves to stay on the phone and I like when she's happy." After class, Dr. Edwards told me that the student who offered to write at home does not usually get home from work until 11:00 p.m. and by the time she eats dinner and takes a shower, it is usually well past midnight. Dr. Edwards used this as an opportunity to show that she remembered important details about the student's life, while also helping her create a schedule to get her work completed.

LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

Many of the students at the non-traditional school are not heterosexual and some are transgender. Through various observations, I noticed that many of these students are open about discussing sexual orientation and gender identity with each other, teachers and myself. Because Mrs. Jeffrey's previous district was conservative, she did not disclose her sexual orientation to anybody who was affiliated with the school for fear of backlash. In her first few years at the non-traditional school, she only told other staff members that she identifies as a lesbian and is married to a woman. This school year, however, she has decided to share this information with students because she has gotten to know many queer-identifying students who are navigating coming out and believes it is important for them to know she is open to talking.

Both Angel, the student who often has arguments with her mom about being gay, and Christian, a student that I met during an observation but did not interview, mentioned that their gender expression and sexual orientation caused conflict between themselves and their teachers

at their previous schools. Angel recalls, “I got really behind because some teachers just didn’t agree with the fact that I was what I am . . . I am gay. Even though as a teacher you’re not supposed to discriminate, I got kicked out of Spanish class 24/7.” To avoid this discrimination, she said she would sometimes skip those classes. Angel said that her Spanish teacher would sometimes kick her out of class before she made it to her seat and the teacher would simply say “I can’t deal with you today.” When I asked how the homophobic atmosphere, as she described it, impacted her, she replied:

> So, I would go talk to some girl and then teachers would give me a side eye and I was like “That’s how you really feel?” I wouldn’t even always be flirting. Sometimes just talking. Some teachers would speak their opinions about my sexuality and it’s like they can say some wrong things and I would ask how do they know that and they would say I was talking back. It wasn’t that many people that were openly gay, but the people that were openly gay, they let it be known. We didn’t have a LGBTQ club or anything like that, so half of the gay kids skipped school and they wondered why. It was because the teachers.

Angel said that since coming to this school she has felt accepted and after writing her personal essay about her mother not accepting her sexuality, Mrs. Jeffrey spoke to her about her own wife and offered support and encouragement. She said she was surprised to learn that Mrs. Jeffrey is a lesbian, but it makes her feel like she can talk to her.

Christian, the student that I got to know during observations, identifies as a transman and is in the process of legally changing his name. He said he failed his anatomy class because he would challenge the teacher on different topics and wording choices. Mrs. Booker, the science teacher at the non-traditional school, found a way to combine the biology and anatomy

requirements so that he would not have to retake the entire course. He told me that the upstairs math teacher is his favorite teacher and that they would play small pranks on each other. In his online classes he was typically on his computer and working on his assignment. In teacher-led classes, he was usually one of the most talkative students and jumped to answer teachers' questions. In History class one day, the class was divided in two teams and students were given half sheets of paper that assigned them a role in the prohibition debate. Christian was on the side that supports prohibition and he said his reason for supporting prohibition is he cares more about families not having to deal with alcoholic men and the violence that comes with that. He leads his team in thinking about other reasons prohibition should be in place and offers to share their opening and closing arguments. Christian not only said he feels more comfortable in this environment, but his willingness to engage with teachers and other students exemplifies that.

During English class one day, a Black female student was working on writing a memoir as an assignment and said, "I'm gay, but my mom wants me to be straight." Mrs. Jeffrey talks to her and tells her that she has a wife. Another student asks a question so Mrs. Jeffrey leaves for a few seconds to answer, but the previous student still looks surprised and is smiling. Mrs. Jeffrey goes to her desk to get her phone. She shows the student she was talking to a picture of her and her wife on different vacations and at different events. The student is animated and asking questions about different vacations and said she has been to a similar zipline in Gatlinburg. Mrs. Jeffrey told me after class that she had that student last term, but "had been waiting for the right time to tell her—when it wouldn't just feel random, but as a way to empower her."

Students also seem accepting of students who are not heterosexual and those who are transgender which positively impacts school culture. During lunch in the student lounge one day, a student who is a transgender walked in to pick up her lunch wearing makeup, acrylic nails and

a purse. Other students spoke to her just as they did any other student that walked into the lounge. Another example of students openly accepting LGBTQ+ topics was in math class one day when a group of girls were having a conversation about their partners. Three out of the five girls identify as gay. The girl that presents the most masculine began talking about her partner and the other girls asked her if she is really gay if she was not willing to perform certain sexual acts. She explained that that does not impact whom she is attracted to or how she identifies. The other girls gave some pushback at first, but as she continued to explain, they began to understand the difference between sexual orientation and sexual expression. Other students sitting near them began to listen in to the conversation and some nodded their heads in agreement and some listened mostly with indifference. This scene stood out because it seemed like people were either interested in this conversation as a learning moment or did not care, but nobody seemed hostile towards the topic or the students who identify as gay. While I do not know each student and teachers' beliefs on LGBTQ+ topics, I never heard or saw indications of non-acceptance which creates the feeling of having a community of support.

Food Security

The school provides breakfast and lunch for students every day, but almost all teachers have snacks on their desk that they offer students. Teachers also occasionally cook and bring in food or offer students crackers, chips and cookies during class which students then said makes them feel cared for. This was an unexpected theme, but after getting to know students and learning that many of them face food insecurity or may have a larger appetite due to pregnancy, this topic came up frequently in observations and interviews. Whenever one student said they were hungry, the teacher would usually offer each student in the classroom a snack. Many of the teachers also offered me snacks, so it seems natural to them at this point to always offer food.

At the end of English class one day, Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher, reminded students that tomorrow is Cookie Friday. She asked them what kind of cookies they wanted her to bring and the class was split between chocolate chip cookies and Oreos so she said she would bring half and half. A student asked her if she would cook for them one Friday and she said she would make pasta and garlic bread before the holidays. She said, “I love y’all, so I gotta show you the love.” Three of them reply, “We love you too!” One of the boys said, “Garlic bread and pasta?! You going off!” The principal also sometimes cooks for students. Alex, the reserved student who was a caretaker for his father, said, “I mean, it's not very often when you get your principal to grill you a grilled cheese, because it's Halloween. She makes chocolate chip pancakes in the winter sometimes, too. It's fresh. It doesn't get much better than that.” He said these kinds of treats makes the school fun and engaging, but also shows him that the teachers and principal care about him as a person because they are willing to go above and beyond.

Mrs. Jeffrey cited a more extreme case of making sure a student had food when a female student came to her class on a Monday and said they had not eaten for two days. She said:

> Immediately I sent them to the office to get food, so that they had something to eat. Then they wanted to work a little bit with Ms. Walton on that issue, you know? And that to me takes precedence over any lesson that I have planned. Because I can make up that lesson with the student, but that student needs to eat and needs to talk through not having eaten for two days and what is going on.

Ms. Walton, the guidance counselor, said that she often helps connect students with SNAP and WIC benefits and has even driven students to the office where they need to apply a few times.

During a lunch observation, the school security guard, Mrs. Gills, came into the gym and hugged a pregnant student. Mrs. Gills asked her what she brought for lunch and said “I hope you

brought something healthy!" The student had leftovers in a to-go container. The student then asked Mrs. Gills if she could put pennies in the vending machine. Mrs. Gills told her pennies would break the machine, but she would give her quarters. She said, "You don't need to have any Coke though! So, choose something else." The school security guard was an unexpected actor in showing care for students' diet and looking after their health, but caring for students in this way appears to be a joint effort amongst all staff. While it is likely that not every student felt taken care of, I did not witness or hear examples of that in the non-traditional school.

Encouraging Individuality

Students at the non-traditional school are given more freedom in terms of rules, language and movement than many of them express having at their previous charter and traditional schools. While students are afforded more freedom than they express having in their traditional high school, students and teachers find that the school culture and classroom management is better than at schools that have strict rules like the charter that Amari attended or schools that were too lenient like the one Chase attended. Teachers said the level of freedom is intentionally structured in a way that creates a culture of trust and students explain that they have intrinsic motivation to show up and stay on task. When students do get off task, small redirects from teachers or other staff members are generally sufficient to get them back on track. Students' self-efficacy and orientation to the future are internal promotive factors (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). While students may have always had these character traits, the non-traditional school's culture allows them to manifest them in a more productive way. The support from teachers in allowing students to show up as their authentic selves is also a promotive factor that contributes to identity building.

Legitimizing Language

Students are given freedom with how much they talk and to a great extent, they are given freedom with the language they use. Amari said re-learning how to open up and be social has been easy in the non-traditional school environment, because she said this school allows students to express themselves more and teachers encourage conversations. During a lunch observation, she talks to another student non-stop about a television show they both watch and how sex trafficking does not receive enough attention.

The students also have informal conversations with teachers sometimes where they curse, use slang or teach teachers slang. When I asked Damion, the student who recently reprioritized school over boxing, about the school culture, he responded:

> I feel free. I can do whatever. Say what's on my mind and the teachers will listen and agree. It's a good freedom for me to have because at my old school I would say something that could trigger the teacher and I could get in trouble for it. The school I'm going to now, I can say whatever is on my mind.

An example of this occurred during one transition to lunch. A Black male student ran into Mr. Jackson in the hallway and asked if he could come by later to ask a question about an upcoming assignment and the teacher said yes. The student responded, "Don't be cappin." The teacher asked "Don't be what?" And the student said "Cappin! Cappin! Cappin!" as he laughed and walked away. The teacher still looks confused, so Chase, the student who has made himself the unofficial ambassador, was standing near him and explained that "cappin" means lying or not following through.

During math class on a different day, a student asked the male math teacher whether or not he was "drippin." The teacher asked what that meant. The student responded, "Aw man! You don't know what the drip is?!" The student said, "Okay. I'll teach you about the drip," and

started pointing to other students in the classroom as examples. “Ced—he got the drip. Mike—he ALWAYS has the drip. Me . . . well you already know I got it.” He then goes on to explain you have “the drip” if you dress nice, especially in name brands and are wearing nice shoes. The teacher laughed and said, “I hear you.” Students are also usually allowed to use profanity. In math class one day, the male teacher was helping a student find the angles of a triangle and when she finally got it, she said “Aw shitty titties!” He ignored that and walked away. When students curse or teach teachers slang, the teachers do not seem to engage with the conversations much, but it was worth noting that they also did not lean into respectability politics or try to change the students’ language by challenging them on the word choice. Students generally are not expected to code switch or change their language unless they said “f**k,” in which case a teacher usually said “language,” the student apologizes and they move on.

Students' voices are also not controlled tightly in the classroom when they need help with their work. Students almost never raise their hand to get the teachers’ attention. Instead, they call out to the teacher, ask another student sitting near them or walk to the teacher’s desk. For example, in math class one day, Dr. Edwards was helping Alex, the student who was a caretaker for his father, with a math problem on his computer. The teacher went back to her own desk after helping him and he attempted the problem after receiving instruction, but still did not get it. A few minutes later, he brought his scratch paper to her desk and asked her to explain where he went wrong. Throughout observations of Dr. Edwards’ classroom, I never observed any of the students raise their hands when they needed help. Instead they always called out to her or walked up to her desk. She never seemed bothered by this and helped students immediately unless she was already working with another student. Even then, once she got the student she was currently working with started on their problem, she would respond to students who called out and

interrupted her. The upstairs math classroom has similar practices. In one instance, the teacher went to the shelf to get a folder for a student when another student stopped him to ask a quick question. He answered without having to stop walking. As he brought the folder to the student, another student asked him to come to her when he was done with what he was doing. A separate student called out and asked him to spell "gravel." He managed to answer each student's question and bring them the supplies they needed without delaying any of the students' work or seeming flustered. The norm in the non-traditional school is for students to use their voice to ask for help when it is needed. This happens predominately in online classrooms, so other students have on headphones and do not seem distracted by their peers calling out.

In regards to students talking in class, Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher, also said, "If we're doing group work, you know, talk, get loud, that's fine, it's not an issue. I value engagement over the other stuff." Other teachers seem to have similar approaches to classroom management. In Science class, one day after the students went on a field trip to the water treatment plant, they reviewed what they learned. The class started off relatively quiet as students started writing paragraphs about their field trip. One girl went to the teacher's desk to read her paragraph and mentioned that the water treatment prevents the bacteria from eating our DNA. The teacher allowed her to finish reading her paragraph but asked her to go back to that part and explained what actually happens and how the treatment works—ultraviolet rays destroy the bacteria's DNA so that it can't reproduce. Christian, the trans man that did not get along with his previous science teacher, was not writing a paragraph and announced that he missed the field trip because his mom wouldn't bring him to school. He said he tried waking her up, but she said, "I don't care if you have a field trip, I'm not getting out of the bed!" The students told him about the trip and the topic turned to littering and how it not only messes up the water, but our

environment. The teacher mentioned that animals can be hit by cars while they are trying to eat food that has been thrown out of car windows. The same girl who had been reading posed a question, “Are people or animals dying faster?” The teacher had trouble answering based on the wording of the question and the student turned to me to ask what I thought. The teacher allowed the conversation to continue for a couple minutes and then steered the students back to the waste treatment plant by asking how the work of the treatment plants impact animals that live in the water. As in this class discussion, if students get loud, but are on topic, teachers encourage the engagement instead of trying to quiet them.

Recognition of Students’ Agency

Through observations I noticed that students were able to make judgement calls on what they needed to do without asking for permission to move around and without having to navigate a controlling environment. Students showed signs of feeling comfortable in the school setting; for example, some students take their shoes off during class, while others put their feet up in the chairs next to them. In credit recovery, the teacher told a student who was reading a book that since she didn’t need a computer, she could sit anywhere she’d like. The student leaned back in a computer chair with her feet up for a while. Eventually she laid down on one of the many rugs in the classroom while still reading and the teacher offered her one of the pillows from the couch. Students are also able to move freely to get supplies or turn things in without having to get permission first. For example, in math class one day, a student needed to hand the teacher a piece of paper. Rather than walking over to the teacher's desk, the student rolled in their chair from one end of the room to the other until the student reached the teacher’s desk. On a different day, two students got up to get supplies from a table in the middle of the classroom. Each time, Dr. Edwards asked what they needed and they mumbled inaudible answers that she did not respond

to. Mrs. Patterson, the principal, says that allowing students to move around as needed is a way of showing students that they are respected as adults and are responsible for themselves.

In self-paced classes, students often wear headphones to listen to music while they work. Dr. Edwards said she used to not like it when students wore headphones, but she has noticed that the students who wear headphones tend to stay focused on their work more than students who don't. She said she had to realize that her preference for no headphones might be a generational difference and if the students are always used to "being plugged in," and that helped them get their work done, then she did not mind it. Each computer in her classroom has a pair of yellow over-the-ear headphones plugged into it. To break up the two-and-a-half-hour class, during self-paced classes, students are allowed to take short breaks from work to watch a YouTube video or play a computer game. In the hybrid classes, like English, students are also allowed to wear headphones. Mrs. Jeffrey said:

> I let my students know if they can still focus and listen to music—like because this group is reading chapter 5 and you are on chapter 10—if they need to tune it out, I suggest they put on some instrumental music so that they can still focus and aren't overstimulated or if some students are doing group work, I will put on music so that others aren't distracted.

Students have the freedom to choose how to best situate their environment in a way that is conducive to their learning, even if it takes teachers awhile to get used to different practices, because they trust students will make responsible decisions based on what they need in a learning environment.

Some students put their heads down to take a nap and teachers usually wake them up. One exception was in Dr. Edwards' class. She allowed a girl to sleep and explained to me after class that that student works two jobs and is on track to finish her math credit early, so she allows

her to sleep sometimes. Alex, the student who now supports himself after his father passed away, also noticed and appreciated this leniency because he works outside of school. He said, “Some of the teachers, if you've completed all your work, let you take maybe a 15, 20-minute nap. You don't usually get that in high school anymore!”

When a student is sleepy, Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher that has the loose classroom management style, allows them to walk up and down the hallway a few times. She also said that if a student is more comfortable standing up, it does not bother her. She explains,

> We're all adults in here, you know if you need to use the bathroom, you know if you're hungry, as long as it's not the first or last ten minutes, we're good. Just grab the pass and let me know that you've got to go, or you need to walk the hall for a second because you are feeling some sort of way, you know? Just give me a heads up, grab the pass, you can do that.

Similarly, during a credit recovery classroom observation, a student did pushups and jumping jacks to stay awake. Other students did not seem to be distracted by these movements, but finding active ways to stay alert during the long class periods allowed that student to stay focused on their work. In math class one day, a female student abruptly said “I need a hug!” and walked over to Damion, the student athlete, whom she regularly talks and laughs with, to give him a hug and then went back to her desk to keep working. In most instances, students get the hall pass and go to the restroom or vending machine without asking for permission. In math class, one student asked Chase to get her a pack of sugar from the student lounge for her coffee and he left to get it without asking permission. He came back quickly and immediately got back to work. While students’ physical movement is not controlled tightly, teachers seem to always know their whereabouts and students usually get themselves back on track. Mrs. Jeffrey invites

students to leave towards the beginning of the period to control the amount of movement throughout the period. For example, during class one day a student asked to go to the restroom at the beginning of the class and Mrs. Jeffrey responded, “Of course. Anybody need anything? Coffee? Water? Then we’re going to jump into the book.” Another student left to get water, but once they came back and started reading, no other students left the classroom during that period.

In some instances, teachers have gone to run quick errands like get a handout from the printer and left the students unattended and they all continued doing their work. In Science class one day, Mrs. Booker got a call from the front office and after she hung up, she told the students she would be right back and went to the office. During that time, one student got the hall pass and went to the restroom and made it back before the teacher and another student stood up to turn off the air conditioning before getting back to work. All of the other students remained in their seats and focused on the assignment they were working on before the teacher left. Students did not seem to take advantage of the increased level of freedom, but were intrinsically motivated to stay on task and complete their assignments.

Amari said that while she likes being able to be more social at this school and enjoying more freedom than at the strict charter school, she also likes that it feels like teachers care. She expressed this by saying:

> This school, they make sure every kid is in their classroom. You can't get away with doing nothing at this school. Not saying that's a bad thing, but it just means they actually care and watching what the kids is doing. You can’t go . . . a student can't be walking around and somebody never said nothing. They're going to make sure you in class, motivate you to be in class. If you miss a day, they going to call you. “Why you not at

school? You coming in today?" They going to make sure you get here and be in your classroom.

From students' perspective, the non-traditional school has found a way to balance giving students freedom, yet still remaining aware of students' movements and actions.

Teachers monitor students and intervene when they think students are getting off track. For example, in Spanish class one day a student was trying to sneak and talk to his friend who was standing in the hallway and eventually just asked the teacher if he could go to the restroom. The teacher had already noticed the conversation taking place and asked the student to wait 10 minutes until she got everybody started on the lesson. By the time the 10 minutes were over, the student's friend had gone back to his own class. That student did not ask for permission to go to the restroom again and got started on his assignment instead. Similarly, in math class one day, a student got up to go to the restroom and told the teacher he was going. His friend said he wants to go too, but had to wait for the other student to get back. While there are generally not strict rules about leaving the classroom to take a break and multiple students are allowed to go at one time, when the teachers notice that it may become a distraction to students, they step in.

When a classroom has more movement than the teacher seems to be comfortable with, the teacher uses different classroom management policies to keep students focused. In Government class one day, shortly after being told to do their daily quiz, a white male student asked to go to the restroom, but the teacher told him he had to wait until he was done with his quiz. Shortly after that, an announcement on the intercom notified the class that the water had been turned off in the building and was being fixed now. The teacher apologized to the student for not letting him go to the restroom before. A few minutes later, a different student threw a paper ball towards the trash can but missed. The teacher gave him a look but didn't say anything.

The student apologized, got up and threw the paper into the trash can. During that same class period, one student saw his friend in the hallway and tried to leave class to talk to him, but Mr. Jackson told him to sit back down and let the other student get back to his class. The student went back to his seat. While students seemed restless that day, Mr. Jackson kept them on track with redirects.

Students are also allowed to move freely throughout the building during lunch time and those who are 18 years or older are able to leave campus during lunch time. If students are over 18 years old and only have one more credit to earn, they can leave for the day at lunch time since they do not have another course that they are enrolled in for the afternoon. Students turn in their tickets to get their phone before leaving for lunch. Students who stay on campus can eat and hang out almost anywhere in the building during lunch: the student lounge, the gym, the guidance counselors' room, the math teachers' room, the stairwell or even on the outside stairs when the weather is nice. During one lunch observation, two girls hugged in the hallway while they were in line to get their phones. They exclaimed how long it had been since they'd seen each other and one girl said she'd just gotten out of jail. I went into the student lounge, but found that it was relatively quiet that day with only a few students sitting, immersed in their phones and one working on a puzzle. Next, I went to the gym/auditorium where I could hear more students moving around and interacting. There girls were sitting on the stage while eating and talking to each other. One student who was pregnant said her stomach hurt, she wanted to go home and she couldn't believe she was about to be someone's mom. A group of boys who often play 21 on the basketball goal were getting started on a game. One student who was playing basketball took off his shoes so he wouldn't crease them, but a few minutes later, the college coach, Mrs. Branch, stuck her head in, noticed that his shoes were off and told him to put his shoes back on so he

wouldn't slip and fall. The white male student who was playing basketball was wearing an ankle monitor. A few more students eventually came into the gym with McDonald's cups and some joined the basketball game. The students cursed freely during this time while they were talking to each other. There were no faculty or staff in there with them. This scene of a typical lunch period illustrates the level of freedom and responsibility that students are trusted with. The school does not monitor where they go for lunch and students regularly got back to campus and made it to class on time. The students who stayed in the building were also not tightly monitored. Instead the school relied on students to make responsible decisions and the loosely supervised time allowed students to build relationships by having unmonitored conversations.

The principal, Mrs. Patterson, makes decisions regarding discipline in ways that help her maintain control, but also help students develop a sense of agency around their education and graduation. The rules regarding social norms and physical movement are also lenient in a way that seems to signal that the school is happy to have students there, being their full selves and students are not tightly policed or controlled. Students seem to be successful even though they are given increased freedom, because they tend to express a high level of personal responsibility and drive to graduate. As Dr. Edwards described it,

> I think the relationships we build help us guide them. You get close to them, so they are driven by your drive. It's amazing—one thing that drives them is they can see their success. We already pulled them out of their unsuccessfulness somewhat to get here for the most part. But, they can see it, and when they can see it, they are more motivated to finish.

Mrs. Patterson often tells students, "As long as you are in it with us, we are with you until you finish." Those who are successful at this school really seem to take this to heart. Most students

remain engaged in lessons, with only small interruptions. This is not to say it is a perfect system and students are always engaged. An example of students who did not seem engaged were two Latinx students who usually spoke to each other (in Spanish) instead of doing work or would put their heads down and go to sleep. During one math class, the ESL teacher came in and stressed the importance of them being awake and doing work. “They will not just give you credit for being here. You have to be awake and do the work. I don’t want to hear that you’ve been sleeping again.” She said that he fell asleep right after she left him in his last class too, so it sounds like she regularly checked on him in class. She sat between the two of them for the first 20 minutes of class and alternated helping them with their work. After she left, they started talking and the math teacher came over and asked questions about their math to get them back on task. They worked on math for a few minutes before each of them went back to sleep. I did not interview them, because there would have been a language barrier, so I do not know their backstory, but I did not see them after the winter break. I am not sure if they graduated, transferred back to their previous school or dropped out.

While the level of freedom that students are given seems to help many students develop a locus of control over their own lives, that level of freedom does not always result in students remaining engaged. The mission of this school is to help students graduate and prepare them for the future. Allowing them to develop a sense of responsibility and agency, while respecting how they show up to school--their clothes, language and body language--contributes to students feeling comfortable allowing different aspects of their personalities show through. These factors also help the school have an overall positive culture where students feel accepted and respected.

Adaptable Accountability

As discussed in the "Encouraging Individuality" section of this chapter, students have more freedom with movement, expression and language than they expressed having in their previous traditional school settings. This section discusses how teachers and staff address behaviors that are beyond what they allow. School discipline practices at the non-traditional school are important to note, because many of the students at the non-traditional school cited absences due to suspensions as the primary reason they fell behind in credits and the reason that they began to disengage from school. This section discusses how students' misbehaviors have been addressed at previous schools and the non-punitive responses to discipline that the non-traditional school implements to maintain authority. This section is vitally important in understanding how staff at the non-traditional school incorporate alternative discipline policies as a protective factor to mitigate the potential risk of suspensions and expulsions.

Past Experiences with Punitive Discipline

Students and teachers reported that punitive responses to disciplinary infractions at their previous schools contributed to creating a negative school culture. Students were often assigned in-school and out-of-school suspensions in response to misbehaviors, which caused them to fall behind in classes and thus were a risk factor that made it more likely that students would disengage from school. As mentioned in each of the students' profiles, Amari, Jaylen, Angel and Chase said that being suspended was at least part of the reason they fell behind in credits. These students' prior experiences are important to note, because it helps show the various backgrounds that students at the non-traditional school have. It also helps illustrate the difference between discipline policies at the non-traditional school and students' previous schools.

Amari, the student who has two children and attended the “no-excuses” charter school, would often get suspended after receiving too many demerits for talking in class. She attended the same charter school from fifth through ninth grade and said:

> They have real strict rules. You can't talk in class. We were still teenagers. You going to talk. We was in fifth through ninth, they expected you to be a strict scholar. Act like a college student when you still teens, or not even teens yet. That's why I switched out of charter schools cause they force you to be somebody you're not. They don't let you be yourself. They did good academically, but it’s too much pressure for a child.

She said she was never shy, but eventually trying to force herself into the school model changed her personality: “It's like you're in the military in some ways. You just get forced to do the same thing every day.” She learned how to stop talking to stop getting demerits, but her mom could see some of the change and eventually decided that the potential academic benefits were not worth the personality changes. However, by the time Amari transferred to a traditional school, she was already behind in credits due to suspensions. She tried to catch up on credits there, but eventually decided to transfer to the transitional school to earn the credits she needed to be eligible to apply for the non-traditional school.

Jaylen, the student whose mother tried to appeal his suspensions, was suspended twice back to back. He was sent to the office for smelling like marijuana and when they swabbed his finger to see if it had traces of marijuana on it, the test came back negative. They still suspended him for five days for suspicion. On his first day back to school after that suspension, he was standing near a fight that broke out. He was suspended for four days for not breaking up the fight. He had never been suspended prior to these two suspensions. While he was suspended, he missed the final exam for his statistics class, causing him to fail the course. Of his decision to

transfer, he said, “I would’ve had to do summer school to get that credit back so I just decided to come here.” Jaylen’s mother tried to raise this issue to the school board when she called to try to appeal his suspensions, but she did not receive a call back after numerous attempts. Instead of staying at his school and having to do summer school to earn the credits he missed, he transferred to the non-traditional school.

When I asked Angel, the student who is learning to cope with different mental health conditions, what she had been suspended for, she replied, “A lot. Vandalism because my anger issues. I would punch lockers and stuff would fall from the walls. So, I got in trouble for vandalism. Sleeping, because my brain couldn’t take the work. Just my attitude—just mouthing back. Drugs. That stuff.” She said she regularly received in-school suspensions from her Spanish teacher, who she believes was homophobic. She also received an out of school suspension for falling asleep in the hallway one day when she’d started taking a new prescribed medication that made her sleepy. She said she was suspended a total of five times, but lost count of in-school suspensions. Her final suspension before deciding to transfer to the non-traditional school occurred after an argument with the principal. She explained the incident by saying:

> I can get smart. If you don’t listen, I’ll make you listen. If you don’t listen when I tell you you’re treating me unfair, I’m the type of person that will hold stuff in until I . . . I’ll let you know. I told my principal his breath stink and he bald headed. I didn’t mean to but look, he kinda made me mad cause I was like “Look you doing all this and you think I don’t see it. You’d rather listen to (the teacher). She’s kicking me out and I hadn’t even stepped foot in the classroom. I’m in ISS every day and y’all wondering why I’m failing Spanish.” I told him he needs to do better. I just snapped. He said “That’s how you really feel?” I said “Yeah that’s how I really feel.” He said, “Okay I’m going to talk to her, but

> you're suspended." I said "Bet." And I didn't come back for two weeks. He'll suspend the people who always get in trouble for like two weeks, but everybody else for like 3-4 days.

During this suspension, she connected with her social worker who introduced her to the idea of the non-traditional school. She decided to transfer, because she knew she wanted to graduate, but she felt like she would not be successful in the school model she was currently in.

Chase said, "Most of my fights were like secret going 30 just for fun, just to fight for the fun of it, but during my 11th grade year I was expelled for a fight." Going thirty is when two students fist fight for thirty seconds to see who will win and when the time runs out, they stop fighting. He said that he would participate because he thought it was fun and it was what the popular boys did. When he got expelled he figured he would have to get his GED because he was too far behind in credits, but then he learned that the non-traditional school could be an option. He went to the transitional school to earn enough credits to then transfer to the non-traditional school.

Both Angel and Jaylen noticed that different students received different punishment for similar offenses. To describe the unequal responses to discipline that Angel witnessed, she said:

> If you played sports, they would let you go because they'd rather have their team win. Someone who plays sports got caught doing drugs in the bathroom and they didn't suspend him, but they suspended me over my mouth. Like c'mon, just over my mouth? I think everyone should be treated equally, but they discriminate too. At (her previous school), there's people with money cause they come from (the wealthier area) and then there's people from (the lower-income area), so they looked at us like we're garbage.

She said people from the wealthier nearby suburb were almost never suspended, but students from the lower-income area nearby were regularly suspended for 2-3 weeks at a time.

Jaylen had a similar experience with noticing that Black students received harsher punishments than white students. He hesitated to directly name the discrimination, but gave an example. He said:

> I feel like they were ready to get certain kids out of the school. They started to suspend kids for the smallest problems and I didn't like that. Well, I'm not going to say . . . Well, I don't necessarily want to say they want to kick out Black students, but I saw that it was heavier punishments for something that the Black students did than when white students did. These white students, they jumped a kid and they got to come back after a two-day suspension. These Black kids, they didn't jump. It was just four kids fighting—like two and two and they got expelled.

Studies show that Black, Latinx and low-income students receive harsher punishments than their white peers even when committing similar offenses (Welch, & Payne, 2010). Responses to discipline map onto resilience theory, because these students' perception that they were being pushed out of their traditional school caused them to disengage from their school. In the next two sections I discuss how the discipline responses in the non-traditional school contribute to helping students feel welcome and engaged in school. The non-punitive responses to discipline serve as promotive factors and as I found in this study, contribute to the positive outcome of interest: graduation.

Responsive Authority

Each teacher has some autonomy in how they choose to handle most disciplinary infractions. The only two rules that seem to be strictly enforced across the school are: students

must turn their phones in during class time and students cannot leave the classroom during the first ten or last ten minutes of class. The most enforced rule at the non-traditional school is that students turn their phones in to the front office staff at the beginning of the school day and after lunch if they choose to check their phones out during lunch. Students are given a claim ticket for their phone when they pick it up. If the number of phones that have been turned in is not the same as the number of students that are present in school that day, the principal will sometimes make an announcement reminding students to turn their phones in or Mrs. Gills, the security guard, may come into classrooms to ask students if their phones are turned in. For example, towards the end of lunch one day, the daily announcement over the intercom let students know that it was time to turn in phones. The security guard also came to the door of the student lounge to personally let students know that it was time to turn their phones in. A few minutes later, there was another announcement that 23 phones were still missing. Once class got started, there was a brief interruption as the front office called up to ask Mr. Jackson if each student had their phone ticket (they turn their phones back in and are given a ticket with a number on it), because the principal was trying to figure out which students didn't turn their phones in. He checked and all students had their tag except for one student who said he didn't have a cell phone. The front office asked for his last name and they verified that he does not have a phone according to their records.

I wanted to better understand why the cellphone rule was so tightly enforced, but there were differing answers from staff members on why the rule is in place. Ms. Walton, the guidance counselor, said this rule is in place to prevent distractions in the classroom and prevent bullying. She has worked at the school since before the rule was in place and said "(Cell phones) created the drama that we had . . . our drama was always girls, girls fighting with girls on social media or

disrespecting each other on social media." She also said students would often use phones to Google answers and they wanted to be sure students were actually learning. Dr. Edwards, the math teacher, said,

> Older people designed the program and older people don't understand the benefits of cell phones. They see them as chronically distracting and horrible so I think it was designed to eliminate distraction. I think that the better thing it does is it shows the need for sacrifice. It's not about you being distracted by your phone, it's about you giving something for what great gifts you are receiving here and that is the ability to earn one whole credit every four weeks. So, I think I twixed the purpose of that.

Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher, said she does not know the reason behind the rule, but when she sees a student with a phone, she reminds them that the consequences for having a phone in class are harsh after the first incident. The first time a student does not turn in their phone, they will simply be asked to turn it in. The second time, they will be sent home. The third time, they will no longer be enrolled at the school. Mrs. Jeffrey said:

> I usually have this conversation, "Please don't let yourself not get to attend this school over a cell phone." And I also just let them know, "If there is something going on and you need to go check on your cell phone every once in a while, take my pass, go check on your cell phone, but don't let it get you kicked out of school." And if there is something where they need to call home, I'll just let them use my phone.

The students regularly complain about this rule, but a majority of them seem to follow this rule. Over the course of the year, I have seen two different students with phones in classes, but the students would hide the phone when teachers walked around the classroom. Mr. Jackson said if he does notice a phone, he asks the student to turn it in. He said, "they don't get upset or

anything. As long as you don't chide them about it or say it in a mean-spirited way." While the official school rules are harsh, I did not witness or hear about any student being sent home or expelled for having a cell phone.

The second most enforced rule is that students are not to leave class during the first or last ten minutes of the class period. The most stringent example of witnessing this rule be enforced was during one visit to the school, I used the restroom towards the end of the class period and I was unable to go back into the classroom because when I returned to the classroom, the school had been put in lockdown. Lockdowns are typically put into effect when there is a threat in the school and teachers are not allowed to unlock their classroom doors until it is lifted. On this day, however, the principal called for a lockdown from 2:00-2:14 so that students would not leave before class officially ended at 2:15 p.m. I only witnessed this happen once, but in the days that followed, it appeared fewer students were leaving the classroom before 2:15 p.m. The principal said this rule is necessary because they are responsible for students from 8:30 a.m.-2:15 p.m., so they need to know where students are. She also said that when students become accustomed to leaving a few minutes early, some will try to keep leaving earlier and earlier as the school year goes on.

The non-traditional school's dress code is not strictly enforced. Students regularly wear running-short length shorts and tank tops and I never witnessed a student be asked to change based on outfit choice, even though students' clothes were often not in compliance with the schools' dress code. The only time I saw a student be asked to alter their appearance was when a student who always had a blue bandana hanging out of his back left pocket chose to wear the bandana on his head. The principal asked, "What have I told you about that?" and he smiled, took it off and put it back in his pocket. She addressed this dress code infraction because it could

potentially pose a problem with other students if interpreted as a gang sign. All of the high schools in the district, including the non-traditional school, have dress codes and some of the schools that students attended previously require uniforms. Since I did not observe those schools, I do not know how strictly dress codes are enforced at other schools. This was important to note, because similar to the policies that do not police students' movement and language, students being allowed to wear the clothes they choose to wear helps them develop a sense of agency and feeling that they can be themselves when they show up to the non-traditional school. I previously mentioned that many of the transgender students wear clothes that best fit their gender identity, but the unenforced dress code policy allows all students to express parts of their identity and personality through their clothes. I also noticed these policies impacting how the six students that I interviewed showed up to school daily from Damion being an athlete and choosing to wear sweats most days to Angel choosing to wear loose fitting clothes that are traditionally worn by men and Chase wearing sagging skinny jeans and hats like many of the rappers that he listens to.

Teachers are largely responsible for setting their own classroom rules. Mrs. Jeffrey said her classroom management style "is very loose." She tells students that she wants them to feel at home in the classroom and her only rule is that they are respectful of others and themselves. She believes that "Unless you are harming yourself or someone else, probably everything is okay." She said she values engagement over rules, so they can do whatever they need to do to stay engaged (stand up or take a walk) as long as it is not distracting other students. Mr. Jackson's main rule is that students stay focused on the topic he is presenting. He said he had two students who would not stop talking to each other. He had them sit at different tables and found ways to have them lead parts of discussions since they were talkative. Dr. Edwards said she does not

have many classroom rules—she just makes sure that students stay focused and wake them up if they fall asleep.

The discipline system at the non-traditional school also contributes to the freedom of movement that students experience. For example, during one science class observation, one student walked to a different lab table to help explain an equation to another student in the middle of a lesson and students regularly walked to the cabinet in the front of the classroom to retrieve supplies as needed. There are not strict rules regarding students moving around the classroom or calling out to ask for help with their work.

The credit recovery teacher expressed that she wishes she had more support from the administration in enforcing a no-sleeping policy. She said she cannot know whether they are actually sleeping or having health problems, because she has had an experience where a student was close to having a seizure. His blood sugar was too high she wouldn't have known except she woke him up. If she sends a student out of class for sleeping, they will be sent right back. During one observation, she pointed out one sleeping student and said that student never sleeps but she works and weekends are hard for her because she works a lot of hours. That Monday, she let the student nap for about 15 minutes and then woke her up. She also pointed to another girl and said that she usually sleeps the whole class period and probably will not graduate. While teachers seem to allow students who work at night to take quick naps, this was the only teacher that expressed sleeping could be a problem and wants there to be a rule in place. Other than the cell phone policy, teachers largely seem to respond to disciplinary infractions when they are worried that the students' health or wellbeing might be at risk, but do not seem to assert their authority regarding rules that they find inconsequential. This autonomy to choose how to respond to discipline contributes to the school culture by

Discretionary Consequences

The discipline policies at the non-traditional school are also different from the punitive responses that many large, urban high schools that serve low-income and minority students typically use, including the schools that the students I interviewed attended. These consequences seem to suffice, at least partially due to the positive school culture that has been built and the relationships that teachers and students have. Teachers often use small redirects to correct minor misbehaviors. If that does not work, students are sometimes asked to go speak to the principal or the security guard and then the student is sent back to class. If the student needs to be escorted from class, teachers can call the security guard to escort the student to the principal's office where they will have a conversation to de-escalate and try to understand the situation. Each of these responses is typically left to the teacher's discretion. The only exception is with zero tolerance offenses. With zero tolerance offenses, students must leave the non-traditional school for a few weeks and then they are allowed to come back.

When I asked the principal what discipline framework they use, she hesitated to name one. She eventually answered that technically the school said it applies socioemotional learning (SEL) as its discipline system, but many schools in the district want to shift away from the idea of choosing a single disciplinary framework. She believes there should be a continuum of support and "just because you are an SEL Foundation school like doesn't mean that you shouldn't be trained in restorative practices, for example." She said she thinks SEL practices are a good fit for the school but they could also use school-wide training in restorative practices.

Staff at the non-traditional school usually redirect students quickly and students are typically responsive. For example, Angel, who used to get angry with her principal for not listening to her, said that at the non-traditional school, she knows the teachers well and feels like

they check in with her, so she has not had incidents where she feels like she needs to yell to have her voice heard. Angel said that she does not get upset with teachers or the principal at the non-traditional school because she believes they listen to her and try to help address her concerns.

Some previous examples of re-directs include when a teacher says “language” to tell a student to stop using profanity and the student being told to take his bandana off. In online classes when a student is off task, teachers have different ways of shaping students’ behavior. The male math teacher will usually just walk up to a student and instead of directly addressing their talking or being off task, he will look at the last problem they were working on and ask what the next step would be in solving it. If a student is watching YouTube videos for too long, Dr. Edwards, the other math teacher, will just let them know their break is over and they close out of the screen. In Spanish class one day, two students were sitting next to each other and occasionally the girl would play with the boy’s hair. The girl eventually put her head down and he leaned on her. The teacher came over and asked if they are doing okay. They both sat up and the teacher went over the girl’s online test results with her. Both students continued working after the teacher walked away. In these ways, teachers shape students’ behaviors without directly addressing or scolding students for being off task.

Mrs. Jeffrey and Dr. Edwards said this process requires a high level of patience and it works because they do not take it personally when a student yells at them. Mrs. Jeffrey gave this example of a new student who was escalated in class and asked to leave:

> She really cussed me out and it wasn't, I knew it wasn't personal. I let her get out what she needed to get out and then right before she left, I said, “Look, I hope you have a good night, and I hope everything is okay.” And she already liked me alright, but then after that it really like, changed something in her head and she was like, “Okay, you're not like

> the other teachers I've dealt with and they wouldn't have erred on the side of kindness or grace." But again, I don't take things personal that aren't personal. She just needed to vent because of the situation, you know?

These teachers explained that this patience and response to students being disrespectful is largely possible because they have taken the time to get to know students and understand that students' anger is often misdirected. Instead of taking it personally, teachers find ways to show students they care for them and will continue to support them, which in turn helps students remain engaged and teaches them that they do not have to yell to be heard in this school setting.

Teachers also use positive reinforcement to see a change in students' behavior. Mr. Jackson gave this example to describe how he addresses students with a lot of absences:

> I explain to them how the curriculum builds, so if you miss this chunk, you can't start the next chunk until you have this foundation. And then if a student isn't here, texting them to see where they are, are they okay, and letting them know, "I really wish you could have been here. The class wasn't as good because you weren't here." That kind of positive reinforcement, so when a student comes in, I don't grill them, like "Where were you and what were you doing? You need to be here." It's just like, "Oh, I'm happy you are here today," because I feel like they don't get enough of that in their life and I would rather celebrate them being here so then they go, "Wow, maybe he does care and maybe the class does need me."

Dr. Edwards said she does not think a student should ever be suspended and has never had to rely on punitive measures "to get stuff done." She said she will occasionally ask a student to leave to have a conversation with the principal if a student is not responsive to her classroom management style. She said she had one student who kept talking and she kept saying "Darling,

could you please stop?" Because the student continued talking, Dr. Edwards finally said, "If you can't be quiet, you have to leave. Do something, but you're not going to sit in here and just keep disrespecting me and ignoring me." While redirects and positive reinforcement usually are enough to correct students' behavior, they do not work every time. Another example of students not responding to teachers' redirects was during the only disagreement between a teacher and student that I witnessed.

During this incident, a Black female student who was working on a test on the computer called out from the far side of the classroom and asked the teacher to look over the test that she just submitted online. The teacher looked on her own computer screen to see the girl's test results. She told the student her grade by signaling the numbers with her finger (it looks like she said 40%). The teacher said, "That's not like you. You got an 80% on the review but it looks like you got most of 1-12 wrong on the test. Look at those again and read the questions carefully before answering." The student tries again and then asks her what her grade was this time. The teacher said, "Much better. You need to get one from 15-17 right to have a passing score and then you can submit." A few moments later, the teacher went to talk to her (I couldn't hear what the teacher said), and the student responded "I didn't cheat! I'm just trying to pass this and get my diploma." They had a conversation and the student got more escalated. The teacher told the girl she needs to leave because she was disrupting the class. The student said "You're disrupting me! Go back to your desk and do your work!" The teacher left the classroom to get the school Mrs. Gills, the security guard. When Mrs. Gills arrived, the student left without protesting.

The response was swift and all of the other students continued working on their computers with headphones during the altercation. The teacher explained to me after class that she can see from her computer what each student has pulled up on their computer screen. The

student had the internet open and was googling answers. The teacher saw that and disabled the student's mouse. She then went to the student and saw that a website with the answers was pulled up. Before she brought the security guard in, the student had told her she was "about to snap on her" and told her to "get the f*** away from her," so that's why she had the student escorted from class. She said normally the student would just talk to the principal for 10-15 minutes and come back but since there were only 20 minutes left of class, she asked that the student be dismissed for the day. The student was allowed to come back to class the following day to retake the test. The teacher said students come to this school wanting "a no-drama place," because it was so common in their larger traditional schools and that is why she responds quickly to students who are escalated. She said she always tries to talk to students in the hallway first to help de-escalate them but if they refuse (as the student did that day), then they are asked to leave.

When small redirects are unsuccessful, students are sent to talk to either the guidance counselor, the security guard or the principal. If the guidance counselor is talking to a student who has been misbehaving, such as being inappropriate on social media or using inappropriate language, she will then do goal setting with the student and have a conversation with them about how their actions might hinder them from reaching their goals. The guidance counselor said when they realize students' behavior is not changing, they invite them to attend one of the adult schools in the district and "that is usually a pretty big deterrent." Students may also be sent to the principal when they misbehave. Mrs. Patterson said they take each case on a "one-on-one basis" and then "investigate fairly and independently." She said she has done a lot of restorative practices training and uses investigative and supportive techniques to try to restore relationships. Her overall goal is to keep students in school, especially since many students at the school have fallen behind in credits due to being out of school for numerous reasons, including suspensions.

She will also sometimes bring the guidance counselor in to help understand the root of the problem. If two students who are enrolled in the same class are unsuccessful at resolving a conflict, Ms. Walton might schedule one student to take the class at a different time. Dr. Edwards said that if she does send a student out of class, when they come back, she does not bring it up again. She helps them get back on track with their next lesson.

The only zero tolerance offense the principal has had to deal with since being at the non-traditional school are drug related offenses. The school has random drug searches quarterly. The principal reduced the number of random drug searches in response to student feedback. She said:

> I got some feedback from a kid like midyear last year who said to me, "You know, these searches are culture killers. They make us feel not trusted." I really chewed on that and thought about it. I don't think that it is something that I can eliminate completely, but I went down to like quarterly this year instead of monthly, so that there is still like a level of accountability, but it's not disrupting class and everything once a month. With the kids, there's an overarching theme that, like we trust you and appreciate that you're here, rather than we're trying to catch you with something.

Mrs. Patterson discussed how she had to alter the level of control in regards to random drug searches to create a positive school culture. The principal states that her "hands are tied" when it comes to responding to drug related offenses. After the first offense, the district mandates that students attend a drug education course and have a drug test done, and then they can return to school. After any additional offenses, they are technically expelled for a calendar year. She gives an example of a student who was attending the non-traditional school last year who she had to expel because they found drugs on him, but after he attended the alternative school for a while, she applied for a modification to his expulsion and he was able to re-enroll and complete his last

two credits so he could graduate. She gave this example to illustrate that she has to respond to drug-related offenses, but still does what she can to help the student be able to graduate.

There is very little contact with parents regarding discipline or academic issues. As the counselor stated it, “Our policy is once they become 18, they are their own adult, so most of the time I'm dealing directly with students.” Dr. Edwards said the students at the non-traditional school are often in “weird situations,” so it’s not always safe to contact parents. She said if she does, she risks breaking trust with the student, so instead she “treats them like adults.” Both Dr. Edwards and Mrs. Jeffrey said that when a student is absent, they will text message the student before calling the parent. Also, Mrs. Jeffrey does not contact parents for behavioral concerns, because she does not want to risk creating new problems at home, so she works through the problem directly with the student.

CHAPTER 6

SCHOOL STRUCTURE

This chapter outlines ways that the non-traditional school is structured to meet students' academic and social needs. In the section titled "Individualized Teaching," I discuss the most commonly cited structure that makes a difference—small class sizes that allow teachers to meet individualized academic needs as students work towards earning the credits needed to graduate. In the section titled "Flexible Structure," I discuss ways that the non-traditional school allows students to complete credits in an order that they are comfortable with and manage their time for outside responsibilities. Students are also connected with internal and external social services as needed to help address outside factors that impact their academics. This system is described in the section titled "Cultivated Caring." Finally, in the "Asset-Focused Practices" section, I discuss ways that the non-traditional school both motivates students and helps them plan for life after graduation.

Individualized Teaching

The principal, counselor, teachers and students emphasized that the small school and class sizes help students receive the personalized attention that they need to be successful in their academics. Mrs. Patterson said the school usually has a maximum of 100 students enrolled, but typically there are closer to 75 students enrolled, as compared to 700-1000+ students that are enrolled in the larger feeder high schools. This section discusses how teachers cater their lessons to meet individual student's academic needs. The small class sizes allow teachers to recognize students' academic needs and provide individualized academic assistance. These promotive

factors help develop students' academic abilities and problem-solving skills and mitigate risk factors such as learning disabilities and prior low academic performance.

The small school size also impacts students' beliefs that they can perform well academically. The main reason that Damion said he fell behind in classes was because there were too many distractions in the overcrowded school. He said, "I couldn't focus. My grades were low. The school environment was just too big and the school was too small for the amount of kids that were at the school, so it was hard for me to focus." He says he is better able to focus in the smaller, quieter school environment. Similarly, Angel said that the small school size has helped her anxiety decrease. She explained:

> This school doesn't remind me of jail. The other schools remind me of jail. It's so crowded you don't have any breathing space. No breathing space. You can't go down another hallway because everyone tries to use that hallway. Here it's easy to walk around. It's not crowded. I like it.

She said when she feels calm, she is better able to focus on school work. The school building was originally built to house more students than currently attend, so hallways, classrooms and areas that students gather like the student lounge are never crowded or at capacity. The school enrollment is determined by the number of students who decide to transfer to the non-traditional school.

Recognizing Individual Needs

Teachers often cite the lower enrollment of students as the reason they are able to recognize and meet students' academic needs. The credit recovery teacher noted that at her previous schools she had too many students to be able to recognize or meet their needs in the same way she does now. She said in her previous school she regularly had 350 students and in

the school before that she had 150 students. She mentions that the entire school only has about 75 students, so she is better able to recognize their needs. For example, she noticed that a few students in her classes would squint while they were doing their work on the computers, so she took a group of them to the optometrist and they all got new glasses. She said that likely would not have been possible if the school had more students, because she may not have even noticed the need as managing a large, overcrowded classroom requires more attention on other things.

Small class sizes allow teachers to recognize students' academic needs and take time to figure out which teachers can best serve them. Mrs. Jeffrey, the English teacher, gave a similar example, saying "I had three classes of 32 students, so that's 96 students, as opposed to here, if I have 24 in a term, it's less than one class size." Therefore, she is "not swamped with 96 papers to grade or 96 assessments of any sort," so she has more time to talk to students and figure out what they need. Dr. Edwards, the math teacher, shared a similar sentiment by saying:

> Well, the young man that I couldn't reach, what I mean by that is none of my efforts are successful, but I started with writing him a letter, because you know some kids don't like to be talked to. I noticed through the notes that nothing was changing, so I spoke to him on the side. I started going to him more often during class. He came to tell me he was okay, you know, not wanting my help. The young man finally said, "You do know that I just hate math?" He was being successful in other classes, but I just couldn't get him where he needed to be. If I had kept on, we still wouldn't have gotten a credit. So, I have another math teacher, I said, "Hey, I have this kid . . . " and I told him the situation, and he said, "I have one too." And we swapped kids. We'll see if it makes a difference. Every other kid I've been able to motivate.

While their efforts are not always perfect, with smaller classes, teachers can try different methods to reach students on an individual level. By knowing what each individual student needs, teachers can also talk amongst themselves to create alternatives for students who are not succeeding.

Personalized Instruction

Students are often working on different subjects at the same time in one classroom. In online classrooms, students are able to log in and work on whichever course they need to earn credit for. In hybrid classes, some students may have on headphones and work on an assignment on their computer while the teacher leads the rest of the class. An example of how personalized instruction works is in English class one day, five students were following along in the book that the teacher was reading aloud, one student chose her own book to read and two others worked on worksheets. The teacher circulated to all students and staggered how she answered questions. For example, she would have the larger group answer questions on a worksheet at different points throughout the book and talk to students who were working on individualized assignments in the meantime. In all classes, students are able to ask questions as they arise and teachers provide assistance on different topics throughout the class period. In regards to this, Jaylen said:

> The online classes they're fun and I mean, it's cool, but the thing that I like about the online classes is that even if you don't understand how they've explained it to you online, then your teacher will still come to you and actually explain it better in words. Then we understand better than what they've said online. So, I really appreciate that. It makes it so much easier.

These setups are typical in the non-traditional school and students do not seem to hesitate to ask for help even if they are working on something different than a majority of the class. The

teachers also regularly check-in with students who are working on their own to answer questions and gauge progress.

Teachers in this school often teach multiple lessons at one time since students might be covering different topics in math or have progressed at different speeds. For example, during one observation, 10 minutes into class, the teacher walked around and answered individual students' questions on a variety of topics. As she walked to get four different color markers to help answer one student's question on his graphing worksheet, she answered a question about greatest common factors for another student she was walking past. Once she got the student started on graphing, she turned to the girl on the opposite side of her and answered a question about exponents. During one science class period, different students were working on a nuclear power plant project, mitosis and molar mass. One student was working on a worksheet and when he needed help, he alternated between asking the teacher for help, referring to a textbook and using YouTube tutorial videos to get through the lesson. Chase, the student who used to play fight a lot, described the feeling of getting individualized attention by saying:

> I feel like every time I've walked in this school I know I'm learning something new. Doesn't matter if it's a different day or anything I know I'm going to learn something new if I walk into this school. The teachers' goal is always just to help us. It is just to make sure that we understand so it doesn't matter if, like you know, if you don't understand then that teacher's fixing to work with you until you get it. That's why the academic progress is so much higher. That's why it's so much easier to get work done here because the teacher actually puts 100% of their attention into you as well. So, you get better help one on one and it just goes out a lot smoother.

This one on one attention helps Chase stay engaged with the academic material and on track to graduating, even though he was behind in many of his classes since he used to skip class a lot.

Alex expressed having a similar, supportive experience at the non-traditional school. Alex's experience was interesting to hear, because he had previous experience with an online school where he worked from home. Although he attended an online school from home for a while as he took care of his father, he said the online class experience at the non-traditional school is completely different and makes it much easier to stay on track. He prefers online classes to teacher-led classes because he is more efficient when he works by himself, but likes having access to teachers to ask questions as needed. He said,

> Since it's a smaller class size I can interact with (teachers) more. I know in Ms. (Edwards) class, for sure, she'll go around the room and be talking to people. And since there's like 10 people in her class, her attention can go to everybody. Whereas in a class of about 20 people, you'd have to see the teacher after class for about 10 minutes before they get their next class in. So, I feel like I can actually interact with teachers a lot more here, and it's a lot better interaction because it's more focused.

Teachers also sometimes alter lessons for students who need it. For example, Angel said the timer on math problems on the computer makes her anxious and when she rushes, she's more likely to get an incorrect answer. Since she has a 504 plan, sometimes instead of requiring her to complete her work on the computer, the math teacher will print out her work and show her which steps she's getting wrong until she understands how to solve the problem. She appreciates this assistance, because "The computer will just keep making you try the problem over again, but I need to know the steps." She said this system helps her learn more and feel less anxious about her work.

Teachers seem to know how many lessons they can reasonably lead at one time and when additional students who are not scheduled to take their class ask to come in during an off time, as they sometimes do, teachers will ask them to come back another time. An example of this was during science class one day, a Black male student walked into the classroom and asked the teacher if he could take his end of year exam. Mrs. Booker responded that it's not a good time because there are so many different lessons going on at once. She asks if he would be able to come back at 2:15 when she could give him "quality time." He agreed and came back during the optional extra academic time that is built into the schedule.

Prior to attending the non-traditional school, many of the students I spoke to expressed not feeling like their academic needs were being met. Amari, the student who attended the no-excuses charter school followed by the large traditional school, said, "I really like this school because you can work at your own pace and you really not getting rushed through nothing. At the other schools, you got to work at a certain pace and follow along with other people. Then (teachers) didn't really help you that much." She said in her previous traditional school, teachers "would skip right past you" if you were not able to keep up with the material as they were presenting it. While those teachers had different constraints and may have had to teach towards the middle to keep as many students on track as possible, students' perception of their academic experience is important when understanding why they disengaged or were not successful in their previous schools.

It was common for students to mention that the individualized lessons make a positive difference in how much they are learning. Teachers also spoke about how they teach to different levels of mastery in their classrooms as compared to having a one-size-fits all model in traditional high schools. Mrs. Jeffrey said,

> Because of the small classroom, I am able to better gauge and meet the students where they are as opposed to dragging along all of the students. Prior to this, I felt perhaps I'm boring some students and they could be challenged a little more, but some are barely able to keep up because I'm gearing everything towards the middle. So, it's, it's very different that way because I have the opportunity to form that relationship with students on an individual level.

She then tailors her content to match students' needs and help them learn the topics that are required. She describes this process by saying:

> I will go back to earlier standards and see where gaps are or give them assignments based on what standards I need to cover. I have a student right now that really can't read. So, he is working with the Bluford Series. He can follow along as he listens to it to improve his reading, and then I have him working on basic elements on the online platform. Then we will work together on answering the questions, and just work on developing his reading. He is following the standard of reading texts that are harder for him, but I had to meet him where he was. That means different things for different students, you know? So, the ones that sort of have been pushed along without really mastering those standards, I have to kind of take a step back and give them assignments that challenge them, but also do it in a way that it is not glaringly obvious that I'm like giving them something specialized. You know, because I want them to feel comfortable and safe in here and also safe from ridicule.

She personalizes her approach to students to meet their learning needs in other ways as well. I asked her to talk through her approach to one of the classes she was currently teaching. In her morning class, she had two students that she often read to individually, because one has had a lot

of concussions and has trouble focusing and the other student is an audio learner, so she processes at a higher level when Mrs. Jeffrey reads aloud. A different student sits in the back of the classroom by herself, because she does not like interacting with people but "can be given any amount of work and will work hard the whole class period." Another student had been absent a lot, so he had to catch up on work and was at a completely different part of the lesson from the rest of the students. She gave that student separate assignments so he could get caught up. This level of individualized lessons is what students mention make a difference in feeling like their work is an appropriate pace and difficulty level.

Mr. Jackson also mentioned that he is able to better learn what his students' needs are and how to meet them since he has a smaller class. He expressed this by saying:

> I can focus on kids that need help, not to the detriment of others, but I can spend time with those kids, rather than with a traditional 30 kid class. There is just no way, I mean, there is just zero way, there is just too much a teacher has to do during those 80 minutes of class. So, here I can. It consists of calling on them during conversations, especially when you think that they know the answer or they are kind of on the edge, so build up their confidence or kind of just tweak with their thoughts. I also have the chance to just independently go up to them and check for understanding and make sure they are on track.

Building confidence is yet another positive outcome that results from the promotive factor: academic support from a school. This personalized instruction is largely possible due to the small class sizes. While it would be difficult to directly replicate this in a larger school, this facet of the school structure is important to highlight, because the individualized teaching and support from a close adult is a promotive factor.

Students and teachers said that students are learning more in the non-traditional school setting than they were learning before, which helps them be better prepared for college, which most of the students aspire to. Mr. Jackson said:

> There is definitely a huge, huge benefit for students going to this sort of school where it is small enough and it's an amazing culture and they are getting ten times more out of it. I've had students who took my English class (at the previous school) and they will straight up tell me that they learned nothing and they just had busy work and I agree with them, and those same students are now learning, they are getting 100% on their quiz, they are learning all the concepts, they are enjoying it, they are engaged and so, you know, the learning experience is just black and white, like there's no comparison.

Dr. Edwards expressed a similar sentiment that her students learn more in the non-traditional school setting than her students were learning in her previous traditional school, saying:

> I have them in class for two and a half hours, five days a week, for four and a half weeks. At the traditional school, they are in class about 80 minutes every other day. The amount of work that happens in that classroom where everybody is not getting individual instruction, it just doesn't compare. They do more work in this setting.

Damion said classes at his previous charter school were “ruthless” in terms of homework and classwork requirements, but he did not learn much because the pace was too fast and he felt embarrassed to ask questions. Alex said his private school had strict rules for things like dress code and deadlines and the online school had unreasonable expectations like having 10 essays for the U.S. History final. He said he is learning about the same amount as he was at the private school, but he thinks the non-traditional school prepares them for adulthood better. Amari said

she is learning about the same amount as she was before. She said “that was the one good thing” about the charter school—they pushed her to learn, so she said she was already used to learning a lot. Chase said that while the state requirements stayed the same, he feels like he is learning more because he is more engaged and gets help from teachers now. Angel thinks the classes at the non-traditional school are harder, but she is able to learn more because of the individualized support.

Flexible Structure

The non-traditional school has a later start time than most of the traditional and charter schools in the district, students only take two classes at a time and class requirements are structured in a way that allows students to balance school and a part time job. Disengagement is a common risk factor that is associated with high dropout rates. Disengagement can result in increased tardies and absences and prioritizing out of school needs (like having a job). The flexible schedule addresses these factors and acts as a promotive factor that helps students stay engaged with school.

Accommodating Schedules

The school day lasts from 8:30 a.m.- 2:15 p.m., which is a later start time than the traditional schools in the district. Angel said her attendance is better with the later start time, because her previous school started at 7:05 and she would often arrive around 8:15. She would usually be late to school on days that she had to find a ride, because she had chosen not to stay at home to avoid arguments with her mom. Since 8:30 is the start time at the non-traditional school, she makes it to school on time even on days that she has to find a ride.

In regards to taking two classes each term, Chase, Damion and Angel all mentioned that they prefer taking two classes at a time even though that means being in the classroom for a longer time. Damion explained:

> You don't have to stress as much. At (previous school), you have like five or seven different classes. Depending on what grade you're in. You have different classes, then after all those classes, you have to do the homework. Then you might be playing sports or something, so you have all of that. That's a lot of stress. And if you have a job, that's too much. At this school, I only have two classes a day and I finish my work in class.

He also said he likes this class schedule, because he said he thinks it will prepare him for how college classes are set up (fewer classes per day) and enough free time in the evening to continue training for boxing.

The later start time does not ensure everybody makes it to school on time, however. On one rainy winter morning, there was only one student in U.S. History class when the bell rang at 8:30. The teacher led the lesson the same way she does on days when the classroom is full—she tells the student they will be discussing women's suffrage. She shows a picture of Susan B. Anthony's gravestone with "I voted" and Hillary Clinton campaign stickers and a local monument to women suffragists. She continued with the lesson and the second student showed up at 9:13. The last two students arrived around 9:30. At this point, the teacher began to tie the earlier conversation to the current wave of feminism, intersectionality, LGBT rights and the "Me Too" movement. While the first student was able to engage in a rich conversation, the students that showed up late missed the introductory part of the lesson that was the foundation for the rest of the class period.

On a different day, when I went to observe the upstairs math classroom, there were only three students in there. The teacher commented on low attendance on days that have particularly bad weather. Teachers text students when they are absent to see where they are and encourage them to keep coming to school when they see them in person. However, the principal said that attendance is their greatest challenge. The flexible schedule helps students who want to come to school, but may not be enough to encourage students who do not want to or are unable to come to school. However, the six students I interviewed said they only miss days when they cannot find a ride, they are sick or their children are sick.

There is also some flexibility in scheduling regarding the order in which they take their required classes. For example, I saw Amari, the student who is re-learning how to open up to people, in passing one day and asked how she was doing. She told me she was heading to the guidance counselor's office to get her schedule fixed. She asked to take math during the last term after all of her other credits were complete, because she wanted to save the hardest for last. They accidentally enrolled her in math mid-year, but after bringing it to their attention, they switched her to Economics and English for the term. The non-traditional school allows students to complete their classes in an order that makes sense to them instead of forcing them into a rigid schedule. Mr. Jackson also appreciates this flexibility. He expressed it by saying:

> If you need a kid switched, you can get a kid switched to take the class later, which would never happen at (his previous school), I mean, there's just no way. And so, this kind of environment is just so supportive to education. Also, as a teacher, it just makes you feel supported, which also makes a difference in terms of staff culture and morale.

Allowing students to take classes on their own timeline contributes to students remaining engaged in classes and focused on achieving their goal of graduating. Students' schedules are

also sometimes changed when teachers need to separate students to minimize distractions which aids in improving classroom culture and helps students stay focused on academics.

School-Work-Life Balance

The self-paced classes give students flexibility to manage out of school responsibilities, such as a part time job, because they do not have homework that they are required to complete. One student that I met during an observation told me she works 30 hours/week at Whole Foods. The day I met her she was leaving school early to make it to a 1:30 p.m. doctor's appointment, so that she would make it to her 3:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m. shift on time. Many students at the non-traditional school have to find ways to balance their school and work schedules. Amari, the student who has two children, works at Pizza Hut from 6:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m. on weeknights. On weekends she sometimes asks to work 11:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. instead of 6:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m. so she can work more hours. Both of these students are able to balance school work and their part time jobs, because they are not required to complete work outside of school. This is particularly important for Amari, because she needs to earn enough to support her children. Angel said that attempting to balance a job with school work posed a problem at her previous school, because she would often be too tired after she got off work to do her homework, which caused her grades to drop. She compares the non-traditional school by saying, “They understand that we are growing up and we have jobs and things to do outside of school, so they work with us.”

The non-traditional school also offers an optional third period from 2:15 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. during which time a student can fit in an extra class or catch up or get ahead on work for one of the classes they are currently enrolled in. Alex sometimes utilized this study hall, because he had an agreement with his manager at Captain D’s that he would be flexible with his afternoon work hours. He typically worked from 3:30 p.m.-8:00 p.m., but sometimes his

manager asked him to come in earlier and Alex had to leave school 30 minutes before the class period was over. By staying to do work from 2:15 p.m.-3:00 p.m. on the days that he did not have to go to work early, he was able to make sure he was always ahead in his classes. He also appreciated the no homework policy, because he has been living with his neighbor and their four dogs and two children since his father passed away, so he says it would be difficult to focus and get work done in that house. The flexibility in scheduling allows Alex to keep up with school work and earn a paycheck which he feels like he needs to do so he can support himself.

Teachers regularly discuss various responsibilities that students are managing and the ways that they support students. Throughout classroom observations, I have seen some students be allowed to sleep. Both Dr. Edwards and Mrs. Jeffrey mentioned that they sometimes let students take a short nap in class. Mrs. Jeffrey said sometimes when a student is having trouble staying awake, they will tell her that they did not get sleep the night before because they were dealing with something at home and she responds with "Why don't you take a 20-minute nap and then I'm going to come back and let's see if we can get some stuff done?" During an interview, Dr. Edwards mentioned a student that was sleeping during a classroom observation earlier that day. She said that the student works late hours to help support her family, so she occasionally lets her sleep for 15 minutes before waking her up.

With the flexibility in schedules, two-and-a-half-hour class periods and additional work time offered after school, the non-traditional school is structured in a way that helps students manage their work schedule. Teachers have not found that an occasional 20-minute nap has hindered students' academic progress, but they said they know if students had to choose between school and work, many of them would have to choose work. Therefore, teachers are understanding when students who did not get off work until 10:00 the night before are sleepy in

class, so they do what they can to help students manage both responsibilities. However, all teachers do not agree on allowing students to sleep. The credit recovery teacher said she has some students who sleep through the entire class and those students are usually prolonging being put out of their home or having to get a job, because their parents have told them that those would be the consequences if they dropped out of school. While she said she does have some students who have jobs and need to take naps, she does not agree with the lenient policy that allows students to sleep in class. She allows it though, because in the past she has found that waking them up or sending them to the principal or counselor's offices has not made a lasting difference. She said it usually is up to the students and how motivated they are to complete their school work.

Cultivated Caring

Students at the non-traditional school receive support from three different counselors: a graduation coach who focuses on college and career prep, a guidance counselor who focuses primarily on social and emotional needs, and a social worker from the district who visits once a week. The social worker focuses on social emotional support for students with significant needs such as homelessness or parenting. The guidance counselor also does crisis intervention which she defines as homelessness, lack of access to food or suicidal thoughts whenever the social worker is not at the school. When asked about counseling at the non-traditional school, the guidance counselor said "I think that their needs are definitely apparent. There are kids struggling everywhere, but we have a higher concentration of kids that have those really significant needs for support and intervention." Having access to counselors is a promotive factor against risk factors because students have a supportive person to rely on when they are facing hardships (Lessard et al., 2014). In the smaller school setting, counselors serve as a promotive

factor by being readily available to help address students' needs. In this section I discuss the types of services that are available, why the small size of the school matters and how the cultivated care supports students' success.

The guidance counselor shares a similar sentiment as teachers who said they are able to recognize students' needs in the smaller setting. Ms. Walton said she is better able to know the students' needs when there are 65-75 students instead of 300 like at her last school. She said, "There is too much opportunity for people to fall in the cracks when you have so many." She also explained that she is free to take students out of class when she needs to talk to them because it is less of a disruption in a class that lasts for two-and-a-half hours than in a traditional 50-minute class. She said in her previous school, "Even if you put more counselors there (to decrease caseloads), students are taking six classes a day and teachers don't want them out of class, so you just run into a lot of roadblocks." At the non-traditional school, however, she said, "I'm blessed to be in a school where the teachers understand the model, so if a student asks to come to me, I would say 99% of the time the teacher is not going to ask any questions. They are just going to let them come."

Accessible Counseling Services

Teachers, counselors and students described ways that the non-traditional school makes counseling services more accessible to students. Teachers said students often share personal hardships with them and when needed, the teacher refers students to the counselor. Counselors said they are able to pull students from class as needed. Students that I interviewed also said they feel comfortable seeking out the guidance counselor and college coach for assistance when needed.

Some of the care for students is provided informally with regular check-ins from different staff members and referrals to the guidance counselor for situations that teachers, as mandated reporters, must address. As discussed in the "Community of Support" section in the "School Culture" chapter, Mr. Jackson said that students regularly talk to him about things they are facing outside of school—topics range from past sexual assault to asking for legal advice regarding their children's fathers and Dr. Edwards and Mrs. Jeffrey have both shared stories of times that students reached out to them for advice or help solving out of school problems. When the situation is dire, such as when they learn that a student has not eaten for days or a student is experiencing homelessness, they often send students to the guidance counselor's office. The principal also plays a role with checks ins. During observations, I have noticed different times that Mrs. Patterson approached a student who was working individually to ask about a situation at home and asked students to let her know if there was anything that the school could do to help.

Teachers also sometimes go directly to Ms. Walton to discuss their concerns. When needed and appropriate, Ms. Walton relays some of the information to teachers. She said:

> As a counselor, you have to be careful. You want to disclose things that (teachers) need to know but not disclose things that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. So, trying to balance that and have those conversations, because teachers, you know, I've been a teacher, it's difficult to have some of these students, but you don't want teachers to treat them differently either. So, we try to help them not become frustrated by telling them what they need to know about different students' situations.

She informs teachers about external circumstances that may impact how attentive and engaged students are in class, but she does not overshare, because she does not want teachers to treat students differently simply because they are facing adverse situations outside of school.

Amari, the student who attended a “no-excuses” high school and then large traditional high school, said that in her previous schools, she was able to go to the guidance counselor if she needed to, but she did not really know the counselor since they mainly spent their day in their office. She expressed this by saying,

> The counselor at (previous school), she would sit in her office all day not doing nothing. You got to go to her if you got a problem. She didn't really build a relationship, so that's why I didn’t feel comfortable going to her to talk to her about nothing. I was feeling some type of way, because she didn't make it seem like she wanted a relationship. She didn’t make a relationship with the students she had that she was counseling or whatever. That's why I just stayed to myself at (that school) and didn't talk to nobody, because I wasn't comfortable talking to her.

At Amari’s previous school, there was a girl’s group led by a therapist that would visit the school and she would occasionally attend those meetings. At the non-traditional school, she regularly sees the counselors around the school and knows them pretty well, so she said she feels more comfortable talking to them when she needs to be connected to resources. She also said that she sometimes just goes to her math or science teacher to talk when she needs to.

The guidance counselor and college coach can regularly be found around the school interacting with students. For example, during lunch one day, Mrs. Branch, the college coach, a short white woman with glasses, came into the gym where a few of the students were playing basketball. She got a rebound after one of the boys missed his shot and the boy asked for the ball. She said, “No change! You didn’t make it!” They laugh as she keeps shooting around with them. She made most of her shots and another boy asked, “You used to play, didn’t you?” and she said, “I did!” After a while she tells them to have a good rest of their day and leaves. Mrs. Branch

could regularly be found around the school interacting with students in an unofficial capacity, which made her seem more accessible to students and demonstrated her willingness to build relationships with students.

Ms. Walton said she wears more hats at the non-traditional school than she ever has in her previous 13 years of counseling. When I asked her to describe her responsibilities at the school, she said:

> Our kids are needy in a lot of different ways and once they know they have a place to go and somebody to listen and they open up to you, then they want to open up to you all the time, so there's constantly something going on and because we're always graduating and enrolling, I have to screen people for enrollment. Then the downside of back-filling grades and coordinating testing, those things take me away from kids, but that's also necessary too. In the big schools you have a support staff that does a lot of things and here, I always said, counselors wear many hats, but I've never worn as many hats as I have here. It's always something.

When asked how much of her time she spends on different responsibilities, she estimates that she spends 40% of her time with students, 30% doing something involving grades, testing or scheduling, 15% talking to teachers about student progress and 15% planning events. She also serves as the test coordinator. When comparing her current role to being a counselor in a traditional school, she said she does more individual and crisis counseling at the non-traditional school, because she has the capacity.

Guidance counselors at traditional schools also typically work on scheduling and testing, like Ms. Walton does, but for a larger number of students, so that often lessens the amount of time they have to work directly with students. This work is also not visible to students, which

can signal to students that they are not available or do not prioritize building relationships. When Amari said the guidance counselor used to "sit in their office not doing nothing," that is likely not true, but was her perception of the accessibility of social services. It is also worth noting that while guidance counselors at the traditional school may not have been as readily available, in most cases, they can be credited with connecting students who are facing risk factors to the non-traditional school and its resources. Many of the students who currently attend the non-traditional school were referred by a guidance counselor and that counselor put them in contact with the non-traditional school or invited them to a presentation that the non-traditional school principal gives at the different feeder schools. In that way, the traditional school guidance counselors helped change the trajectory of many of these students' academic pathways. However, support in larger schools is less direct and for students who are facing many risk factors, like the students who attend the non-traditional school, the direct counseling model seems to offer the necessary level of support.

Connecting to Social Services

Students seek help from the guidance counselor for a variety of reasons. Many students seek support for basic and essential needs like help finding a solution for unstable housing situations, conflicts with people who they live with and food insecurities. In the 2017-18 school year, 1.5 million students experienced homelessness and about 14 million children are food insecure, both of which negatively impact academic performance (Ralston et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Some students at the non-traditional school also go to the guidance counselor for emotional support. When she determines that students need specialized or more intensive support, she often connects them to outside resources.

Students at the non-traditional school have a variety of stable and unstable living situations and the staff find ways to adjust to students' needs. For example, Amari has two children at home and has to fit her school and work schedule with her mom's and grandma's schedules to be sure someone is always at home with the kids. Students are given a free city bus pass, but she is late to school every day because the city bus only comes to the stop near her house at 5:30 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. She cannot catch the 5:30 bus before her mom gets home from work, because that would mean leaving her children home alone. She explained this to the staff and they do not penalize her for arriving to school 20 minutes late each day. By district definitions of homelessness, Alex, the student who was a caretaker for his father, is considered homeless. He lives with his neighbors where he said, "There's always something else aside from your work that needs to be done . . . the second you're taken away from it you don't go back to it, or at least it's hard to." Instead of trying to complete his work at home and manage his work schedule, he often stays for the optional extra time that is offered at the end of the day to stay caught up with work. Angel said she gets kicked out of her house regularly, because she and her mother often argue about her sexuality. Her mom usually only wants her home when she needs Angel to watch her younger siblings. When her mom does not need help, Angel avoids being at home because they typically will get into an argument. She regularly checks in with Ms. Walton and the school social worker and they ensure she has stable housing options. While housing needs are deep and enduring for some students, these issues do not seem to present for all students. Damion, Chase and Jaylen never mention having difficulties at home.

Both the guidance counselor and Dr. Edwards, the math teacher, connect students with the city housing agency as needed. For example, one student was living with a foster parent who she feared was about to put her out, but she was pregnant and needed somewhere to stay. Dr.

Edwards looked up phone numbers to call at the housing agency and had her meet with Ms. Walton to nail down housing plans. Similarly, Mrs. Jeffrey said she had a student who she learned was sleeping in her car and she connected her with Ms. Walton who connected her to the city housing agency. Mr. Jackson said he also has a good idea about which students have housing insecurities--stating that many live with a grandparent or are kicked out for different periods of time. He regularly checks in with them to see how their housing is and refers them to the guidance counselor if he learns that their housing is unstable.

Counselors also connect students to resources for food and groceries as needed. The guidance counselor helps connect students with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits as needed. Students are sometimes connected with a local nonprofit that provides crisis intervention for youth. The guidance counselor said "problems seem to be changing, but being aware of resources and connecting kids to the resources they need is essential because the resources are constantly changing," so part of her job is to maintain relationships within the community that she can connect students with as needed.

The guidance counselor points to mental health as a major contributor to problems that students face. She refers students to different non-profits, a mental health co-op or even a hospital psychiatric division when necessary. Dr. Edwards spoke to the importance of mental health in regards to students' academics. She had a student last year who was close to graduating when he suddenly stopped coming to school. She learned from his grandma that he was suffering from depression. On several mornings, she would go to the students' house to encourage him to come to school some mornings. She has also had many conversations with students who had suicidal thoughts. Because they opened up to her, she knew to check in with those students more

frequently and referred them to the guidance counselor so they could be connected to mental health resources. Mrs. Jeffrey gave an example of a student she teaches that was often worried about their mother who was recently arrested. Some days she said the student was almost frantic and might blow up, but other days the student completely shut down. She sent that student to talk to Ms. Walton briefly on days that the student said she will not be able to focus in class for the day. Angel said that the social worker who visits the non-traditional school also worked at her previous school, so she still works with her to be connected with mental health resources. She said it was important that she stay connected, because that was how she got the medication that helped her manage her depression and anxiety.

Ms. Walton is not confident this model could work in a larger school setting. She explained this belief by saying:

> I really think as a culture when we went to larger schools, it was a disservice to most kids and I get why we did, but ultimately neighborhood support and small environments are going to be the most productive. It has nothing to do with anything else. I just don't see that in a big school you can, the more you increase your numbers, the more you have a lack of buy-in.

She said in the smaller school setting it feels like everyone is on the same page and has similar priorities. Because the culture of the school is caring for students and supporting them through graduation, teachers tend to understand that sometimes students need to solve an outside problem with her before being able to focus in the classroom. She also continuously finds new ways to try to meet students' needs. She is working on starting a parenting group for students who are pregnant or have children, because she said she is starting to see that need more in the school.

Asset-Focused Practices

This section describes support that the non-traditional school offers students as they make post-graduation plans. Students are also able to meet with college recruiters and representatives from local non-profits who are on campus during class. Students note that this is important, because once they can envision what will come after high school, it increases their motivation to graduate. Communicating the importance of education for reaching future goals is a promotive factor that helps build self-efficacy (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Focusing on Graduation

The non-traditional school is designed to increase graduation rates and many of the students state that their motivation to graduate is the reason they chose to attend this school. Ms. Walton said, "students realize that we are the last boat out in terms of the high school diploma and a regular high school environment," so they tend to make an effort to do the work that needs to be done to graduate. Amari, Chase and Alex knew that they wanted to obtain a high school diploma, but thought they would have to settle for a GED. Alex, the student who was a caretaker for his father, in particular was worried about the pay gap between those who have a GED and diploma and said that his plans of becoming involved with architecture would not be much harder if he did not have a diploma. Dr. Edwards said the school also supports students who are not behind in credits. For example, one student was caught up on credits, but she said the environment at her previous school was too rigorous academically and she felt pressured to be perfect, so she transferred to the non-traditional school to finish her remaining credits. Dr. Edwards explained how the difference in environment seems to motivate students by saying:

> The kids aren't different (from her previous school). Here, we have "The kids that couldn't make it" in either of those settings. So, we still have the horrible attendance kids,

> we have the kids that are low performing. You couldn't even get in if you are not over-aged and under-credited. So, our demographic of kids is the same. I think that it is the hope piece that the program offers that makes us most successful, along with the structure.

The variation in student backgrounds makes the non-traditional school study site particularly interesting. What was consistent was students' motivation to complete high school and value placed on education, yet they fell behind in credits and were not on track to graduate in time. While facing the same external risk factors and having the support of promotive factors at the non-traditional school, these students were able to make progress towards their future goals.

The credit recovery teacher regularly tells students, "This is a school of choice. You have to choose to be here and choose to do well." Many of the students that I interviewed recognize the role they played in getting behind and said that their motivation has shifted since coming to the non-traditional school. Damion said he "was messing up," by not paying attention and not asking questions in class. When he realized going to college would be the best way for him to be successful with or without boxing, he got focused on completing his credits and bringing his grades up. Amari said she "was really bad" and that is why she would get suspended. She said when she saw her transcript before deciding to transfer, she broke down because "she thought it would take forever and it makes you look stupid on paperwork when you're really not stupid." She said it hurt but she never gave up, because she wanted her children to know it's possible. Chase said after he was expelled for fighting, he figured he would have to get a GED, "But then it kind of like hit me that if I just work and stay focused, stay on track, that I can achieve anything I need to really." Jaylen said he thought he would graduate until the suspensions and then he said, "I wasn't fully focused on my work after I got suspended. So really, I kind of held

myself back. After getting suspended, I thought I wouldn't be able to finish what I needed to get done." He came to the non-traditional school hoping he would be able to finish on time, but was not sure it would happen. When Angel said she always knew she wanted to graduate, but was not sure how that would happen in the environment she was in and with the number of times she was suspended. While students transfer to the non-traditional school with different levels of buy-in, the focus on helping students plan for the future helps keep them motivated to graduate.

The guidance counselor stated, "I don't think (students) see themselves in the next week much less the rest of their lives. They live in the moment and I try to talk to them about deferred gratification." This includes using goal setting as a means to help encourage students to behave and remain engaged in classes. She said she also witnesses a lot of self-esteem issues, including meeting with students who think they will not be able to graduate because nobody in their family has graduated. Ms. Walton gave an example of a student who graduated recently, saying "the first thing she did when she met me was cuss me out, but what it came down to were her own insecurities and lack of self-esteem." Nobody in that girl's family had graduated from high school and she thought school was a waste of time. Ms. Walton eventually convinced the student that she could graduate if she worked towards her goals and the girl ultimately ended up graduating. Ms. Walton said she and the student still speak regularly. She has found that many times students entering the school do not have high goals or ambitions outside of graduating from high school. During the students' introductory interview, the guidance counselor tells students "you can't graduate without a plan . . . our goal is not just to give you a piece of paper that puts you out on the street with no connection." She said some do not buy into this and choose to leave, but they tell those students that the doors are always open and after some time passes, many students choose to come back and enroll.

Preparing for the Future

The non-traditional school supports students' preparation for the future regarding high school graduation, applying for college and getting a job (for those who want to go directly into the workforce). The school provides students with numerous resources to prepare them for different stages of their lives. For example, during morning announcements one Monday, the principal announced that representatives from the city's youth employment initiative would be at the school from 11:00-2:00 to work on resumes and job applications, on Tuesday they would be administering the ACT and all students who were present would be taking it, on Wednesday they would be having a voter registration drive during lunch, and on Thursday, representatives from a local community college would be visiting. She encouraged students to take advantage of these resources by telling them they will get credit for going to the events, because she wanted them to attend without feeling like they would fall behind in their classes. She also encouraged them to work on their short-term goals saying "we are halfway through the term, so you should be halfway through earning your credit for this class." She ended the announcement with "We love you. We believe in you."

The non-traditional school also helps connect students with resources to meet different requirements for applying for college. They offer two days per school year that students can take the ACT. During one class, a student was telling the teacher that she got an 18 on the ACT and was worried that she would not be able to retake the test to get a 21 and qualify for state scholarships. The teacher assured her that she would be allowed to come back and take the test and congratulated her on graduating. The non-traditional school also provides resources to help students with applying to college and filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Sometimes they have representatives from colleges help students and they have online

resources that teach students how to fill out the FAFSA and apply for the state scholarship. Otherwise, Alex said Ms. Walton is always available. Chase said these resources have helped him understand how much a college degree will cost and the best way to cover the cost. The organization has students bring in their tax forms and their parents tax forms and assist them with filling out the form. Ms. Walton said one "trap" that she tries to help students avoid is enrolling in "predatory" for-profit colleges.

During lunch one day, the college coach came into the gym and students were excited to see her because she constantly works on building a relationship with them. They asked if she was going to play basketball with them today. She said, "Not today, but I have somebody I would like to introduce you all to!" She introduced a representative from a local college and two students said hello and that they recognized her from a previous visit. Students stopped playing basketball while she was talking and seemed receptive to what she was saying. The college representative told them, "We want your potential!" and sat with them to explain the college's leadership, entrepreneur, and social work programs. She invited them to come sit with her in the student lounge and start an application.

During lunch on a different day, a representative from another local college visited the non-traditional school. She smiled when she saw Damion walking past and threw air punches. He laughed and stopped to talk to her. She asked how the boxing was going and he updated her. She asked if he was ready to apply today and they sat at a table in the student lounge while she helped him with the application. He left to ask two teachers if they would be willing to write him a recommendation. When he came back, she gave him a few more forms to sign and congratulated him on finishing his application. He told me later that he was excited about

applying and appreciated that the woman thought to ask him about his boxing. After lunch, the principal congratulated students who applied with the representative over the intercom.

For those looking for work, the teachers are supportive of students leaving class to work with representatives from the city's youth employment initiative. This group helps students find part time jobs while they are still in high school and full-time jobs for when they graduate. During one class, Jaylen said it was time for him to do his application and the teacher gave him directions to the room that they were in. As he was leaving, she said "Go fill out that application, submit your resume, and get that job!" Dr. Edwards tells me that she regularly writes letters of recommendation for students who are applying for jobs. Mrs. Jeffrey said she sometimes goes over practice interview questions with students. Sometimes she notices students looking up jobs on their computers and she'll ask them what's going on--whether they lost their job or are just looking. Then she'll ask them to finish up their classwork and just use the last 20-30 minutes of class to look up jobs. During that time, she will sometimes try to help them figure it out. She will also offer to be a reference if she honestly feels like she can refer the student. Helping students plan for their future and providing resources is a promotive factor that helps students stay engaged with school. The asset-focused practices listed in this section help students feel motivated towards graduating, because they have a plan mapped out for their futures and support to help make those plans come to fruition.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss how the key findings from this study are situated within the literature and how the data points extend, bend and fit within what we know about resilience theory. Given that this study was conducted in a non-traditional school and I used a small sample size, the discussion is designed to highlight what students emphasize as important, without overstating the generalizability of the findings. Prior studies have well documented how under-resourced traditional urban schools often rely on punitive discipline policies that create cultures of control and result in students missing instructional time. These schools are also often overcrowded, with class sizes that are too large to give personalized instruction and caseloads that are difficult for school counselors to manage. Together, these factors push students who are facing various risk factors out of school. In this study, I have highlighted a contrasting case of a non-traditional urban school that champions identity, community, accountability, diversity, opportunity and equity, building students' resilience and helping them graduate.

Identity

Students' identity, especially in regards to their self-esteem and individuality, were accepted and celebrated at the non-traditional school in ways that many students expressed they had not previously experienced in a school setting. For example, students were able to verbally express themselves using the language that felt most comfortable and natural to them, whether that was Spanish, African American Vernacular English, profanity or slang. Students were never expected to code switch or change the way they spoke to adhere to dominant culture or norms.

Similarly, students were able to wear the clothes that seemed to best fit with parts of their identity: whether that meant athletes wearing sweat suits, transgender students wearing clothes that matched their gender identity or working students wearing their company uniform. Having a strong sense of identity and self-efficacy is a promotive factor (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Helping students develop a strong sense of identity mitigated the effects of risk factors.

These findings extend the literature on identity and respectability politics at no-excuses charter schools. The non-traditional school did not subscribe to the belief that students must all dress, move and learn in the same way in order to be successful. Students were able to use the language they were comfortable with, learn at their own pace and move around freely. In response, students seemed to enjoy showing up at school and feel comfortable expressing themselves and their needs. These findings also extend the dropout among LGBTQ+ students, as students who identify as such are more likely to drop out and have a lower sense of school belonging (Sansone, 2019). The non-traditional school created a welcoming environment that LGBTQ+ students reported feeling safe in and the ethnographic nature of this study allowed to learn about past examples of discrimination, whether direct like Angel being asked to leave class or indirect like Christian's biology teacher promoting a binary understanding of sexes. I was also able to observe interactions among students with their peers and with their teachers that indicate the school is an inclusive space.

Students also relearned their identities as scholars and learners. Teachers created a welcoming classroom environment, but students seemed to take the lead in acculturating newcomers to the idea that they should ask questions in class, work with peers when they need help and celebrate each other when they reach academic milestones. Each of these factors indicate an interest in learning and a willingness to learn, which are signs of engagement

(Archambault et al., 2009). The literature on high school dropout finds that individual-level factors such as identification with school and social bonding increase are predictive factors of student engagement and school completion among racial minority and low-income students (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Lehr et al., 2003). By not having to change who they were to fit into the school model, as Amari expressed having to do by becoming more reserved, students felt comfortable showing up as they were. That in turn increased their level of engagement. Using resilience theory as a lens for understanding students' identity allowed me to understand students' experiences from a strengths-based perspective. Instead of understanding different parts of their identity as predictors of dropout, I was able to understand them as risk factors that can be mitigated through proper support and promotive factors.

Community

External support from non-family members and institutions was one of the promotive factors that Garmezy (1971) originally posited. The community of support and care that students experienced at the non-traditional school was another promotive factor that mitigated the effects or risk factors. The supportive community was driven by positive peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships. Student peer-to-peer relationships were evidenced by how students got along with each other, were open to learning from each other and chose not to bully students who were different from them. Teachers worked to intentionally build a safe and inclusive learning environment for students. Staff members also had supportive peer-to-peer relationships as they switched students when they thought the other was better suited to meet the students' needs. Counselors also kept teachers up to date with students' changing circumstances. The wraparound services that counselors provided addressed risk factors such as housing and food insecurities and helped mitigate external risk factors (Fries et al., 2012). The principal gave teachers

autonomy on designing lesson plans and enforcing discipline policies. Together, these supportive relationships throughout the school resulted in an overall sense of trust and togetherness. Teachers and counselors at the non-traditional school created a safety net that students expressed not having previously.

These findings extend literature on students' gradual disengagement from high school and their resulting decision to drop out. The ethnographic study allowed me to see how staff at the non-traditional school created a supportive community and surrounded students with whatever was needed to keep each individual student engaged in school. These findings fit a compensatory model of resiliency as Garmezy (1971) posited. The risk factors that students faced were not removed. Instead, the school offered ways to mitigate the effects of the risk factors.

Accountability

When students reflected on their academic histories, they acknowledged both structural constraints and individual decisions that resulted in them falling behind in credits. The non-traditional school holds students accountable both behaviorally and academically. While students at the non-traditional school were allowed to move freely within and out of the classroom as needed, they were also held accountable to school rules, such as turning in phones and staying in class until the final bell rang unless they had a reason to check out early. Students were also held accountable for their progress towards graduating, as teachers, the counselors and the principal would pull students into meetings to look over their blue progress cards when they started to get behind. Together they addressed what was causing the student to fall behind and created a plan for completing the work that was needed. These findings raise a question about how future

studies on high school dropout could discuss ways of holding students accountable and motivated to graduate, because this theme is largely missing from literature on dropout.

While the non-traditional school held students accountable, it did so through non-punitive measures. This was vitally important because students who are suspended are more likely to become disengaged and being suspended one time increases the likelihood of dropout by more than 75% (Suh & Suh, 2007; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). Many of the students at the non-traditional school had already been suspended at least once, so finding alternative responses to enforce school rules was imperative when seeking ways to keep them engaged in school. Holding students accountable helped them develop a sense of self-determination, which is a promotive factor (Hupfeld, 2010). These findings extend the work on dropout, because while the damaging effects of punitive discipline are widely reported, there are fewer studies on ways to use accountability to develop a sense of intrinsic motivation. The conversations that the counselor had with students who were not making progress would be difficult in a larger school due to resource constraints, but an avenue for exploration when thinking about different ways to keep students motivated and engaged.

Diversity

The non-traditional school student body is diverse in racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, gender/gender expression, sexual orientation and English fluency. Students from minority groups tend to have worse educational outcomes, including lower rates of high school graduation. For example, Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out from high school than their wealthier peers (Suh et al., 2011). American Indian, Latinx and Black students are more likely to drop out than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). LGBT students are more likely to drop out, have a lower sense

of school belonging and are more likely to report experiencing discrimination in school, after controlling for demographics and state and school fixed effects (Sansone, 2019). According to each student I interviewed formally and spoke to informally, the school environment felt safe and inclusive regardless of their background or identity. The school also had a diverse teaching staff that sought to find ways to teach material that would resonate with students and used curriculum to get to know students and their interests. The methods ranged from reading contemporary literature books that focused on relevant issues, connecting constitutional rights to students' everyday lives or engaging in conversations about higher level math at the students' request. There was also a teacher who worked with students that were learning English. Allowing students to show up as they are and creating a welcoming school environment helped them remain engaged, which is a promotive factor that made graduating more likely.

These findings extend literature on dropout by looking at culturally responsive teaching through a lens of keeping students engaged and motivated to graduate. Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). For this study, I would extend the definition of diverse students to include socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. The school sought ways to create a culturally relevant curriculum that would resonate with each student based on different backgrounds and cultures. This finding could be further explored in future studies, as it is not discussed often in dropout literature.

Opportunity

The ability to recognize individuals' needs and provide personalized education helped improve students' ability to focus in the classroom, their mastery of skills and the likelihood that they would graduate. These improved academic outcomes, especially earning a high school

diploma, open up future opportunities that require a high school credential such as securing a job, enrolling in college and joining the military. Having a high school diploma is also likely to result in higher wages over the diploma holder's lifetime (Christenson et al., 2000). The guidance counselor and college coach focused much of their attention on ensuring students had the information and resources they needed in order to see their plans come to fruition. For those who wanted to attend college, that meant providing resources and inviting college recruiters that helped students fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), college application and applications for scholarships. For students who were interested in working, the school invited a local non-profit that helped students create a resume, improve a job application and prepare for interviews. Having a strong orientation to the future is a promotive factor (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Students remained engaged and motivated to graduate, so that they could move on to their post-graduation plans. The improved life outcomes that are associated with graduating from high school, such as lower likelihood of incarceration and better health, are well documented (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Christenson et al., 2000). This study fits these findings because students often cited these reasons as motivators to persisting through graduation. For example, Chase recognized that GED holders earn less money and Damion wanted a financially secure future that he thought would be difficult to attain without a formal education.

The non-traditional school adopted features that are common at different types of alternative schools such as small class sizes, flexible class schedules and support to meet students' socioemotional needs (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Most alternative schools today specifically target students who have fallen behind in school due to life circumstances and focus on teaching basic academic and life skills (Lange & Sletten, 2002). By providing specialized and

often personalized options for students to get an education, the non-traditional school was able to increase opportunities for students who may not have been successful in graduating in a traditional school setting. This finding extends studies on alternative school models, by describing the culture and structure of a school model that is a blend of other models. For example, Raywid (1994) defines three different types of alternative schools and the non-traditional school fits two of the categories: Type I alternative school that students can choose to go to for a new type of curriculum and Type III school that offers remedial academic support and specialized support for social emotional issues. The non-traditional school also offers small class sizes, online classes and flexible class schedules similar to many other alternative school models (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Most alternative school models have similar goals and the ethnographic nature of this study allowed me to learn about how the various non-traditional factors work together and understand which features resonate best with students and help them remain engaged in school.

Equity

The care that the non-traditional school took in meeting students' individual needs also increased equity. The smaller class sizes allow for personalized settings and individual learning plans, both of which are associated with lower dropout rates (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Koedel, 2008). While the playing field will never be completely level as long as structural oppression and inequalities exist, this school advanced equity in creative ways. For example, the school had flexible schedules to accommodate students' different needs, like needing to work to help financially support their families or needing to arrive at school late without penalty so that students' children are not left unattended. Students who needed additional academic assistance or more time to complete assignments were able to stay for an optional third period every day after

a majority of students went home at 2:30 p.m. Students were given city bus passes so that they did not have to rely on finding their own transportation daily. The guidance counselor also connected students to external resources that help mitigate the effects of external risk factors such as food insecurity and housing instability. By addressing students' external needs, students were better situated to work towards their high school diploma because they did not have to divide their attention with external concerns while they were in class. This study fits with literature on wraparound services that finds that meeting students' needs can mitigate risk factors (Fries et al., 2012).

Literature on the causes of dropout point towards a process of gradual disengagement that occurs when students face external circumstances such as having to get a job or take care of a parent (Hupfeld, 2010). An example of gradual disengagement occurred when Alex's caretaking became so time intensive that he was unable to remain engaged with school. After his father passed away, he needed to work to financially support himself and the non-traditional school's flexible schedule helped him stay on track to earning the high school credential that he hopes will allow him to earn more over his lifetime, avoid the wage gap that exists between diploma holders and GED holders and be admitted into the college architecture program of his choice. This study extends literature on how education can advance equity by showing concrete ways schools can promote equitable outcomes and offering another lens to understand wraparound services through. This study provides a strengths-based understanding of how students remain engaged in school while facing various risk factors and how schools can promote equity in life outcomes.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In 2017, 2.1 million students did not earn a high school diploma or GED (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). These individuals are more likely to experience negative health effects, be incarcerated and have lower incomes than those who have a high school credential. The country also loses revenue on welfare and unemployment programs because individuals who do not have a high school diploma use these programs at a higher rate than those who have a higher level of educational attainment (Christenson et al., 2000). Studies have found that individual-level risk factors including individual characteristics such as family context, children's attitudes and school experiences and school-level factors such as teacher quality, classroom management and school culture are predictors of high school dropout (Alexander et al., 1997; Archambault et al., 2009; Axelson & Flick, 2010; Lehr et al., 2003; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). Numerous dropout prevention programs such as credit recovery, summer school, vocational training programs and non-punitive discipline models have been implemented as protective factors with varying success (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Lehr et al., 2003; Skiba et al., 2012; Fries et al., 2012).

In this ethnographic study, I explored the ways that a non-traditional school that is designed to help students graduate supports them on the journey to reaching that goal and noted barriers to graduating. I interviewed three teachers, the guidance counselor and the principal to understand how the school is designed. I also interviewed six students to learn how the non-traditional school's culture and structure contributed to their level of engagement or disengagement from school. I found that the school's emphasis on building a positive school

culture and implementing supportive structures helped students reach their goal of high school graduation. The system was not perfect and did not guarantee success for students who did not buy into it; however, this school provided an important opportunity for students who wanted to graduate, but had been unsuccessful in a traditional school setting. While students' level of motivation towards graduating varied when they initially transferred to the non-traditional school, the protective factors that are in place help moderate the effects of the various risk factors tended to result in a high level of motivation and drive towards graduating.

This dissertation highlights successful methods of keeping students engaged in high school and implementing dropout prevention strategies. The non-traditional school had a culture of motivation that allowed students to feel welcome and appreciated as their whole selves in school. Students also had positive relationships with peers in which they normalize celebrating academic achievement. The non-traditional school in this study helped foster this school culture through building a community of support which includes supportive student-teacher relationships, promoting an environment that is inclusive to LGBTQ school members. Students' language and movement was also not tightly controlled. When students did need to be redirected, the school only relied on punitive measures for drug related offenses. Together these aspects of school culture were successful in keeping students engaged in high school.

The non-traditional school in this study also had structures in place to support students' success towards graduation including small class sizes teachers could recognize and address student needs with personalized instruction. There was also flexibility in scheduling to accommodate students' external responsibilities, so students did not feel like they needed to choose between working or caretaking and school. The school also employed a guidance counselor and a college coach that helped connect students with emergency resources that

students needed in the short-term and resources that would help students reach their long-term goals. This helped students be able to focus in class and feel motivated in reaching future goals. Having support staff such as guidance counselors and social workers was important for meeting students' needs, but these resources are often limited due to funding and the amount of time that can be spent on counseling is limited by various other responsibilities such as test coordination. The study offers insight on how these structures can be implemented and ways that students find these aspects important.

Impact of COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic and the state's resulting decision to close schools from mid-March (spring break) through the end of the school year, the grades that students had prior to spring break counted as their second semester grade and no final exams were given. If a student wanted to improve their grade, they were able to complete the course via an online class tool that the non-traditional school already used. The state-required number of credits to graduate also decreased from 22 to 20. Students who needed to recover credits for classes that they'd previously failed were able to do so via online classes. The school district provided laptops to students who needed them to complete their course requirements. Students at the non-traditional school were already familiar with using the platform for online classes, because it was the same one that was used for math, Spanish and credit recovery classes.

I spoke to the school principal to understand how the non-traditional school responded to the state and district responses to the pandemic. The principal, Mrs. Patterson, said she began making alternative plans for students to complete their credits about two weeks before the district laid out a plan. All of the principals were asked to "pump the brakes," because the district anticipated there would be state-wide changes to graduation requirements. Mrs. Patterson said

that she and her staff were worried that they would lose students if they did not stay connected to them and keep them moving, so they had students continue working on the work they had been doing before spring break until the district made a decision. She said many of her students are always deciding how to balance school and work and she was worried that many of the students would choose entering the workforce without graduating if they did not stay connected to students during the weeks of uncertainty while they awaited a decision from the district.

The non-traditional school staff scheduled times for teachers to call students using the schedules that students had prior to spring break. Each teacher reached out to the students in their first period classes during the first half of each week and then the second period teacher reached out by the end of the week to ensure they directly contacted students multiple times each week. The principal reached out once or twice a week to students that they were particularly worried might not graduate. Ms. Walton, the guidance counselor, also scheduled "Care Calls" to understand any barriers that students were facing and learn how the school could support each student. She also asked students what they needed to be able to work from home. When the district initially decided to only keep schools closed for a few additional weeks, the school was initially allotted 25 laptops. When the district made the final decision to keep schools closed for the remainder of the school year, schools were able to loan more laptops and approximately 45 students enrolled at the non-traditional school picked up laptops. The district also organized lunch pickups through a partnership with a local nonprofit. There were various food distribution sites around the district where students could pick up food boxes and school lunches. The teachers' ability to stay connected to students through a time of uncertainty is in large part due to the community of support that had been built throughout the school year. Teachers and students already had each other's phone numbers and, in many cases, had utilized this method of

communication prior to the state's decision to close schools. Although students and staff were not able to come back to the school building, the support staff continued to rely on methods described in the "Cultivated Caring" section including making the guidance counselor available and connecting students to external resources, to find ways to best meet students' needs.

The non-traditional school also maintained its focus on graduation and helping students prepare for the future as discussed in the "Asset-Focused Practices" section. Mrs. Patterson and Ms. Walton contacted students who had stopped coming to school and been dropped from the roster earlier in the school year to see if they were interested in coming back to complete their requirements. Four students accepted this offer. Mrs. Patterson said, "Some of the students who had dropped off the face of the planet were suddenly super invested in working from home." The non-traditional school also worked with the principal of a nearby alternative school to identify seniors who were close to having the number of credits needed to graduate. Since students cannot graduate from an alternative school in the district studied, the seniors that were identified were invited to enroll at the non-traditional school. Approximately ten of those students were able to graduate by completing the online courses they needed with the non-traditional school. As students approached graduation, the college coach, Mrs. Branch, contacted students via email to make sure they had the information they needed to apply for the state scholarship and to keep students informed as requirements (such as required service hours) for that state scholarship changed.

Once the set of students who were enrolled was solidified, to ensure students remained on track to graduate, teachers prioritized reaching out to students who had incomplete coursework going into spring break. Teachers reached out to them so they could create a plan together for how students would get their work done. During this time, they also figured out how to help

students who still needed to earn credits for core classes that they knew the state would not drop such as the four English and the four required math courses. The principal said she did not want to waste students' time with courses that they thought the state would end up dropping. When the state announced the reduction in graduation requirements, the school was able to create a new plan to figure out how to help students earn the remaining credits they needed using the online class platform. She explained, "The way the state reduced the graduation requirements really helped a lot of these students." 77 students graduated from the non-traditional school during the 2019-20 school year, as compared to 54 students during the prior year. The individualized approach to teaching that the non-traditional school already had meant teachers were already accustomed to learning what each student needed to earn their credits and graduate. The staff went through each students' files to map out a plan for helping students graduate on time. I would attribute the success that the non-traditional school experienced during the time of uncertainty and shifting requirements to the fact that many of their individualized practices and culture of support were already normalized. They simply had to find an effective way to reach out to students virtually.

When Mrs. Patterson learned that students were not coming back after spring break, she had teachers plan what their instruction would look like if their classes were virtual. She continued to allow teachers to have autonomy in creating their lesson plans as they did throughout the school year. Ultimately, each teacher chose to use the online class platform. Because the students were accustomed to taking online classes, this change was essentially just a shift in the location of learning. The only exception to online learning was in classes that students had nearly completed a project. If teachers were able to help the student complete the project from home, they took that course of action to wrap up the lesson. The teacher who

typically coordinates access to the online class platform led a session to train all of the teachers on using the system before they began lesson planning. The system gave content area teachers the flexibility to customize their courses and teachers were able to supplement that learning when they felt it was needed. Summer school will still be in session and since students who have to complete courses in the summer are still considered part of the 2020 graduating class, they will also be held to the reduced graduation requirements. The principal anticipates 12-15 more graduates from the summer session. The non-traditional school's institutionalized practices such as helping students prepare for the future, the familiar arrangement of taking online classes and the schools' consistent focus on graduation seemed to provide support to students as they navigated a time of uncertainty.

Five out of the six students in this study graduated in May 2020. Damion, the boxer, told Mrs. Patterson that he planned on dropping out of the non-traditional school and completing the High School Equivalency Test to earn a state-issued high school equivalency credential the week before spring break. He chose not to disclose why he was making this decision. When the state decided to reduce graduation requirements, the principal reached back out to him and he decided to stay enrolled. Damion completed his courses and graduated. He was accepted to the college that he applied to during lunch time with the admissions representative, but is unsure if he wants to attend. Amari, the student who attended the "no-excuses" charter school, graduated and is planning on attending community college for two years while using the state scholarship. Chase, the student who would play fight at school, graduated and would still like to join the military but is waiting to see what happens with the economy and pandemic. Jaylen, the student who was suspended twice back to back, graduated and plans on attending a local historically Black university. Angel, the student who is learning to cope with mental health conditions, graduated

and is not sure what is next. She would still like to go to school for sound audio engineering, but is going to look for a job in the meantime so she can afford to move out of her mother's house. Alex, the student who was a caretaker for his father, was considered homeless for most of the school year, but recently got his own apartment. With not being physically in school, he put his focus on working to earn and save money. He is still enrolled at the non-traditional school and making progress, but is planning on graduating by December.

Limitations

This study has three key limitations that provide opportunities for future research. There is mixed evidence of the impact of family context on student engagement and graduation (i.e. Astone & McLanahan 1991), but in following the non-traditional school's practice of minimizing contact with parents, I did not directly contact students' families or observe family context. I asked students about family context and learned that while students like Angel (who argued with her mom) and Alex (who was a caretaker for his father) have faced family hardships that made it difficult to remain engaged in school, other students like Amari (whose family helps with child care) and Jaylen (whose mother tried to appeal his suspensions) have supportive families that support and encourage them to stay in school. Not directly observing students' family lives or interviewing family members was a limitation of this study. Given the various home and familial factors that can impact students' academic success, an ethnographic study that includes home visits and interviews with family members would be informative.

As an ethnography of a non-traditional school, I was immersed in this single study site to understand the culture and structure that plays a role in students' engagement and disengagement from school. The goal of this study was to capture students' voices and perspective of what influenced their engagement levels. To better understand supportive mechanisms and constraints

in other school settings, a comparative study would be insightful. A comparative study would allow the researcher to gather primary data from other school settings to help them better understand the context of students' educational trajectories and risk factors that they have faced in other school settings. A comparative study designed in this way would also provide insight on ways that larger schools can implement some of the dropout prevention strategies discussed in the findings chapters.

Finally, the results from this study are limited in terms of generalizability, because the students who applied to attend the non-traditional school may have already had a higher level of motivation to graduate than some of their peers at previous schools. The important question that this study answers is how a school can help support students who are facing external hardships, but this study is unable to answer how to motivate students to want to graduate if that desire is not already there. This is another question that a comparative study or a study conducted with people who ultimately made the decision to dropout would be better suited to answer. Given the fact that the students in this study chose to enroll at the non-traditional school, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to a larger population of students with varying levels of motivation.

Contributions

An important contribution that this dissertation makes is highlighting the perspectives and lived experiences of students who attend a nontraditional high school to better understand what factors keep students who are most likely to drop out motivated to complete high school. Through gaining an understanding of students' beliefs, identities, and conditions or contexts as they relate to their academic engagement, this study documents factors that influence students' decision to persist in high school. This dissertation provides a counternarrative to studies that list

student behavior and attitudes towards school as primary reasons that students ultimately drop out of high school. As this study shows, there are often numerous forces that shape each of their decisions and actions and when students do not feel supported by or wanted at their school, they tend to disengage. This study operates on the understanding that students' perception drives their decisions, so while Amari did not think her previous guidance counselor wanted to engage with students, Damion felt like he could not ask his teacher questions quickly enough to get an answer and Angel believed her Spanish teacher discriminated based on her sexual orientation, the students' perceptions of these interactions was of utmost importance as these perceptions and experiences led them to them disengage from school. When protective factors were put in place, the students were successful in achieving their goal of graduating.

A second important contribution to this study is the exploration of school culture and structure that moderate the effects of individual, social and environmental risk factors that help students be resilient. In this study, I give detailed descriptions of ways that the non-traditional school implements dropout prevention practices and which practices resonate with students to inform future dropout prevention programs. There are numerous studies that cite reasons that students choose to drop out from high school and various programs designed to prevent dropout and this study offers students' insights as to which of these factors are important and why. Having a better understanding of these factors can inform design of future dropout prevention programs.

Future Directions

This section details areas for future examination, policies and practices. The discipline policy that the non-traditional school implements is one of the most important features, because the non-punitive approach directly addresses and counteracts reasons that many students fell

behind in their previous schools. By not relying on in-school and out-of-school suspensions, the non-traditional school was able to maximize the amount of time that students spent in the classroom receiving instruction. The non-punitive response to discipline also created an atmosphere of trust and care, rather than control and punishment. Non-punitive responses to discipline have an important impact on reducing dropout, especially because a student receiving suspensions is one of the strongest predictors of dropout (Suh & Suh, 2007). The practice of focusing on students' future plans, including high school graduation, postsecondary education and entering the workforce, also helps keep students motivated to graduate. Teachers, the guidance counselor and the principal constantly reminded students that their ultimate goal is to graduate and they regularly checked on students' progress towards that goal. These findings can inform practices that schools put in place by highlighting ways of keeping students engaged in school.

I did not include a section on teenage parents in this dissertation, because I only interviewed one student that had children. However, many of the students at the non-traditional school were pregnant or had children. In the state that the non-traditional school is located, schools are limited to a sex education curriculum that teaches students about sexual risk avoidance through abstinence and how non-martial sex can affect them as people (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). There are limits to conversations on condom use and contraceptives and parents of students are allowed to sue teachers who deviate from the abstinence-centered curriculum. States that have comprehensive sex education and teach students about safe sex, condom use and contraceptives have lower teen pregnancy rates than the national average (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Policies regarding comprehensive sex education classes should consider trends showing that abstinence-focused teaching is not effective at preventing pregnancies and find ways to

implement education programs that can help teach students about safe sex and preventing pregnancies.

Finally, and most importantly, this dissertation shows the importance of student voice in understanding how policies and practices impact their disengagement or engagement from school. High school students are often able to articulate the risk factors they face and protective factors that help mitigate those factors. They are able to express when they feel discriminated against and uncared for. They are also able to explain how supportive adults have made a difference in their lives. As studies and programs continue to look at high school students' dropout and graduation patterns, it is important to ask why the trends occur and what can be done about it. While teachers, administrators and researchers can offer insight and students may not be able to tie their own experiences to systemic inequalities, theoretical frameworks or academic jargon, students are experts at their own stories and their voices should be highlighted. Having a platform to tell their own stories and create a counternarrative is particularly important for students from historically marginalized populations—Black, Latinx, LGBT and low-income students. Taking the time to ask questions and learn from their experiences provides an in-depth understanding of patterns of engagement and disengagement.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guides

Introduction

My name is Ashley Jones. I am a researcher at Vanderbilt University. First of all, thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to meet with me. I am studying how differences in school environments impact students' academic achievement. This interview will include questions about your personal and professional (or academic) background. There aren't any right or wrong answers - I really want to understand your personal perspective and experiences. You have been asked to participate because you are a member of a non-traditional school community, and I look forward to learning more about your experience.

Before we begin, I want to review this informed consent form with you. Specifically, I want you to note that your participation is voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw your participation at any time. I will not use your name or your school's name in any of our reports; however, you should be aware that those close to you may be able to identify you. Only I will have access to data with identifying information. If you feel comfortable with this, all you need to do is sign here, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the study. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes, but you can stop the interview at any time if something needs to be attended to or skip any question you would prefer not to answer.

Do you have any questions before we begin? I am going to begin the audio recording.

Principal Interviews

Interview #1: Background & comparisons

1. Where did you work prior to being principal at this school?
    a. How long? What did you do?
    b. How long have you been principal at this school?
2. Which schools do your students primarily attend before applying for this school?
    a. How do they learn about this school and the application process?
    b. What do you look for in student interviews after the student has applied?
    c. What percent of students are admitted after they interview?
3. What do you think is the biggest difference between non-traditional, traditional and magnet high schools in the district?
    a. How does the school culture here compare to the other schools?
    b. Do you think the students' needs at this school are different?
    c. Dropout prevention, credit recovery, SEL, focus on testing, curriculum
4. What is the graduation rate at this school? How is it calculated?
    a. What are the reasons that students leave?
    b. Do they typically dropout or transfer to other schools?

    c. How long does it typically take students to complete their coursework at this school?
5. What do you see as your school's strengths and challenges?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #2: Identifying risk and protective factors

1. Can you give me examples of some of the (school-based) reasons students are behind in credits when they apply for these schools?
    a. Attendance
    b. School discipline
    c. Academics
2. What are the steps you take when responding to disciplinary infractions? Can you give an example of this?
    a. Attendance
    b. Disruptions
    c. Arguments or fights
    d. Zero tolerance policies
3. Can you give me examples of some of the (external) reasons students are behind in credits when they apply for these schools?
    a. Traumas
    b. Family support
4. Can you talk about ways that schools help address these issues? (*specific examples*)
    a. Traditional schools
    b. Non-traditional schools
    c. School counselors, teachers, friends, coaches
5. Resilience refers to ways that people overcome and positively adapt to risk factors including obstacles, trauma and hostile environments. How would you define students' resilience (or lack thereof), specifically regarding education?
    a. At this school?
    b. In your previous schools?
6. What factors contribute to their resilience? Can you talk about the last time you witness an example of resilience?
    a. Personal?
    b. Family/community?
    c. School?
7. How have you noticed these factors impact academic outcomes, if at all?
    a. Grades/Test scores
    b. Engagement
    c. Graduation
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #3: Reflections & wrap-up

1. What do you see as this school's strengths?
2. What do you see as this school's weaknesses?
3. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school culture to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school culture?
4. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school structure to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school structure?
5. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school practices to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school practices?
6. How did the non-traditional school support students after schools were closed due to COVID-19?
    a. Did students pick up equipment?
    b. Were classes available online?
    c. Did teachers contact students?
    d. How did students receive food/lunch?
    e. Availability of guidance counselor?
    f. Availability of college coach?
7. What was graduation percent?
8. Anything else you would like to add?

Teacher Interviews

Interview #1: Background & academics

1. What is your educational and work background?
    a. Training
    b. How long have you taught? Where?
2. Have you taught in a traditional school?
    a. If yes, how does this school compare?
    b. What motivated you to apply to teach at this school?
3. How has your experience been teaching at this school?
4. How much autonomy do you have in designing lessons?
    a. How do you attempt to make lessons relevant for students?
    b. What things do you try to include in your lessons?
5. How is students' learning measured?
    a. How often are students assessed?
    b. Do you think this is a fair/accurate measure?
6. How do you support students who are not performing as well as you think they can?
7. What role, if any, do you play in addressing attendance concerns?
8. Can you give me examples of some classroom management strategies that you use?
    a. How strict are school-wide discipline policies?

    b. In what ways are you able to respond to infractions using your own judgement?
    c. What kind of disciplinary consequences have you assigned and for what infractions?
9. How would you describe the school culture?
    a. Goals of the school
    b. Challenges that the school faces
10. What do you see as your school's strengths and challenges?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #2: Identifying risk and protective factors

1. How do you try to learn about students' backgrounds, if at all? Can you give me an example?
    a. Do you try to address outside problems that could impact their academic performance?
    b. How much do you communicate with parents or guardians?
2. Can you give me examples of the (school-based) reasons your students were behind in credits when they applied for this school?
    a. Attendance
    b. School discipline
    c. Academics
3. Can you give me examples of the (external) reasons your students were behind in credits when they applied for this school?
    a. Traumas
    b. Family support
4. Can you talk about ways that schools help address these issues? (*specific examples*)
    a. Traditional schools
    b. Non-traditional schools
    c. School counselors, teachers, friends, coaches
5. Resilience refers to ways that people overcome and positively adapt to risk factors including obstacles, trauma and hostile environments. How would you define students' resilience (or lack thereof), specifically regarding education?
    a. At this school?
    b. In your previous schools?
6. What factors contribute to their resilience? Can you give me an example of the last time you witnessed a student being resilient?
    a. Personal?
    b. Family/community?
    c. School?
7. How have you noticed these factors impact academic outcomes, if at all?
    a. Grades/Test scores

    b. Engagement
    c. Graduation
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #3: Reflections & wrap-up

1. What do you see as this school's strengths?
2. What do you see as this school's weaknesses?
3. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school culture to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school culture?
4. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school structure to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school structure?
5. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school practices to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school practices?
6. How did the non-traditional school support students after schools were closed due to COVID-19?
    a. Were classes available online?
    b. How often did you contact students?
    c. How did you address changes to your lesson plans?
7. What was graduation percent?
8. Anything else you would like to add?

Counselor Interviews

Interview #1: Background & role as counselor

1. Have you been a counselor in a traditional school?
    a. If yes, how does this school compare?
    b. What motivated you to apply to work at this school?
2. What are your priorities as the school counselor?
    a. What do you spend most of your time on?
    b. How much time do you spend with students? Teachers? Principal?
    c. How does this compare to traditional schools?
3. How do you try to learn about students' backgrounds, if at all?
    a. Do you try to address outside problems that could impact their academic performance?
    b. How much do you communicate with parents or guardians?
4. How, if at all, do you notice trauma impacting students' ability to focus on academics? Can you give me an example?
    a. Impact on behavior?
5. How do you support students who are not performing as well as you think they can? Can you give me an example?

    a. What role do you play in addressing students' perception of school?
    b. How often do you discuss students' future plans with them?
6. Which disciplinary framework did your school choose to implement?
    a. How is this framework implemented in your school?
7. What role, if any, do you play in addressing attendance concerns?
8. What role, if any, do you play in addressing discipline concerns?
9. How much support do you have from the school when making decisions on how to help meet students' needs?
    a. What outside resources do you utilize to help serve students' needs?
    b. How successful do you feel in meeting student and school needs?
10. Are there other factors that you would like to address?
11. What do you see as your school's strengths and challenges?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #2: Identifying risk and protective factors

1. Can you give me an example of some of the (school-based) reasons students are behind in credits when they apply for these schools?
    a. Attendance
    b. School discipline
    c. Academics
2. What are the steps you take when responding to disciplinary infractions? Can you give an example of this?
    a. Attendance
    b. Disruptions
    c. Arguments or fights
    d. Zero tolerance policies
3. What are some of the (external) reasons students are behind in credits when they apply for these schools?
    a. Traumas
    b. Family support
4. Can you talk about ways that schools help address these issues? (*specific examples*)
    a. Traditional schools
    b. Non-traditional schools
    c. School counselors, teachers, friends, coaches
5. Resilience refers to ways that people overcome and positively adapt to risk factors including obstacles, trauma and hostile environments. How would you define students' resilience (or lack thereof), specifically regarding education?
    a. At this school?
    b. In your previous schools?
6. What factors contribute to their resilience?
    a. Personal?

    b. Family/community?
    c. School?
7. How have you noticed these factors impact academic outcomes, if at all?
    a. Grades/Test scores
    b. Engagement
    c. Graduation

Interview #3: Reflections & wrap-up

1. What do you see as this school's strengths?
2. What do you see as this school's weaknesses?
3. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school culture to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school culture?
4. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school structure to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school structure?
5. What do you think are the most important ways that you shape school practices to help students stay engaged?
    a. What are challenges you see with shaping school practices?
6. How did the non-traditional school support students after schools were closed due to COVID-19?
    a. Did students pick up equipment?
    b. How did students receive food/lunch?
    c. Availability of guidance counselor?
    d. Availability of college coach?
7. Anything else you would like to add?

Student Interviews

Interview #1: Life History

1. Where are you from?
    a. What schools have you attended prior to this school?
2. What motivated you to apply to (non-traditional school)?
    a. What school did you attend prior?
    b. How did you learn about this school as an option?
    c. How did you feel during the interview after you applied to this school?
    d. What were some of the reasons you were behind in credits at your previous school?
3. How would you compare the physical setting of this school and your previous school? Can you give me examples?
    a. Resources (desks, books, building)
4. How would you compare the staff at this school and your previous school?
    a. Who was your favorite teacher and why?

    b. Who was your least favorite teacher and why?
    c. Resources (counseling, college counseling, career readiness)
5. Did you experience discipline problems at your previous school? If yes,
    a. What did you get in trouble for?
    b. Did that impact your decision to leave that school?
    c. How did that impact your grades?
    d. How did your previous schools respond to disciplinary refractions? This school?
6. How has your motivation towards graduating from high school changed since you entered high school, if at all?
    a. What are the motivating factors?
7. What do you think were the largest obstacles/barriers to your success?
    a. What do you think were the keys to your success?
8. Does your family impact your motivation for success in school?
    a. How is your relationship with your parents/guardians?
9. What are your future educational and/or occupational plans?
10. What do you see as your strengths? Your weaknesses?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #2: Concrete details about school experiences

1. What do you think is the biggest difference between this school and your previous high school? Any concrete examples?
    a. What do you prefer about this school?
    b. What do you prefer about your previous school?
    c. Teacher expectations
    d. Teachers' understanding of students' backgrounds
    e. Teachers' perception of student
2. How would you compare the social setting at this school and your previous schools?
    a. School culture, safety, responses to discipline problems
    b. Interacting with other students
    c. Interacting with teachers
    d. Interacting with principal
3. How would you compare the academics at this school and your previous schools?
    a. Do you feel like the curriculum here helps prepare you for success after you graduate?
    b. Has your interest level changed?
    c. Is the difficulty level different?
4. Has your attendance rate changed since attending this school?
    a. Why?
    b. Is there any communication with the school when you will be absent?
5. How do you feel like the academics here compare to your previous school?

    a. Are they more or less relevant to what you want to do after graduating?
    b. Are they more or less challenging?
6. How do you cope with factors that negatively impact your ability to do well in school? Can you give me examples?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview #3: Reflect on meaningful experiences

1. If you have outside circumstances impacting your ability to come to school or do well in school, does the school help you figure this out?
    a. Principal
    b. Teachers
    c. Counselor
        i. Socioemotional support
        ii. Planning for the future
2. How has your motivation towards graduating from high school changed since you entered high school, if at all?
3. What factors do you think help you face challenges either inside or out of school?
    a. Individual
    b. Family/community
    c. School
4. What do you think were the largest obstacles/barriers to your success?
5. What do you think were the keys to your success?
6. What do you see as this school's strengths?
7. What do you see as this school's weaknesses?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Observation Protocol

Below is the observation guide that I will use to take notes on classroom and school observations (adapted from Heinrich (2016) Implementation of Digital Instructional Tools observation instrument).

Date of Observation: _____ Time of Observation: _____
Site: _____

Type of observation:
Individual student Small Group Whole Class Other: _____

Notes on instructional grouping:

Student(s) Gender: _____ Female _____ Male

Students' Race/Ethnicity: ___ Black ___ White ___ Latinx___ Asian ___ Other

Notes on language status:

Student(s)' Disability Status

❍ Accommodations or modifications observed

❍ No accommodations or modifications observed

❍ Unable to determine if accommodations or modifications were made

Notes on disability status:

Instructor(s) gender: _____ Female _____ Male

Instructor Race/Ethnicity: ___ Black ___ White ___ Latinx ___ Asian ___ Other

Total Times
_____ Instructional time
_____ Total time on task
_____ Total time student interacts with a live instructor
_____ Total Observation Time

Notes for time off-task:

Total time spent in instructional formats
_____ All face-to-face
_____ All digital

_____ Blended

Time spent on curricular content
_____ Math
_____ Reading
_____ Writing
_____ Other: _____

Time spent related to particular instructional expectations:

Use of Time in Instructional Session
_____ Skill Introduction
_____ Drilling/Practice
_____ Review of Previously Taught Lesson
_____ Other (specify): _____

Physical Environment
[How and where students access the instructional setting, including the technological setting and any associated limitations, and who else in the same physical environment as the student]

Instructional Model and Tasks
[Role of instructor; purpose or target of instruction; student/instructor ratio and grouping patterns; ability to meet/adapt instructional model and tasks to student needs]

Interaction
[Is there constant, constructive interaction?]

Student Engagement
[Overall student engagement levels (passive or active), level of student self-regulation and persistence, and level of community within the instructional setting]

Instructor Engagement
[Overall instructor engagement levels (passive or active) and instructor efforts to encourage engagement]

Appendix C: Participants

Table A1

Participant Demographics and Background

Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Age	Race	Previous Schools	Reason for transferring
Damion	Student	M	18	Black	Charter	Unable to focus in large setting
Amari	Student	F	18	Black	Charter, Traditional, & Transitional	Suspensions
Alex	Student	M	19	White	Private & Online	Care-taker for father
Chase	Student	M	18	White	Private, Traditional, & Transitional	Suspensions & unable to focus in large setting
Jaylen	Student	M	18	Black	Traditional	Suspensions
Angel	Student	F	18	Latinx	Traditional	Suspensions & mental health
Mrs. Patterson	Principal	F	37	White	Traditional	Offered the job
Ms. Walton	Counselor	F	57	White	Traditional & Magnet	Liked the focus on graduation
Dr. Edwards	Math teacher	F	42	Black	Traditional	Already focused on graduation & credit recovery at previous school
Mrs. Jeffrey	English teacher	F	51	White & Chinese	Traditional	Moved to new city & liked the focus on helping students

Mr. Jackson	Gov't teacher	M	23	White & Latino	Traditional	Wanted to teach new subject & wanted new environment
Ms. Curtis	Feeder School Guidance Counselor	F	35	Black	Traditional	Wanted to work at more diverse school
Mrs. Tavern	Feeder School Guidance Counselor	F	30	White	None	Transitioned from being Special Ed. teacher

Note. Data collected from interviews with participants. Pseudonyms used to protect the identity of participants.

Appendix D: Feeder School Counselor Interviews

I interviewed school counselors from two of the feeder schools to better understand students' past schooling environments. My original goal was to also observe schools as I conducted the interviews, but with schools closing due to COVID-19, these interviews were conducted remotely. Therefore, I was not able to see any of the traditional school settings first hand. Instead, during interviews I asked school counselors to discuss their backgrounds, responsibilities as counselors and their thoughts on the numerous roles they have. The two counselors that I interviewed were Ms. Curtis and Mrs. Tavern. Ms. Curtis has a Master of Education with a specialization in Counseling and Mrs. Tavern has a Masters in School Counseling. They both have their educator license and have completed a preparation program as required by the state.

While they worked at different schools, their primary obligations were largely the same. They both stated that they are responsible for completing administrative tasks focused on academic progress including coordinating standardized state testing and tracking students' progress towards graduation requirements. They also advise students on college options and requirements for applying to college. They also provide socioemotional support, especially for students who they think might be contemplating suicide. They each mentioned trying to find effective ways of addressing bullying and harassment. Ms. Curtis said that it is difficult to keep tabs on bullying given the size of the school and the fact that few students report bullying. They both mentioned helping students with immediate needs such as helping students who are experiencing homelessness and food insecurity with the needed resources.

Ms. Curtis is a school counselor at the school listed as Feeder School #2 in Table 1. The school has just over 700 students enrolled, 84% Black, Latinx or Native American and 78%

economically disadvantaged. Ms. Curtis said that students can request to come speak to her and she will work with teachers to find the best time to pull the student from class. She also collaborates with teachers and administrators to address attendance concerns. When a student has five unexcused absences, she contacts the parents and sets up a conference to discuss a plan to prevent future absences. She takes these on a case by case basis, because she said each student requires a different plan of action. If a student has 10 unexcused absences in a row, they will be withdrawn. Ms. Curtis invites two external non-profit organizations, one for a boy's group and one for a girl's group, to host small group discussions with students who indicate an interest and some students who are recommended by their teachers. The goal of these sessions is to discuss life events and develop social skills like conflict resolution, empathy and planning for the future. Ms. Curtis discusses discipline problems if there seems to be an underlying cause that she can help address, but for the most part, she says discipline is handled by the Dean of Students and the principal.

Mrs. Tavern is a school counselor at the school listed as Feeder School #3 in Table 1. The school has just over 1100 students enrolled, 59% Black, Latinx or Native American and 55% economically disadvantaged. Mrs. Tavern works with three other counselors at her school. She seems to spend more time on one-on-one and group counseling than Ms. Curtis indicated, but she stated that her priority is reaching students who need crisis counseling. She is typically able to pull students who need crisis counseling out of class for a check-in as long as they are not taking a test. Her school also implements restorative practices as its discipline framework, so she sometimes organizes mediations after there is a conflict among students. She says that lack of resources and personnel makes it difficult to implement restorative practices with fidelity. Scheduling challenges make it difficult to find a convenient time for all members of a mediation

to meet. She is a member of an informal network of school counselors in the area that share resources such as potential non-profit partners and educational resources.

Without being able to observe the feeder schools and relying on only one interview with each feeder school counselor, I was able to get an overview of responsibilities, but not a full understanding of their approach to their job. The division of labor and responsibilities that each counselor discussed sounded like the ideal role of school counselor, but they hesitated to talk in detail about some of the hardships they face in their schools. We only met once over a video chat, so I was not able to build rapport in a way that would encourage a participant to really talk through the highs and lows of their job. These findings are also limited, because students transferred to the non-traditional school from a number of different school settings: private schools, well-resourced public schools, poorly resourced public schools, charter schools and a transitional school. Since each school type has different resources, constraints and charters/guidelines to determine the setup and resource allocation of their counseling departments, it is also important to note students' recollections and perceptions of accessing counseling services as discussed in the "Cultivated Caring" section of Chapter 6.