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Redefining Culture and Climate in the Alternative Setting: Dumping Grounds or Where Students Are Found?

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REDEFINING CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING: DUMPING GROUNDS OR PLACES WHERE STUDENTS ARE FOUND?

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the staff, students, parents, and guardians I had the privilege of serving and working with over the past decade. You have taught me the true meaning of life and education; I am eternally grateful. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your world.

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To my Dad, who said, “You know, babe, I want you to finish this before I die.” Thanks for being there for me every day. You have taught me and continue to teach me so much. I am thankful you are my dad and for all that we have done together. I love you, and this dissertation is for you.

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Abstract

REDEFINING CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING
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James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.
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This autoethnographic study aims to answer the following questions: How can a school leader design a culturally sensitive, inclusive alternative education program? What type of systemic change does an alternative school leader believe to be most effective in supporting students in attaining a high school diploma and a solid postsecondary plan to become productive members of society? What characteristics of culture and climate are most critical in an alternative school setting? The study focused on 4 years and tells how a school leader successfully changed the school culture and climate to best serve students and staff in the alternative school setting. The study viewed these activities through research. Effective school culture can be identified through six factors, namely collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnership. The study also used Schein (2010) as a framework to gain a deeper understanding of culture. The educational field should find this study helpful as it can be replicated to improve student outcomes for the most vulnerable students.

Keywords: alternative education, educational leadership, school culture, school climate, inclusivity

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Alternative education in the United States has a rich and diverse history, describing many nontraditional schools. Albeit broad, the definition of an alternative school and alternative programming refers to various nontraditional strategies and approaches to teaching and learning. The term *alternative education* addresses a wide swath of nontraditional programs and practices. Such schools or programs aim to implement various types of pedagogy while providing enhanced support and structure to serve students whose learning needs are as equally atypical or nontraditional as the programs designed to serve them. Alternative education also covers homeschooling, the General Equivalency Development Test (GED), Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) programming, charter schools, and special programs for gifted children. Students who attend alternative education programs need more help to succeed than the regularly assigned public schools can or are willing to provide.

Timothy Young (1990) claimed that alternative education options have existed in one form or another since the very start of public education in America. Alternative education offerings began to develop and multiply during the Civil Rights Movement and resulted from the highly inequitable and racist structures of American schools in the 1950s and 1960s. By the end of the 1960s, public education began incorporating new models that offered alternatives outside of public education or within the public school system (Lange & Sletten, 2002). These schools became necessary due to the inequalities

of schools for underrepresented students and the need to provide a better and more equitable education to all.

Before this time, the long-standing ideals established in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision reinforced the notion that all aspects of life between Black and White citizens should be separate but equal. In 1930, The American Council for Education released a sobering report entitled *Growing up in the Black Belt.* The report concluded that Jim Crow schools were grossly underfunded, which led to further inequities. The Jim Crow schools faced significant overcrowding, a lack of skilled and qualified teachers, and inadequate supplies. Although one of the primary goals of the Civil Rights Movement was to desegregate schools, the Freedom School model of alternative schools resulted. These alternative schools had a crucial role in the civil rights movement and significantly impacted the development of progressive education throughout the nation (Hale, 2018).

The broader alternative school movement increased public alternatives at all levels of education, with several examples cited herein (Young, 1990). Schools Without Walls focused on community-based learning, where the individuals within the community were utilized to teach students. Schools Within a School aimed to break down larger schools into communities of belonging; individual groups were designed to meet students' educational needs and interests. Multicultural schools are designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some have a diverse student body, and some cater to a specific ethnic group. Continuation schools are an option for those failing in the regular school system because of dropouts, pregnancy, and poor grades; these schools were less competitive and contained more individualized education. Learning centers are

intended to meet particular student needs by including unique resources, such as vocational education, in the school setting. Fundamental schools emphasized a back-to-basics tactic in response to the lack of perceived academic rigor in the free schools. From this, magnet schools evolved due to the need for racial integration and offered a curriculum to attract diverse students from various racial and cultural backgrounds.

Raywid (1981) stated that schools were "cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions, largely indifferent to humanity and the 'personhood' of those within them" (p. 551). Critics of the public school systems have argued that excellence has been defined solely in narrow cognitive terms at the expense of equity (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Due to these changes and the demand for something new, the number of alternative offerings increased exponentially.

Shifts in Alternative Education

Consequently, in the 1980s, alternative schools and offerings began to change and diminish. Through the 1980s, the definition of alternative education started to narrow in scope. Many of the school's first alternative schools to open did not survive, and options seemed to change "from the more progressive and open orientation in the 1970s to a more conservative and remedial one in the 1980s" (Young, 1990, p. 20). Young asserted that the rise of the continuation of fundamental schools and the decline in innovation in education in general, including alternative schools, coupled with a conservative climate of the 1980s, began to diminish.

Throughout the 1980s, many alternatives were geared toward students who were behaviorally impaired or failing in school, and this change significantly shaped the character and variety of options. This shift started the negative connotation that the public

places on alternative education and alternative school placements. This opinion prevails despite prior research illustrating that alternative schools possess a "cutting-edge" educational reform. Lange and Sletten (2002) proposed

> that many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered. (p. 26)

As time passed, these early alternative education programs often were a significant segment of a school district's dropout prevention program (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2014). The number of alternative education programs increased in the 1990s to assist students who were in danger of dropping out of school altogether (Caroleo, 2014). Programs that offer an alternative format to the traditional classroom remain essential for students at risk of dropping out of school altogether (Schargel & Smink, 2013). According to the United States Department of Education (2012), the number of alternative schools was reportedly 1,151 in 1990-1991. As of the 2019-2020 school year, there were 36,377 alternative schools in the United States. Alternative school programs continue to trend upward.

Research Problem Statement

An estimated 20,000 alternative schools operate in the United States, most of which have been crafted to mitigate students who are at risk of failure (Barr & Parrett, 2001). There is no exact number of these programs because of the diverse meanings and classification of alternative programs throughout the country. Lange and Sletten (2002) stated:

> Although alternative schools and programs have been in existence for many years, there is still very little consistent wide range of their effectiveness, and many educators continue to believe that alternative education is one important answer to meeting the needs of disenfranchised youth. (p. 7)

The research points to the lack of long-range data for stakeholders to review to make informed decisions on alternative education offerings. Furthermore, according to the Intercultural Development Research Association (1996), alternative schools are given extensive latitude by local school districts that wish to develop them, along with minimal guidelines other than the usual minimum graduation requirements imposed by the state.

Additionally, the quality of curriculum and academic rigor has been posed to alternative schools and programs. Research has shown that most alternative schools' curricula do not prepare students for postsecondary education due to their focus on remediation, credit retrieval, or course packets submitted weekly or biweekly (Huerta, 2016; Muñoz, 2005). Most alternative schools in the United States do not offer honors or advanced placement courses.

Most alarmingly, the use of alternative schools/placements has been refuted by many, claiming that removing students from the traditional classroom fuels the "school-to-prison pipeline." This theory contends that disenfranchised students are mistreated and prepared to enter a life of incarceration versus becoming productive members of society. Moyer et al. (2020) asserted that attending an alternative school, commonly associated with discipline, subsequently increases young people's involvement with the juvenile justice system. "Police may identify alternative schools as high-risk zones and give

young people in the vicinity extra scrutiny, especially if their ethnicity makes them stand out" (Hirschfield, 2018, p. 4).

According to Lange and Sletten (2002), public education is rooted in conventional approaches, and alternative schools have fewer federal and state limits and expectations. For some students, traditional approaches to education may need to be more effective. The terms *alternative school* and *alternative programming* are used loosely and broadly, making extrapolating supporting data even more challenging. Research has shown how alternative schools' academic rigor and course offerings do not prepare students for postsecondary education due to the heavy focus on remediation and credit recovery (Huerta 2016; Muñoz, 2005). Gregory (2011) contended that their district often treats alternative schools as second-class citizens. They frequently find themselves in weak political positions; they seem to be misunderstood by professionals in other schools and district administration.

The Intercultural Development Research Association (1996) claimed that public secondary schools, when faced with problems of behavior, violence, or general lack of respect and order, tend to exclude problem students rather than make attempts to change the culture and climate positively. Consequently, dumping grounds have been commonly used to describe alternative education and schools. Nearly every student admitted to the subject alternative school has experienced some form of dissonance in their home schools that was never resolved. However, it continued to grow when the students felt they could no longer succeed in any aspect of school, even to the minimal standard(s). This negative paradigm in no way describes the subject of alternative school. Alternative schools and programs have been labeled as "less than" over the years. No doubt there are certainly

alternative schools deserving of this label. During casual conversations, when I am asked about my profession, alternative school principal, I receive, “God bless you,” “Oof,” and “I am sorry to hear that!” This is all from individuals who have never stepped inside my alternative school. Alternative schools have a negative connotation in the eyes of the public. Sadly, a great deal of literature supports these negative feelings.

The school that this study highlights has educators that invest time and energy in understanding each student as they join this new school community. The staff uncovers the positive attributes of every student: their academic skills, interests, and each student’s story. A personal plan is developed for each student to begin learning based on their current learning levels. In this sense, the alternative school studied in this work is not a dumping ground but a place where students are found. Students who were lost in their home schools felt the educators did not know them, did not see them, did not hear them, and did not care about them. Finally, they had their dissonance resolved. They experience adults who genuinely want to listen to and learn about them as students and individuals. This current subject school works to create a new purpose for students, a new beginning, and new relationships. With this fresh start, students no longer need to respond with negative behaviors, which was the only thing they could do with success in their home school. This current research seeks to illustrate this description of the alternative school under consideration with vivid details and examples.

Next, the research referenced that students enrolled in alternative schools are often exposed to curricula that are watered down or less meaningful than those of their traditional school counterparts. This is avoided in this study because all curriculum is written and monitored by a highly successful curriculum team within the larger school

district. Additionally, all enrolled students must meet the specific criteria of their schools home schools in order to graduate.

Locally, many students within the county would benefit from enrolling in this program, but the tuition costs have soared to approximately $28,000 per pupil. The sheer cost of the program systematically excludes many students from more economically challenged school districts. This assertion is reinforced because the wealthier districts enroll more students than others.

Some proponents of alternative schools feel these institutions are a dumping ground for students who are “problems” with other students and staff within traditional schools. Educators are all too familiar with the negative impact that disruptive student behavior can have on a classroom and a school. Teachers must spend valuable instructional time on behavioral management, which steals time away from those students who remain on task (Kennedy & Swain-Bradway, 2012). Even though limited or partially proficient academic performance is the strongest predictor of students who eventually become at risk of dropping out of school, most students enrolled in alternative schools have behavioral challenges (Caroleo, 2014). Caroleo acknowledged that segregating and excluding alternative school students from the mainstream population can further disenfranchise these fragile students. Due to the above reasons, many alternative schools remain quiet to avoid disturbing the status quo.

Ironically, alternative schools were born out of defiance of traditional schools' lack of programming and success around many underserved groups within the population. School leaders can use the research highlighting alternative schools' shortcomings and potential problems to create an academically challenging and

therapeutically sound environment. It is possible to disrupt the status quo and demonstrate that an alternative placement does not mean “less than”; it is just a different path to get to the finish line.

The overarching goal of education is to educate students to become productive members of society. Each school has a different environment, with its culture and climate depending on various factors. The culture is a vital aspect of the school that enhances and gives meaning to various school activities (Dimmock et al., 2021). A school's culture is the school's primary personality, which is formed by the members' shared norms, values, beliefs, and traditions (Karadag et al., 2014; Senol & Lesinger, 2018). The school's culture influences how people think, feel, and act in the school (Peterson, 2002), and every aspect of a school, including school effectiveness, is impacted by a positive school culture (Kythreotis et al., 2010).

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the impact and effectiveness of school leadership within an alternative school setting. This study explored culture, climate, and inclusivity in an alternative school. The overall purpose of this autoethnography was to give a highly personalized account of an inclusive, supportive environment along with the thoughts and beliefs of alternative school educators. Through discussion and analysis of this account, a deeper understanding of the ideologies, approaches, strategies, and actions that support effective systemic change in beliefs, practices, and pedagogy that foster student success and achievement are developed here. The study also focused on the journey of how a leader worked to build an inclusive culture and climate with a focus on disaffected youth, such as those with mental health and substance abuse issues, those who have experienced

significant trauma, and those struggling with school refusal, anxiety, depression, along with LGBTQ youth who are fleeing bullying and harassment at their home school. Finally, school leaders, teachers, and other practitioners do not function in isolation; instead, they must often adhere to broader school and district policies, practices, mandates, or directives without considering alternative school tenets and needs. This study also explored how district and central office leadership, practices, policies, and personnel transitions and ideologies at the district level affect alternative school functioning.

School culture and climate affects teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community. The National School Climate Center (2021) maintained that "a sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe" (p. 1). During its development, this culture and climate have purposely and thoughtfully evolved into what it represents today. If the environment and culture are just right, this will support students with varying needs and all of the reasons that students were enrolled in an alternative school. Branstetter (2012) claimed that climate and culture directly impact the well-being of the entire school, teacher retention rates, classroom management, morale, sense of fulfillment, willingness to attend and participate in professional development, and a sense of being supported. Studying culture and climate more deeply is essential because all the components above are critical to any successful educational organization.

More research on culture and climate in alternative school settings that can be used to inform, assist, and guide practitioners who seek to establish alternative school settings in their schools, districts, or regions needs to be done. The most concentrated areas of educational research focus heavily on curriculum and instruction, assessment, graduation rates, and the other areas that address student achievement (Institute of Educational Sciences: National Center for Educational Research [IES: NCER], 2016). This autoethnography will give voice to the students and staff at the Alternative High School. These pioneer practitioners' experiences, challenges, and failures can assist other stakeholders in implementing and maintaining a successful alternative school program.

In conducting this research, I intended to learn more clearly what worked and what did not work in the nearly three-decade journey of the studied alternative school. When one engages in work in the field, documenting a detailed account often falls victim to the urgent tasks, problems, and crises of the day. The present research sought to uncover and recapture some presently lost accounts. The research findings shall be compiled into a practitioner's guide to assist practitioners in the planning, launching, developing, evaluating, and continually refining of an alternative school. This guide will help future alternative school leaders make a case for an alternative school in their regions, communities, districts, and schools and continue to assist at every step.

Rossman and Rallis (2016) explained that “ethnographies are the hallmark of qualitative research, derived from the disciplines of cultural anthropology and qualitative sociology” (p. 82). This study is qualitative in design via an autoethnographic methodology. I am at the center of the research. It is rooted in my practice and experiences. As the researcher begins to understand and reflect upon the organization's

internal workings, they must dig deep to analyze how their leadership and presence impact the setting. Ellis (2007) stated that this genre focuses on introspective and retrospective views of self, allowing the researcher to connect with the subject personally. Autoethnographic research honors researchers' voices as members of cultural communities by allowing them to use their experiences within a particular culture "to look more deeply at self–other interactions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). Through these experiences, a highly productive alternative school has been crafted and is thriving in changing the lives of at-risk students.

Ellis (2007) asserted that autoethnographic research allows the organizational researcher to intimately connect the person within the culture by revealing multiple layers of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that guide behavior. These assertions promote an autoethnographic study design. The rationale for conducting this study using this methodology was to gain further insight into how a school leader can create a positive and inclusive environment for all students enrolled in alternative schools. The lessons learned over the past 10 years can add to the literature and assist other school leaders in their practices.

Theoretical Framework

The school culture and climate literature was utilized to shape this research. After reviewing the literature, a framework or pattern emerged. Gruenert and Valentine's (1998) study provided the initial groundwork for the six factors of school culture. The factors are: collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, collegial support, unity of purpose, and learning partnerships.

Additionally, Schein's (2010) research stated that the levels of organizational culture include artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions. Through this core literature, this study sought to understand the intersection of the bodies of knowledge and research concerning educational leadership, school culture, climate, inclusivity in schooling, and marginalized students. Those intersections shall be analyzed and dissected to understand this research's focus better. These frameworks will be further explored in Chapter 2 as they were the outline for answering the stated research questions.

Research Questions

This dissertation was developed to answer the question: What factors should be included in an alternative school setting? To support this overarching question, I examined the following supporting research questions:

RQ1. How can a school leader design a culturally sensitive, inclusive alternative education program?

RQ2. What type of systemic change does an alternative school leader believe to be most effective in supporting students in attaining a high school diploma and a strong postsecondary plan to become productive members of society?

RQ3. What characteristics of culture and climate are most critical in an alternative school setting?

Significance of the Study

This research is unique because it builds a theory of best practices in alternative education that serves all students (although focused on marginalized students) through a positive, culture-rich, and supportive climate. The primary purpose of this study was to provide aspiring and current educational leaders with a firsthand perspective, along with

a highly personalized account of my successes and failures over the past decade at the Alternative High School (pseudonym). Understanding these factors is critical and enables this study to yield recommendations for practices regarding how educational leaders can appropriately organize and construct learning environments and experiences to serve students (Schunk, 1991). This will allow other stakeholders to learn and adapt some best practices for leading an alternative school. Many of the components of alternative education should and could be adapted to traditional schools for the overall benefit of staff and students.

The secondary purpose of this study was to add to the research and dialogue concerning school reform and alternative education. Through this dissertation process, it is clear that a gap in the research exists, especially when attempting to ascertain new and relevant information on culture and climate within an alternative school setting. By completing an in-depth study of alternative education practices, I can develop a theory about best practices to support students and staff.

Conclusion

This dissertation analyzed and considered the development and evolution of changes in a selected alternative school during a 4-year window. The changes have been made to create a supportive, warm, and inclusive environment for all students. School culture and climate are critical in all educational institutions, but even more so in an alternative school setting where the stakes are high, as students are at a crossroads. Now more than ever, students need strong schools in a time of cancel culture, school bullying, and endless social media use. If appropriately facilitated, alternative schools can change student outcomes and boost communities and neighborhoods.

This study will make recommendations, serve as a model for alternative schools, and contribute to the more significant conversations about school change and reform. Lange and Sletten (2002) contended that alternative schools have evolved from a promise made within the American educational system: to educate all students, regardless of their circumstances or academic issues. This promise can be realized if schools, teachers, and school leaders are given the correct tools to do so. The next chapter will summarize the relevant literature surrounding this topic.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The question of how to best educate students has been a long-running topic of debate and contention since the start of education and education reform. Throughout the years, different groups of leaders, teachers, politicians, and anyone else who has ever attended school have had distinct opinions on what should be happening in our schools and how to fix the problems there. School reform aims to include efforts to improve education and schools for students. School reform efforts have included programs designed to enhance areas specific to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Efforts to reform American schools date back nearly as far as the opening of the first documented American public school in Boston, Massachusetts, on April 23, 1635 (National Geographic, May 2022). Reform efforts varied greatly in their practicality and effectiveness (Bridich, 2016). In 1647, John Locke published his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which is widely believed to have significantly influenced American education and mainly asserted that the human mind is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, at birth. Therefore, Locke stated that knowledge is gained through experience rather than knowledge being a collection of a God-instilled set of thoughts and concepts (Locke, 1948). At that time, public school systems in the United States did not exist. Schools were locally administered and primarily focused on religious learning, spreading the spiritual gospel, family life, and community.

After the Revolutionary War, Thomas Jefferson envisioned a school system for all, financed by tax dollars. The Founding Fathers believed that the success of the new American democracy would depend upon the competency of the citizens. Kober (2020) contended that to maintain a thriving democracy, the people must be educated to

understand political and social issues better, participate in civic life, make educated voting choices, protect their rights and freedoms, and resist future tyrants and demagogues. Furthermore, character and virtue are required for good citizenship, and education is the platform to boost these ideals (Kober, 2020).

One hundred years later, the fledgling democracy still had not established a federal system of public schools. In the 1830s, Horace Mann, a legislator from Massachusetts, began his campaign to lobby for free public education for all. Horace Mann stated:

> Universal Education can counter-work this tendency to the domination of capital and labor servility. If one class possesses all the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is ignorant and poor, nevertheless, if schooling is equitably diffused, it will draw property after it by the strongest of all attractions, for such a thing never did happen and never can happen, as that an intelligent and practical body of men should be permanently poor. (Johnson & Reed, 2012, p. 92)

These ideals were created by the Founding Fathers and echoed a century later by Mann and his proponents. Mann envisioned “common schools” that would be available to all children and would not charge any tuition to the families. Those favoring common schools argued that this movement would educate young people in academics and civic virtues that supported the nation. According to Kober (2020), educational reformers were concerned that if private schools were given substantial power, the common school movement would stagnate, allowing significant numbers of students, resources, and parental support from the most advantaged groups. A successful typical school needs to include children from all social classes.

By the middle of the 19th century, every state in the union had a system of free public education. The United States had established greater primary school enrollment per capita than the world's wealthy nations, girls were educated at similar rates as boys, and the United States boasted high literacy levels for its citizens. The 19th century would close with a system of highly decentralized, locally funded schools in the United States.

The Birth of Alternative Schools

Federal spending on schools composed approximately 7% of school district budgets, which has remained unchanged today. The Federal Department of Education was established in 1867 to collect data on the nation's schools and help the states maintain effective public schools. Unfortunately, during this time, "there were gaping holes in" the nation's education systems, which were not equitable (Goldin, 1999, p. 7). The remnants of slavery would hinder educating Black students for decades to come. Jim Crow laws prohibited teaching Black people to read or write. Following President Abraham Lincoln's penning and signing of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862, teaching African Americans literacy skills was legal. The Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ended segregation by race in the nation's schools.

However, by that time, geographic boundaries of cities and towns had been drawn, often considering race, wealth, crime rates, immigrant communities, and other factors leading to de facto segregation. Other forms of discrimination also plagued the American school systems. Female students were either excluded or taught a different curriculum than their male counterparts. Many non-White students, such as Asian Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics, were forced to attend segregated schools

that lacked proper funding, facilities, and staffing. Many students with learning disabilities were institutionalized or prohibited from attending school during this time.

The realization of the concept behind a free universal education system like the one Horace Mann envisioned has endured a rocky road that has yet to be achieved for all students. Many groups did not support universal education due to the materials being taught, the teaching methodology utilized, or the social justice supported by the institution. Some opposed universal education because the curricula, materials used, and underlying social justice tenets contradicted their beliefs.

In his description of alternative schools, Timothy Young (1990) maintained that alternatives in public education have existed since the very birth of American education. Societal turmoil and inequality propelled alternative school and alternative education offerings into the light. Neumann (2003) stated that the

> 1960s were a tumultuous time, and subsequent advancements for African Americans in housing, employment, and education over the next ten years marked the Sixties as the era when the movement reached its zenith and made the country acutely aware of contradictions to its principles of freedom, justice, and equality. The Civil Rights Movement inspired many other groups and individuals seeking liberation and justice. Among these were women's efforts to imagine and actualize new life possibilities and achieve greater equity in education and employment. (p. 10)

The entire landscape of the country was changing in various segments. People were demanding more from the government and their local schools. Critics of the public school systems have argued that excellence has been defined solely in narrow cognitive terms at

the expense of equity (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Due to these changes and the demand for something new, the number of alternative offerings increased dramatically. These schools were popular and supported until the 1980s.

The alternative schools at the time focused on excellence and righting societal injustices for their students. The Freedom Schools were born out of this and aimed to provide educational experiences to counter the educational disenfranchisement of Black children (Ares et. Al, 2023Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001). Raywid (1981) viewed these alternative schools as "cutting-edge" educational reform for all. Raywid stated,

> Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, alternatives are the most evident example of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the programmatic, organizational, and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools include downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, and authentic assessment practices that alternative schools pioneered p. 26).

The alternative schools at this time were designed to promote student choice and authentic learning. Due to the small size, the students were more connected to the staff and ultimately performed better. McLeod (2014) contended that these ideas “such as child-centeredness and the role of schools as places to foster self-discovery, were gaining renewed attention in the late 1960s, alongside a radical critique of schools that looked to their potential to disrupt entrenched power inequalities” (p. 172). This was a powerful educational time for students seeking something better and different.

The Unraveling of Alternative Schools via School Reform

By the 1980s, the momentum and original spirit surrounding alternative schools had dissipated. In April 1983, the National Commission for Excellence in Education released the earth-shattering report entitled *A Nation At-Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This controversial report crafted an alarming and dismal picture of the state of education in the United States. This report started widespread paranoia and swift decision-making from those in power to "fix" American schools rapidly because the news media closely covered it. Ronald Regan also joined the authors in public hearings nationwide to discuss its contents.

The report spawned aggressive, comprehensive school reform efforts. Out of *A Nation at Risk*, the academic standards movement, a renewed focus on educational policy, and strict school accountability processes evolved (Stedman, 2011). The positive outcome is that, for the first time, a report demanded the attention of all Americans to recognize that in 1983, there was a significant achievement gap between races and socioeconomic statuses. The unintended consequence of this report started a domino effect of school reform mandates, many of which hurt our most vulnerable students.

Through the years, each president has attempted to enact some type of school reform effort and goals. The most researched and highly criticized reform stemmed from the leadership of President George W. Bush. In 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), marking an increase in the federal government's role in education. No Child Left Behind reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The most significant change was to mandate that all public school students meet state standards in reading and math by a designated time; consequently, closing the achievement gap was based on race, ethnicity, and language (Yell & Drasgow, 2005). By

2015, bipartisan criticism had increased so much that a bipartisan Congress stripped away the national features of No Child Left Behind. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Instead of a universal accountability system for all states, ESSA allowed states to develop accountability systems that best measure student success in their respective states.

Still, despite the grand history of school reform and the American reform efforts, there are so many misrepresented and underserved groups within schools. Darling-Hammond (2001) contended that few Americans realize that the U.S. educational system is one of the most unequal in the industrialized world, with students routinely receiving significantly different learning opportunities based on socioeconomic status. School reform efforts that have tied accountability to funding sources have further aggravated this systemic problem. Darling-Hammond (2001) stated, "In combination, policies associated with school funding, resource allocations, and tracking leave minority students with fewer and lower-quality books, curriculum materials, laboratories, and computers; significantly larger class sizes; less qualified and experienced teachers; and less access to high-quality curriculum" (p. 377). More research on school reform is needed, particularly concerning social justice initiatives, such as those that explicitly aim to improve teaching practices and outcomes for marginalized students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2008). At this time of hyperfocus on school reform, alternative schools were utilized to remove students who did not "fit" in the traditional school setting. This practice raises a new set of ethical and moral issues for students.

Forced Removal to Alternative Placements

The premise of alternative education revolves around the thought that there are various ways to become educated, various educational environments, and a range of academic structures and that not every student will "fit" into the larger traditional school model. Sadly, 80% of present-day alternative schools are punitive, meaning students are placed into alternative schools mainly due to behaviors rather than academic issues (Piper, 2017). Alternative schools have served as placements for students who violated disciplinary codes, and it was a simple lateral move for administrators. According to Vogell and Fresques (2017), "Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 refashioned the yardstick for judging schools, alternative education has taken on another role: A silent release valve for high schools…that are straining under the pressure of accountability reform" (p. 2). The founding principles of alternative schools are not predicated on moving students with behavior issues out of traditional schools into segregated placement. Alternative school placements intend to serve students experiencing hardship in a traditional placement. They were never meant to be a "dumping ground" for schools to remove so-called problem students. Caroleo (2014) acknowledged that it appears as though segregating and removing alternative school students from the mainstream population alienates disadvantaged students further.

Despite some districts straying from the original philosophies of alternative schools, there has been a continual decrease in high school dropouts in the United States. Alternative school placements have assisted in this area by servicing students who would be potential high school dropouts. So many alternative schools are working hard to help their students attain a high school diploma and plan for a productive and happy future. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, dropout rates have decreased

over the past 40 years, declining from 14.1% in 1973 to 5.8% in 2017. During the most recent 10-year period of available data (2007 to 2017), the status dropout rate decreased from 8.7% to 5.8%. On the surface, these statistics present a bright view of graduation trends in American schools. The truth is that marginalized populations still face significant dropout risks. Alternative schools must offer the absolute best options in academic, behavioral, postsecondary job training, and service learning to prepare students who have been failed by decades of school reform. It is well noted in the research that poor academic performance is a powerful predictor of students who eventually become at risk of dropping out of school (Caroleo, 2014). Schools that serve this population must recognize and attempt to remediate this fact.

Marginalized Populations

For decades, the terms *marginalized* and *at-risk* students have been part of the educational vocabulary. The term at-risk encompasses students who, for various reasons, are in jeopardy of not achieving the goals of education and not acquiring the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to be productive members of society (Austin & McCann, 1988). Furthermore, Cox and Sagor (2013) expanded the definition to include "any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter/intra personal relationships" (p. 22). Many proponents of education believe that using the label or terminology at-risk is harmful to student success. The term marginalized populations appears to be gaining traction.

According to Mayer and Scherr (2019), millions of students are at risk for harmful academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes associated with peer rejection and

various forms of marginalization. These include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning students, students of color and culturally and linguistically diverse students, young people with severe mental health issues, and those with serious problem behaviors and school failure trajectories, including students with disabilities.

Historically and presently, schools have struggled to serve this population of students effectively. Sadly, the fate of these identified students has been captured in research repeatedly. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2020, there were 2.0 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24, and the overall status dropout rate was 5.3%; students who drop out of school face incredibly bleak economic and social futures. Rumberger (1995) explained that compared to high school graduates, they are less likely to find a job and earn a living wage, more likely to be poor and suffer from a variety of adverse health outcomes, and are more likely to rely on public assistance, engage in crime, and generate other social costs borne by taxpayers. If schools cannot support these students, there are far greater societal and economic consequences for the future.

Transformational Leadership and the Principalship

The school reform and leadership concept began to shift when schools were held accountable for the supposed success or failures of the students and overall school (Murphy, 2020). Schools are responsible for the effective teaching of students, and governments and school systems need to hold schools accountable for the learning outcomes of their students (Foster, 1999). The connection between effective leadership and its relationship to student success is absolute (Stronge et al., 2011). Leithwood et al. (2004) maintained that leadership is a close runner-up to classroom instruction regarding

students' learning. Whitaker (2003), Cotton (2003), and Marzano et al. (2005) clearly defined leadership behaviors as having a remarkable effect on achievement. Effective school leadership is an essential part of a successful school. Therefore, the school principal is responsible for the underpinnings of effective school reform. For this type of work, leaders must seek to incorporate a leadership style that can make drastic positive changes for these students and their educational and life outcomes.

Numerous organizational leadership styles connect with this study, but the elements of transformational leadership are most applicable. Numerous organizational leadership styles connect with this study, but the aspects of transformational leadership are most applicable. Transformational leadership is a style that can transform followers' values and priorities and motivate them to perform beyond their expectations (Yukl, 2008). Transformational leadership behaviors comprise four components: inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Bass (2000) stated:

> Transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration. It elevates the follower's level of maturity and ideals and concerns for achievement, self-actualization, and the well-being of others, the organization, and society. (p. 19)

Kark et al. (2003) contended:

> Inspirational motivation includes creating and presenting an attractive vision of the future, using symbols and emotional arguments, and demonstrating optimism and enthusiasm. Idealized influence includes behaviors such as sacrificing for the

> benefit of the group, setting a personal example, and demonstrating high ethical standards. The third component, individualized consideration, includes supporting followers, encouraging, and coaching. The fourth component, intellectual stimulation, involves behaviors that increase awareness of problems and challenge followers to view problems from new perspectives. (p. 247)

It is through these tenets that the underpinnings of servicing alternative school students are embedded. These tenets must be an integral component of the organization, including leadership in school culture, climate, and inclusivity. Each segment is pivotal in a successful school for staff and students. These theories and structures guide educational leaders to create the best possible outcomes for staff and students. Innovative and motivating school principals possess more transformational leadership characteristics (Mi et al., 2019). By utilizing these pieces as a framework for success, a principal can begin to build a learning environment for all. To start this process, a leader must begin with a deep understanding of the importance of school culture.

"Transformational leaders are innovative thinkers who plan with the end in mind, predict unintended consequences of decision-making, and empower employees to gain relevant experiences aligned with their personal goals and the organization's overarching goals" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 98). Hooper and Bernhard (2016) stated that a transformational leader methodically designs structures for team collaboration and for schools to be culturally responsive and inclusive of all students to support teaching and learning for all school community members (Hooper & Bernhard, 2016). Kouzes and Posner (2017) created a leadership framework that identified five exemplary leadership practices that are transformational: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c)

challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. It is through these tenets that the underpinnings of servicing alternative school students are embedded. These tenets must be an integral component of the organization, including leadership in school culture, climate, and inclusivity. Each segment is pivotal in a successful school for staff and students.

According to Berkovich (2016), transformational leadership theory has been one of education's most influential leadership models. This style is broadly viewed as the most utilized one because those who practice it try to change, inspire, and engage followers (Hassan, 2013). This makes perfect sense, as most people who aspire to be educational leaders want to make positive and meaningful change that impacts student outcomes for the greater good.

Educating these students is an attempt to right inequitable processes and deliver social justice to the country's most vulnerable students. Oakes and Rogers (2006) highlighted a need for less technical and more equitable reforms so that leaders can contribute significantly to more inclusive and equitable schooling for all children. By utilizing these pieces as a framework for success, a principal can begin to build a learning environment for all. To start this process, a leader must begin with a working understanding of change theory.

Change Theory in Schools

Change theory is prevalent in schools and is a basic description of what needs to change and how it will be accomplished. Change theory requires educational leaders to be highly reflective and dig deep for their espoused values versus their theories in use (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Kotter's change model was utilized for this study. The model is

simple, straightforward, and direct. Kotter (1996) claimed that there are eight steps in the process of change: creating a sense of urgency, forming powerful guiding coalitions, developing a vision and a strategy, communicating the vision, removing obstacles and empowering employees for action, creating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and strengthening change by anchoring change in the culture. Leaders must have a strong understanding of these change components to begin addressing shortcomings within their schools.

Importance of School Culture

School culture is a product of what people believe about the organization, why they think it, and, as a result, how they do things. Numerous scholars share this conception of school culture as the guiding beliefs, assumptions, and expectations evident in how the school operates (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). As a result of those beliefs, school culture manifests itself in the actions, procedures, processes, and systems that are replicated repeatedly.

Culture is not limited to what one piece of evidence speaks and represents; instead, it is the aggregate of what every example that demonstrates the truth about how the place works. Gruenert (2000) stated, “Culture provides the context in which the whole education process occurs” (p. 14). School culture can be understood by seeking an understanding of the feelings derived from how staff, teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other members of the school community talk and behave toward each other. School culture may be represented in every item hung or posted on walls, doors, windows, or outside the school.

Understanding school culture takes careful observation, analysis, and synthesis of artifacts, including but not limited to observations of students, teachers, or other staff members, any written or print item such as posted rules and consequences, letters, memoranda, curricular documents, policies and regulations, illustrations, pictures, paintings, photographs, records that reveal information about the school, and anything else that contributes to understanding what the people in the organization believe and how they do things. Each of these symbols of school culture becomes a thread woven and backstitched into a complex and delicate fabric of the organizational quilts. It is constructed of a seamless blend and integration of countless different, contrasting, and complimenting colors, patterns, and textures. The blocks are stitched to complete each other into the whole quilt, a more significant, stronger, and more potent synergy, more complex and striking than any of its blocks. This way of defining school culture illustrates why establishing a unique culture is critical to any organization, as it will impact every aspect of the organization moving forward.

According to Schein (2010), culture is learned as it evolves slowly and is reinforced continuously over time. It becomes the shared manner in which people experience the organization. Because culture is woven, stitch by stitch, gradually growing in detail and clarity, changing culture occurs through the same incremental process and takes time. Attempting to modify or deconstruct an individual thread or block of a beautiful complex quilt without damaging one or more others is painstakingly difficult. The many school culture symbols are inextricably woven and integrated into the organization. Changing or creating school culture can be done in a positive, productive manner; however, it takes patience, thoughtfulness, and involvement and collaboration by

the organization's members. (Schein, 2010) The exciting yet challenging part for members of an organization is knowing that one can be responsible for creating meaningful experiences for a large segment of the population if the work is done correctly.

Levels of Organizational Culture

Schein (2010) stated that there are three levels of organizational culture. The first level includes artifacts. Artifacts are anything we can touch and observe. For example, the school building is an artifact; it has an aesthetic design, and we can touch the materials and observe if they are in good repair or neglected and ailing. Any print item, illustration, photo, or artwork can be considered a first-level artifact. Examples of these might include a posted mission statement, posted goals, an official calendar, any supplies or equipment that exist in the school, for example, sports or fitness equipment for physical education, a list of school rules or norms, a list of commonly used math formulas, or a bulletin board that displays the calendar and any pertinent dates and events for the schools. Anything you can see and touch is an artifact.

Schein (2010) suggested that espoused values are the second level of organizational culture. Argyris and Schon (1978) asserted that people hold maps about planning, implementing, and reviewing their espoused values. Espoused values are the intricate plans on how to implement our work best. Prokopchuk (2016) affirmed that espoused values contribute to the development of expected standards of the organization now and in the future. The school organization has strategic planning and goals. Values are sometimes discussed and revised as new members come to the culture. Goldring (2002) stated, “Developing a shared vision is a leadership process that must include all

contributors at the school site" (p. 33). A shared vision and mission is essential to have a thriving school culture. Staff needs to feel a sense of ownership in creating this vision to make it live and visible.

Schein (2010) described the third level of organizational culture as rooted in assumptions. Schein contended that leaders must fully understand and dissect underlying assumptions deeply embedded in the culture to deepen understanding of an organization's culture. Schein (1984) described these assumptions as "how group members perceive, think, and feel" (p. 4). Progress can be achieved only by factoring in an organization's spoken and unspoken assumptions. A successful school leader can understand and mobilize these factors to create a positive school culture.

Culture and Organizational Leadership

Organizational culture describes the norms, values, perceptions, practices, and accepted behavior that all employees have accepted (Denison, 1996; Glisson, 2007; Gruenert, 2008). It has been described as "the way we do things around here." It is about doing the right things in the right way. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) defined culture as "the social glue that holds people together" (p. 6). Planning, preparing, and acting to build a particular desired school culture cannot be left to talking about it and hoping people make decisions to do the right things and know how to do those things so that it all supports the desired school culture. There can be a lot left to chance.

The primary task of a building principal is to foster a strong school culture by solidifying a commitment to all school members to create and maintain a positive school culture (Lee & Louis, 2019). Kalkan et al. (2020) stated:

> School culture is a critical factor that determines the perception of the school and the behavior patterns of all partners, especially teachers and students, in which the shared leadership style comes into play. Therefore, school culture is a phenomenon that affects the quality of human relationships in educational organizations and is also affected by the quality of these relationships. (p. 101)

The leader who wants to ensure the right culture is planted and grows ensures that the right seeds are sown; that is, she ensures everyone in the school is doing the right things to promote the culture. She provides the right initiatives, the right actions, the right stated rules and norms, the right priorities, the suitable curricula, the right kind of instruction, the proper assessment model, and the right student support, all to promote the right culture. The principal's role in influencing the culture is essential in influencing teacher satisfaction through their behaviors as a leader in the school (Gruenert, 2008). School leaders are critical in creating the right conditions for teachers and students to thrive (Stoll et al., 2006). Being a leader means celebrating and empowering staff, students, and community, making the school alive with what we do (Prokopchuk, 2016). A purposeful leader nurtures and strengthens those seedlings, the sprouts of school culture to blossom if given the right conditions and continued tending. The leader carefully observes and determines everyone's needs. They provide opportunities for professional development, direct instruction, embedded coaching and direction, and modeling of how to do the things the school and its leader have chosen to do. School culture is essential for disadvantaged students (Johnston, 2013; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). The culture and the people make the culture grow in strength and confidence as the culture takes root, grows robust, and spreads throughout the school.

Leadership and School Climate

The school climate is the physical and emotional manifestation of the organization's culture. School culture is grounded in the organization's beliefs, while the climate is grounded in the culture. Freiberg and Stein (1999) described school climate as "the heart and soul of the school," the feeling that encourages teachers and students to engage, love the school, and want to be a part of it or to reject the school and disengage from it. The idea of climate is closely connected with culture, as culture is what breeds the climate (p.76). Organizational climate is created when employees share the same perceptions of how the work environment affects them individually; it is a property of the individual (James & Glisson, 2002). The organization will advance when individuals work together with these same perceptions or unity of purpose. "A school climate that stimulates personal growth enhances the positive self-image of the school and promotes achievement is necessary for excellence to occur" (Chang and Le, 2010, p. 485). It is evident how significant the school climate is for the overall success of the school and all individuals within the school.

There are factors and levels surrounding school culture, and these aspects exist when examining school climate. Loukas (2007) maintained that three dimensions of school climate can be analyzed. These dimensions include the physical, social, and academic realms. The physical dimension consists of the appearance of the school building and its classrooms, school size and the ratio of students to teachers, order and organization of classrooms in the school, availability of resources, and safety and comfort. The second dimension of social aspects includes the quality of interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff; equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff; degree of competition and social comparison

between students; and the degree to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decision-making at the school. The academic dimension includes quality of instruction, teacher expectations for student achievement, monitoring student progress, and promptly reporting results to students and parents.

When entering a school building, an individual can sense the climate. Significant relationships exist between various school culture factors, school climate, leadership, and student achievement. All organizational stakeholders must spend considerable time and effort to shape and foster a positive school climate. Daily et al. (2020) stated that several considerations underline the importance of school climate. This climate sets the tone for the school's approach to meeting stated goals and resolving problems. Effective communication necessitates a climate of trust, mutual respect, and clarity of function. The climate is an essential determinant of attitudes toward continuous personal growth and development. Climate conditions are the setting for creativity, generating new ideas and program improvements. (Norton, 2002, p. 43). The considerations listed above illustrate the importance of school climate. These notions can be compared to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which explicitly states that individuals cannot reach self-actualization until all physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, and self-esteem needs have been attained (Maslow, 1943). This is the same with the climate; the school cannot reach its full potential unless all of these considerations have been achieved.

Importance of Inclusivity in Schools and Leadership

Humans, by nature, are pack animals with an inherent need to fit in and be included. Inclusivity includes all types of people, things, or ideas and treats them fairly and equally. This concept is fundamental to young people's learning to navigate social

and peer relationships. James (1890/1950), Freud (1930/1961), Maslow (1968), and Deci and Ryan (1985) have argued that belongingness is a crucial aspect of human motivation. Adolescents are hyper-aware and petrified of standing out and not being included, whether in athletics, social, or academic settings.

Inclusivity has gained traction over the past few decades, significantly impacting educational policy and practice (Egbo, 2009; Howard & Aleman, 2008). In the past, inclusivity was solely utilized for special education students. Now, inclusivity encompasses so much more. The focus now aims to include all children regarded as being at educational risk due to marginalization due to minority group status through disability, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic and psychological factors. This new push for inclusivity has allowed many who may otherwise have become alienated from the educational system to remain in it (Ysseldyke et al., 1994).

Parents, school officials, and peer groups may exclude students from all facets of the school day. The two main types of exclusion are social and school. According to Lynn, Boswell, and Zheng (2017), social exclusion can take many forms, with children reporting a range of experiences from being deliberately excluded from a peer group to having rumors spread about them, being called names, and being purposefully embarrassed. Social exclusion fundamentally entails a lack of connectedness and participation from a peer group. Approximately 1 in 6 children report experiences of social exclusion; however, this may underrepresent the actual number given the difficulties in measuring social exclusion (Ysseldyke et al., 1994).

A group that has emerged as being excluded is students who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Ridings (2020) stated:

> Students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) continue to experience bullying and harassment from their peers in K–12 education. LGBTQ students experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as intersecting identities that encompass race, disability status, ethnicity, religion, color, and national origin, among other categories. These experiences create barriers to short-term and long-term educational attainment and well-being. (p. 38)

Ridings also confirmed that the majority of LGBTQ students (87.3%) experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, and disability. Seven in ten LGBTQ students (70.1%) experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation, and more than half based on gender expression (59.1%) or gender (53.2%). These statistics are startling, and so many students are hurting each day.

Sadly, the physical, emotional, and mental health of children exposed to social exclusion can be compromised. These children tend to have a lower immune function, reduced sleep quality, reduced ability to calm themselves in times of distress, lowered self-esteem, and feelings of anxiety, depression, and aggression have all been observed in children who have been excluded from a peer group (DeWall et al., 2011). These outcomes are unacceptable for students and will hinder success in many ways for teachers and students.

School exclusion occurs when school officials deem that a student needs to be removed from the educational facility for many reasons. These reasons include but are not limited to being deliberately disobedient or disorderly, being violent, having a gun or

dangerous weapon, hurting or threatening to hurt someone with a dangerous weapon, being in possession, selling or distributing drugs, or violating a school's code of conduct rules. Ford (2017) reported that school exclusion is common among boys, secondary school pupils, and those living in socioeconomically deprived circumstances, along with those with poor general health and learning disabilities and having parents with mental illness.

Both of the types of exclusion mentioned above counteract the importance of inclusivity. Students excluded from school do not perform as well as their counterparts. The next section of this chapter discusses at-risk and marginalized populations. It should be noted that when students of this subgroup experience social and school exclusion, the outcomes are significantly worse.

Conceptual Framework: Creating a Tool to Discuss, Analyze, and Evaluate School Culture

Creating a positive culture is paramount in an educational setting. The culture of a school impacts every other function of the school. DuFour and Eaker (1998) said that reform efforts of the last 30 years have failed to improve student achievement due to a lack of explicit attention to creating, nurturing, developing, and maintaining a culture of the school conducive to successful outcomes. The more positive the culture is, the better the student outcomes will be produced (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Therefore, it follows that the development of a systematic process or tool, based on the literature, to facilitate discussion, analysis, and the evaluation of school culture would help researchers and practitioners better understand the culture of a school, areas in need of improvement, and those that are working well.

Gruenert and Valentine (1998) identified six factors contributing to a school's culture: collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnership. These six factors are essential in understanding a school's collaborative culture, which is instrumental for overall student success and school improvement (Zahed Babelan et al., 2019). Therefore, systematically analyzing the functioning of a school with attention to each of these factors, one at a time, should provide a deep and rich description and understanding of the school.

Factor One: Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership is grounded in the idea that schools can create broader and deeper leadership capacity by including more valued staff in leadership activities. Collaborative or shared leadership can be traced back to the Roman Empire, where senators and consuls would work with the Emperor (Sally, 2002).

More recent conceptions of educational leadership view leadership not as the application of authority, power, and influence emanating from one "heroic" leader, usually the principal, in the pursuit of their vision but rather as a distributed practice with multiple people sharing leadership responsibilities and tasks over the various contexts of a school organization in the pursuit of shared goals (Hart, 1995; Heller & Firestone, 1995; J. Spillane et al., 2001 as cited in Manno, 2006).

According to Hallinger and Heck (2010), collaborative leadership focuses on strategic school-wide actions directed toward improvement in student learning that are shared among teachers, administrators, and others that are directed toward improvement in student learning. Additionally, collaborative leadership emphasizes governance structures and processes that foster a shared commitment to achieving school

improvement goals, broad participation and collaboration in decision-making, and shared accountability for student-learning outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Schools organized around democratic and collaborative cultures produce students with higher achievement and better skills and understanding than traditionally organized schools (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This type of leadership is critical in creating a positive school culture, as a team makes decisions that ultimately will earn more staff buy-in and, therefore, more committed action. Staff and students feel valued and included when consulted and believe their input concerning school-wide decisions is valued.

Factor Two: Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration is the backbone of efforts to improve student instructional outcomes, and such collaboration bolsters the overall culture of a learning organization. Laal et al. (2014) maintained that teacher collaboration is a practice that includes groups of teachers working together to solve problems, complete tasks, or create products. Consequently, teaching in the United States has historically been isolated work; in recent years, reform efforts have aimed to increase teacher collaboration through various strategies. Grissom et al. (2015) contended that policymakers have called for creating school-based professional learning communities and for schools to promote regular opportunities for teachers to collaborate with teams of colleagues. The premise behind this factor contends that educators must have the space and time to collaborate to create and enhance theories, methods, and teaching and learning processes to improve student outcomes and experiences. The result of recognizing the power of leveraging teacher expertise and collaboration was efforts to promote teacher leadership as a school improvement strategy.

> Consistent with a distributed leadership perspective, many scholars and practitioners have asserted that the promotion of school effectiveness, school improvement, morale, teacher retention, and school climate can be enhanced through the development of internal leadership capacity through nurturing, embracing, and applying *teacher leadership* (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Harris, 2002a; Sherrill, 1999; Silva et al., 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004 as cited by Manno, 2006).

Decades of studies have identified the positive outcomes resulting from the collaboration of teachers, including improved efficacy, improved professional attitudes of teachers, and higher levels of trust (Goddard et al., 2007). All of these feelings of positivity from the teaching staff will trickle down to the students and form a cyclical pattern that will further solidify the school's culture. When students are achieving and thriving, the teachers are validated. When teacher teams are supported, the students will recognize this, and the model will continue to grow.

Factor Three: Professional Development

Schools and other learning organizations must continually monitor, adjust, and recreate themselves to serve students best. Students enroll in school to acquire the necessary skills to learn, grow, and become productive citizens. This is also valid for educators, who must continuously learn. In New Jersey, professional development (PD) is defined by five components (New Jersey Administrative Code 6A:9C-3.2): (a) comprised of professional learning opportunities aligned with student learning and educator development needs and school, school district, and State improvement goals; (b) have as its primary focus the improvement of teachers and school leaders' effectiveness

in assisting all students in meeting state standards; (c) include the work of established collaborative teams of educational professionals committed to the improvement of evaluating student needs through data and setting clear, rigorous learning goals; (d) incorporate coherent, sustained, and evidenced-based strategies that improve educator effectiveness and student achievement; and (e) include support by external expert assistance or additional activities that address defined student and educator learning goals.

Desimone (2009) stated that effective teacher PD enhances student learning and achievement. The above professional development components reference the previously discussed factors of collaborative teaching and collaborative leadership. These factors are entwined, and a clear pattern is emerging in meaningful school culture.

Factor Four: Unity of Purpose

The unity of purpose is self-explanatory. It embodies the reasoning that a group works in unison on a particular project or common goal. Damon and Mallon (2020) defined purpose as a specific type of long-term goal that combines two essential elements: (1) it is meaningful to the self, and (2) it comprises an intention to accomplish something of consequence to the world that is beyond itself. Damon and Mallin (2020) explained that this purpose cannot be forced on an individual or group without mutual agreement. Creating a unity of purpose is done collectively. Schools must face this task together, involving as many stakeholders as possible. The purpose of schools should be grounded in the school mission and its influence on all other aspects of the school community. In schools where the superintendents, principals, teachers, and staff all work independently of each other, there will be little to no connection on a school-wide basis.

Davidson and Dell (1995) stated that this lack of connection leads to isolation as school members separate in purpose, focus, and action. This disconnect will ultimately jeopardize any efforts to create a positive school culture.

Factor Five: Collegial Support

Collegial support is the formal and informal relationships that provide a foundation of support amongst colleagues in an organizational setting. “Research has consistently underlined the contribution of strong collegial relationships to school improvement and success and argued that high levels of collegiality among staff members are one of the characteristics found most often among successful schools” (Shah, 2012, p. 1242). Collegiality is linked to improved student outcomes, but this concept also serves educators well in various purposeful ways. Collegiality among staff increases teacher satisfaction, and adaptability breaks classroom isolation and brings teachers career rewards and daily satisfaction (Martin, 2008). Additionally, “Teachers benefit greatly from the collective generation of ideas and suggestions, enhanced communication, willingness to seek and give help, improved practice, and enhanced repertoires of techniques” (Shah, 2012, p. 1242). The dangers of teacher isolation are referenced in the explanations for each factor mentioned above. Isolationism has been identified as a danger in terms of positive school cultures. Collegiality must exist at all levels and facets of the organization as it is a critical factor in the components of a quality school.

Factor Six: Learning Partnership

Partnerships are used as an effective strategy to improve and achieve outcomes within schools. This factor identifies the importance of stakeholders (teachers, parents,

community members, and others) working together for the common good of the students and the school at large (Miller, 2020). A formal or informal partnership consists of two or more individuals working together on matters related to the operations and mission of the school. School partners may include the following or any other individual or group that brings resources to bear in the interest of the school, such as teachers, administrators, other education professionals, school staff, parents or guardians, other interested community members, other government, local, county, state, or national, elected officials, business and industry persons, other non-school personnel with interest. Resources could be of interest or benefit to the school.

The ancient African proverb says “it takes a village to raise a child” (Seymour, 2013). It is through these learning partnerships that this proverb is realized. All stakeholders must interact with children in support of schools. Partnerships teach children that the community cares for them. Children can develop confidence that the community cares for them through such partnerships and modeling of collaboration, cooperation, generosity, and service.

A number of these partnerships are well-established and familiar in schools across America. The most notable national parent collaborative organization with schools is the National Parent Teacher Association. The PTA is a network of millions of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business and community leaders devoted to children's educational success and promoting family engagement in schools. Law Enforcement Against Drugs (L.E.A.D.) partners local schools with police departments to reduce violence, bullying, and drug use in Grades K–12. Additionally, various business and industry partnerships enhance teaching and learning, such as Scholastic Books, a

corporation that provides students with free or low-cost reading materials. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, National Science Foundation, Rotary Clubs, and Teen Arts are just a few of these corporate partnerships.

Conclusion

This literature review has strengthened the central focus of this autoethnographic study concerning my journey to build a solid and supportive culture and climate within an alternative school. The review defined and highlighted school culture, climate, and the various levels and factors associated with the concepts. The review memorialized the critical importance of culture and climate for all students, especially those excluded or marginalized. From this, a tool to discuss, analyze, and evaluate school culture has been developed by viewing each aspect through the three levels defined by Schein (2010), the six factors defined by Gruenert and Valentine (1998), and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This segment is most critical because it establishes the framework for the study. The study of the tool to discuss, analyze, and evaluate school culture fits with the primary goal of this autoethnographic exploration of the creation, refinement, and enhancement of the culture and climate of an alternative school.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

All school staff educating alternative school students face daily challenges and struggles more pronounced than their traditional counterparts. Each student's journey is individual, unique, and highly challenging. Many students transfer into the alternative setting with an open mind and are ready to receive this next chapter in life with open arms. There may be a few setbacks, but the student is open and compliant with the new system. Other students, especially those who have experienced significant trauma, are slow to adapt to the latest climate and culture offered in alternative schools. Many of these students will resist and self-sabotage with behavior outbreaks, substance abuse, chronic absenteeism, or other self-defense mechanisms that have served them in the past. It is critical to note that alternative schools attempt to meet the needs of some of the most marginalized young people in society and some of those who have had a traumatic relationship with traditional schools. Mosen-Lowe et al. (2009) contended that there are a plethora of reasons that students disengage from conventional school, which may include school rigidity, authoritarian structures, irrelevant curricula, and unfair pedagogical practices.

For each student, there is a unique story that we can recount, study, reflect on, analyze, and from which we seek to learn. Similarly, an alternative school environment is a new journey for staff, teachers, other education professionals, and administrators. These journeys are also complex and intricate stories. The staffing of alternative schools must be purposeful and selective. Teachers are the most incredible tool to engage students of low-income schools and at-risk populations (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Rice, 2010).

The success of the alternative school placement rests in the hands of the administrators, teachers, parents, staff, and students.

This dissertation focused on planning, launching, and rebranding an alternative school in the Mid-Atlantic region and how the school evolved. This study highlighted a regional alternative school established within one sizable suburban school district and the subsequent transition of responsibility, oversight, administration, operations, and funding to a countywide special services school district. This particular alternative school is rooted in the literature ideals, which Lange and Sletten (2008) argued are the root of successful alternative schools.

This autoethnography provided a first-hand account of the nature and functioning of nontraditional educational placements for students. Through critical analysis and reflection, a working theory of practice was constructed, and a protocol of the underpinnings and mechanics of establishing and administering such schools is presented. Both are intended to benefit research on alternative education and practitioners designing, implementing, and refining schools serving students in such alternative educational settings.

Numerous factors and challenges impact all school leaders attempting to educate students in today's society, and these factors are often intensified in the alternative school world. School leaders frequently fall short of the goal of successfully educating students due to federal and state mandates and a lack of understanding concerning culture and climate, especially as it relates to working with disadvantaged students.

Research Questions

This dissertation was developed to answer the question: What factors should be included in an alternative school setting? To support this question, I explored the following supporting research questions:

RQ1. How can a school leader design a culturally sensitive, inclusive alternative education program?

RQ2. What type of systemic change does an alternative school leader believe to be most effective in supporting students in attaining a high school diploma and a strong postsecondary plan to become productive members of society?

RQ3. What characteristics of culture and climate are most critical in an alternative school setting?

Research Design

The overarching goal of this autoethnographic research project was to document how I, as a school leader, impact a small alternative school in terms of culture, climate, inclusivity, and marginalized students through a lens of research that permits me to connect and recount the steps and methodologies to propel students to success. Autoethnographic research honors researchers' voices as members of cultural communities by allowing them to use their experiences within a particular culture "to look more deeply at self–other interactions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). This reflective journey explored creating, adopting, refining, and maintaining an environment that champions social–emotional learning, character education, service learning, academic success, and restorative practices through effective leadership. Sparkes (1996) stated, "I attempt to take you as the reader into the intimacies of my world. I hope to do this in such a way

that you are stimulated to reflect upon your own life to mine" (p. 467). These words embody the rationale behind the research method.

The literature suggests that school leadership, reflective practice, and autoethnographic research provide a broader view to examine these phenomena (Kottkamp, 1990), which is conducive to studying what a complicated, dynamic, and multidimensional environment is. For these reasons, the method used to conduct this study followed the guidelines of autoethnography. Detailing the necessary steps to build and maintain the culture and climate of a relatively small school requires the careful and systematic collection of data and artifacts. It is only understood through analyzing and synthesizing stories and their many meanings, layers, and contexts. Wall (2006) stated that autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on their experience to extend an understanding of a societal phenomenon. Wall (2006) asserted that autoethnography is grounded in postmodern philosophy and is linked to the growing debate about reflexivity and voice in social research. Students often attend an alternative school, partly or mainly, due to complicated social constructs and challenges in their home school. For various factors, including the social phenomena that led students to an alternative school, alternative schools present rich, complex, and unique social environments and phenomena ripe for study, analysis, and learning. For these reasons, autoethnography is a methodology well suited to delve into the inextricably linked questions arising from the present case.

This study's methodology is autoethnography, categorized as a qualitative research approach. There is a plethora of research on qualitative methods. Marshall and

Rossman (2014) believe that qualitative research allows the researcher to comprehend the human experience's vastness better. Autoethnography is a form of ethnography that allows the researcher's life to take center stage in the study (Reed-Danahay, 2002). Autoethnographic research honors researchers' voices as members of cultural communities by allowing them to use their experiences within a particular culture "to look more deeply at self–other interactions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. A qualitative research approach is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivism, post-positivism, pragmatism advocacy/participatory perspectives, or a combination of these (Creswell Et al., 2003). A qualitative research approach involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, indicating that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The purpose of research is that its authentic setting allows the researcher to analyze all subject components. Some characteristics of a qualitative approach are (a) the data are collected as words, (b) the outcome is a process rather than a product, (c) the focus is how the participants make sense of their lives and experiences, and (d) the language is expressive (Creswell Et al., 2003).

Although qualitative research does not fully utilize all the exact methods that quantitative research does, it allows the researcher to delve deeply into the study, allowing for a realistic perspective of the problem. Since the central focus of this research was to examine the principal's experiences, it will provide an accurate picture of the unique journey in the alternative school setting. Ellis (2007) claimed that

autoethnography focuses on introspective and retrospective aspects of the self. Ellis detailed that autoethnographic research allows the organizational researcher to intimately connect the personal significance of the culture by revealing multiple layers of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. These data can be used to make positive changes in learning organizations.

Additionally, autoethnography is recognized as a vehicle to promote transformational learning (Boyd, 2008; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2005). I intend to teach others engaged with alternative school students. The autoethnographic research project was the best methodology to explain this journey authentically. The methodology allows for deep reflection of the self and the culture, resulting in personal and professional internal and external growth. According to Denzin (1989), the underpinnings of autoethnography are characterized by personal experiences, narratives, and self-reflection. This lens allows the researcher to examine their work while trying to understand how they impact their unique situations that can support the greater good. Ellis and Bochner (2000) contended that autoethnographic research reveals how we struggle to make sense of our experiences. This research design closely matches this study's needs and wants output because of the professional and personal internal struggles during my tenure as principal of an alternative school.

Positionality

In an autoethnographic study, the positionality of the researcher is critical. Positionality in research has been defined as the researcher's stance on the field and is informed by multiple factors underpinning the researcher's view of the world (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Empson, 2013). This study highlights how personal attributes and

variables (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, class, and location) dictate the frames of reference through which the researcher perceives their environment. These personal attributes and variables will no doubt impact the study. The journey behind the research and thought processes behind this dissertation are rooted in my educational practice. In my 21 years of teaching and school administration, there have been accomplishments, successes, disappointments, and failures. It is important to note that my traditional school experiences have significantly shaped my alternative school experiences. The school at the center of this research has been recognized at the national and state levels for best practices in the world of education. Parents and school representatives often ask what yields such success at this school. This research aims to provide the researcher with a reflective exercise to extrapolate critical findings that may be implemented and utilized by fellow practitioners in the field.

My positionality is grounded in experiences within the traditional school climate, culture, and norms. As a novice teacher, I participated in the required team meetings that facilitated staff from the entire grade to discuss managerial issues, state mandates, and student concerns. I often left these meetings dismayed at the highly negative talk about students. During my first year of teaching, the teacher's union attempted to settle our contract and enforced "sanctions" against the administration. These sanctions included strict adherence to the contract regulations. All bulletin boards were to read "Happy Fall" and be plain. In unison, all staff were asked to leave the building precisely at 2:45 p.m. This carried on for quite some time.

The union message was apparent: Teachers should not do anything extra during the hostile contract negotiations. A student in my class was failing, was unorganized,

unkempt, and was usually lost, sitting on the bench outside the principal's office each morning. The student had a broken leg and could not participate in physical education class. I walked by during my prep period each day and saw him sitting there alone. Secretly, I invited this student to my classroom to help him with his work. The first order of business was to dump his backpack out (which was filled with trash). I purchased school supplies for him and organized all his class binders and folders. As the weeks passed, I enjoyed getting to know this student on an entirely different level. I could listen to his stories about his absent parents and the challenges of being raised by his grandparents. This student had experienced significant life traumas. By the end of our 8 weeks together, my student passed all classes and regularly submitted his homework. My co-workers commented on the noticeable change in his entire affect.

After reflecting upon my time with the student, I understood much more about one individual's power to enact positive change. The student had grown so accustomed to being a nuisance or an annoyance to staff that he just accepted. My experiences with him were the springboard of a new after-school program to assist students who needed a strong and positive ally within the school. This small program crafted my philosophy concerning educating students in whatever they need to be successful and removing all unnecessary red tape, such as union rules and regulations.

Worldview

Clark and Creswell (2008) defined worldview as a fundamental belief set that guides actions. This study is grounded in advocacy and a participatory worldview. Clark and Creswell (2008) contended:

> Thus, the research contains an action agenda for reform that may change the participants' lives, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life. Moreover, specific issues that speak to important social issues of the day must be addressed, such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation. (p. 9)

Given that the study aimed to highlight and challenge alternative schools' status quo by creating greater academic and social outcomes, this worldview closely aligns with the mission and purpose.

Leadership Challenges and Historical Context of the Setting

In the mid-1980s, a mathematics teacher at a high school in the mid-Atlantic area visited the Outward Bound School in Colorado. After spending time at this school, he was motivated and convinced that education should and could be better for all students. This teacher began researching and applying for mini-grants that supported wilderness field trips for "at-risk" high school students. The conversations developed using some of the strategies viewed at the Outward Bound School within his current district. The school district's former superintendent believed that traditional schools could serve most of the population while special education would serve another sector. It was thought that the students who do not fit into either of those categories and who need a different type of guidance and support would perpetually fall through the cracks of our modern education system.

The team took advantage of a grant program. In November 1989, the teacher began creating a School Within a School program framework. By the spring of 1991, the school was fully operational in a section of the existing high school. The Alternative

High School (pseudonym) was officially established in 1993 and relocated to a local community college campus. Students were accepted throughout the county by application. The sending school districts in the county were responsible for paying the tuition of around $3,500 per year.

Additionally, the home school was responsible for transportation costs. The students would complete the credit requirements of the sending school and remain officially on the rolls of the sending school. All students were required to enroll in a county college class, participate in field trips and outdoor adventures, and earn credits using a proficiency-based grading system. It is important to note that although the entire school operates on a proficiency-based system, all state-approved curriculum standards are maintained along with sending school and state-approved graduation requirements for students. Enrollment started at around 14 students and peaked at 80 students over the years. Additional staffing was added as enrollment increased.

The AHS operated in its original form until the close of the school year in 2013. Between 1993 and 2013, AHS serviced thousands of students in the county. On June 25, 2013, the school district closed AHS permanently. Over the summer months, all staff were laid off and instructed to stay in the school building. In August, another local special services school district assumed ownership. This would be the beginning of the following chapter, which is the current chapter of AHS. Shortly after that, I was named as the next director/principal. This study also attempted to reframe and redefine the common stigma around alternative education schools and placements.

Demographics of Participants

This study focused on alternative school programming for school-aged children who are vulnerable or at risk of being pushed out or dropping out of traditional school programming. Specifically, the study followed the development of an alternative high school that serves students in a diverse mid-Atlantic County, serving rural, suburban, and small urban centers. Student circumstances include but are not limited to students with anxiety and school phobia; students who were academically unsuccessful for a variety of reasons in their traditional placement; students who were excluded from their traditional school as a disciplinary consequence of behavior; students with housing instability; students who reside in group homes, treatment homes, or the like; students with chronic health problems resulting in attendance issues; students from surrounding counties in which this type of program is not available; and students with other exceptional circumstances.

The socioeconomic and racial representations of students have been significantly diverse. The school serves general and special education students. It is not considered a special services or special education school, even though a special services school district facilitates it. The one limitation on entry to the alternative school is a student exhibiting violent behavior patterns toward staff or students. This limitation is critical to ensuring all students, particularly students manifesting anxiety and phobia(s), feel safe in the alternative environment. Many students enrolled in alternative schools have been victims of trauma. Creating an environment free of violence is essential for these students to thrive.

The subject school utilizes a proficiency-based model of assessment and achievement. For various reasons stated above, students have experienced difficulty

achieving academically and earning credits in the traditional sense of getting a letter or number grade with a designated minimum value required to pass and gain credit. Students must meet or exceed state and local graduation requirements in the subject school through highly individualized programs. Instruction encourages experiential learning and student-driven projects. Credits are awarded for proficiencies, and students may be enrolled in a local community college to gain dual credit. There is a heavy focus on mental health, postsecondary training, restorative practices, and service learning.

The schools and school districts that send students to this alternative school share a common problem; that is, the educational environments of the traditional placements do not have a program to meet the students' needs, and they do not know how to meet the students' needs. Pupils may need a fresh start away from previous social groups. Many students who identify as transgender elect to enroll in the AHS. "Transgender and nonbinary (TNB) youths are disproportionately burdened by poor mental health outcomes owing to decreased social support and increased stigma and discrimination" (Tordoff, et al, 2022, p. 5). These students require a new and more supportive and therapeutic environment. Other students may have been the target of harassment, intimidation, and bullying. It is often the case that students simply thrive in a smaller, more personalized environment that alternative school provides. The individualized proficiency-based program allows students to see a direct and immediate connection between their learning (i.e., new knowledge and skills and their documented academic achievement).

Data Collection Strategies

When collecting and analyzing data, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis, making judgments about coding, theming, decontextualizing, and

recontextualizing the data (Starks & Brown- Trinidad, 2007). The daily interactions that I have had with staff, students, parents, central administration, outside stakeholders, board of education members, and the community have shaped my experiences as a building principal. These experiences provide the backdrop for my research via an auto ethnographical lens. Since reflective practice is essentially a critical examination of practice, data about practice are necessary for the process to be effective (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). In qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument requires that the researcher identify their own personal values, assumptions, and biases at the start of the study (Creswell et al., 2003). My data collection strategies included personal narratives, content analysis, material culture, and journaling to document my leadership experiences. Although I have been the principal at the school for the past 11 years, this study focused on a 4-year window.

Personal Narratives

Collecting personal narratives can gain much reliable information about behavior and behavior traits. Personal narratives involve reconstructing events from the perspective of the reflective practitioner (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). A profoundly reflective process occurs by writing down events and spending time deconstructing and reconstructing them. Osterman and Kottkamp emphasized that the primary goal of personal narratives is to generate a detailed description that may incorporate different dimensions of behavior, such as intentions, feelings, assumptions, actions, and outcomes. Mattingly and Gillette (1991) described unstructured oral storytelling as a self-account of one's work that allows for analyzing underlying values and beliefs. I believe this process

to be critical when I think about how my leadership impacts the climate and culture of the building.

The personal narratives have been kept in an organized date book spiral notebook. These narratives highlight the day-to-day operations of my 4-year focus period. The steps to capture my narratives began with reflecting on my time at the AHS. After these reflections, I created shorter field notes that can be revisited, and additional details may be added as they were recollected throughout the data collection and analysis process. These field notes permitted a self-inventory for me to rank these experiences in importance and relevance to the study.

Content Analysis and Material Culture

Another valuable instrument utilized for data collection is content analysis. Content analysis allows for a collection and review of certain artifacts produced by staff and the instructional leader that impact and define the school culture and climate of the organization. For example, this strategy can examine emails from staff and parents, lesson plans, meeting schedules and notes, and observation details (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). For this section, I collected artifacts similar to those in traditional schools, such as lesson plans, emails from parents and students, discipline logs, and observation details. At AHS, there are more artifacts to consider, such as police reports, incident reports, and weekly operational reports. These items are considered artifacts and other cultural materials collected during the designated study period. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) asserted that such information may prove sufficient to extrapolate an organization's espoused theory or serve as the starting point for data collection.

According to O'Toole and Were (2008),

> Material culture refers to the bodily, tangible object constructed by humans. Ferguson describes material culture as "all things people leave behind…People make everything from the physical world – farm tools, ceramics, houses, furniture, toys, buttons, roads, and cities. Material culture refers to objects used, lived in, displayed, and experienced" (p. 622).

For this study, I examined the material culture of the school as it relates to my research questions. This is important because the school was moved to a new location during the study.

The data were collected during the 4 years of my study focus. The items were organized and stored in Google Drive folders labeled based on the topic. During my analysis, all pieces were reviewed and labeled according to order of importance and relevance. These files will be moved and labeled according to the six factors of school culture (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998). This organizing allowed me to reflect and think deeply about emerging connections and themes.

Reflective Journaling

Journaling is a form of narrative writing that correlates with reflective practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Each year since my start in 2013, I have purchased a calendar book with blank pages. This book is used daily and allows me to document events, perceptions, and feelings. Journaling is essential to gathering information about events, actions, emotions, and interpretations (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). On the weekends, I would create additional journal entries after reflecting upon my weekly operating reports to reflect more deeply on the week's events. These journals were made after hours and often stemmed from my narratives as an expansion of the challenges,

struggles, failures, mistakes, and successes that occurred. These journals are in written marble notebooks and Google Drives, organized by date.

Data Analysis

Data analysis begins when the researcher thinks deeply about the study. Data analysis is an ongoing event that develops and materializes over time in autoethnography. According to Wong (2008), data analysis in qualitative research is systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, observation notes, or other non-textual materials that the researcher accumulates to increase the understanding of the phenomenon. Data analysis involves making sense of vast amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, identifying significant patterns, drawing meaning from data, and subsequently building a logical chain of evidence (Patton and Patton, 2002). As time advances and personal journals, personal narratives, content, and material culture are reviewed, the process and clarity of the research are enriched. These processes form data analysis in a qualitative study of an auto ethnographical nature (Wall, 2006). The gathering and analysis of data go hand-in-hand as theories and themes are presented (Erlandson, 1993). The reflection involved by the researcher perpetually shapes the researcher's experiences in an autoethnographic study.

This study required a deep analysis of my journals, personal narratives, material culture, and content analysis artifacts. I reviewed my reflections, thoughts, and critical events during my 4-year analysis. As the data were reviewed, I reflected upon the results and discuss them based on the conceptual framework that speaks to transformational leadership and the six factors in evaluating school culture (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998).

Coding the Data

The data were coded to identify emerging themes. Coding refers to examining data (i.e., words, phrases, statements, or paragraphs) and assigning a short word or statement as a label to summarize the data's inherent or apparent meaning and content (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch (2010) described coding as a "sense-making" endeavor (p. 137). Adu (2019) proposed three types of coding: description-focused, interpretation-focused, and presumption-focused coding. This study focused on interpretation-focused coding. Patton and Patton (2002) asserted that the qualitative analyst demonstrates patterns and themes and categorizes them by showing what is meaningful and relevant to the study. After reviewing all three data sources, I labeled each segment dedicated to the conceptual framework. Each emerging theme was labeled with a Leadership, Teacher Collaboration, Professional Development, Unity of Purpose, Collegial Support, or Learning Partnerships identifier/abbreviation. These codes represent the six factors in evaluating school climate (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998). The material culture and content analysis data was reviewed and sorted similarly. Lastly, the six factors, components of transformational leadership, and Schein (2010) levels were placed in a table so I could see a visual representation of the codes and themes in one place. During this coding, I was looking for critical factors and turning points that impacted the culture and climate of the alternative school.

Procedures

After being named the new principal of the AHS in 2014, I knew I wanted to make a positive change for students and staff immediately. Fortunately, I was a teacher at the school from 2013 to 2014, which allowed me to understand the school, its employees,

its strengths, and its weaknesses. I had minimal administrative experience. To start, I created a working school improvement plan that addressed what I saw as shortcomings. There were numerous areas that I wanted to expand and improve. After completing an analysis, these items need to be addressed.

Staff Bonding Activities

Staff need to be more connected. They need to participate in bonding and team-building activities both on- and off-site. Alternative schools can be highly challenging, and team support is critical. Staff outings and team-building trips were scheduled. I know this is a vital component of team building. Still, I have to admit that I was fearful due to the behavior of some of the staff when the former principal attempted to have staff participate in any type of icebreaker or team-building activity.

Restructure Schedule and Expectations

The current schedule consists of the students and teachers arriving simultaneously. Also, after dismissal, a one-hour time slot for a team meeting needed more structure and purpose. There was no scheduled preparation period for teachers or counselors. I plan to change the start time of the day to 7:30 a.m. versus 7:45 a.m. The staff will now start each day with a morning meeting. At dismissal, the staff hour will be divided between staff preparation and a whole school meeting. This time will allow teachers ample time to create and submit lesson plans. Teachers were not required to submit lesson plans under the prior administration. The whole staff meeting will have an agenda and will be student centered. Time must be used strategically to provide teachers and leaders with collaborative opportunities to target interventions and improve professional practice, including analysis of assessment data.

Lack of Resources

The school had three classrooms, three offices, and a storage closet that served as a counselor's office. There were approximately 12 desktop computers available for the students. The furniture could have been better, with many broken chairs and tables. The hall had a rippled carpet, which is a safety concern for staff and students. There are no windows in this section of the school at all. There is a dusty storage closet with various textbooks that are 25 years old or older. There are no classroom libraries for student use. The space is sad and needs to be more inviting. It is somewhat depressing. I plan to work with our new LEA to relocate and purchase all the items that the students deserve. This includes but is not limited to new furniture, a young adult library that provides for all students, and staff will be required to create and maintain bulletin boards, new textbooks, new desktop and laptop computers, and other required school supplies. The environment needs to be warm and inviting. Students should be allowed to utilize hand-me-downs. They need to feel valued and important.

Safety and Security Concerns

The campus is currently on a community college campus. There are no district security guards. There are no security procedures. The students do not participate in any emergency or fire drills. There is a college security team, which made it very clear that the alternative school students were a nuisance and not welcomed on campus. There is a wave of people moving through this building without any screening. Students must be in a secure location that the general public cannot access. Students must be electronically monitored, and bags must be searched before school access. Cellular phones are also a safety and academic distraction.

Staffing Concerns

There needs to be a school nurse or registered nurse on staff. Students carry their medications, and staff are unaware of their medical issues. A student who was having a seizure was taken to the ground because the college security guards thought that she was being behavioral when, in fact, there was a medical emergency taking place. Teachers needed to be certified to teach the courses they were scheduled to do. The current Spanish teacher is not licensed. A special education teacher and BCBA needs to be added to the staff. No special needs teachers are on staff, yet many classified students exist. An audit of the staff certifications needs to be conducted to ensure all teachers are qualified to teach the students served. The students deserve the most competent staff. Lastly, there was one individual on staff that I shared a classroom with the year before. I observed her daily working on her graduate coursework, refusing to work with students, and inciting arguments with students. Firing her was my first order of business. This was a bold move on my part, but I remain true to my word that there is no place at the AHS for people who do not want to work with students.

Additionally, there was a very primitive tool to evaluate faculty and staff. I plan to utilize Danielson to offer staff feedback on their practices and lessons.

Student Breakfast and Lunch

The school was not enrolled in the FDA School Lunch Program. The students are given a credit of $3.00 daily for breakfast and lunch. The students utilize a community college cafeteria that is overpriced and needs access to healthy foods. A buffalo chicken wrap with a side of potato chips and a beverage is $9.95 plus tax for lunch. They cannot afford this. The $3.00 covers an order of French fries and a soda. The students skipped

breakfast, and by lunch, they were so hungry. Students beg other students and staff for money to eat.

Consequently, many thefts occurred so students could purchase the overpriced food offerings. These are some of the most vulnerable students in the state. They need access to a free and reduced lunch program and various healthy foods and beverages.

Student Attendance and Lateness

There is an expectation grounded in the reward system, but no concrete student attendance or lateness policy exists. A policy must be formed and present, and on time must be the standard. I plan to require attendance and lateness to be incorporated into the behavior modification system. Sending school districts will receive weekly reports on student attendance and lateness. The robocall system for student absenteeism will not be used, and a staff member will call each student by 9:00 a.m. to report absences and speak to the family. A system will be created for continued staff contact with families of chronically absent or tardy students. The principal, school nurse, and counselors will all be given school cell phones to contact students and family.

Enhanced Communication

The Family Project has been part of AHS for some time. This dictated that each staff member (“The Family Head”) would be assigned a “Family” of students. This staff member serves as the student's mom/dad at school. Family Heads must contact the student’s family once weekly to discuss how the school week went and how many credits were earned. It was apparent that not all staff were making the calls or logging the contacts. I requested that the money associated with the project be moved to a stipend. Staff will be paid $200.00 monthly for their weekly contacts, which must be phone calls

and logged in a data management system. The calls must cover the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Curricular Concerns

Teachers are teaching whatever they wish. I do not see any curriculum plans. There are course sheets for English language arts and mathematics but none for other subjects. The school needs a curriculum overhaul, assignments, and class expectations. Students appear to be able to select their schedules, and most avoid mathematics altogether. Several students only needed math courses to graduate and were permitted to leave all of these courses until the end of their high school career. These students who do not love math now only have math all day, every day, to graduate. This is an issue that needs to be resolved immediately. Each teacher must create a curriculum guide and course content sheet for student portfolios to track student success and progress.

Behavior Modification and Real-Time Data for Students and Staff

The behavior modification system needs to be revamped, including attendance, lateness, Yonder pouch care, willingness to work in all subjects, and service learning. The acronym shall be based on behavior, attendance, credits, and service learning. The overarching goal is to reduce out-of-school suspensions for all students.

The school currently creates a "credit sheet" that gives staff, students, and parents real-time information on progress. This sheet is remarkable and essential to support the students. The method in which it is disseminated to students is wrong. All students' names and credits earned and remaining are posted around the school and given out. Students review each other's credits and make derogatory comments to each other. The system is beneficial, but an individualized private sheet must be created. Student grade information should never be public. Alternative schools require that each student have an

Individualized Program Plan that addresses all aspects of their school career. This needs to be created for staff as it is not happening now. Counselors appear to be dedicating a significant amount of time to an old-fashioned method of transcript creation. All transcripts will be created and maintained in the district-utilized data management system.

Renew and Establish Outside Partnerships

The school will need to partner with outside organizations for support and assistance. The mission is to foster collaboration with the community, targeting community groups and families of students struggling academically or socially. Some organizations are Character Ed.org, Juvenile Justice Commission, Project Pride, Say it With Clay, Minding your Mind, NCAA, a local dog rescue non-profit, local police departments, local colleges and universities, and businesses.

Staff Empowerment, Education, and Professional Development

All staff must feel valued, empowered, cared for, and listened to. I will model and instill a successful "by any means necessary" approach. All staff will be empowered to be leaders. Staff will be financially supported to continue their education. All staff will be trained in a variety of topics that concern alternative schools, including but not limited to restorative practices, trauma-informed practices, and non-suicidal self-injurious behavior. All staff will become Google Classroom certified; others may expand their knowledge by taking additional coursework. Staff will have a choice for professional development and what is offered for all.

Trustworthiness in Autoethnographic Research

Trustworthiness in autoethnographic studies requires more thoughtful work and processes to establish trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the

absolute value of a research study is strengthened by its trustworthiness. Enworo (2023) stated, “The importance of evaluation of the quality of research cannot be overemphasized. Without rigor, argue Morse et al. (2002), research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility” (p. 372). Lincoln and Guba stated that trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, which is confidence in the study; transferability, the ability to transfer findings to other settings; dependability, the ability to replicate the study in different places; and confirmability, where the research shapes the study, not researcher biases.

In my autoethnography, I built credibility by collecting, organizing, and placing journal pages and artifacts for content analysis pieces collected over time in the framework. I also collected cultural and personal archives that validated the times and places of transpired events. I also utilized member checking to build credibility further. Lincoln and Guba (1985) claimed that member checking is critical to ensure credible data. Creswell and Miller (2000) explained:

> It consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account. The researchers systematically check the data and the narrative account with the lens focused on participants. (p. 125)

Several staff members have been employed at the AHS since its inception, and I planned to consult these people to conduct a member check.

Stahl and King (2020) contended:

> Transfer is only possible when a thick description provides a rich enough portrayal of circumstance for application to others’ situations, and usually at the

> behest of the local constituents. Transfer applications such as these rely on the researchers' thick descriptions that would include contextual information about the fieldwork site. (p. 27)

The transferability of this study was realized by making the study relatable to alternative school staff and administrators. I need to spend a significant time ensuring that I create the “thick description” that is cited in the research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also discussed the importance of credibility in the realm of trustworthiness. Stahl and King (2010) stated that member checking can also be utilized in this realm. Stahl and King claimed, “Having another researcher to read and react to field notes, with their embedded researcher interpretations, is a confirmation that creates a tacit reality for the researcher” (p. 27). To satisfy this section of trustworthiness, I also used member checks from a peer who has ample experience within my setting.

In summary, the 4 years of journaling, collecting artifacts, and making the study relatable to alternative school educators and researchers established the trustworthiness of this specific study on alternative school leadership. I relied upon my peers to ensure that I was satisfying all areas of trustworthiness in the research.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

As with all forms of research, assumptions and limitations must be presented and addressed. Recognizing and reflecting upon these assumptions and limitations early in the process is critical for proper study and unbiased conclusions to be crafted. Assumptions are ingrained beliefs that people believe are valid. Every research study has certain limitations. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) defined limitations as specific characteristics of design or methodology that alter the interpretation and findings from the research. The

significant limitations of this study are grounded in the fact that I am the primary source of information for this research. Although this study covers 4 years, it only addresses one alternative school, so the transferability of the findings may be limited.

Additionally, this setting lacks a teachers' union, so I have no red tape in this area as the building administrator. This will also impact transferability to a building staffed with teachers trained to exist within the confines of union-negotiated contracts. These limitations have been addressed throughout my research on this subject and should be considered as future research is conducted. This study was predicated on the assumption that alternative school settings can and do provide a more therapeutic environment due to an enhanced positive and inclusive climate and culture that traditional schools cannot support. This assumption may be confirmed or denied as the research process takes shape (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). “Limitations derive from the design and methods and help contextualize the study. Limitations stipulate the weaknesses of the study, thereby encouraging the reader to judge it with these limitations in mind” (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 118). This study is limited in its content to the experiences and thoughts related to my educational leadership career in one alternative school setting. This research is autobiographical and limited to my and my colleagues' encounters within the setting. Since the setting of this study is only in one educational environment, the transferability can be potentially affected. As the research continued, every attempt was made to be transparent about such limitations.

Conclusion

The process of this autoethnographic research study gave me the time and space to reflect upon my leadership style and techniques related to school culture and climate.

This exercise also allowed me to memorialize all of the work that has been done at the AHS. This chapter highlighted the methodology for the study and the school improvement plan that was started to attempt to make deep and positive changes for students who need it the most. The life of a principal is packed with busy schedules and non-stop crisis management and mitigation. There needs to be time for reflection and to break down the work that must be completed. More time is required in order to focus on these items intensely. This process allowed me to think about my successes and failures. It also provided insight into some of my decisions, often grounded in the literature, but I was unaware of that then.

Chapter 4

Redefining Culture and Climate in the Alternative School Setting

Introduction

Although this research centers around my work over 4 years show boater. The superintendent at the time wanted the school district to be the first to participate in all initiatives. Consequently, all staff were required to pilot Professional Learning Communities, the Excellent Educators for New Jersey Pilot Program (EE4NJ), a flex schedule pilot, and a pilot that eliminated the resource room for special education students. All of these initiatives took place within a 2-year window.

The staff experienced significant burnout, and none of the initiatives were highly successful because ample time could not be dedicated to any project. At the opening day activities, I sat there watching the interactions between the staff. Every year, when school opens, there is a buzz of excitement, an energy that can be felt by staff who are excited, well rested, and inspired to spend the upcoming year with their classes. This feeling was absent. Teachers started the school year without that energized dedication due to initiative saturation. The superintendent went through his normal opening day activities; he presented as cheerful and enthusiastic about the upcoming school year. For the most part, the staff were sad and disconnected. As I reflected upon the day, I wondered, as a whole, what we are doing. The most critical individuals appeared to be forgotten through all the initiatives: the staff and students.

When I was presented with the opportunity to lead a school of my own, I knew that my philosophies and espoused theories would be grounded solidly in servant leadership that put students and staff at the forefront of all decisions and initiatives.

Gruenert and Valentine (1998) identified six factors contributing to a school's culture: collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnership. For the following sections, I will use data to support each of the six factors as a conceptual framework and utilize Schein's (2010) levels of organizational culture to examine artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions coupled with the elements of transformational leadership to tell the story.

Alternative High School Mission

The mission of AHS is to challenge, instruct, and guide students to develop the abilities to:

- achieve academically through self-initiated projects, experiential learning activities, and creative expression within an individualized and proficiency-based curriculum;
- build resiliency by strengthening mental and emotional health and interpersonal skills within an accepting and supportive school environment; and
- contribute to the school family and apply these skills to everyday life by becoming self-sufficient, well-adjusted, and socially responsible members of society.

My vision for the school was to meet this mission of all students, especially those seemingly unsuccessful at their home school district.

Factor One: Collaborative Leadership

Anfara et al. (2008) stated, "Collaborative leadership refers to inclusiveness—teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders—in decision-making

related to organizational goals" (p. 100). Collaborative leadership stresses making decisions, as a unit, that are perceived as best for the organization. "In this approach to leadership, authority, and influence are potentially available to any legitimate stakeholder in the school, based on their expert knowledge, their democratic right to choose, and their critical role in implementing decisions" (Anfara et al., 2008, p. 100).

Collaborative leadership will guide the creation of better outcomes for students and staff. The Alternative High School (AHS) is intentionally designed to be small to develop and foster deeper connections between staff and students. Currently, the staffing pattern consists of one teacher in each subject area: history, health and physical education, science, and Spanish. There is one special education teacher, two guidance counselors, a social worker, a substance abuse coordinator, a school nurse, two custodians, a vice principal, and a principal. There are two mathematics teachers, two English teachers, and two administrative assistants. There are three security guards, one custodian, and one cafeteria worker. All school members are essential and represent the vision and mission of the organization. It is important to recognize that the school employs four mental health professionals to support students.

My vision for the school is to employ professionals who want to work together to make positive changes for students by any means necessary. A group of like-minded individuals can change student outcomes. All team members must want to work together and must want to work with alternative school students. There have been cases where newer or ineffective teachers have been placed in classrooms with students with behavioral problems. This is backward thinking, as these students need the best and

brightest educators around them. Students know immediately at this level who is for real and who is just going through the motions.

A benefit I had was teaching at the school for one year before being named principal. This year was a chance to learn about the school and the students and to observe what effective and ineffective structures existed. Once I assumed the role of building principal, I wanted to focus on creating a culture of collaboration. To do this, a needs assessment was conducted and noted that significant changes had to be made to the master schedule. Time is essential, and the workday must be maximized. The former schedule wasted time and did not use staffing resources to their full potential. The schedule was more staff friendly than student friendly.

Schedule Change

Collaborative leadership is grounded in the idea that schools can create broader and deeper leadership capacity by including more valued staff in leadership activities. To facilitate collaborative leadership, all team members must feel included and valued and have a voice in the school's operations. This takes time to establish. To encourage this, the schedule needed to be modified. This change was initially not a popular decision.

The staff contracted hours initially were from 7:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. I am not a latecomer, but this is not true for all. The students arrived at 7:45 a.m., the same time as the staff. There are a multitude of issues in this area. First, if a student was sick, hurt, or in danger right at arrival, they may not have staff present to handle it. During the year I was a teacher, the former principal assigned two staff members to door duty at 7:45 a.m. to complete attendance. I can recall one day when another teacher and I were at the door, and no other staff had reported for work yet. The staff did show up before 8:00 a.m., but we were worried about what we would do with students, just the two of us. After students

had walked by the two staff members, they headed down to the college cafeteria, where there may or may not have been staff waiting there to supervise breakfast. This is a safety issue. Also, there needed to be a way of knowing which staff were scheduled to be absent, who called out sick, and the plans for the day. Out of this chaos came the idea to implement a "Morning Meeting."

Morning Meeting

The 7:30–7:45 a.m. time slot would now serve as the Morning Meeting start of the day. The idea of this meeting is grounded in effective classroom practices for a responsive classroom but can efficiently serve the same purpose for adults in a school. "Morning Meeting allows us to begin each day as a community of caring and respectful learners" (Kriete & Davis, 2014, p. 2). We expect this from our students, but it is just as effective with staff. During this time, staff are gathered in a circle to openly discuss the day's events, review student action plans, discuss events that may have transpired overnight, and issue reminders of relevant information. On a deeper level, this short time allows the team to re-establish plans, builds community via check-ins, allows reflection on the previous day, and boosts team effort and morale. Additionally, these morning meetings often become light moments where the staff laugh together and share life events.

Figure 1

Morning Meeting Notes

November 2016
Susan out. I need someone to cover lunch and electives.
JJC will be here at 10:40 am.
Rick's mother texted last night. Nick totaled his car, he is fine, but his anxiety is very

high. Counselor check-in first thing.
There was a behavior incident on the school bus between Anna, Tori, Sean, and Bonnie. Waiting for the video.
Budget wishlists are due by tomorrow.
A new student, Gemma , is starting today.

The staff knows that I understand that life happens and that, at times, there may be unplanned lateness, but I start these meetings strictly at 7:30 a.m. Staff are expected to be seated in the meeting at 7:30 a.m., not strolling into the building at this time. The meeting is essential, sets the day's tone, and gives all staff valuable information before the students arrive. As the administrator, the meeting allows me to gauge how the staff feel. Is someone overly tired? Does someone look disheveled? Is someone getting a cold? Do issues with students emotionally impact someone? We all see each other and can check in after the meeting if necessary.

This creates a platform for a caring culture and climate, which is needed to build an environment that values collaboration. Schein (2010) divided organizational culture into three distinct levels: artifacts, values, and assumptions. Implementing the Morning Meeting correlates with the organization's values. We value the safety of our students. We value being professionals, arriving at work on time, and ready to serve students. We value being prepared for students. We recognize that being prepared is critical to maintaining order in the school. We value each other and need to see each other. We support each other and treat each other with respect. This relatively minute change can be viewed as a positive contribution to the school climate and culture, especially when staff bring surprises for the group, such as donuts, coffee, pretzels, and other sweet treats for the meeting. The contracted time and reorganization change promote the school's vision and mission.

Preparation Period

Secondly, there needed to be an established planning time for teachers or counselors. The prior schedule had a daily staff meeting from 1:45 to 2:45 p.m. If the meeting ended early, staff were permitted to leave early. As a teacher who lived under this schedule, I found it infuriating because the daily meetings often lacked vision and purpose. The session predominantly consisted of endless complaints about student behavior. I would sit there wondering what we were doing and of the massive stack of essays on my desk that had to be graded and filed. I also had phone calls and copies to make. This schedule made me feel that tasks that promote teaching and learning were unimportant here. The usual tasks associated with teaching were not built into the schedule. When I spoke to the principal about my frustrations, he said he drags out the meetings because people run out the door if he does not. I suggested building in a planning time first from 1:45 p.m.–2:15 pm, followed by the meeting at 2:15 p.m.–2:45 p.m. with an agenda to force conciseness. At the next meeting, the principal said, "Joan had a suggestion and wants to change the times…" The staff quickly shot the idea down, and I felt awkward because he had put me out there. I learned to keep my mouth shut and would arrive at work extremely early to handle my tasks.

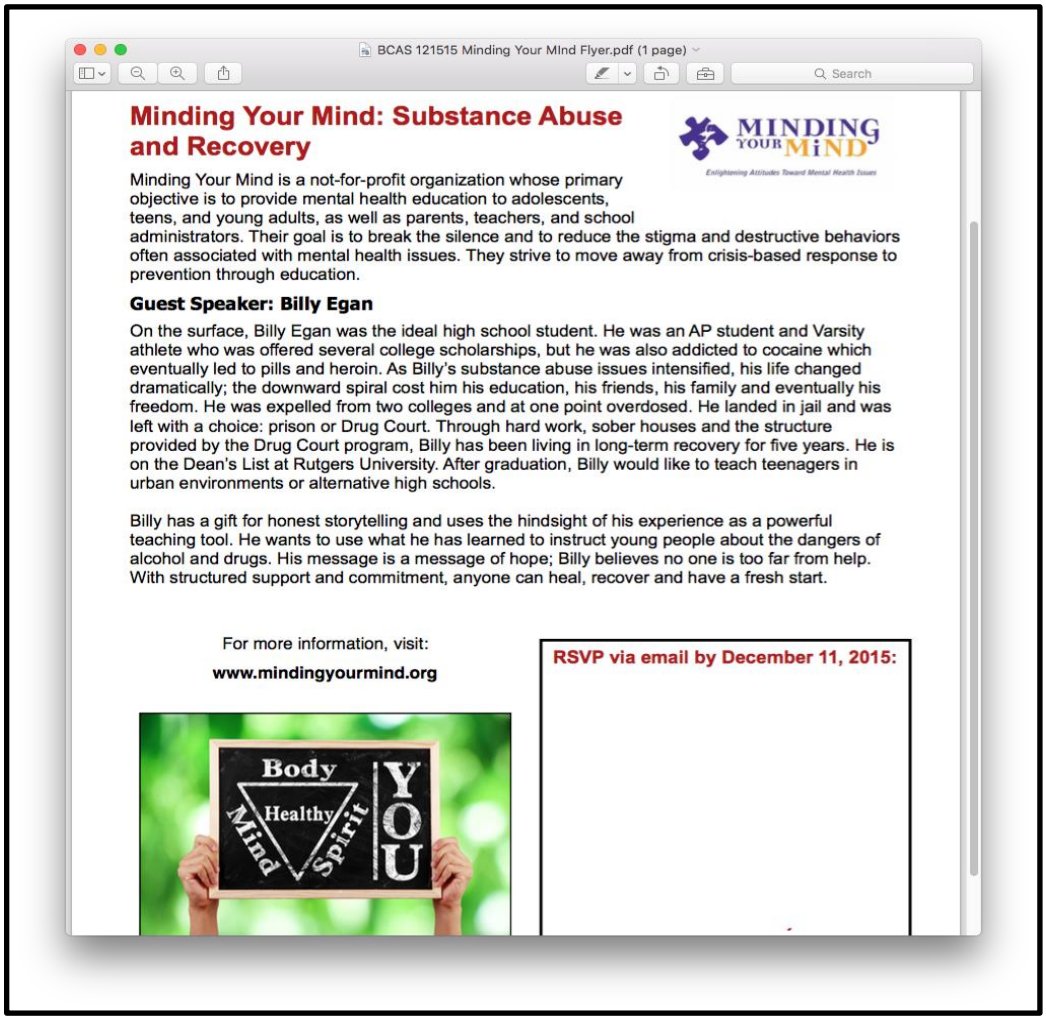
As principal, I needed to change the former schedule, which was packed the entire day and left no time for cross-curricular efforts, lesson planning, parent/guardian reach-out, grading, copies, or any other usual instructional tasks teachers needed to attend to. I did not ask for the input of staff. Staff need a preparation period. For the first time, teachers can focus on lesson planning, copies, parent outreach, cross-curricular activities, field trip planning, and grading. This time slot was necessary as staff were not required to submit lesson plans under the previous administration. As a teacher, I did enjoy not

writing plans, but it is not the best practice. The counseling department will utilize the time to ensure all documentation is completed, along with any follow-up needs for parents, guardians, and outside therapists.

Once staff understood the expectations and became familiar with the new schedule, the school day felt more organized. This common planning time fosters a deep collaborative learning culture among the staff. I was incredibly proud of the outcomes of the common planning time. The counselors decided to begin a mental health awareness initiative, inviting speakers to the school for a parent/student information session. Below is the product of this planning.

Figure 2

Minding Your Mind Outreach



The English teachers had the time to collaborate and created a school newspaper entitled *The Clean Slate*. The newspaper's name signifies our philosophy at the AHS: All students deserve a fresh start and a clean slate. The newspaper can be viewed as both an artifact and an espoused value through the lens of Schein (2010). The actual newspaper is the artifact, but the teamwork, student work, and more profound message behind the paper speak to our espoused values and what we stand for here.

Afternoon Meeting

Communication is at the center of collaborative leadership. The notion of the afternoon meeting is brilliant and can benefit staff and students if done correctly. My vision was to designate 30 or possibly 60 minutes that students are not on campus for the afternoon meeting. As previously mentioned, the former meetings had no structure or purpose. This meeting would start with a round-robin, allowing each staff member to share a positive of the day with the group.

Figure 3

Good Stuff

CS: I had an entire class today, and the students enjoyed reading.
JC: Sean finished World History I today.
MG: The math room was packed. Bob finished his portfolio.
SS: I had Anna's exit meeting today, and she was accepted into Ramapo.
CM: I gave David short 30-minute blocks on his schedule, and he did much better.

This "positive" section of the meeting only takes a few minutes and allows staff to decompress, share, smile, and cheer on their co-workers. It also allows others to see what works in different classrooms with different students. The next part of the meeting provides a chance for staff to receive and discuss information as a team. I lead this section and have a list of students to bring to the group.

Figure 4

Agenda from Meeting

Jen issues Aly in the classroom.
Mia has issues with George.

G has issues with Mia, but for different reasons.
S and Z were both admitted to IOP and will be picked up at 12.
Tido-marijuana shake and blunt in vest. 911 call due to outbursts.

As a team, we review each of the items and make comments. All staff members are expected to participate and offer feedback. The staff can often piece together situations students may have misunderstood or misrepresented. For example, a new student named Jane Doe started at AHS on this particular day. The student was highly nervous and initially had difficulty leaving her father's car in the parking lot. We guided her into the building, and she worked in an office most of the day. The team crafted a short plan for Jane's second day. The parent would send a text message to the counselor when they were enroute to the school. The counselor would then be waiting at the door for Jane. A student ambassador would be introduced to Jane and would be willing to chat and hopefully make a connection to help her feel more comfortable.

The team also discusses any behavior or academic issues. Often, one teacher is better with a student than another; this is the time to share strategies. For example, a student named John Doe usually had difficulties transitioning activities during the day and would sit on the floor and be unresponsive. Staff members asked John to get up, but he would not listen. One staff member discovered that if John were told, "This is against the rules, and you have to get up right now," he would immediately leave the floor and return to class. Without these meeting opportunities, information would not have been circulated as quickly, and the situation with the student could have escalated.

With these changes, the meeting has a purpose and a daily agenda. The purpose of the staff meeting is to allow the staff to voice and share concerns about students in a group setting. Each staff member has the opportunity to speak if needed. The decisions

are made as a group, and all issues are fleshed out completely. The meetings will not be a source of complaint but a place where action plans are created to serve students best. It is a place for counselors to inform staff about issues that students may be facing.

The meeting closes with an open floor for anyone to share or bring up any other concerns that have not been covered. Once those items have been discussed, we always adjourn in the same way with a loud clap by one of the math teachers. This loud clap is a silly way to end the meeting that just became embedded into what we do. The math teacher is a former coach and usually claps or signals students and staff. It was a joke one day, and it just stuck.

As I reflect upon the purpose and content of these afternoon meetings through Schein (2010), it is evident that all levels, artifacts, assumptions, and espoused values are present here. The daily agendas are at the lowest level of culture: artifacts. The staff conduct, positive attitude, and ability to work together and make change are all signs of a healthy culture and climate. The simple clap at the end of the meeting is a tradition that does mean something to the group.

Community Meetings

At the time of the study, the school had four counselors on staff. Each counselor is responsible for a community of students. The counselor is assigned to a student upon application. The counselor completes the intake and case manages the student for their entire duration at AHS. Each counselor is then assigned certain teachers who are part of their community.

Every Thursday, these designated communities meet as a team. This meeting has a monthly “Community Meeting” leader facilitating the session. Staff use this time to discuss each student's academic, behavioral, attendance and lateness, and service-learning

progress. The staff uses qualitative and quantitative data to assign each student a "Level of Mobility" rating. The levels of mobility will be discussed later in this study. From this, the ratings and comments are posted to a master list and then on the individual progress reports that are disseminated to students every Monday so that they can have real-time updates on their progress at the AHS.

Additionally, this practice reinforces the collaborative leadership model. The changes to the schedule may seem minimal, but collaborative leadership, like all initiatives, can only be started if staff is given the time to do so. This demonstrates that the espoused values of collaborative leadership are embedded into the school's backbone.

Big Picture School-Wide Problem-Solving

The superintendent at the time believed in collaborative leadership to solve complex problems. Trego-Ed trained multiple members of the staff and me in situation appraisal, decision analysis, problem analysis, and potential problem analysis. The Trego-Ed model poses questions to all stakeholders to see the issues, using questioning techniques that allow the identification of critical problems from different perspectives. Staff was taught to clarify the issues, access priorities, and name the next steps. When there are large and complex issues to be solved, the staff uses this model. For example, in November of 2015, I wrote this in my leadership journal:

Figure 5

Reflective Journal Entry A

"The issues continue in the math room. The teacher is a master, seasoned teacher but cannot keep up with the demands of the students currently on roll. So many students have transferred and need all of Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. The forcing of direct instruction classes appears to make no real difference in the math deficit. It is just

not working. How can students be passed along for years after failing all their math courses? Something needs to change. I just do not know what that something is."

My superintendent then hosted weekly "Walk & Talks" with new principals every Friday. During our session, I shared my issues and concerns about mathematics. At this time, there was one math teacher responsible for all courses. The aggravating issue is that students would transfer in with a significant math deficit. How does an 18-year-old student get to senior year and still be a freshman in math? Secondly, many of these students were math-resistant and would avoid the math room at all costs. The teacher was frustrated. The counselors were frustrated. Most of all, the students were not making progress. The school faced a significant issue that I was not supporting, as well as the building principal.

A Trego-Ed session was scheduled with the superintendent, staff, and myself. A Trego-Ed problem analysis session is facilitated by sitting in a circle and addressing the following: (1) state the problem, (2) organize relevant information, (3) look for possible causes, (4) vet possible causes, and (5) ensure the cause is genuine. In the second session, a decision analysis session was conducted, and the following were addressed: (1) state the decision, (2) establish criteria, (3) list alternatives, (4) evaluate alternatives, (5) consider risks, and (6) trust your work.

During the third session, the team agreed on a few items. First, the direct instruction classes would be eliminated for all math courses and traded for one-on-one or small-group instruction. All students would have portfolios to track progress in their prospective math courses. A second math teacher would be hired to share the workload. A new course entitled "Math Recovery" was created to catch those students identified by

staff as needing more intensive instruction. The teachers would review the students and what math credits were required. Those substantially in arrears with credits would be selected for Math Recovery. This class has two teachers with a maximum of eight students. It is intentionally small, so students receive even more specialized attention when learning math. Sadly, it is not uncommon for a 12th grader to transfer to the school who is still technically a freshman in math. This student needs more instruction and more support.

Lastly, the team would attempt to change the culture in the math room by not giving students a choice about when they can start on math credits. It was determined that when students started school, the counselors would allow students to opt out of going to the math room. I ended this practice. Students are now required to begin with math on their first day. The AHS is about student choice, but not working cannot be a choice. If we avoid the tough things, we will never get better.

The culture began to shift as the older students graduated and were replaced by new students who did not know any better. Students just went to math—no questions. Over the years, this math reform has been one of the most vivid and essential changes I have made. The math classroom went from being empty on most days to a place where students were waiting for seats.

Leadership Connections

Fullan (2007) would categorize this shift in the math room as a "deep" change and a re-culturing. Schein (2010) would classify the changes to the math program as representing espoused values. Students need the time, space, and opportunity to learn. These collaborative leadership tactics have shown our goal-conscious strategies that support our mission. Bass (1984) showed that the abovementioned activities and factors

can be viewed through the intellectual stimulation lens under transformational leadership. This realm embodies goals, inspirations, and challenges, fostering innovation and creativity. The collaborative leadership behind the schedule change, morning meetings, preparation period, community meetings, and school-wide big-picture problem-solving speak to this style.

Factor Two: Teacher (Staff) Collaboration

Teacher collaboration is the backbone of efforts to improve student instructional outcomes, and such collaboration bolsters the overall culture of a learning organization. Laal et al. (2014) maintained that teacher collaboration is a practice that includes groups of teachers working together to solve problems, complete tasks, or create products. For this study, I want this factor to include the social worker, school counselor, and school nurse. All these stakeholders are equally important.

Professional Learning Communities

As mentioned in Factor One: Collaborative Leadership, the schedule was revised to permit time for the staff to collaborate after the students left. During this "Staff Collaboration" time, the staff created and refined initiatives that would benefit the school overall. This staff collaboration formulated a professional learning community that would serve the school. The shining star that the staff collaboratively worked on with my guidance and oversight was utilizing the 11 principles of character education (Lickona et al. 2007) to create programs, assess school needs regarding character education, and ensure our practices were best practices in terms of the literature.

Figure 6

Staff PLC Research Questions

Given the nature of an alternative school, would a character education program reduce disciplinary problems, instill compassion and caring, and promote citizenship with the same success achieved in a regular school, given the nature of an alternative school?

From the staff PLC research question, the following action plan was developed to begin our character education journey:

- Partner with Character.org, an organization that assists schools in becoming National Schools of Character
- Partner with NJDOE School Culture and Climate Transformation Project
- Restructure of the school Grades 7–12
- Institute/Revive the Family Project
- Revise the schedule to include electives and group counseling slot
- Train all staff in restorative practices
- Create a student leadership group
- Create an attendance policy
- Revise the system in which grades/credits are reported
- Revise the levels of mobility to incorporate service learning

Partner With Character.org

As a staff, we partnered with Character.org to begin the highly challenging process of a complete character audit. No other alternative schools were listed as National and State School of Character. There is no single script for effective character education, but some essential basic principles exist. Linkona et al. (2007) stated 11 principles that

schools and other groups can use to plan a character education effort and to evaluate available character education programs: (1) promotes core ethical values and supportive performance values as the foundation of good character; (2) defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior; (3) uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development; (4) creates a caring school community; (5) provides students with opportunities for moral action; (6) includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed; (7) strives to foster students' self-motivation; (8) engages the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students; (9) fosters shared moral leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative; (10) engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort; and (11) assesses the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character (p. 1).

Although the team worked hard and created some profound changes that are good for students, we did not win the award. The figure below is a text of the email notifying central administration that AHS was awarded Honorable Mention.

Figure 7

Email About Honorable Mention

"Greetings. BCAS has worked hard this year to improve character education in an alternative setting. The school counselors, teachers, and administrative team worked hard on the National School of Character application process. The application requires a narrative and examples from each of the eleven principles. I received a phone call today with the results. The competition has three levels: Emerging, Honorable Mention, and National School of Character. Mrs. Kemps, a representative from the organization, stated that all schools land on the emerging section of the rubric the first time they apply. The representative was so impressed with our application that we were awarded Honorable Mention status. On May 20, 2016, BCAS will be recognized at Rider University for this accomplishment. Additionally, our original application will be returned with detailed feedback on how we can improve and ultimately be named a National School of Character. I am so proud of the counselors and teachers for their hard work on this initiative."

The team took the feedback from the organization and continued to refine program offerings and enhance character education offerings. Our application was submitted the following year, and this was received:

Figure 8

Email on Award

"Dear Mrs. Joan Barbagiovanni,
On behalf of the New Jersey Alliance of Social, Emotional, and Character Development, we would like to congratulate the **Alternative High School** for becoming a 2017 New Jersey School of Character. It is evident that you have incorporated the 11 Principles into your total school program and are living them each and every day. Your students are reaping the benefits of a successful program and this is so important for their future.
As a SOC, it is important that you reach out to other schools to encourage them to become a SOC. We ask you to offer assistance to other schools in your district or in the surrounding districts that have not reached this status. New Jersey has led the nation for several years in the most SOCs and we want that number to grow. Our goal is to see every school in the state become a NJSOC."

The staff and students were so excited. Additionally, a group of students were featured in the local newspaper. For many, this was the first time such positive recognition was received. It was a shining star of the year. The superintendent of schools purchased treats and a giant cake for the students to celebrate.

Figure 9

Article in Local Newspaper

Alternative High School Achieves National School of Character Status
By: Brian Woods

"The Alternative High School was named a 2017 National School of Character, joining 82 other schools in the yearly distinction. The award is bestowed upon schools by Character.org. This nonprofit helps districts fuse core ethical values, such as integrity, honesty, and respect, into everyday education to create compassionate students. The Alternative School was announced as a designee at a press event in Washington, D.C., on May 23 and was recognized with a "School of Character" banner by the Freeholders at its

meeting the next day. The school is part of the county's Special Services School District. It educates high school and middle school students and is for those who struggle at traditional high schools for various reasons. The county's Special Services School District assumed responsibility in the summer of 2014."

Completing and resubmitting the character education application was arduous and taxing on all staff. The staff wanted the school to improve and stand out. The staff wanted to redefine what the outside world thinks about alternative schools. The staff wanted to make our students proud to be enrolled at this school. This award lets the outside world know that this school is authentically meaningful and serves students well. Again, when thinking about Schein (2010), all levels are represented again. The staff worked hard to give the school and students the recognition they deserve. The staff fully believes in our vision and mission and goes above and beyond.

Partner With Local University

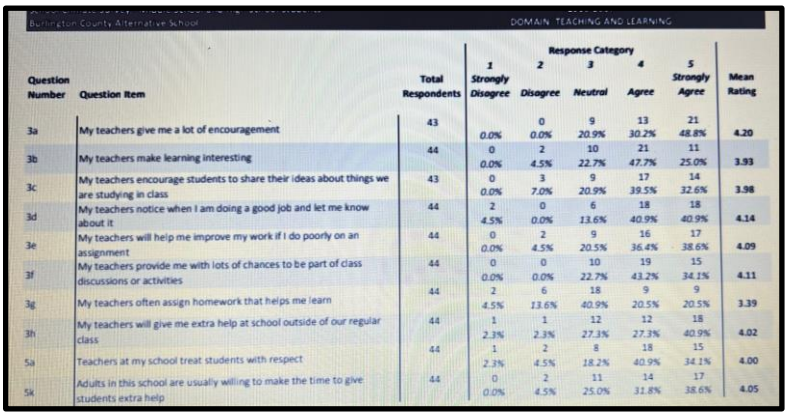
A secondary partnership was created to support the character education initiative. All staff members were on the team, which further supported teacher collaboration. The School Climate Transformation Project (SCTP), a partnership between the Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology and the New Jersey Department of Education supports public K–12 school districts in New Jersey in implementing a data-driven change process to promote systems-level change and inclusive and positive school climates. The SCTP developed the New Jersey School Climate Improvement (NJ SCI) Survey, administered online (NJ SCI Platform). The NJ

SCI Platform features online data collection tools and strategic planning resources, which help school leaders use data to set school climate goals, implement research-based strategies, and monitor progress over time. NJ SCI Platform districts can also access professional development opportunities, technical assistance, and direct consultation.

This partnership was pivotal to the collaboration and character education initiative because it supported the school with legitimate data that were used to make informed decisions about change. The organization had well-trained researchers who were able to teach the staff about data collection and data use.

Figure 10

Sample Data from the SCTP Project



Burlington County Alternative School — DOMAIN: TEACHING AND LEARNING

Question Number	Question Item	Total Respondents	Response Category 1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree	Mean Rating
3a	My teachers give me a lot of encouragement	43	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	9 20.9%	13 30.2%	21 48.8%	4.20
3b	My teachers make learning interesting	44	0 0.0%	2 4.5%	10 22.7%	21 47.7%	11 25.0%	3.93
3c	My teachers encourage students to share their ideas about things we are studying in class	43	0 0.0%	3 7.0%	9 20.9%	17 39.5%	14 32.6%	3.98
3d	My teachers notice when I am doing a good job and let me know about it	44	2 4.5%	0 0.0%	6 13.6%	18 40.9%	18 40.9%	4.14
3e	My teachers will help me improve my work if I do poorly on an assignment	44	0 0.0%	2 4.5%	9 20.5%	16 36.4%	17 38.6%	4.09
3f	My teachers provide me with lots of chances to be part of class discussions or activities	44	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	10 22.7%	19 43.2%	15 34.1%	4.11
3g	My teachers often assign homework that helps me learn	44	2 4.5%	6 13.6%	18 40.9%	9 20.5%	9 20.5%	3.39
3h	My teachers will give me extra help at school outside of our regular class	44	1 2.3%	1 2.3%	12 27.3%	12 27.3%	18 40.9%	4.02
5a	Teachers at my school treat students with respect	44	1 2.3%	2 4.5%	8 18.2%	18 40.9%	15 34.1%	4.00
5k	Adults in this school are usually willing to make the time to give students extra help	44	0 0.0%	2 4.5%	11 25.0%	14 31.8%	17 38.6%	4.05

Restructure the School Grades 7–12

Through this teacher collaboration (which ultimately is staff collaboration at AHS), it was decided that the school should not be separated by middle and high school. At the time, students in Grades 7 and 8 followed a “push-in” schedule, while students in Grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 followed the regular instructional model/free-flowing schedule.

The root of the idea came to me on my morning drive and was captured in my reflective journal.

Figure 11

Reflective Journal Entry B

> "The middle school students are not responding to any of the positive behavior supports that are being implemented. All staff, from new to veteran teachers, complain about their behavior. Z and D are the most disruptive. If I failed two grades and were still in middle school, I would be angry, too. I am considering pulling the two kids out and giving them a high school schedule. At this point, what is the worst that can happen?"

There was a mixed review when this idea was initially presented to staff. Some staff members felt the students needed to earn their way into the high school and, therefore, should not be moved. Others felt the two students were disruptive and needed to be removed from the classroom. The following day, I met with the two students and stated that they were overly disruptive and were not returning to the classroom again. I gave them a high school schedule and sent them on their way. To our surprise, both students were motivated and got to work. The ability to catch back up to their original graduating class was a motivator that changed the game for these students.

Once the staff saw the benefits of this "push-out" decision, they began collaborating on how this could be applied to the entire school. From here, it was decided that all middle school students would be allowed to be integrated and learn alongside their high school counterparts. This developed into the school's yearly theme, "One School, Your Journey." From there, teachers created individualized schedules for middle school students who identified as needing to push out into high school.

Institute and Revive the Family Project

The Family Project program supports communication between the school and the home. Each teacher is assigned a group of students for whom they are responsible for mentoring. These students are called “Families,” and the teacher is the “Family Head.” The Family Head is responsible for contacting parents/guardians once per week. These phone calls usually occur on Thursdays or Fridays and provide the parents with an update on how their child is doing at school. These updates cover the highs and lows of student performance. These calls are part of a larger initiative to gain the trust of parents and guardians so that there can be a positive and supporting relationship between the school and the home. Often, parents are so used to schools calling with negative information about their children that this is a welcomed change. The staff all agree that this initiative, although time-consuming, is worthwhile.

Figure 12

Family Project Restructuring Guidelines

Revised Family Project Guidelines

Objective: To provide parents and guardians with supplemental support and communication to strengthen the home/school relationship.

Role	Tasks	Documentation	Total Hours
Counselor	Contact students and parents who have been absent for three consecutive days.	Genesis	40+ hours
Counselor	Facilitate one virtual/in-house outside speaker per year for students.	District Forms	1-2 hours
Teacher	Make human contact with parents and guardians once a week to share academic, behavioral, and social progress.	Genesis	40+ hours
*Counselors also have after-hours emergency calls, which are required by law.			

Requirements
1. Calls must be made weekly. 2. Calls must be documented in the Genesis notes section. 3. Joan will monitor the Genesis documentation. 4. If the documentation is inaccurate during auditing, the stipend will be withheld.

Revise the Schedule to Include Electives and Group Counseling Slots

Good educators are reflective and are continually making plans to improve the school. It was common to hear teachers complain that student behavior was at its worst during the last period of the day. The former schedule had students eating lunch, followed

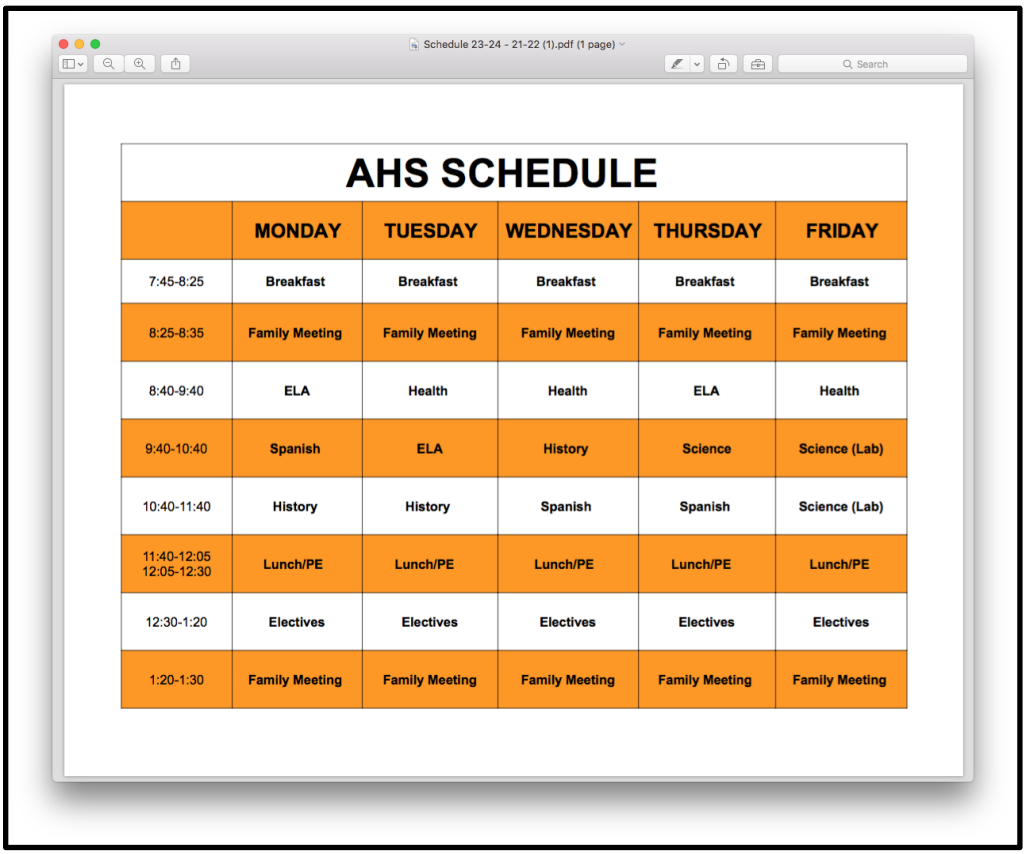
by physical education, followed by another academic period. Teachers began asking if this last period of the day could be restructured. From this, the elective period was born. It was decided, collaboratively, that the last period would now be an enrichment period. Additionally, in the past, the counseling department always facilitated group counseling sessions during the physical education period. This was upsetting for those students who loved physical education. Those students often acted out when told they had to go to a group. The group counseling would now be moved to his elective period. The counselors were happy because they were tired of chasing frustrated students and forcing them into groups. The students were delighted because they got all the fun and engaging physical education activities. I was happy because I did not have to plead with students who refused to attend the group.

The teachers worked together and decided that elective periods would run in three-week cycles and would be open to any student regardless of grade level. This also applies to middle school students. The courses were based on student and staff interests. Some of the elective choices over the years have been Japanese culture, Black History films, Latin X games, pickleball, creative writing, book club, strategy games, outdoor gardening, weight room, art, STEAM, Studio Ghibli fans, yoga and guided meditation, Dungeons and Dragons, puzzles and circuits, school murals, awkward history, service learning opportunities, and gross science. The students loved this, and the behavior problems began to dissipate. The counseling department would facilitate group sessions on substance abuse awareness, social skills, healthy lifestyles, healthy relationships, open discussion groups, LGBTQA+ support and alliance groups, and men's groups. All the electives and group offerings are rotated, and the students have input on the next round of

offerings. This was a perfect solution because the students were not making the most of their academic time; with this new period, students were still engaged and learning.

Figure 13

Revised Schedule



AHS SCHEDULE

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
7:45-8:25	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast
8:25-8:35	Family Meeting	Family Meeting	Family Meeting	Family Meeting	Family Meeting
8:40-9:40	ELA	Health	Health	ELA	Health
9:40-10:40	Spanish	ELA	History	Science	Science (Lab)
10:40-11:40	History	History	Spanish	Spanish	Science (Lab)
11:40-12:05 12:05-12:30	Lunch/PE	Lunch/PE	Lunch/PE	Lunch/PE	Lunch/PE
12:30-1:20	Electives	Electives	Electives	Electives	Electives
1:20-1:30	Family Meeting	Family Meeting	Family Meeting	Family Meeting	Family Meeting

Train All Staff in Restorative Practices

This heading can also be viewed under the Professional Development section, but it is listed here since it resulted from teacher and staff collaboration. Through my education as a teacher and an administrator, I had never been taught about restorative practices. I learned such an important lesson about this from the school social worker. It

is captured here in my reflection journal from when I was a teacher there.

Figure 14

Reflection Journal C

"Ryan would not get off the computer when told to do so often. Ryan? Ryan? Ryan? He continued to blast music in my classroom. I lost my patience and simply pulled the plug on the machine. Ryan got angry because his essay was in one of the other tabs, and thought it was lost. He was loud, rude, and disrespectful to me. I kicked him out of my class. I went to the principal and wanted Ryan suspended for his actions. The next day, the school social worker asked me to attend a meeting with her and Ryan. I agreed. I believed the purpose of this meeting was to discipline the student. The social worker facilitated a restorative meeting between Ryan and me. Each of us could share our perspective of what happened in the classroom. At the end of the session, we both ended up apologizing and were able to move forward. I felt like the school social worker was crazy initially, but this meeting was meaningful for Ryan and me. I need to learn more about restorative practices."

This was a critical lesson for me and my practice. I envisioned a whole school operating with restorative practices at the center. All staff needed and wanted to be trained in restorative practices. Out of this training came the AHS Around Here-ism. These norms are the "rules" of how the school operates. They are rooted in restorative practice, and the staff utilizes similar language. If a student breaks a norm, staff will say, "Well, around here, we do not…" to address the situation.

Figure 15

Around Here-isms

Around Here We…
● Respect each other, each other's property, and ourselves. ● Stay focused and work during academic times.

- Value the differences between our backgrounds and life experiences.
- Ask for help and offer it to others.
- Restore relationships when needed.
- Seek and utilize resolutions for problems.
- Dress appropriately-presentation matters.
- Use appropriate language that is not offensive to anyone.

Create a Student Leadership Group

The next piece that grew from the staff collaboration was starting a student leadership group. Alternative school educators are well aware of the existing student hierarchy. There are high- and low-status students. A high-status student is a leader and can sway all the other students. A low-status student has no following and wields no initial group power. If you can gain the trust and acceptance of a high-status student for your cause, he/she will also pull the others to you. Consequently, if a high-status student is against you, he/she will cause mayhem. The leadership group would attempt to build community through a group of high-status individuals who would serve as ambassadors, student leaders, mentors, and staff assistants. The group was wildly popular and gained significant momentum.

Create an Attendance Policy That Works

One of the staff's concerns was the student population's horrible attendance. Students cannot be taught if they do not come to school. The initial attendance rate hovered around 45%. Once the new Local Education Agency (LEA) assumed control over the AHS, the district attendance policy was forced upon the school. The policy is so drastic and counterproductive to alternative school students.

The district policy states:

> Every student is expected to be in school daily. Should the student be absent more than six unexcused days per semester, he/she will be placed on non-credit status. Students who exceed nine or more days with excused or unexcused absences from school for the semester will not be eligible for non-credit remediation and may be referred to the Superintendent for consideration for referral to the Board of Education for action. The Board of Education reserves the right to take any action it deems necessary in accordance with the law, which includes administratively dropping from the school rolls students with ten days of consecutive unexcused absences. The notification of a student reaching non-credit status, along with the information referencing the appeal process and remediation procedures will be sent to the parent(s) or legal guardian(s) and adult student by certified mail.

These aforementioned policies and others like them are why many students enroll in the alternative school. As a team, it was decided that a policy needed to be specially created for the alternative school population that would foster student success and not discourage students after missing six school days for the entire semester. This policy will be linked to the positive behavior support model entitled the "Levels of Mobility."

Revise the "Levels of Mobility"

Cihon et al. (2018) claimed, "Level systems have been described as a framework which can be used to shape behavior through the systematic application of behavioral principles. Within level systems, individuals move up and down through various levels contingent upon specific behaviors" (p. 44). The Levels of Mobility is the system that the AHS uses to positively support behavior, academic progress, and attendance/lateness. The former director initially designed this process, but it has been modified for simplicity

and to support efforts to increase attendance, credit earnings, and service-learning commitments as part of the character education program.

The levels are divided into three tiers: Level One, Level Two, and Level Three. Students with Level One status have demonstrated acceptable behavior all week, worked in all academic subjects, attended all 5 days of school (or had excused absences), and completed three service learning tasks. Students with Level Two status have demonstrated acceptable behavior all week, worked at a sufficient rate in their courses, were absent or late once during the 5-day window, and completed one service learning task. Students on Level Three status may be new, have been absent or late more than once, have damaged their Yondr pouch, have worked slower than expected, or have not completed service learning requirements.

Figure 16

Levels of Mobility

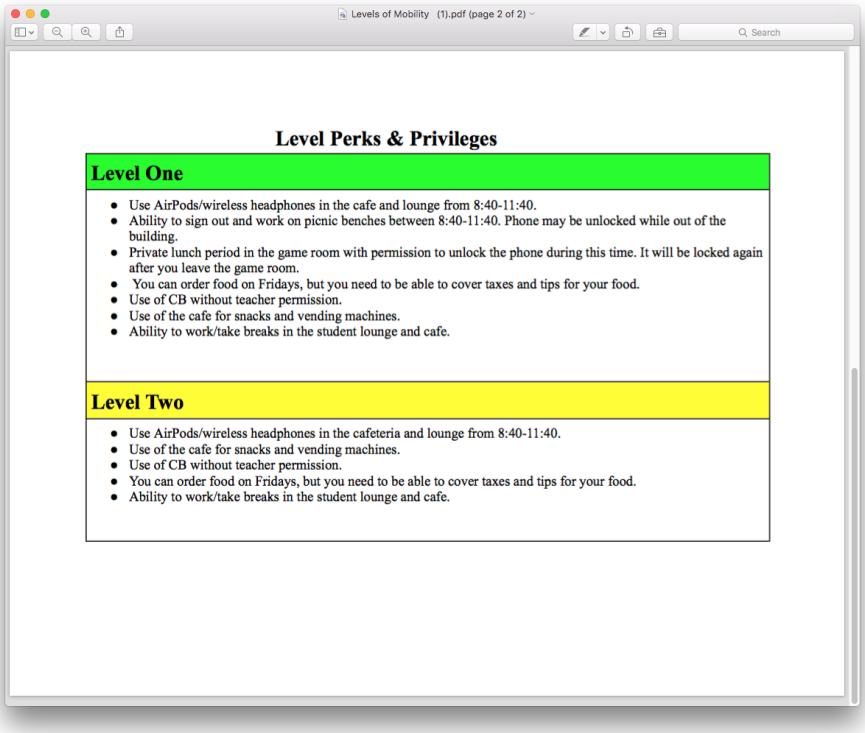
Levels of Mobility

Behavior		Credits		Attendance		Service Learning	
Outstanding behavior at all times. (includes language and Yondr pouch care).	+	CAR < 3.00 Earns academic credits weekly. Works in all subject areas needed.	+	Zero unexcused absences, tardies, or early dismissals in the five-day window (Friday-Thursday).	+	Earns and submits 3 BCAS SL coupons by Thursday of each week.	=Level 1
Satisfactory behavior at all times. (includes language and Yondr pouch care). No disruptive events as defined by staff.	+	CAR > 3.0 < 5.00 Actively working in all subject areas is needed.	+	No more than ONE unexcused absence, tardy, or early dismissal in the five-day window (Friday-Thursday).	+	Earns and submits 1 BCAS SL coupon by Thursday of each week.	=Level 2
CAR > 5.00. Not working in all subject areas needed. No credits were earned in 3 weeks.	+	The student exhibits unsatisfactory behavior. Yondr Pouch vandalized/tampered with. ($30.00 fee)	+	More than TWO unexcused absences, tardies, or early dismissals in the 5-day window (Friday-Thursday).	+	Does not earn BCAS SL coupons or forgot to deposit into the Family Head bin.	=Level 3

Every Thursday in the Community Meeting, the staff uses the levels of mobility chart to discuss students and assign them a level. Students earn a level for one week, determined by the prior week. Students must earn credits, participate in service learning, demonstrate acceptable behavior, and attend school regularly. If students have a bad week, they do not lose credit for completed work; they would just drop a level that week. Students aspire to be on Level One or Level Two due to the related privileges associated with each. Level Three is the most restrictive.

Figure 17

Levels 1 & 2 Privileges



The students at AHS are serious about being on level and having access to privileges. These levels are posted every Monday. Staff and security use this list, as areas such as the cafeteria and student lounge are locked, and only those on the level can access them.

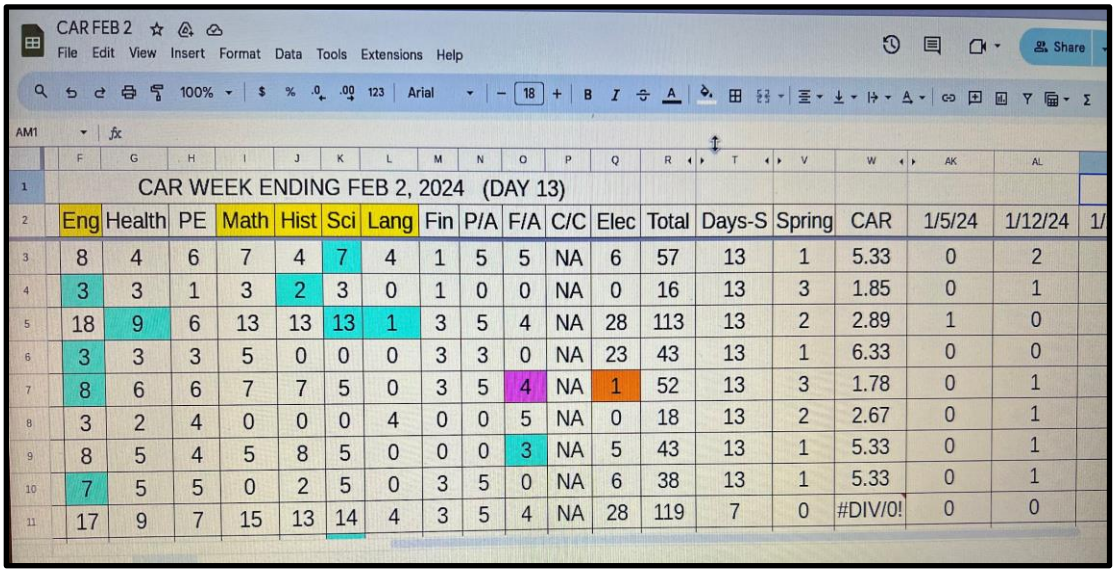
Revise the System in Which Grades/Credits Are Reported

The last segment of the staff collaboration plan involved overhauling how grades and credits were reported. This school is unique because it provides feedback promptly to students. Every Thursday, a credit accrual rate (CAR) sheet is generated. This sheet lists all students and what credits were earned that week. The CAR score is a mathematical

formula that computes how many days the student has been on a roll with the number of academic credits earned.

Figure 18

CAR Sheet



CAR FEB 2

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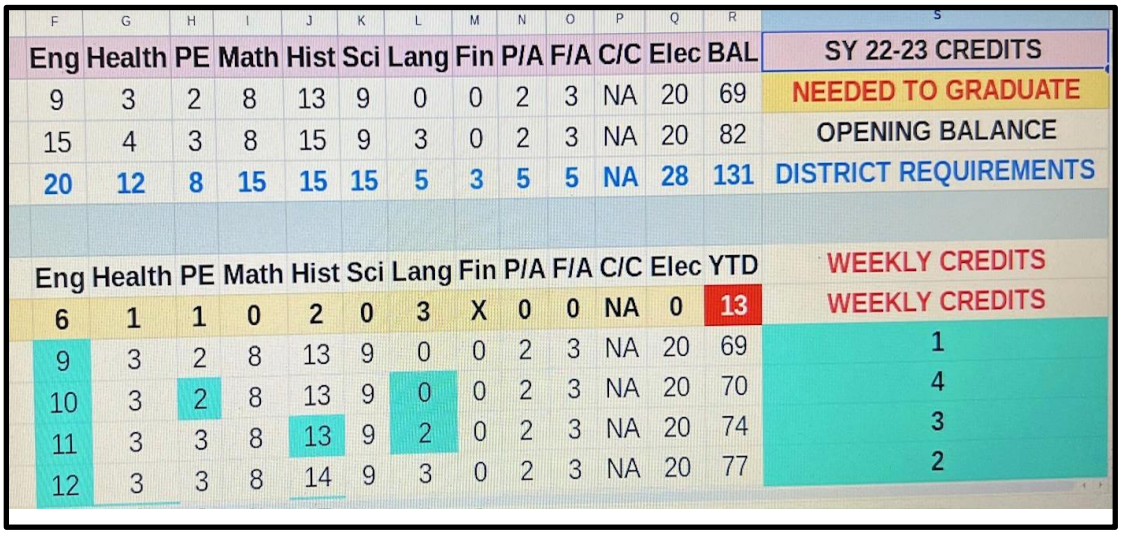
CAR WEEK ENDING FEB 2, 2024 (DAY 13)

	Eng	Health	PE	Math	Hist	Sci	Lang	Fin	P/A	F/A	C/C	Elec	Total	Days-S	Spring	CAR	1/5/24	1/12/24	1/
3	8	4	6	7	4	7	4	1	5	5	NA	6	57	13	1	5.33	0	2	
4	3	3	1	3	2	3	0	1	0	0	NA	0	16	13	3	1.85	0	1	
5	18	9	6	13	13	13	1	3	5	4	NA	28	113	13	2	2.89	1	0	
6	3	3	3	5	0	0	0	3	3	0	NA	23	43	13	1	6.33	0	0	
7	8	6	6	7	7	5	0	3	5	4	NA	1	52	13	3	1.78	0	1	
8	3	2	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	5	NA	0	18	13	2	2.67	0	1	
9	8	5	4	5	8	5	0	0	0	3	NA	5	43	13	1	5.33	0	1	
10	7	5	5	0	2	5	0	3	5	0	NA	6	38	13	1	5.33	0	1	
11	17	9	7	15	13	14	4	3	5	4	NA	28	119	7	0	#DIV/0!	0	0	

This sheet is an internal document, and the student name, sending district, and sending district requirements are listed on the left-hand side. Under the previous administration, this sheet was posted publicly for all students. This poses many issues, from student privacy to creating conflict among the students over comments or embarrassment about academic progress. The team wanted to transform this document into individualized sheets for students.

Figure 19

Revised Credit Sheet



Eng	Health	PE	Math	Hist	Sci	Lang	Fin	P/A	F/A	C/C	Elec	BAL	SY 22-23 CREDITS
9	3	2	8	13	9	0	0	2	3	NA	20	69	NEEDED TO GRADUATE
15	4	3	8	15	9	3	0	2	3	NA	20	82	OPENING BALANCE
20	12	8	15	15	15	5	3	5	5	NA	28	131	DISTRICT REQUIREMENTS
Eng	Health	PE	Math	Hist	Sci	Lang	Fin	P/A	F/A	C/C	Elec	YTD	WEEKLY CREDITS
6	1	1	0	2	0	3	X	0	0	NA	0	13	WEEKLY CREDITS
9	3	2	8	13	9	0	0	2	3	NA	20	69	1
10	3	2	8	13	9	0	0	2	3	NA	20	70	4
11	3	3	8	13	9	2	0	2	3	NA	20	74	3
12	3	3	8	14	9	3	0	2	3	NA	20	77	2

The Family Heads distribute these new individual sheets to students, along with new weekly goals and handwritten notes offering praise, guidance, and feedback. Staff can email these sheets to parents, guardians, and home schools. The staff uses these documents as a starting point for the weekly Family Project contacts.

Reflecting upon the momentum and outcomes generated by the staff and teacher, collaboration is compelling. According to the levels of organizational culture by Schein (2010), the teacher and staff collaboration factor illustrates a solid and positive culture and climate on all three model levels. The artifacts are the actual schedules and new documents that were created. The espoused values of parts like the family project speak to a deeper purpose and attempt to build relationships with parents and guardians. The group's assumptions and willingness to work collaboratively demonstrate the deepest level of organizational culture. The team members will work together and ensure that students are successful no matter what it takes.

Leadership Connections

Schein (2010) classified the changes in school overall as representing espoused values. Students need the time, space, and opportunity to learn. These collaborative leadership tactics have shown our goal-conscious strategies that support our mission. The staff collaboration has been the springboard for many innovations. Bass (2000) showed that all of the activities above and factors can be viewed through the lens of Intellectual Stimulation and Inspirational Motivation under transformational leadership. This realm embodies goals, inspirations, and challenges and fosters innovation, creativity, optimism, productivity, inclusion, and a clear mission. The collaborative leadership behind the professional learning community goals has changed the culture and climate of the school dramatically.

Factor Three: Professional Development

Schools and other learning organizations must continually monitor, adjust, and recreate themselves to serve students best. Students enroll in school to acquire the necessary skills to learn, grow, and become productive citizens. This is also valid for educators, who must continuously learn. I wanted to ensure staff were exposed to meaningful professional development experiences for this factor. As a teacher, I felt so much time was wasted on meaningless initiatives that did not directly benefit students. The overarching topics that needed to be covered were shortcomings that needed to be addressed. Staff needed training in equity and diversity, non-suicidal self-injurious behavior, the importance of culture and climate, trauma-informed practices, restorative practices, and teen mental health first aid. These professional development initiatives must also be coupled with continuous team-building activities. My vision is professional development in areas of need and interest and a dedication to team building to create a

team that functions well through turbulent times. Alternative schools certainly have their share of tumultuous times, and the team must withstand them for students to succeed. Below is a report that the superintendent required every month. This report demonstrates the deep commitment to improving culture and climate on all levels.

Figure 20

Monthly Achievement Report, *October 2015*

Student and staff accomplishments, recognition, awards, activities, assemblies, programs, etc.

- Ty Sells presented School Culture and Climate workshops to middle and high school students and staff.
- The Parent/Community Networking event was held on October 13th. The topic was "How Money Works," and the speaker represented PrimAmerica. There was a great turnout of students, parents, and community members.
- Staff members Joan Barbagiovanni, Steve Fitzgerald, Lisa Cleary, and Michelle Delaney attended the School Culture Transformation Project Training in Union, NJ.
- Theresa Kemp and Steve Fitzgerald attended HIBSTERrvention training at BCSSSD.
- Cathy Maista, Pam Gessert, and Jim Codianni were trained to implement Acellus.
- Pam Gessert attended the School Resource Fair.
- Staff attended the second workshop on Multiculturalism conducted by Dr. Walpole of Rowan University.
- Jim Codianni participated in the NJ State Bar Foundation Mock Trial Coaches Training.
- Bobbie Downs attended the TregoED Advanced Training

She's Lost Her Mind, and It's August

How often have I sat in training and wondered how useful this is? Is there a class the administration enrolls in to select meaningless professional development for staff? Each year, staff have a week before the students arrive in September for opening activities and professional development. I knew I did not wish to torture my staff with worthless professional development experiences so that I could check a box as the leader.

Secondly, I wanted to do something that fostered our budding climate and culture. I wanted to do something outside the box in education for our staff opening. I spoke to our funding source, who committed $3,000.00 to my opening day efforts for staff.

I wanted to get staff out of the building and their comfort zones. The best way to build teams is outdoors in nature. I booked an hour for staff at an inflatable trampoline park on the bay. A private bus was rented, and a reservation at an outdoor restaurant was made. This was a risk, and some staff members were not pleased with my choice. Multiple staff members complained on the bus that this idea was an absolute waste of time and that there was so much work to be done back at the school. All of these statements were true. I did not care. I have witnessed the positive power of an outdoor adventure activity on a student group I used to facilitate and had the same hopes for the staff. I sent an email to staff explaining the details of the opening day. I received a text message from a staff member saying, “She has lost her mind, and it is August!” This teacher sent this to me accidentally. I did not respond.

Figure 21

Personal Narrative Entry A

It was a beautiful day, the water was warm and the sun was shining. The group is a collection of very different personalities, fitness levels, and ages. No one was forced to participate in the water activities. If a staff member was not interested they could cheer on their colleagues from the lounge chairs. I was so happy that Ryan took the initiative and said that as the Health and PE teacher I will get this started. Ryan immediately fell into the bay and it was funny. One by one the staff started to join in to attempt to successfully complete the course. No one knew that I was so sick last week, so I put on the face. I was so pleased to see that every single staff member got out there and was trying. The water was so warm! I couldn’t believe that Mark made it to the top of the platform and jumped off. The service at lunch was awful and the food was not much better, but no one would have known that. The time was spent with staff abuzz and laughing about the events of the day. The jellyfish, a teacher believing that the bay was a

swamp and subsequently throwing out her bathing suit that got wet, Matias pushing Frank off and so on. The day was a slam dunk, no one got hurt and everyone enjoyed themselves. My other teacher friends were jealous of our event. I feel this was a success and I am proud of the team and of my leadership in this instance.

Figure 22

Staff Outing Picture

This staff outing was such a positive event for all parties. It set a great tone for the school year, and staff appeared inspired to begin another school year together. Alternative schools move at a much faster pace than traditional schools. There are many days when students have significant issues, the police are contacted, and the work is non-stop. We need each other. Staff members must feel like their colleagues have their back through thick and thin. This staff outing was a way to solidify and build the climate and culture continually. My strategy and philosophy for the team represented my espoused values (Schein, 2010). The actual behavior, staff laughing and cheering each other on, having a meal together, and just enjoying each other's company in a relaxed environment, fosters the assumptions and values of the group (Schein, 2010).

Trauma-Informed Schools

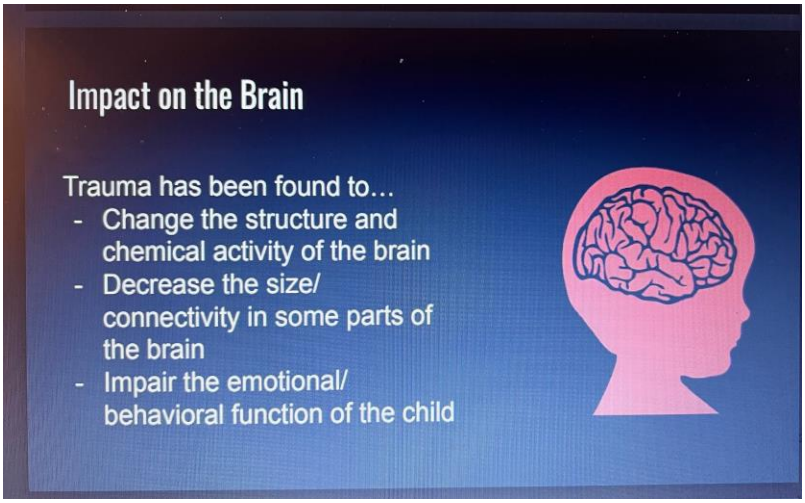
The students who enroll at the alternative school have experienced significant trauma. My vision was to couple trauma-informed practices with restorative practices to support students better. The National Child Stress Network stated:

> A trauma-informed school system (pre-school – 12th grade) is one in which all administrators, staff, students, families, and community members recognize and respond to the potentially negative behavioral, relational, and academic impact of traumatic stress on those within the school system including children, caregivers, teachers, other school staff, as well as on the system itself. Such a school system provides trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills as part of the fabric of the school culture, practices, and policies. It acts in collaboration with those involved with the child, including students' families, community agencies, leaders, and law enforcement, using the best available science to facilitate and support the recovery and resiliency of the school community. (p. 4)

We had district-level administrators, staff-led workshops, and an outside consultant teach about the content as a group. This allowed the team, who are from diverse backgrounds, to learn about the need for trauma-informed learning but also allowed for self-reflection and thought on how individual trauma impacts daily interactions.

Figure 23

Sample Slide from Training



The group's espoused values demonstrate that trauma-informed practices are essential to the organization (Schein, 2010). The staff was open, cooperative, and welcoming of the trauma-informed training and lessons. These deeply rooted assumptions guide the culture of why the staff feels trauma-informed schools are worthy of study and implementation.

ALICE Training

Student and staff safety is of the utmost priority. Before the entire school moved to the new building, there was little protection. The college campus is mainly a public area, and it is free flowing. At any point, a parent, disgruntled ex, or community member could stroll directly into classrooms and offices. The new building provided more security with locking doors and video surveillance cameras. A secure foyer was established, and three district security guards were hired to support staff and students. I met with the director of safety and security to create an action plan on how the AHS

could improve in this area. One of the outcomes was that all students would be subject to search and metal detecting before being permitted to enter the building. This decision created a bit of pushback from students, staff, and a few parents. If we care enough about safety and security at sporting events, airports, and concerts, we can apply these techniques to ensure that students and faculty are safe. Eventually, the pushback settled. The metal detecting and bag searches are timely but have yielded many types of weapons, drugs, alcohol, and other contraband that jeopardize the safe operation of the school.

The second piece of this initiative was ALICE training for all. ALICE is an acronym for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate. According to the K–12 ALICE Training site:

> Ensure the preparedness of your K–12 School by adding school shooter response training to your Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). ALICE Training provides the tools to support your school training plan, perform safety drills and exercises, and certify your K–12 School staff. Active shooter response training provides students and staff with effective response options in an active shooter situation. No single response fits all active shooter situations. However, ensuring each individual knows his or her options for response and is prepared to react decisively can save valuable time and help minimize the loss of life.

The entire staff completed a two-day training on this topic. Although the contents, reenactments, and training modules were alarming and scary, it was necessary. The staff took this training seriously as student safety is the most important thing. Below is a staff member who sent an email to central administration regarding the training.

Figure 24

Staff Email About Training

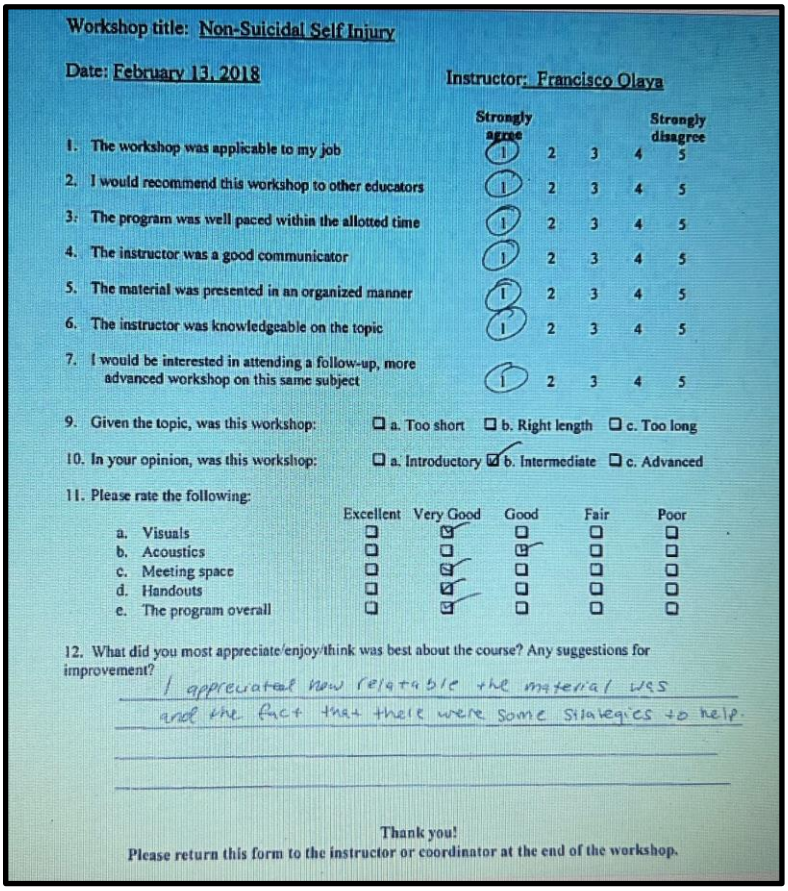
Good afternoon. I wanted to say that the ALICE training that Steve Martin is leading is one of the most valuable and useful things I have ever come across. The ideas he presented today were grounded in many years of research and I am proud to be part of a team who dedicate so much to keeping our students and staff safe. We have a lot of work to do but I feel good about it. Steve and Tommy did a fantastic job today. Thank you.

Non-Suicidal Self-Injurious Behavior

Non-suicidal self-injurious behavior (NSSI) refers to the intentional destruction of one's body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned (Klonsky, 2007). These behaviors include cutting, burning, scratching, hitting, or banging of the body. The counseling department at the AHS was well versed in NSSI, but the teaching staff and I were not as informed. I do not recall this behavior growing up; I doubt I learned about it in teacher preparation coursework. Since so many students have experienced some type of trauma, adding in training on NSSI made sense to me. The counseling department supported ongoing daily efforts, but an outside presenter was hired. Below is a staff member's survey response to the training.

Figure 25

NSSI Post-Survey



Workshop title: Non-Suicidal Self Injury

Date: February 13, 2018 Instructor: Francisco Olaya

	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree
1. The workshop was applicable to my job	1	2	3	4	5
2. I would recommend this workshop to other educators	1	2	3	4	5
3. The program was well paced within the allotted time	1	2	3	4	5
4. The instructor was a good communicator	1	2	3	4	5
5. The material was presented in an organized manner	1	2	3	4	5
6. The instructor was knowledgeable on the topic	1	2	3	4	5
7. I would be interested in attending a follow-up, more advanced workshop on this same subject	1	2	3	4	5

9. Given the topic, was this workshop: ☐ a. Too short ☐ b. Right length ☐ c. Too long

10. In your opinion, was this workshop: ☐ a. Introductory ☑ b. Intermediate ☐ c. Advanced

11. Please rate the following:

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
a. Visuals	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
b. Acoustics	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐
c. Meeting space	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
d. Handouts	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
e. The program overall	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐

12. What did you most appreciate/enjoy/think was best about the course? Any suggestions for improvement?

I appreciated how relatable the material was and the fact that there were some strategies to help.

Thank you!

Please return this form to the instructor or coordinator at the end of the workshop.

Character Education Forum

After the announcement that the AHS was recognized as a New Jersey and National School of Character, an invitation was extended for the school to attend the award ceremony and forum hosted in Annapolis, Maryland. The third-party vendor wanted to support the entire team in this matter. The vendor paid for all hotel rooms, transportation, meals, and conference fees. Every member of the AHS attended, from administrative assistant to the school nurse. Each member is critical and assists in getting the school to this level. It was informative to learn about other character education

practices during the two-day event, but it was terrific as a team to get on the stage and accept our award on behalf of the students! Below is a picture of the team before we boarded the bus to Annapolis.

Figure 26

Team Picture Heading to Annapolis

Leadership Connections

Schein (2010) stated that professional development opportunities represent the organization's espoused values. The staff, like students, need the time, space, and opportunity to learn. These professional development enhancements have shown our goal-conscious strategies that support our mission. Bass (2000) showed that all activities above and factors can be viewed through the lens of individualized consideration under transformational leadership. This realm embodies mentorship, empathy, purpose, strength, and skills. The professional development activities demonstrate to staff that I value their time as professionals and will democratically select the best options for the students and staff.

Factor Four: Unity of Purpose

The unity of purpose is self-explanatory. It embodies the reasoning that a group works in unison on a particular project or common goal. This unity of purpose is critical as it relates to the mission and overall impact on teaching and learning. For this section, I will explore our primary objective: to give students the absolute best in every aspect.

Why Do We Do This?

Why do we do this job? The days are long. The work is hard. The trauma transfer is actual. The pay is not great for the level of education the team possesses. Staff who gravitate to the alternative school realm do so for individual reasons usually embedded in their past. Looking at the staff, each has a story of personal struggles and obstacles that could have easily landed them in a hostile place. Instead, they chose to harness those tragedies and make improvements. It is this underlying purpose that explains why the staff work at AHS. Not only do they enjoy the work, but it is also a chance to pay it forward.

Reflecting on the many success stories the AHS has, one captured in my reflective journal resonates with the team's unity of purpose.

Figure 27

Personal Narrative Entry B

AC transferred to our school over a year ago. She initially was too scared to come into the building. She was shaking with fear. We started with just driving to the parking lot. Next, it entered the foyer, followed by walking around the school, etc. Eventually, AC attended full-day sessions and even made friends. AC never allowed people to be close to her, and you absolutely could never touch her. This was well understood. The graduation ceremony is always emotional. When AC walked across the stage, I had already notified the dignitaries that AC would not shake hands. I was the first one she encountered in the line. I congratulated her and smiled. AC said, “Can I hug you?” We

did. The staff, AC's parents, and I cried because we knew what this hug meant. This school is beyond exceptional. This is why we do what we do.

The graduation and the fact that AC asked for a hug were not understood by any other participants in the ceremony outside of the parents, staff, and students at the AHS. The amount of crying and cheering from the staff and students that evening exemplified the positive school culture and climate being established at the school. This event exhibits Schein's (2010) most profound and most complex level of organizational culture: underlying assumptions. These assumptions demonstrate the unspoken culture and explain why the team behaves as they do.

We Are Moving Out

The unity of purpose is exemplified in every positive interaction that the staff has with students. Students who transfer to the AHS often have not made the best choices in the past. Some have massive conduct reports used to label and pigeonhole them into a dark and hopeless place. At AHS, the team wants to show students a different way and change their perspective on education and what education means. I had doubts that this was possible in our initial building. In my reflective journal, I captured the following:

Figure 28

Reflective Journal D

This school is located on an old, dilapidated community college campus. There appears to be no groundskeeper, and the weeds are growing wild. Upon entering the three-room footprint, I noticed a long hallway with old carpet and bunching in the center. People trip over this bunched wave of carpet. There are no windows. The first classroom contains empty boxes and old science equipment. The second mint-colored room is littered with old and wobbly furniture. There are papers all over. The third classroom is an angry yellow with similar furniture. The current LEA gives the school hand-me-down computers, supplies, and antiquated textbooks. Do the kids feel like throwaways in this environment? I am doing my best to fix the space, using my money to make them feel more welcome. When I was talking to the staff about working as a team to make some improvements to the space, a teacher replied, “You can’t polish a turd.”

The space in which these students were housed felt depressing and less than. The staff wants to inspire and make positive changes for students, but the building, its contents, and curricular materials would add another challenge. I invited the business administrator to the school for a meeting to discuss the school's financial needs. The business administrator toured the school and had a look of disgust on her face. At one point, she rested her hand on a table that wobbled when she touched it. Her eyes grew large. She turned to me and said, “I am getting you the f*** out of here.”

Things were quiet for a while, and I continued to voice my concerns about the building and its safety. I was also very disturbed by the college meals. This frustration was captured in my reflective journal.

Figure 29

Reflective Journal E

I continue not to understand the meal program here. The staff and students are forced to utilize the college cafeteria. Every AHS student is allotted $3.00 per day for breakfast

and lunch. A breakfast sandwich and a beverage run around $6.00. At lunch, there are daily specials that hover around $7.95. I see students skipping breakfast and getting a large soda and a side of french fries at lunch. The staff in the kitchen are rude to them. Every day, Immua gets a blueberry muffin for weeks and weeks. He accidentally picked up a chocolate chip muffin, but the food service worker, Colleen, would not allow him to switch. This pisses me off. I offered Immua the blueberry muffin, but he declined and was too angry. I see kids asking staff for money to supplement their given food allowance. How can this be legal? I organized a salad club with staff after the muffin incident. I will not buy food in this cafeteria until they treat my kids with respect.

At the end of October, I was invited to a leadership meeting with the superintendent of schools and the business administrator. This meeting aimed to discuss plans to move the AHS to a new location. Over the winter break, the entire school would relocate to a new centralized location in the county that was still directly behind another local community college campus. We had 2 months to pack and prepare to move. The new building would have six classrooms, a small cafeteria, and six offices. It was explained that this location would be temporary until our final home was finished being built. The cafeteria would serve free and reduced meals to students following the national guidelines.

This building was clean, had windows, and was pleasant. Our temporary home was small but a massive improvement. Over the next 2 months, the staff pulled together to pack what was necessary and discard items that were not worth moving. The students also assisted. On our last day, the students posed for a picture.

Figure 30

Students on the Last Day at the Old Building

What the Kids Say

It is important to note that the staff at the AHS gave up part of their winter break to set up the new building so that we would be ready to receive students on January 2, 2015. It was a monumental task, but we did it and were prepared for the next phase of the alternative school to begin. The superintendent and business administrator believed that the students deserved the best. The school was outfitted with all-new computers for students and staff, new furniture, bulletin boards, smart boards, school supplies, and all-new textbooks. It was as if we won the lottery. The investment in the students was massive. Below is a narrative from a graduate of the school. There are so many testimonials just like this one.

Figure 31

Student Graduation Speech Excerpt

"I was so successful at AHS because the teachers are always there to help you. In regular high school, the teachers have so many students to look after. Here, I felt like the teachers were always available for me, and I was able to get help anytime I needed it. The school even let me stay past dismissal time so I could get extra help to graduate. I do not think this would have happened in other schools. I do not think that I would have graduated high school if it weren't for AHS. Now, I am graduating and will attend college to pursue a career in culinary arts or fashion design. Just because AHS is an alternative school please don't think it's filled with bad kids because it's not. If you ever wanted to graduate early or leave your public high school because you didn't feel comfortable there, AHS is the perfect school for you, I promise."

During our second year, wide-scale efforts were made to legitimize and make the students feel as though this school was, in fact, a real school. One initiative centered on creating a school-wide newspaper for students. Below is one of the student pieces featured in "The Clean Slate."

Figure 32

The Clean Slate Article

Alternative School – vs – Regular School
by Anthony, Assistant to the Editor

The "Alternative" part of Alternative school has wrongfully earned a negative connotation, to the point that people of the general public seem to have forgotten that "Alternative" means of one or more things. It does not mean misbehaved, troublesome, or drug-addicted, as some seem to think when the subject of Alternative school is brought up in conversations. Those who have any experience with kids from an Alternative school can easily debunk these stereotypes for themselves, but for those with no prior experience, this short article should offer some insight.

One of the privileges that kids from alternative school can earn through hard work and positive moral choices is the ability to sign out of school for the day, in order to find a comfortable place to work. I have never heard of a similar opportunity offered at a high school. While some students are expelled from their high school for behavior problems,

others simply have attention problems, or experience crippling shyness. On the other end of the spectrum are those whose reason for attending alternative school is drug abuse. That is why our random drug testing for students is a nuisance yet a necessity that is definitely worth the inconvenience.
As one of these Alternative Students, I cannot help but be incredulous of the thought that Alternative kids are less valuable to society, less intelligent, or just lazy. While *some* students do not take full advantage of the privileges afforded to students of Alternative school, students who see the full potential of the program can see themselves thrive, and graduate years earlier than their intended graduation date. I am very thankful for my Alternative School experience.

New Year, New Shirt

From my first year as principal, I kicked off the school year by providing school T-shirts and sweatshirts to all students at no cost. The students love these and look forward to the new design each year. There is a yearly theme that can connect to pop culture, literature, positivity, or any idea that supports the alternative school. I want students to be proud of their school. The staff always wears shirts, which unify the school. For this particular year, we featured the lotus flower that blooms despite growing in less-than-ideal conditions.

Figure 33

School Shirts

Leadership Connections

Schein (2010) would state that the unity of purpose ideals mentioned above are artifacts such as the school newspaper and student testimonials that represent the organization's espoused values. The unity of purpose is one of the most critical and profound factors. These actions illustrate the deeply embedded mission that staff-espoused theories are congruent to their theories in action. These purposes have shown our goal-conscious strategies that support our mission. Bass (2000) showed that all of the abovementioned activities and factors can be viewed through the lens of idealized influence under transformational leadership. This realm embodies role modeling, walking the walk, enthusiasm, and values. This purpose models to students that staff truly value and care for them.

Factor Five: Collegial Support

Collegial support is the formal and informal relationships that provide a foundation of support among colleagues in an organizational setting. My vision is to have

a professional staff who support each other professionally and personally. I envisioned an extraordinarily positive and supportive setting for all so that those feelings can be modeled and transferred to the students. Some of this is discussed in the professional development factor, which overlaps with this factor.

As I reflected on the type of principal I wanted to be, I knew I wanted to be involved every day in the classrooms, cafeteria, and physical education class. I do not wear heels; I wear sneakers because I usually log around 8,000 steps in my small school. I wanted to model what I want teachers and staff to do daily. We need to be present and constantly moving around, seeing students all day, interacting with them, and conversing with most students every day.

Figure 34

Reflective Journal F

> The National School of Character committee team was in again today conducting their audit. Today was the student panel and interview portion. Staff are not permitted to be present for this. I am very curious as to what was shared. I did get one piece of information from one of the reviewers. She shared that the student group was giving a tour and pointed out my office. The student said, "Well there is Joan's office, but you'll never find her there."

This statement made me very proud. It is critical to work alongside the team in order to build collegiate relationships. I wanted teachers to view me as one of them, not someone from behind a desk barking out demands. This is how I started to build trust and gain support.

Family First

The staff that work at the AHS are essential to me. Their families are important to me. My response to a staff member who needs to be absent for a sick child or relative is always, “family first.” When observations are conducted, I always enter this statement into the recommendations section:

Figure 35

Observation Language

Please utilize your earned PTO time when needed. We can not support others when we feel unwell or are exhausted.

Additionally, I requested from the third-party vendor that any rules associated with staff utilization of earned time off be removed. Schools often have rules when staff cannot use time off before or after a holiday. Also, there are distinctions between sick and personal days. I requested that there be no rules and that all earned time be categorized as personal time off (PTO) versus ill and personal days. For example, a teacher wanted to take his wife to Key West for their anniversary over the weekend of Columbus Day. The teacher felt comfortable enough to share this with me and could do so. I am not interested in staff missing work regularly, but this has not been the result of my decision. The staff are open and honest about their travel plans, and it is beautiful to share and hear stories about adventures with friends and families. I never want an environment where people have to lie to me to take a day off. It just is not correct.

Keep Learning

Secondly, encouraging staff growth and learning is equally as important. As stated earlier, this school is facilitated by a third-party vendor. This vendor trusts the educational leader of the building. Per my request, the vendor has found creative ways to assist staff in returning to school and earning advanced degrees. I want staff to be able to afford these degrees. Staff receive ample monies towards tuition and earn more for advanced and specialized degrees in a traditional school setting. This fosters an automatic environment that values continued learning and makes it accessible. Ultimately, the students benefit from having highly educated, specialized teachers.

Mentorship

The NJDOE requires that new teachers receive mentoring upon entering a teaching position. At the AHS, I have instituted a required mentoring program for all newly hired teachers and counselors, regardless of years of service. The alternative school world is very different; everyone must learn about the culture, unspoken norms, and so on. This initiative, in turn, again fosters a culture of collegial support as a bond is built between mentor and mentee. My message to staff is always the same: Every team member needs to be strong, or we will all suffer. All staff at AHS are always ready to assist each other in any way.

Figure 36

Reflection Journal G

I spent some time chatting in our new science teacher's classroom today. I am so pleased to hear how happy she is here. The teacher stated that she has never been to a school like AHS. The people are professional, with no backstabbing or hoarding of lessons or materials. The teacher said every day, she pinches herself. The team is

strong, and I am glad a newbie to an alternative school recognizes this.

The message shared by the science teacher was one that I have experienced so many times in traditional school. My vision for the school was one of collegial support, where we are looking to learn and help each other, not one of complete individualism. I wanted staff to feel comfortable sharing and proud of their work, not worried about praise and credit for thinking of an idea first, and so forth.

Your Staff Are Funny

Humor is a gift when working with people, especially young people. If I can make a student laugh or smile, it lightens the mood and opens the door for conversation and relationship building.

Figure 37

Personal Narrative Entry C

The first day of school was officially in the books, and I made a fool of myself. In the auditorium, we did normal opening day activities. I walked and was standing in one of the rows in the back. We were about to leave, and I took a step backward, but my leg got caught on the movable desk in the aisle. I fell. I fell so hard and am wearing a dress. I jumped up, and all the students and staff looked at me wide-eyed. I wanted to crawl away and never return.
After my fall, it was time to do team-building activities with the students. We were seated in a circle, and I asked a question. Crickets. No one. Finally, I said, look, no one had a rougher start than me after taking that spill in the auditorium. One kid began to laugh, and I did; the rest joined in. The ice-breaker game went on, and it was great.

It may be a prerequisite to being employed at an alternative school, but the staff are happy and funny. The staff meetings are always peppered with jokes and fun comments. During a severe incident that the police responded to and later attended the debriefing

meeting, one officer on the way out of the building said to me, “Your staff are funny.” As a group, we work hard but see the value in humor and lightheartedness.

We See You

One of my favorite traditions I worked with our vendor is recognizing staff for years of service at the school opening each year. The staff were honored with an informal ceremony where a few proud words were shared, followed by an announcement of how many years of service they accrued at the AHS. Staff who served 1 to 5 years were awarded $500.00. Staff who served 6 to 10 years were given $750.00. Staff who served 11 to 20 years were given $1000.00. Finally, staff with us for over 20 years were given $1500.00. This money was a total surprise the first year, and after a long summer without checks, it was an excellent mood builder!

Figure 38

Staff Receiving an Award

In 2015, in an attempt to continue to build collegial relationships, a “birthday club” was established. A staff member was assigned another staff member, and when it was their birthday, they would purchase a cake, and the group would eat the cake and celebrate. This went on for one year. By the end of the year, we were sick of cake! A staff member recommended that the birthday club be eliminated and the “AHS Staff Scholarship” be initiated. It was decided that the birthday and “jeans day” money be rerouted to the students and awarded to two students at graduation for postsecondary expenses.

Leadership Connections

Schein (2010) stated that collegial support represents the espoused and assumed values of the organization. Collegial support is necessary, but the actions taken to foster this are now deeply embedded in the school's values. These collegial support tactics have shown our goal-conscious strategies that support our mission. Bass (2000) showed that all of the abovementioned activities and factors can be viewed through the lenses of individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspiration motivation under transformational leadership. Due to the size of this factor, all pieces of transformational leadership are present.

Factor Six: Learning Partnerships

Partnerships are an effective strategy for improving and achieving school outcomes. This factor identifies the importance of stakeholders (teachers, parents, community members, and others) working together for the common good of the students and the school at large (Miller, 2020).

Local University

One of the most critical learning partnerships I facilitated was hiring Dr. W from A University to come to AHS and conduct four sessions with all staff about diversity and LGBTQIA+ challenges. During these four sessions, staff were encouraged to dig deep into their own implicit biases while learning about our LGBTQIA+ students and the hardships these students often have in schools. This was a turning point for the staff because, as a whole, we were not truly aware of how our students were hurting.

From this point, the school social worker and students established a weekly lunch group so students had a safe place to discuss issues and give feedback on how the school could be more comfortable. With the assistance of Dr. W, AHS staff provided feedback on the new transgender policies that were just starting to emerge.

Figure 39

Transgender Policy

District Policy

5756 - TRANSGENDER & GENDER NONCONFORMING STUDENTS

Section: Students

Date Created: August 2015

Date Edited: May 2021

5756 TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

The Board of Education is committed to providing a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for all students. The New Jersey Law Against Discrimination (NJLAD), N.J.S.A. 10:5-12(11)(f), generally makes it unlawful for schools to subject individuals to differential treatment based on gender identity or expression. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 ("Title IX") specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in Federally-funded education programs and activities [20 U.S.C. § 1681(a)].

N.J.S.A. 18A:36-41 directs the Commissioner of Education to establish guidelines outlined in this Policy to provide direction for schools in addressing common issues concerning the needs of transgender students and to assist schools in establishing policies and procedures that ensure a supportive and nondiscriminatory environment for transgender students.

The Board adopts this Policy to help school and district administrators take steps to create an inclusive environment in which transgender and gender nonconforming students feel safe and supported and to ensure each school provides equal educational opportunities for all students, in compliance with N.J.A.C. 6A:7-1.1 et seq.

Graduation and Chicken Nuggets

The National School Climate Survey reported by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2019 found that 69.5% of transgender students feel unsafe at school because of their gender expression, while 84.4% feel unsafe because of their gender (Kosciw et al., 2020). Transgender students experience a more hostile environment than other students. This is something that I needed to address in my leadership. The policy is not enough; we must make all students comfortable. Our first transgender student was attempting to transition from male to female at the local high school. The students were not kind to Sara (pseudonym), and she was verbally, physically, and emotionally abused. Ariel became combative and argumentative with students and staff, no doubt due to the abuse she was enduring each day at school. I met with Sara and admitted her to the AHS. The student was introduced as Sara

I repeatedly reinforced with staff how we would treat Sara and what the expectations were. The staff were excellent (as usual), and we welcomed Sara with open arms. About a week later, a group of students requested a meeting with me. These students voiced concerns about Sara utilizing the female bathroom and how they felt

uncomfortable and creeped out that “he” was in there. The counseling department assisted with creating a short lesson for these students to ease their fears. As time passed, no other concerns and school life carried on as usual. A few parents called about similar issues, but I took the time to speak and educate them to the best of my ability. Some people are just genuinely opposed to this and have the right to feel this way, but they do not have the right to make another student uncomfortable.

In June, Sara volunteered to be an usher at graduation. The AHS had indeed made her feel at ease since she was willing to come to a public place (one that was unstructured) and assist. At the time, my daughter was 5 years old and attending graduation that night. At the end of the ceremony, my daughter and I got into the car. We did not leave the parking lot, and my daughter said, “So, Ariel is cool.”

I replied with, “Yes, she is cool.”

My daughter said, “She kind of looks like a boy. Why does she not want to be a boy?”

I replied, “Well, girls are the best, that you know. Ariel is more comfortable being a girl, wearing dresses and make-up. It makes her happy, and that makes me happy for her.”

My daughter said, “That is nice. Can we go to McDonald’s for chicken nuggets, Ma?”

This conversation between my 5-year-old daughter and me is critical. People have questions. It is acceptable to have these open conversations. This, along with the guidance of Dr. Walpole, has been the learning partnership that has supported so many students.

As time passed, AHS transformed into a desired placement for transitioning students. Students can transfer to AHS utilizing both the gender and associated names desired. These students are given a clean slate and can start their lives by leaving the negative experiences of traditional school in the past.

Without proper adult support, transgender youth have poor outcomes. The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law found that 81% of transgender adults in the U.S. have thought about suicide, 42% of transgender adults have attempted it, and 56% have engaged in non-suicidal self-injury over their lifetimes. This is unacceptable, and my school is determined to do better.

Beyond the lunch group established, the halls were decorated with flags supporting various groups in the multipurpose room. This initiative was well received, and students were quick to point out anything that was missing. Although these flags are made of material, they symbolize a promise from the staff. As a staff, we will celebrate, respect, and keep all students safe. The flags are a small token but are highly visible to students, parents, visitors, and sending district representatives. Over the years, another student has only made one derogatory comment about the flags.

Figure 40

Flag Hanging

Fast forward to another AHS graduation in 2018. A transgender student was selected to deliver a short message to his peers. This is what (pseudonym) Katie shared that night:

Figure 41

Transgender Student Graduation Speech

Katie:
Greetings fellow humanoids! My name is Katie, and I have been a student at AHS for two years. Before I became a student here I was anxious and scared of what it would be like here, but AHS is more than a school, it's a family. This school has some of the best, most inspiring, and most insightful staff I have ever met. They have helped me and countless other students find their way through this tough, merciless world. One day I hope to return as a teacher and be even half as kind and understanding as the fine folks who walk these halls every day.

The efforts were validated, and students felt safe and happy at school. Killian had a positive experience, and his time at the AHS does not match the statistics on how transgender students feel at school.

Joan, We Ordered Domino's Pizza

Cell phones in schools have been a hindrance to learning. Every day in the staff meetings, there were complaints of students using phones and not focusing on lessons. As a school, we tried multiple tactics to get students off their phones to be more present during the day. The first strategy required students not to use their phones during academic times. This failed. The second strategy was to confiscate student phones upon arrival. This quickly fell apart for two reasons. A counselor confiscated a student's phone and broke the screen. I paid out of pocket for the damages. The phones were typically kept in a safe in plastic zipper-lock bags. The battery on the safe died, and I had to hustle to a locksmith to open it during the day. I also had to pay for that out of my pocket. This rule was expensive to enforce. Two incidents forced me to look for another solution to the phone issue.

Figure 42

Personal Narratives D

Today was a scary day for me. A student filmed another during lunch. The student is overweight and, of course, was embarrassed and angry over the incident. No one could calm her down, and a teacher was punched in the face in the shuffle of the verbal altercation that escalated.

Figure 43

Personal Narratives E

Orlando and Jake approached me about an hour before lunch to inform me that they did not care for any lunch offerings, so they ordered Domino's pizza from the bathroom. Orlando said, “We figured you would not be mad if we told you upfront.” I told the boys they were not on the level and needed to cancel the order. Jake said it was too late to cancel. I said that when it was delivered, I would eat the pizza. I thanked the kids for lunch. They canceled the order.

A Facebook advertisement for a company called Yondr appeared on my feed. Yondr supplies locking phone pouches to celebrities such as Jack White of the White Stripes, Alicia Keys, Guns ‘N Roses, the Lumineers, and Dave Chappelle, who use Yondr to create phone-free spaces during their events. Before admittance, guests would be given a pouch with a locking mechanism on the top. It is similar to an anti-theft device found in a department store. The pouch remains locked until a strong magnet is used to disable it. The phone can then be used, and the pouch is placed in a receptacle.

Figure 44

Yondr Phone Pouch

Words cannot express what an unpopular decision it was to partner with Yondr. The students and the parents were extremely unhappy. I received so many phone calls from angry parents stating that this practice is wrong and that they need to be able to contact their child at any time. Some parents cited school shootings as a reason for students to have constant access to their cellular devices. I disagreed. The students participated in training over a couple of days, which honed in on cell phones' damage to society. Most understood but still were not excited to separate from social media and texting. The teachers were so pleased. They no longer wasted time asking students to put their phones away.

Interestingly, when this initiative first started, there were many student conflicts. I captured this phenomenon in my journal.

Figure 45

Reflective Journal Entry H

This is the start of the third week using the Yondr pouches. The parent calls have stopped. The eye-rolls and sighs have not stopped during arrival. What I can't understand is why all of these students are now picking at each other. Our peer conflicts have gone through the roof. Not sure what to do but I am hoping that things change.

During our afternoon meeting, I expressed my dissatisfaction with the number of peer conflicts that seemed to be escalating since the phones have been locked. The math teacher said it made sense to him as they are no longer zombies tuned out with Air Pods in both ears. There is no way to disappear into a phone and ignore your surroundings. This resonated with me. These students need more social skills since they have stared at screens too long. The team added board games, coloring supplies, books, and card games

to the cafeteria during breakfast and lunch to see if this would help. Shockingly, a student favorite is I Spy. Below is a picture of a couple of students and staff looking at books versus looking down at a phone. As time passed, and the phone-free space became part of the culture, the complaints ceased, and now students leave the pouching all over the school because they are not needed.

Figure 46

Phoneless Breakfast

Local Community College

A local community college has always supported the AHS and is a critical learning partnership. The college welcomes our students on campus. All AHS students are permitted to enroll in college coursework at no charge. These courses can double as high school requirements. For example, if a student enrolls in English 101, they will earn three college credits and five high school English credits. This structure exposes the student to the college realm, and the staff at the AHS support students during this process. Each Friday, there is a student group so students can network and chat about

their classes together. Each year at graduation, the president of the college awards two students full scholarships for 1 and 2 years. This is a massive gift and is always well received. So many of our students never envisioned attending college; we do our best to change that.

Juvenile Justice Commission

According to its website, The Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC) was established in 1995 to serve as the single agency of the state government with centralized authority for planning, policy development, and service provision in the juvenile justice system. The JJC is committed to implementing and promoting policies and practices that improve outcomes for young people involved with the juvenile justice system, their families, and their communities.

The JJC's three primary responsibilities are providing care, custody, and rehabilitative services to youth committed to the agency by the courts, supervising and coordinating services for youth released from custody on parole, and supporting local efforts to provide prevention and early intervention services to at-risk and court-involved youth.

Across a continuum of care that includes secure care facilities, residential community homes, and community-based parole and transitional services, the JJC provides programming, supports, and opportunities designed to help youth grow and thrive and become independent, productive, and law-abiding citizens.

Since so many students who attend the alternative school are involved in the juvenile justice system, it made sense to partner with this organization. There are two pieces of information about the AHS relationship with JJC. First, we partner with

probation officers to support students and families in continuing to make academic and social improvements. Secondly, there is a preventative program entitled the “Victim Impact Program” that is facilitated once per week and teaches the students about the short- and long-term effects of crimes on society. Most students enjoy the class and find it to be fun and informative.

Say It With Clay

The mission at Say it with Clay is to provide affordable art therapy for special needs individuals using the unique potential of clay and advanced psychotherapeutic processes. These therapeutic programs target specific needs such as grief, trauma, depression, anxiety, Alzheimer’s, dementia, cancer, and other psychological benefited the students in many ways. The students have truly enjoyed this experience.

Below is an image of the students working on their art.

Figure 47

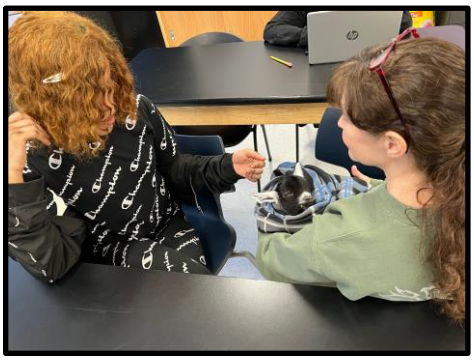
Say it With Clay

Grover and a Local Dog Rescue

The science teacher spoke to me and asked if bringing a baby goat to school was possible. I checked the policy, and it stated that pets are permitted in the building at the building principal's discretion. There was a baby goat that was shunned from its mother who was going to die. The science teacher rescued the goat and bottle-fed him like a newborn baby. A pen was set up in the science classroom for Grover. The impact that Grover had on the staff and students was astounding. The whole community loved caring and holding Grover. This goat was the springboard for our next partnership with puppies. Below is a picture of the science teacher, Grover, and a student.

Figure 48

Grover



The dog rescue organization is run by volunteers dedicated to saving dogs and is located in kill shelters, primarily in Alabama and South Carolina. The rescue relies on the assistance of volunteers as the puppies are transported from the South and need foster homes, which are temporary until a suitable adopter can be secured. I completed the paperwork and was approved as a foster. The puppies would stay with me at night and

spend the day in the Spanish teacher's classroom. I picked up a smelly pair of rambunctious pups from the meeting location. The students named the puppies Ozzy and Lucy and were instantly in love. The students earned time with the puppies by meeting goals. Students took turns caring, feeding, walking, and cleaning up after the puppies. My thoughts were captured in my reflection journal:

Figure 49

Reflective Journal Entry I

Watching the students with the puppies has been the highlight of my day. Ozzy and Lucy have a magical ability to ease tensions and get students to work collaboratively with each other. There is an overall feeling of happiness. Seeing James, an 18-year old gangster from North Jersey actually skip to go walk the puppies melts my heart. This kid missed his childhood and I am able to give him a little snippet of being a little boy with a puppy. James said, "Joan, why does that dog keep smiling at me?" This made me so happy for him.

Figure 50

Students with Ozzy & Lucy

A County Institute of Technology and Adult Education

Due to a unique district structure, the County Institute of Technology (CIT, technical school) and Adult Education technical school are all under the same umbrella of services. This partnership and connection serve two purposes. First, the AHS is small in size (purposely) and does not have the resources to produce a curriculum from scratch. Consequently, there is no sizable budget to purchase a pre-written curriculum. CIT has curriculum instructors and a curriculum writing team. The AHS utilizes all of the materials crafted by CIT. This ensures that all standards are addressed, and the curriculum is rigorous and appropriate. Secondly, the AHS students are welcome to shadow classes offered at the Adult Education campus in fields such as welding, electrician, truck driving, medical assisting, cosmetology, plumbing, HVAC, dental assisting, pet grooming, and water and waste management. This campus also assists with apprenticeships and job searches. This partnership offers a full continuum of services for students with long-term support.

Leadership Connections

Schein (2010) stated that the learning partnerships that have been established represent the espoused and assumed values of the organization. Bass (2000) showed that all of the above activities and factors can be viewed through the lenses of individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation under transformational leadership. Due to the size of this factor, all pieces of transformational leadership are present and required for success.

A Shared Vision Realized

Having taught at the AHS for a year before being named principal shaped my focus and vision for the school. I had the opportunity to observe and reflect on how the

school works and how improvements could be made. I never imagined that I would be the principal of this school. Below is a daily snapshot of what a typical day in the life of an AHS student encompasses:

Since the students are arriving from all over the county and beyond, the arrival time ranges from 7:45 a.m.–8:05 a.m. The students are greeted by the same faces each morning: a teacher who takes attendance, two security guards, and myself. I greet each student and secure their phones in the Yondr pouch. This allows me to have a few words and put eyes on every student daily. Students then proceed to security, where their bags are searched and they are wanded using an electronic hand-held metal detector.

Students can proceed to a classroom of choice, a counselor's office, or the cafeteria, where a hot breakfast is served each morning. Students can sit with friends, play board games, or chat with staff. All phones are secured so that actual conversations and interactions take place. This time allows staff to get a read on student moods or potential issues. The AHS staff utilize an application called GroupMe to communicate with each other in real-time. We only use first names to make the AHS different from traditional schools. Students call me "Joan." Some argue that this is too informal and does not elevate staff to a higher level of respect. The team does not view it that way; it is a way to make students feel more comfortable and familiar.

At 8:15 a.m., all students who arrive via school bus usually arrive. There are no bells at the AHS, so at 8:25 a.m., I play a song of the day, which signifies that it is time for a Family Meeting. During Family Meetings, students listen to the daily announcements and discuss goals and academic progress. Students also submit their lunch orders. Due to our size and the excellent cafeteria service workers, students can

order individualized meals. For example, if Sammy wants a salad with no tomatoes and extra croutons, he can have it. Sammy will find his salad marked with his name at lunch.

At 8:35 a.m., I play the song again, and students move into the academic blocks. Students do not have a schedule to follow; they have a choice. Every student has a solid understanding of what courses they are enrolled in. If a student needs a break from physics on a particular day, they can skip that and work on something else. The teachers offer a whole-group direct instruction class each hour. Teachers work in small groups or individually with students the rest of the time. The entire school is free flowing, and students do not need to ask permission to see me, the nurse, or their counselor, go to the main office, or use the bathroom.

Throughout the day, students will come and go as they sign out to attend their college courses at the local community college in our backyard. Students on Level One work outdoors or over at the college. Adult students who work or have other obligations will sign out early. Students know that if frustrated, any staff member tries to help, even by walking on our outdoor path or spending time in the Zen Den to reset. Depending on the day, outside visitors, as referenced earlier, could be supporting students at school.

At 11:40 a.m., students will be greeted by either the school nurse or me at the cafeteria door to get hand sanitizer and to start the lunch period. Students and staff eat together, and card games are available to pass the time. If a student is uncomfortable in the cafeteria, there is a quieter Lunch Bunch option. A working room is also open for those who do not eat and work through lunch. At 12:05 p.m., lunch is over, and the physical education period begins. On a nice day, the students can choose from walking,

Ga-ga, pickleball, Four-Square, basketball, badminton, chalk, caring, and walking the puppies or the goat. All staff are present and participating in activities.

At 12:45 p.m., the students file back into the school for electives. The electives are selected by the students and staff and offer a variety of enrichment activities. At 1:20 p.m., everyone reports back to the Family Meeting to do an end-of-the-day check. Dismissal is at 1:30 p.m., and students are dismissed by the Family to allow spacing while the Yondr pouches are being opened. All staff must be outside at dismissal to send the students off.

This is a high school, and there are always disagreements or flare-ups, but for the most part, these students coexist peacefully together. When a student completes their credits, we issue the cap and gown. Students traditionally wear caps and gowns around the school to wave at peers. I am always proud when the students root for each other like this. Some children come to the AHS with thick conduct records from their previous schools. Most times, you would never know that. Environment plays such a critical role in the success of students. This environment is positive, safe, clean, welcoming, and soothing. We are getting it right because so many students who have never attended school at their traditional schools often do not wish to leave AHS.

Conclusion

Throughout this process, I reflected upon the actions to purposefully create a positive school culture and climate for alternative school students. I discovered that some methods that felt right to me were part of the research. What has been affirmed is that all students want to be productive and experience success. It is up to the stakeholders to give these students all the supplies and materials necessary to reach their fullest potential. If

the right dedicated and passionate professionals have the time, space, and financial support, positive outcomes will develop for students.

Chapter 5 will discuss and review these findings to determine how they can assist other educational leaders attempting to build an alternative school program with a sharp focus on culture and climate. The next chapter will also provide research, practice, policy, leadership, and future study recommendations. I will conclusively summarize this research into a theory that can be used to improve culture and climate in the alternative school setting.

Chapter 5

Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study explored a leader's actions to create a positive culture and climate for alternative school students. The findings can be used by educational leaders attempting to make effective changes in the lives of the students who need it the most. The education of marginalized students is a social justice issue at heart. Educators and educational leaders must make the time and take meaningful action on this challenge.

The findings in this study will contribute to the existing literature on the importance of culture and climate in alternative schools. The overarching goal of this study is to draw attention to the fact that so many alternative schools have been used in the wrong way as a place to pigeonhole students who do not “fit” into one of the categories of students that traditional schools have created and developed a track, program, and set of strategies to meet the needs of students placed in one of those categories. Students in some of these placements are being cheated out of the many social, academic, or other experiences and opportunities that come with a traditional comprehensive high school and, therefore, are further marginalized. This study will show that we can create an environment where students flourish with a leader equipped to understand and program for such students, supportive and caring faculty and professional staff, compassionate and supportive stakeholders, and ample financial support. Through self-reflection, data collection, and analysis, I developed and showed a meaningful theory of practice that answers the question: How can a school leader design a culturally sensitive, inclusive, alternative education program? What type of systemic change does an alternative school leader believe to be most effective in supporting students in

attaining a high school diploma and a robust postsecondary plan to become productive members of society? What characteristics of culture and climate are most critical in an alternative school setting?

The conceptual framework utilized was a three-pronged approach that discussed Gruenert and Valentine's (1998) six factors to evaluate school culture and climate, Schein's (2010) levels of organizational culture, and the components of transformational leadership. I used the six factors to evaluate culture as the enduring conceptual framework to consider, analyze, and discuss other subservient research frameworks and concepts.

Gruenert and Valentine***'s*** (1998) six factors contributing to a school's culture are used in this work to access, analyze, and conceptualize culture and climate that can and would best support students and staff. As the study progressed and the data were coded into the six factors, it became difficult to differentiate between them. There was so much overlap of the factors that not all data could be placed into a single discrete category of supportive culture and climate. The inability to categorize my findings into simple, clean, and discrete areas is appropriately consistent with what we know of alternative schooling. It is messy. Practitioners who embrace alternative education, the students it serves, and its sometimes-unnerving complexity understand and become comfortable with its messiness and, at times, chaos. Programming for students is often not clear-cut and straightforward. Problems, needs, and objectives for students are complicated with competing goals and solutions, which are rarely absolute.

I was also unable to determine which factor was more important than the other, as all are critical to building a supportive culture and climate. Thus, the approach here of

synthesizing into significant findings cutting across the six factors contributing to a school's culture presented in no particular order of importance. These findings demonstrate that every misstep, ill-conceived program, inappropriate behavioral model, and more perpetrated upon alternative school students is just another layer of marginalization, desperation, failure, and pain piled on top of many alternative school students who have experienced these failures of practice over and over during their school career.

I created a table visually representing the findings during the coding and data analysis. There was an overlap between leadership, the six factors of school climate, and school culture, making it difficult to envision. Although a consideration may initially appear to be in one category only, once those pieces are dissected, it becomes more of a challenge. For example, the enhanced mentorship program at the AHS can be considered individualized consideration, as it includes supporting followers, encouraging, and coaching. Various aspects of school culture are present as artifacts, and values can be assessed. The blending occurs after the enhanced mentorship is enacted. Once this happens, this activity also can be viewed as inspirational motivation, which includes creating and presenting an attractive vision of the future, using symbols and emotional arguments, and demonstrating optimism and enthusiasm. Idealized influence includes behaviors such as sacrificing for the benefit of the group, setting a personal example, and demonstrating and involving behaviors that increase awareness of problems and challenge followers to view issues from new perspectives.

An action starts as one area and then morphs and stretches to other places for consideration. This was apparent in most of my data. Therefore, to build and maintain a

positive culture and climate in the alternative setting, all three frameworks must be utilized and checked against the others. If this is done, there is little chance of missing a critical perspective. Additionally, another framework emerged

Connections to Levels of Organizational Culture and Transformational Leadership

Schein (2010) stated that there are three levels of organizational culture. The first level includes artifacts. Any print item, illustration, photo, or artwork can be considered a first-level artifact. These items include a posted mission statement, posted goals, an official calendar, any supplies or equipment that exist in the school, for example, sports or fitness equipment for physical education, a list of school rules or norms, a list of commonly used math formulas, or a bulletin board that displays the calendar and any pertinent dates and events for the schools. The AHS artifacts include the new, clean, organized school building, Around Here-isms posted for all to see, student murals, and student projects. The school also displays flags from various groups, including all LGBTQIA+, Black Lives Matter, U.S. flag, New Jersey state flag, and so forth. The State and National School of Character awards are also on display. The school boasts a new fitness center and student lounge with computers and new furniture. Each of the classrooms is beautifully decorated with course-relevant information. There are postings for art, health, and essay contests. My favorite artifact is the Hall of Grads. This hallway is decorated for graduation and has all the photographs of the previous year's graduates.

Schein (2010) suggested that espoused values are the second level of organizational culture. Argyris and Schon (1978) asserted that people hold maps about planning, implementing, and reviewing their espoused values. Espoused values are the intricate plans on how to implement our work best. Prokopchuk (2016) affirmed that

espoused values contribute to the development of expected standards of the organization now and in the future. The school organization has strategic planning and goals. Values are sometimes discussed and revised as new members come to the culture. Goldring (2002) stated, “Developing a shared vision is a leadership process that must include all contributors at the school site” (p. 33). A shared vision and mission is essential to have a thriving school culture. Staff needs to feel a sense of ownership in creating this vision to make it lively and visible.

Schein (2010) described the third level of organizational culture as rooted in assumptions. Schein contended that leaders must fully understand and dissect underlying assumptions deeply embedded in the culture to deepen understanding of an organization's culture. Schein (1984) described these assumptions as “how group members perceive, think, and feel” (p. 4). Progress can only be achieved by factoring in an organization's spoken and unspoken assumptions. A successful school leader can understand and mobilize these factors to create a positive school culture.

When viewing an organization, the underlying assumptions are the most complicated evidence to gather and fully understand. The best way to learn about these assumptions is to immerse yourself entirely into the culture. These assumptions cannot be discovered from an office, and the educational leader has to be present and seen by all. My time in the meetings, at specific duties, breakfast, lunch, walking with staff and students during physical education, participation in staff bonding events, and being available and interested in staff lives taught me about this level. What I learned from these lessons has been implemented into my overall leadership style and how I facilitate the school daily, year after year.

Schein (2010) stated that the three levels of organizational culture include artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions. These pieces blend seamlessly like Gruenert and Valentine's (1998) factors to evaluate climate and culture. The artifacts present in the AHS represent the organization's espoused values and assumptions. The espoused values and assumptions influence the artifacts and vice versa.

The tenets of transformational leadership resonated with this study due to the changes in this four-year window. According to Chin (2007), "Transformational leadership examines the relationship between leader and follower and considers that by engaging the higher needs of the followers, instead of merely working for the greater good, the followers become self-actualizing and finally grow to be leaders themselves" (p. 166). This theory was actualized after reviewing the data surrounding staff collaboration and collaborative leadership. These two factors spearheaded many initiatives in the school, which were led by staff. Chin also stated:

> Principals of effective and exemplary schools were described as transformational leaders (Kendrick, 1988; Liontos, 1993; Rodgers, 1994; Sagor, 1992). Principal leadership was related to certain attributes of effective schools, namely, increased student achievement (Kendrick, 1988; Liontos, 1993; Sagor, 1992), declining dropout rates (Liontos, 1993), high student and faculty morale (Sagor, 1992), and improved school climate (Kendrick, 1988). (p. 167)

Reflecting upon the AHS, I see that the data support all these pieces. The students are happy to be in school, there is minimal staff turnover, and the students are meeting standards successfully.

Movement from Transformational Leadership to Transformative Leadership

At the start of the study, my thoughts were solely grounded in transformational leadership theory. This is the theory that, at the time, I most related to this work, as my goals were focused on school reform, developing a common purpose, understanding organizational culture, and redesigning the school's structure. As the study progressed, I realized that a shift was occurring in the work from transformational leadership to transformative leadership. Both theories have closely related roots, which explains the progression here.

Shields (2010) contended:

> Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise of greater individual achievement and a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded. Thus, I contend that transformative leadership and leadership for inclusive and socially just learning environments are inextricably related. (p. 559)

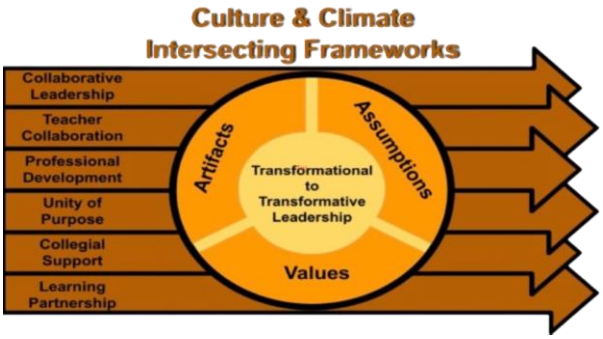
The core concepts behind transformative leadership are built upon the ideas in transformational leadership but expand and elevate them. My work at the AHS is to create a “better life lived in common with others” for all my students.

This theory closely aligns with social justice; the alternative school is a social justice issue. Through transformative leadership, school leaders can be directly connected to offer a more inclusive, equitable, and profoundly democratic conception of education (Shields, 2010). The education system in this country continues to underserve

marginalized students. How can stakeholders continue to enforce the same recycled reform efforts without tangible results?

Figure 51

Shift in Conceptual Framework



Note. The graphic represents the shifts in the conceptual framework as described above.

Significant Findings

The six significant findings and recommendations that follow were evident relationships established in data coding. I shall present these findings by presenting big ideas and recommendations to provide guidance and promote thoughtful, research-grounded, on-point, and student-centric discussion by alternative school leaders, teachers, clinicians, and other practitioners. These recommendations are intended to be a practical resource, perhaps even a roadmap or set of discussion starters, for those endeavoring to develop, evaluate, refine, and improve an alternative school setting.

Finding #1

There is a substantial gap in the research discussing alternative schools' successes and what is possible.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on the importance of alternative schools and the culture and climate in the alternative school setting. The literature is plagued with negatives and what can go wrong in alternative schools. It challenges alternative school effectiveness, demonstrates a lack of consistent programming in alternative schools, describes low expectations and underwhelming course diversity and quality, and denies students rigorous offerings, such as honors, advanced placement, and Option II offerings. If I had read those pieces as a parent, I would never have sent my child to an alternative school. A simple Google search of "alternative school quality" will yield countless hits that create a harrowing image of the school.

This statement concerning the gap in the research and the quantity of research available about why alternative schools are less than is overwhelming. The AHS contradicts this research. The students are enrolled in general, college prep, honors, and community college courses. The students must earn an A, B, or C to move on to the following standard. For so many, this struggle is initially met with frustration. Students from the AHS must earn the same number of credits and pass the same state assessments to be eligible for graduation. The students graduate and attend two- and four-year technical schools and universities. Some students enlist in the military, and others enter the workforce.

The results of this study are favorable if the educational leader can go back to the "roots" of alternative schools and disregard what alternative schools have come to mean today. Outcomes can improve if leaders are given the resources, staff, time, and space.

Finding #2

Leadership matters and must be the right leadership. An alternative school must have a compelling mission or purpose and a clear vision of what that mission will look like and be fully achieved. Leaders must tirelessly promote, advocate, and teach others about the mission and vision until they are shared and pursued with all stakeholders. Collaborative, inclusive, and honest leadership are prerequisites to developing and maintaining an effective alternative school program.

In this study, collaborative leadership was realized when the vision imagined for the school was propelled into motion via a series of professional learning community collaborations. Specifically, in this current research school, without the master schedule change that included a morning, afternoon, and community meeting and a preparation period, leadership capacity among the team members would not have been developed as collaborative leaders and partners in change. In traditional schools, staff often dislike meetings because it feels like a waste of time. They have no constructive opportunity to share ideas or give feedback on items directed; the leader usually reads to or talks to teachers about items unrelated to their core purpose of teaching and learning. These meetings could often be handled via email, or the leader's next big idea is to make themselves look good.

The factor concerning the unity of purpose was defined and established by having a shared purpose of providing the absolute best by any means necessary. This mission was fully realized when a superintendent dreamed of more for students who needed it the most. After the investment into the new building was completed, the staff became even more driven and focused. Senge (1990) stated that a learning organization cannot exist without a shared vision. Mitchell and Sackney (1999) stated that to develop, nurture, and

sustain a community of learners, a culture that includes a shared vision, true collaboration, administrator and teacher leadership, and conditions must be implemented.

The third-party vendor's motto is, “I want to be the best company you ever worked for.” With this in place, the staff is well supported, and I know they feel valued and appreciated. The opening day longevity activities are just one of many routine events to bolster staff collegiality. I believe I am successful in this domain as, over the past 11 years, only four staff members have left the AHS for another job.

The outcomes created and listed under Unity of Purpose, Staff Collaboration, and Collaborative Leadership speak to the second level of organizational culture. The results have been school-wide big-picture decision-making, which resonates with the organization's mission and purpose. Examples such as the Trego-Ed decision-making process and professional learning communities exemplify this. I feel as though, as often as possible, I have fostered a shared vision with the staff that includes all contributors.

Finding #3

Collaboration among alternative school leaders, teachers, and other professionals cannot be left to chance or informal discussions as needed. Practical and constructive collaboration must be deliberate and scheduled.

The morning meeting informs the staff and sets the tone for the day. All staff members are informed of developments simultaneously, and there can be no miscommunications or omissions. The addition of the afternoon meetings allows staff ample time to debrief and unwind from the day. All issues are discussed, and the next steps are planned accordingly. The students are well aware of these meetings and the amount of communication. The Community Meetings and preparation periods allow time

for staff to be creative and make decisions that will benefit students. This time is carved out and is critical to the school's advancement.

The importance and benefit of establishing and maintaining learning partnerships were realized. Neild et al. (2007) stated that learning partnerships gain access to and recruit groups of students most in need of support services; improve program quality and staff engagement, mainly when there is crossover between school and community organization staff; foster better alignment of programming to support a shared vision for learning, one which aligns curriculum to meet and exceed state and local standards; and maximize resource use such as facilities, staff, data, and curriculum (p. 30). The partnerships developed with state agencies, local colleges, art therapy groups, Yondr phone pouch systems, juvenile justice commissions, and local animal rescues have redefined the school.

Collegial support was reviewed and established over 4 years. Recognizing that alternative and traditional schools vary greatly, a mentoring program was established for all new staff. This program allowed staff to build relationships and feel supported and connected to the school. It is understood that working with students of more significant needs can accelerate the burnout factor. The enhanced mentoring program is designed to slow the burnout rate.

Finding #4

Students must feel part of something bigger: a school community in which they have a voice that matters, belonging, membership, and agency.

St.-Amand et al. (2017) argued that belonging significantly contributes to an individual's psychological development. Osterman (2000) has also highlighted the importance of school belonging, writing: "It is possible to conclude that belongingness is

a fundamental concept. As a psychological phenomenon, it has a far-reaching impact on human motivation and behavior" (p. 359). This area is reflected in the activities embedded within the school. It is common knowledge that humans wish to belong and feel comfortable in their surroundings. For many students, this belonging, membership, and agency were missing from their traditional school experience, creating barriers and magnifying deficits over the years.

At the AHS, creating a sense of family is deliberate and necessary. The community meetings allow for a small-group breakout for family heads and counselors to discuss how the student performed that week. Based on the outcomes of the community meetings, the family head calls home to satisfy the family project requirements. These phone calls permit the staff to call home and share positive accomplishments. For many students, they have never had a call home like this. This builds membership and develops relationships and trust. Without this, students will continue down a similar path of resistance.

A "Family First" value has been a constant from the start. The staff knows this, and we celebrate weddings, baby showers, graduations, anniversaries, birthdays, and vacations together. The AHS does not utilize substitute teachers, so the rest of the team must do more work when a staff member is absent. Despite this, the team pitched in and ensured the day ran smoothly. Instead of a derogatory narrative about attendance or a list of the number of days a staff member may be out, I use a general statement that explains that staff should use PTO for family, friends, fun, and mental health days. No one has ever abused this. The staff are treated like the consummate professionals that they are, and the school reaps the benefits of this.

Finding #5

Make decisions and act. Teachers and students must see that their positive and constructive participation in authentic, meaningful collaboration results in action. If they do not, they will shut down to protect themselves from just one more entity that has failed them, one more entity that is all talk and no action.

The staff's time was the springboard for positive and contagious change and collaboration. A series of field trips and in-school mental health events were booked for students. If the staff did not have the time to make decisions together about our overall vision of the school, these things would not have transpired. Staff are involved in school-wide problem-solving events that have shaped the culture and climate. These collaborations and democratic leadership styles have allowed for minimal pushback from staff, as they have been involved in most changes from the start.

Teacher collaboration was reimagined as staff collaboration due to the very nature and size of the school. In a traditional school, there are often barriers between departments and teachers. I challenge these barriers and assert that they are unsuitable for students or staff. All members of the school community need to work together collaboratively. Consequently, staff members have created professional learning communities with outputs that generate excitement and meaningful change that best serve students. Out of these professional learning communities, the following were put into place: partnering with Character.org, partnering with NJDOE School Culture and Climate Transformation Project, restructuring the school, instituting/reviving the Family Project, revising the schedule to include electives and group counseling slot, training all staff in restorative practices, creating a student leadership group, creating an attendance policy,

modifying the system in which grades/credits are reported, and revising the Levels of Mobility to incorporate service learning.

Finding #6

Construct professional development priorities and activities collaboratively and transparently. Professional development for alternative schoolteachers and faculty must seem qualitatively different than any negative PD experiences of their past. As much time as possible, it must directly relate to students, teaching, learning, and school culture. Teachers and staff must always view professional development in an alternative school setting as relevant and a good use of time. PD must be an extension of constructive collaboration (see Finding #3).

The factor of professional development was reconsidered. The changes for professional development are grounded in my personal experiences with professional development. As a teacher, the mandatory training is often useless, taught in isolation, and has zero follow-up. As a building principal, I knew that this needed to change. I wanted the staff to be excited about our professional development and not feel like it wasted time or money. The money invested in professional development that facilitates staff and team bonding is priceless. Additionally, participating in trainings that are useful daily in alternative schools, such as trauma-informed practices, non-suicidal self-injurious behavior, ALICE, teen mental health support, equity and diversity practices, and the character education forum impacted the culture and climate substantially.

Professionals in education should always be encouraged to expand learning to enhance practice. In many schools, tuition reimbursement has been eliminated or capped. This impedes staff members from earning advanced degrees. The vendor at the AHS has listened to the needs of the staff, and every member has the opportunity to receive

financing for education. The only string attached to this compensation is that staff members share the details of their school experiences with students. Our students love to hear about how we could be stressed over an exam or a project due date or if we could have done better on an assignment. This is modeling in its highest form for our students. School is supposed to be complicated. School is supposed to be a challenge. The students learn about this by watching us.

Actions to Create a Successful School Model

1. Read the literature on the history of alternative schools and what the majority of them have evolved into today.
2. Select an enticing, clean, and well-cared-for school site. The space should not be in a basement or a poorly maintained building. School staff should decorate the bulletin boards and halls with student work, awards, and other worthy accomplishments.
3. This school needs staff with flexible work hours that teachers' union rules and regulations cannot dictate. Be prepared to work with teacher unions and offer additional stipends to satisfy their contract rules.
4. All stakeholders, including central administrators and the board of education, must share a congruent policy on alternative education and understand the value of student support.
5. The school must be led and staffed with individuals who are not only seasoned and dynamic but also with those who genuinely want to work with alternative school students. Transferring ineffective staff to these placements will not work.

Students know when staff are authentic. These students need our most talented teachers.

6. Learn about alternative school codes and effective student-to-teacher and student-to-counseling support ratios.
7. The population must remain small to be effective.
8. Be prepared to invest money in staff, professional development, supplies, and field trips.
9. Allow staff to begin planning and creating course portfolios.
10. Allow staff ample time for team building.
11. Create an application and intake process. Do not allow students to be forced or remanded to the school. There should be a "we choose, you choose" admissions policy.
12. Allow students to graduate as soon as they satisfy state testing and credit requirements. This is a motivator.
13. Eliminate traditional school items such as bell systems, duty-free lunches, rigid attendance and lateness policies, loss of credit policies, specific code of conduct punishments, midterms, finals, due dates, and marking periods.
14. Work hard to win parents and guardians back. Allow parents, guardians, and students to call you by your first name. Give administrators, school nurses, counselors, and social workers school cell phones to open the lines of communication further.

15. Review the Eleven Principles of Character Education and work to implement them in your setting. This should be unique to your setting; canned programs will be less successful here.
16. Schedule professional development on topics that matter most in your setting.
17. Create a weekly system for recording and reporting credits earned for parents, guardians, students, and staff.
18. Create a schedule allowing staff to meet and discuss students twice daily, along with a daily preparation period.
19. Connect with local stakeholders to support academic, socio-emotional, and career outcomes.
20. Allow students to have freedom and voice in the workings of the school setting. Treat students like adults; do not give hall passes or raise hands to use the bathroom, get a drink, or see the nurse, counselor, or principal.
21. Make safety and security a top priority. Utilize scanners and bag searches for every student who enters the facility.
22. Ensure that the cafeteria serves ample, healthy, and desirable meals, as many students need help with food instability at home.
23. Eliminate cell phones and other electronic devices that are not educationally relevant.
24. Teach students the value of service learning and restorative practices.
25. Expose students to as many careers and postsecondary options as possible. Allow students to spend time on college campuses to get comfortable and visualize themselves in the space.

Potential Model Outcomes That Shift the Narrative of Alternative School

The aforementioned procedure is the framework for the alternative school highlighted in this study. The outcomes of the AHS have been positive and have shaped and redefined the lives of so many students. It is time to reclaim the original purposes of alternative schools that can offer excellent academic and social outcomes for students who would otherwise be ignored in traditional school settings. Kim (2011) stated that "for the alternative school to work holistically, transcending being a 'dumping ground,' or 'juvenile detention center,' we need to (re)imagine its inhabitants, students, teachers, and administrators and see the world of alternative education" (p. 78). The work in this study is unique because it was successful when the proper support was provided. This work reclaims and shifts the narrative on what alternative schools used to and can be. The alternative school model should not be viewed as less than that because, when done correctly, the excellence produced at the alternative school should be the model for all schools.

Alternative School: A Model for Excellence for All Schools

The work that is being done in the alternative school is important for the students that are served. It is my contention that all students deserve the same level of care, concern, and compassion that students in this environment are given. Granted the students that are serviced are technically in need of more, but all students would certainly benefit from individualized instruction, more contact with teachers, a smaller environment, teachers with more academic freedom, and the other benefits that alternative schools bring? The world of traditional schooling could benefit by accepting some of the lessons that alternative schools provide.

Limitations of Study

As with all forms of research, assumptions and limitations must be presented and addressed. Recognizing and reflecting upon these assumptions and limitations is critical for proper study and unbiased conclusions to be crafted. Assumptions are ingrained beliefs that people believe are valid. Every research study has certain limitations. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) defined limitations as specific characteristics of design or methodology that alter the interpretation and findings from the research. The significant limitations of this study are grounded in the fact that I am the primary source of information for this research. All humans have their own lived life experiences and differences, which will inevitably alter the outcomes of a study of this nature. Although this study covers only 4 years, it only addresses one alternative school, so the transferability of the findings may be limited. Due to this methodology, the results may need to be replicated more precisely.

Additionally, this setting lacks a teachers' union, so I have no red tape in this area as the building administrator. For example, on my first day as principal, my first order of business was to fire a teacher with whom I had shared a classroom for the previous 180 days (about 10 months). This teacher incited arguments with students, completed her graduate schoolwork during work time, and sent students seeking help away. This did not fit in my mission. I called the third-party vendor, and the teacher was released later that day. In my many conversations with students, they speak about teachers and counselors they have encountered who were mean, miserable, and not helpful. I have a decent understanding of the tenure laws in this state. I understand why unions advocate tenure, but it is not always in the best interest of the students if there is an individual who should not be around students. How many schools adopt the philosophy that it is “cheaper to

keep them" versus pay for attorneys and tenure charges? This practice of not granting tenure has been successful, and the school has minimal turnover.

Also, as part of the overall culture and climate and attempt to build community and family, all staff members eat breakfast and lunch together and participate in physical education classes. Staff and students need to have fun and share light moments. This strengthens the bond within the group and breaks down trauma and behavioral barriers. This will also impact transferability to a building staffed with teachers trained to exist within the confines of union-negotiated contracts.

These limitations have been addressed throughout my research on this subject and should be considered as future research is conducted. This study illustrates that alternative school settings can and do provide a more therapeutic environment due to an enhanced positive and inclusive climate and culture that traditional schools cannot support. This assumption has been confirmed throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). "Limitations derive from the design and methods and help contextualize the study. Limitations stipulate the weaknesses of the study, thereby encouraging the reader to judge it with these limitations in mind" (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 118). This study is limited in its content to the experiences and thoughts related to my educational leadership career in one alternative school setting. This research is autobiographical and limited to me and my colleagues' encounters within the setting. Since the setting of this study is only in one educational environment, the transferability can be potentially affected.

Recommendations

This study has produced recommendations for multiple stakeholders on various levels. This includes suggestions for further research, both in depth and breadth of the study. It suggests that educational leaders (at all levels) and policymakers utilize this study before making blanket reform efforts or facilitating alternative schools that further disenfranchise youth.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for those who wish to explore this topic in future research. As stated above, this study is limited to one setting with a unique personnel model versus traditional schools. This study addressed specific questions about how one leader made a positive change and built an inclusive culture and climate. Further studies could use a different methodology to gain deeper and varied perspectives. Additional studies could include a more extensive sampling size and various types of alternative schools. A mixed-methods study could continue and be built upon the initial discoveries presented here.

Another recommendation is replicating this study using the same framework in another location. This would further validate the research, expand the results, and draw new conclusions.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The established findings of this study can significantly inform policy on many levels. The most critical component for policymakers to understand is what precisely alternative schools are and what they are not. If policymakers can have a firm grasp on the true meaning of alternative schools and spend time and consideration on any type of blanket education reform efforts, more meaningful policies will be developed. There are

students in every community who are being underserved and set up for a lifetime of long-term failure. Secondly, policymakers must not seek to profit from alternative school students in any way, shape, or form. Quality educational options should be available in all communities. Those who wish to benefit financially will never be true to the mission. Alternative school students are expensive because they often need more support, and the school is purposefully tiny and heavily staffed. Lastly, the long-term impacts of having uneducated citizens are draining, and they need to be part of policymaker discussions and actions immediately.

History Repeats Itself

As referenced in earlier chapters, the alternative school setting started as an outside-the-box method of educating students and was considered a cutting-edge model for school reform. As time passed, the placements were altered and used to move students who did not fit in. My time at the alternative school, serving students, families, staff, and the community, has defined and shaped my life. It is important work; to me, it is the most important.

This study focuses on 4 years when the policymakers and central administration team truly understood the workings of alternative education. Times change, as they do in education, and not always for the better. The county shifted political parties, and with this came a new philosophy and a regime of central administrators, appointed board members, and commissioner input. The previous administration committed the county to offering a non-traditional school placement that supported students and families well. It was known that the AHS would never generate profit as it is an enterprise account. The newly appointed officials and their hires do not share this philosophy. Immediately, two of the four counselors, the assistant principal, the English teacher, and the after-school program

were all eliminated. These cuts eliminated a dedicated assistant principal who was a quiet visionary and advocate for students, two African American male staff members, a guidance and substance abuse coordinator, and a program that supported students after hours. This was done without discussion or regard for students or staff. My meetings with central administration evolved from teaching and learning to boosting enrollment. I must keep a daily journal of my enrollment activities and meet with the business administrator and assistant superintendent every 2 weeks to report on what I have done for enrollment. I have to battle with my superiors because they constantly want to eliminate more staff, citing that counselors can handle 200–300 students. The tenet of an alternative school is that it is small so students can have close relationships with staff. Anytime concerns about the unraveling of the AHS are ignored, or I am told to have a growth mindset and they threaten to close this school as they did the other one in our district.

Everything that the literature states is best practice within alternative education, which the team has worked so hard to implement, has been slowly but surely dismantled by those above. I believe in alternative education, in what we have and can continue to achieve, but history has undoubtedly repeated itself in the case of the AHS.

Implications for Educational Leaders

This study provides significant findings for educational leaders who are faced with educating students. Research has already shown that schools need help to serve marginalized populations effectively. The fate of these identified students has been captured in research repeatedly. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2020, there were 2.0 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24, and the overall status dropout rate was 5.3%. Students who drop out of school face

incredibly bleak economic and social futures. Rumberger et al. (2017) explained that compared to high school graduates, they are less likely to find a job and earn a living wage, more likely to be poor and suffer from a variety of adverse health outcomes, and are more likely to rely on public assistance, engage in crime, and generate other social costs borne by taxpayers. Educational leaders are responsible for improving outcomes for all students. Transferring students who present as problematic to alternative placements that do not follow best practices is criminal.

Additionally, educational leaders who operate alternative education placements must ground approaches in the literature. Alternative education schools must return to their original purpose of excellence, not a holding cell of a "pipeline to prison." Educational leaders must be ready to work to ensure students are prepared for postsecondary life. Alternative school placements can no longer be convenient dumping grounds for schools looking to remove students who are not wanted. We have to do better.

Conclusion

This autoethnography described the change of one educational leader at an alternative high school. It explored the rich history of the beginnings of alternative schools along with the current status of alternative schools today. The change focused on building and maintaining a positive culture and climate to support students and staff best. The study investigated and answered the following questions: How can a school leader design a culturally sensitive, inclusive, alternative education program? What type of systemic change does an alternative school leader believe to be most effective in supporting students in attaining a high school diploma and a solid postsecondary plan to

become productive members of society? What characteristics of culture and climate are most critical in an alternative school setting? The study viewed these activities through the research of Gruenert and Valentine (1998) and also utilized Schein (2010) as a framework to understand culture better.

The research revealed the answers to these questions into six significant findings. These findings can be synthesized into a working theory on how school leaders can craft successful student alternative schools. This study affirms that positive change is possible when all stakeholders have the same vision and dedication to improving student outcomes. A supportive, collaborative, and academically challenging alternative school is possible, but the individuals at the top must honor and understand the purpose of alternative school.

My favorite thing about working at the AHS is giving students and parents a different experience when it comes to education. So often, they arrive with a negative disposition about school. They are used to getting in trouble. They know the teachers do not like them. I love being part of their paradigm shift and watching them improve daily. Fortunately, I often receive notes, cards, and letters from students, staff, and parents. I will end this research with one of my favorite cards from a student, “Thank you for allowing kids who mess up to have a second chance and for believing in us when no one else does.” What could be more significant than that?

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