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## Looking at students' perceptions of why they did or didn't drop out of New Bedford High School

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Looking at Students' Perceptions of why they did or didn't Drop Out of

New Bedford High School

A Thesis Submitted by

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to

The College of Professional Studies

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate to what extent student perceptions impact a student's decision to exit the school environment. Situated Learning and Self-Efficacy Theory informs the theoretical framework for the literature review and helps to further evaluate the following research questions: (1) What conditions or circumstances, as perceived by students, have contributed to their staying in or dropping out of school? (2) As can be assessed through student focus groups, how might students' stated degree of self-efficacy and resiliency contribute to their staying in or dropping out of school? A case study approach was used to learn about various students' stated feeling of connectedness to the community and activity of school as well as their perceived self-efficacy and resiliency. These elements and the degree to which they contribute to students' persistence in school was the subject of this investigation. The analysis of these themes along with students' stories was documented and presented to inform educators' ability to identify potential high school dropouts and understand better why it is that they exit the school environment.

*Keywords:* dropout prevention, student perceptions, situated learning, self-efficacy.

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	6
Problem of Practice.....	6
Significance of the Problem.....	8
Practical Goals.....	9
Intellectual Goals.....	9
Research Questions.....	10
Theoretical Frameworks.....	10
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	20
Evaluating who the dropout has become in the educational system.....	21
A look at the current dropout prevention programs.....	27
A more in-depth look at what is and is not working to keep our students in school.....	33
A focus on school engagement as it relates to school culture and school climate.....	36
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY.....	41
Research Questions.....	42
Methodology.....	42
Site and Participants.....	44
Data Collection.....	46
Data Analysis.....	48
Validity and Credibility.....	53
Researcher's Role.....	55
Protection of Human Subjects.....	55
Conclusion.....	56
CHAPTER IV: REPORT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	56
Reporting the Findings and Analyses.....	56
Study Context.....	57
Findings and Analysis – Coding.....	58
Emerging Themes.....	58
Themes of Graduates.....	59
Themes of Dropouts.....	65
Themes of Guidance Counselors.....	73
Themes of Administrators.....	80
Comparison and contrast of the various groups.....	86
Summary of Findings.....	89
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	90
Summary of the Study.....	90

Review of Methodology.....	92
Summary of Findings.....	93
Discussion of Findings in relation to the Theoretical Framework of this study.....	99
Situating Learning.....	99
Self Efficacy Theory.....	105
Summary of the Theoretical Framework in Relationship to the Findings of this study..	110
Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review.....	110
Conclusion.....	119
Significance of the Study in the Field.....	121
Final Words.....	122
Next Steps.....	123
References.....	125
Appendices.....	131
Appendix A.....	131
Appendix B.....	132
Appendix C.....	134
Appendix D.....	135

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Problem of Practice

New Bedford High School is a large urban high school, located in New Bedford, Massachusetts servicing 2,594 students with 373 staff members. New Bedford High School is made up of a wide variety of ethnicities, diverse backgrounds and varying socioeconomic statuses. More than half of the students at New Bedford High School come from impoverished backgrounds and are identified as having a number of risk factors associated with high school dropouts as they enter the school building in their freshman year. In the 2009-2010 school years, the dropout rate in the state of Massachusetts was 2.9%. The dropout rate at New Bedford High School was 6.7% which is nearly triple the state average. In a freshman class which entered with 936 students, approximately 522 graduate within the allotted four year time period.

High school dropout is a national crisis. The National dropout rate is exemplified at New Bedford High School. A dropout is defined in Massachusetts by the DESE as one of "...those students who dropped out of school between July 1 and June 30 of a given year and who did not return to school, graduate or receive a GED by the following October 1<sup>st</sup>." Students continue to dropout at alarming rates despite various school districts' initiatives to prevent such behavior. New Bedford is not any different in its efforts. New Bedford as an entire community has taken notice of this growing problem and is seeking through various personnel to evaluate what steps can be taken to learn more about the problem and counteract this behavior. Researchers suggest; "dropping out of school is not best viewed as a single event; rather it is a process by which students become increasingly disaffected and alienated from school through... environmental factors and stressors, academic failure, and behavioral problems" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 527-528). Students who choose to exit the school environment have not made an impulsive

decision based on a single event. Rather their decision appears to be one based on their cumulative educational experiences, good or bad.

Students need to be made part of the conversation that they are so often left out of. The students may be able to provide researchers with their reasons for leaving or staying. “Identifying the predictors of high school failure is a critical task...to help guide the creation of effective approaches to preventing the problem” (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000, p. 568). Some researchers in their evaluation of dropout issues are beginning to look at “taking a community psychology perspective of four key issues that, once addressed, may help to solve the dropout problem” (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 526). The key areas that need to be addressed include first defining the problem, defining the approach, fostering engagement, and timing of interventions. Based on this model, student perception is an essential component in how dropout behavior is framed in terms of what role the school environment plays as perceived by students. A student’s resiliency to continue on and pursue their personal goals given their view of the school climate is so important regarding this issue. Resiliency may be linked to a student’s belief in their ability to succeed or not, informing their decision to stay in school or leave. “When success in school no longer seems likely, removing oneself from the setting in which failure occurs seems reasonable, almost compelling” (Mahood, 1981, p. 56).

The issue of dropout prevention is important given the increasing number of students who exit school and do not graduate. Researchers (S. Suh & J. Suh, 2007; Azzam, 2007; Coley, 1995; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Finn, 1987; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Beck & Muia, 1980) have identified on several occasions the most common risk factors associated with dropout behavior, which many students at New

Bedford High School display. However, these risk factors are shared by many students who display dropout behavior as well as those who graduate. Therefore, this is not sufficient information in identifying who the potential dropouts are in this community. Dropout behavior involves a complex process in which student perceptions play a significant role. The manner in which students perceive their school environment may be the defining factor which in conjunction with the associated risk factors causes a student to make that final decision to leave school or pursue a four year diploma.

### **Significance of the Problem**

The issue of high school dropout is a topic which requires immediate attention. Students continue to drop out of high school at alarming rates. One researcher reports "...the number of high school graduates each year is approximately three-quarters the number of persons who were enrolled in ninth grade three years earlier" (Finn, 1987, p. 5). Students face many obstacles as a result of their decision to exit the school environment early. Students who choose to drop out of school are unable to pursue higher education and as a result have higher incidences of difficulty finding employment. Students have difficulty finding the means to be self-supportive and become productive members of society. Students who fail to attain a high school diploma are missing a crucial component in their ability to have a better future with more options available to them. Researchers (Beck & Muia, 1980) suggest the most prominent difficulties a dropout encounters is a lack of employment, while others endure low-status jobs, less opportunity to advance in a job, less money earned as well as a higher incidence of requiring and receiving public assistance. High school dropouts suffer economic and emotional difficulties more so than those students who earn a high school diploma. There is a high cost associated with dropping out of high school. It is essential that researchers learn as much as possible regarding the factors

that may lead to dropping out of high school to provide more effective programs to keep students in school.

### **Practical Goals**

The practical goals of this research involve various aspects that promote self-awareness of the student learner in relation to dropout behavior. The ultimate goal is to decrease the dropout rate at New Bedford High School through creating awareness to students who are thinking of dropping out or exiting the school environment by providing them with sufficient information of where their decision may lead them. This will be accomplished through a compilation of first-hand accounts of life stories by dropouts. The very personal journey of the high school dropout will be explored while gaining information about how they came to their decision. The overall purpose is to help students gain a sense of the importance of staying in school and graduating in the allotted four years. Practical goals are also geared toward the educators who will be exposed to the stories of the dropouts as to what factors based on their perceptions led these students to become a dropout at this school. Educators may be able to change their teaching practice based on the information they learn through this study.

### **Intellectual Goals**

Intellectual goals include the evaluation of what role student perceptions play in the decision to drop out of school. Maxwell states "...intellectual goals...understanding something, gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21). This qualitative study proposed to study the topic of student perception as an alternative explanation of why so many students with similar risk factors choose such different life paths. It is perplexing to understand how the phenomenon of dropout behavior can occur in a population that shares so many

common risk factors. Yet the outcomes are staggering in their presentation among a group so closely linked with risk.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions will guide this qualitative study:

- 1) What conditions or circumstances, as perceived by students, have contributed to their staying in or dropping out of school?
- 2) As can be assessed through student focus groups, how might students' stated degree of self-efficacy and resiliency contribute to their staying in or dropping out of school?

### **Document Organization**

The rest of this thesis provides a theoretical framework in support of the investigation, which included a discussion of the two educational theories of Situated Learning and Self-Efficacy Theory. A literature review will follow, presenting relevant literature regarding who the dropout has become, commonly identified risk factors of dropouts, a compilation of current efforts through various dropout prevention programs, and research surrounding school climate and engagement. The research design will then be introduced taking into account the theoretical frameworks and the review of the pertinent research. In this presentation, the qualitative study proposed to learn the impact of student perception on dropout behavior. This will be followed with a discussion concerning the limitations of this study as well as precautions taken to protect those involved with the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The educational theories related to the impact of student perceptions in regards to dropout prevention address student connectedness to learning overall as well as the level of self-efficacy a student possesses. They include Situated Learning (Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger) and Self-

Efficacy Theory (Albert Bandura). The manner in which a student perceives their school environment and learning as a process may certainly impact their desire to complete school or drop out. These educational theories propose that there are many factors related to the process of school completion including the forming of relationships, making learning relevant, the social interaction of school, school climate, the application of real world experiences, the community of schooling as well as a student's overall belief in their abilities to be successful. Student perceptions are embedded in these areas and it is essential to learn to what extent, if any, they impact students dropping out of school.

### **Situated Learning**

Situated Learning is a theory developed by Jean Lave (1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991), a social anthropologist, who has developed this idea based on a social theory. "Situated learning emphasizes the idea that much of what is learned is specific to the situations in which it is learned" (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996, p. 5). Lave suggests through this theory that the environment in which learning takes places as well as those involved in a student's learning play a vital role in their academics. Lave's theory is premised on the notion that learning does not occur in isolation. Rather learning takes place in relation to that which is being learned (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated Learning builds on the premise that students are engaged in their learning in a manner which involves a social context of the school environment, which is often left out in a traditional manner of evaluating learning. "Particularly important has been situated learning's emphasis on the mismatch between typical school situations and real world situations..." (Anderson et al., 1996, p. 5). Lave proposes that learning needs to take place in situations that engage students and are familiar to them (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave suggests learning

involves participation in some activity regardless of the setting. School is no exception when applying this notion of communities of practice. Students act upon and are influenced by these communities of practice in their school settings. Lave (1991) urges researchers to “consider learning as a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice” (p. 65).

These communities of practice are thought to be present in many facets of our lives, with school being no exception. There are three characteristics of communities of practice. They include the domain, the community, and the practice. Lave and Wenger suggest the domain is a common area of interest for learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Membership is explained as the commitment the student displays to the domain (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger define the community as the interaction that takes place between the students in this domain as they learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Students who become engaged in these communities of practice are more likely to see the relevance of their learning and gain a sense of ownership in what they learn. Learning becomes more meaningful to the student learner as a result. The relationships these students develop center around their interest in learning about things that matter to them. Students may be more apt to become interested in their learning if they develop these types of relationships and community of practice.

This lens of situated learning helps narrow into focus the concept of connectedness to learning and relationships as having such an important impact on student learning. All too often in the classroom, students are taught in one manner and taught very specific goals versus allowing the student to learn information in a variety of formats and then apply what they learn to the real world setting. Lave highlights how important the student learners are in regards to what and how they learn essentially within the classroom. This suggests the necessity to

examine students' perceptions regarding school culture as well as engagement through meaningful relationships discovered in the school setting as a tool for dropout prevention.

Lave discusses the traditional classroom learning activities where knowledge is often taken out of context and students are unsure how their learning in school connects to future goals or ambitions. Rather, Lave stresses the importance of how the knowledge delivered in school needs to be presented in a manner in which students can apply what they learn directly to what they would like to do in the future. "Many methods of didactic education assume a separation between knowing and doing, treating knowledge as an integral, self-sufficient substance, theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learned and used" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p.32). Student learning is viewed solely as a process in which the student is expected to reiterate what they have heard in the classroom in a cyclical process with no authentic context involved. "The activity and context in which learning takes place are thus regarded as merely ancillary to learning – pedagogically useful, of course, but fundamentally distinct and even neutral with respect to what is learned" (Brown et al., 1989, p. 32). Through the lens of Situated Learning, Lave argues that context plays a large role in student learning in that learning requires social interaction. "Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 15). Learning is not viewed as an individual process, but rather forms out of the reciprocity between individual students on a certain topic or subject.

Situated Learning places emphasis on relationships largely between student learning and where this learning takes place. It suggests that students learn not only from the material, but also through their participation with others. These authors ask through this theory "...what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place" (Lave & Wenger,

1991, p. 14). Students learn through the interaction of working with others including teachers and students and while viewing their education in a context of how they can transfer their learning from inside the classroom to the real world. It has been reported "...conventional schooling too often ignores the influence of school culture on what is learned in school" (Brown et al., 1989, p. 32). This directly relates to this study in evaluating what role the student perceptions play when looking at school culture and learning in regards to a student's decision to leave school. Lave causes one to question if we are leaving students behind based on the manner in which educators view learning, ignoring this critical piece of school culture. Through this lens we may suggest we are driving students to leave the school environment through our lack of awareness of this key issue. A student's perception of school can lend valuable insight into this question. According to Lave and the theory of Situated Learning, Lave and Wenger challenge researchers to evaluate the classrooms students attend and evaluate what is important in their learning through their interactions with others in this environment. In turn, this helps to frame how student perceptions may have an impact on their learning and overall willingness to stay or leave. It is critical to evaluate these types of issues present in the school setting which may negate all efforts concerning dropout prevention if not taken into consideration.

This educational theory is pertinent to this research in helping to explain why students leave school. Students who display dropout behavior are missing this sense of community based on their perceptions of the school environment. If their perceptions lead them to believe they are not valuable members of the learning community, this may lead them to seek alternative outcomes, which may lead to dropping out of school. Students who perceive their school environment as a positive, inclusive setting where their learning and social interactions connect them to this sense of community and culture of learning may be less likely to exit school. The

perception of students graduating and dropping out of school based on the school culture they encounter may prove to be critical in their decision to graduate or leave school.

### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

The Self-Efficacy Theory was developed by Albert Bandura, a social psychologist, who views learning from a social cognitive perspective. Bandura (1977) held the belief that students display differing degrees of self-efficacy which affect their learning and their outcomes.

Bandura (1977) believed through a student's perceived level of self-efficacy, they could either promote or hinder their own learning. This directly relates to the dropout issue in that a student's perception of their ability to be successful within school may contribute to their decision to drop out. Those students who display low self-efficacy and ultimately a greater feeling of being unable to succeed may be more likely to leave school. Their perception of school in conjunction with their sense of self-efficacy within this environment may negatively impact their ability to succeed in various areas.

Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy "as personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals, and he sought to assess its level, generality, and strength across activities and context" (p. 191). Self-efficacy is related to goals students set for themselves and helps in explaining their ability to either achieve these goals or not achieve them. This theory suggests some students will display the confidence in themselves to be active in their learning while many do not possess this same level of self-efficacy. Essentially, those who possess more self-efficacy are thought to become self regulated in their learning.

Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Ponz (1992) state that, "...self-regulated learners direct their learning processes and attainments by setting challenging goals for themselves" (p.

664). Self-regulated learners are those students who embrace their learning and constantly strive to learn better ways to achieve, as well as to be in constant interaction with their learning environments . Students who set goals for themselves, challenge their abilities to reach those goals and strive to achieve more and more may be more likely to complete school. They may see the goal of graduating as a series of goals to achieve each year they attend high school much like they have completed their academic careers. Dropouts may be comprised of a group of students who lack self-efficacy and are unable to set goals through such a process as described above leading them to repeated failure within the educational system. As a result, these students become estranged from their learning environment through a lack of a belief that they can be successful. Also important to this aspect includes the notion that "...the more capable students judge themselves to be, the more challenging the goals they embrace" (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992, p. 663). In a sense, this becomes a vicious cycle for the student learner who lacks self-efficacy. The student who graduates from school has continuously set goals for themselves and has met with much success which continues their process of setting more goals. The dropout is met with failure upon failure and perceives their efforts as being unrewarded which may lead to a lack of goal setting and future failing.

Zimmerman (2000) highlights the premise that "Self-efficacy measures focus on performance capabilities rather than on personal qualities, such as one's physical or psychological characteristics" (p. 83). This is important when using this lens to frame the dropout issue because each student is so unique in the risk factors they bring with them to school. Looking at the Self-Efficacy Theory, it is the perception of the student's ability to perform in school successfully that may ultimately hinder or excel their performance. This is viewed as being separate from individual characteristics a student may possess. These students either

believe they can achieve success or not. Their cumulative experiences of school as well as how they view their own level of self-efficacy may ultimately contribute to their final decision to drop out of school. This becomes a key component when viewing this issue through this lens.

This theory suggests students with higher levels of self-efficacy take a more active role in their learning overall. They are more confident learners and less likely to give up due to a lack of belief in their abilities. Simply put, students who are confident in their abilities will succeed more than students who are not confident in their abilities and the latter group of students may display more difficulties surrounding their learning overall. This may be observed through one's learning, behavior or emotion. Success leads an individual to believe that they can accomplish another goal they set for themselves. Failure causes an individual to wonder if they will be able to be successful on another occasion. A student's perception of their learning environment may be impacted by their level of self-efficacy which impacts their overall motivation. It is difficult for a student who meets with failure on a consistent basis to remain motivated in comparison to a student who succeeds on a consistent basis.

Through this lens, a student's level of self-efficacy may be affected by various levels in the school setting. The manner in which students view their learning occurs across the various domains within school. Students may view themselves differently in terms of self-efficacy in a certain subject matter, class, or other aspect of school. This is important when trying to understand how this view of self-efficacy may impact a student's decision to drop out of school. When it is framed in this manner, it reminds educators to be aware of all the different aspects school entails and to what level students are assessing their level of self-efficacy in each domain. There are many domains where a student may see themselves as a failure, lowering their self-

efficacy belief to find any success in other areas. This type of thought process may lead one to drift out of school over time.

This educational theory highlights the importance of understanding "...student's self-beliefs about academic capabilities do play an essential role in their motivation to achieve" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 89). Dropping out of high school is thought to be a result of years of frustration of schooling. If this is a plausible explanation for why students exit school, perhaps this lens helps to explain the manner in which this behavior begins to occur. That is, if a student's perceived self-efficacy contributes to their motivation and success for learning, or lack thereof, this becomes a critical area of focus. This educational theory provides some context for which students may make their decision to drop out of school given how they perceive their ability to find success.

### **Summary**

Students' perceptions may play a critical role in dropout behavior supported by theories of Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977). These theories remind educators why the perception of the student in relation to school culture is so important. This appears to be especially pertinent when addressing the dropout issue. The manner in which a drop out or a graduate views their school environment overall may directly impact their academic decision ultimately to continue in school or not. Also of importance, includes a student's perception of their own self-efficacy through their school experiences. Exploring the dropout issue through these various theoretical lenses causes one to think of many issues that comprise the school climate overall.

In the Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), there is the idea that learning takes place in a social context of school which is often ignored as part of the learning process.

Learning is thought to involve social interactions and it is through these meaningful relationships and interactions that students become members of communities of practice that shape their behavior to succeed academically within school. Lave highlights the premise that learning is a process which is impacted by so many factors that often go unnoticed. Learning is seen as a series of interactions between learners and the information being imparted to them through problem solving skills, preexisting knowledge, and the ability to transfer this knowledge to the real world. Through the Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000), a student's own belief in their ability to succeed or fail becomes so important in their decision making process. Bandura reminds educators that the belief the student brings with them to school regarding their own ability to find success may hinder all efforts that take place within the school. It is so important to take this information into account when looking at school climate and relationships within school to help students gain self-efficacy which in turn, may lead to an increase in success.

It would be a disservice to the student learner to ignore these educational theories in helping to explain dropout behavior. The decision making process to drop out of school is viewed by many as a series of events in a student's educational career that leads them to this action. The information gained through the evaluation of these theoretical frameworks looks at various areas which will be explored during this study regarding student perceptions within the school climate in helping to shed light on the dropout issue. This research also lends insight into how better to instruct all students to perpetuate learning and engagement in school. These authors have done extensive research in helping to explain how students learn in the context of their school settings and what students bring as well to those settings through their own beliefs. The perception of the high school student who chooses to graduate or drop out may best be

explained in terms of these educational theories in helping to uncover what impacts a student's decision making process regarding their schooling and this final decision.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

A review of the current literature surrounding the issue of dropout offers many theories and strategies for addressing the national drop out crisis. This review of the literature is broken down into four areas:

1. Evaluating who the dropout has become in the educational system;
2. A look at the current dropout prevention programs and their focus to address this problem;
3. A more in-depth look at what is and is not working to keep our students in school;
4. A focus on school engagement as it relates to school culture and school climate.

The overall focus on dropout prevention appears to be shifting from prevention at the high school level to engagement in the elementary years based on the cumulative accounts of research dedicated to this subject. It is so important to look at the many factors related to school dropout from past experiences in order to move forward in making an impact on decreasing the likelihood that a student will leave school.

This literature review is organized in this manner to attempt to explain how students base their decision to ultimately leave the school environment. Through a thorough examination of the research available on the topic of dropout and its prevention as well as those who are affected, this researcher hopes to be able to shed new light on the important aspects that would enable educators to keep students in school in conjunction with this study. Student perceptions and the valuable information obtained as a result may aide in the understanding of this type of behavior and align itself with the more recent research surrounding the importance of school

climate and school engagement. A student's perception of their learning environment may lend information not otherwise attained and may prove useful to educators in their approach to student learning so more individuals can be successful and graduate. This study proposes to actively recruit students' voices to be heard on this crucial topic of dropout to learn why they choose this behavior. The ultimate goal is to decrease the number of students who drop out of high school.

### **Who has the dropout become?**

A student's decision to drop out of school is one that will affect the outcomes of the rest of their lives. Dropouts encounter problems such as a lack of employment, low-status jobs, less chance to advance and less pay, as well as being more likely to be dependent on public assistance as a result of their decisions made prior to graduation (Beck & Muia, 1980). Researchers suggest, "dropping out of school is not best viewed as a single event; rather is a process by which students become increasingly disaffected and alienated from school...leading to drifting out" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 527-528). A student's decision to ultimately leave school is not an easy one on most accounts. Rather, these individuals have numerous hardships and reasons for leaving that may be a compilation of struggles over the years.

It is vital to evaluate who the dropout has become within the educational system to be able to identify who the students are that are most in need of help to stay in school. Based on the premise that learning the most information about who the potential dropout is in turn is thought to help researchers best know how to intervene and change their decision to exit school. This is a notion held by various individuals who have studied this topic in efforts to address this issue. It is so important that researchers learn as much about why students leave in efforts of counteracting the problem. Ideally, if a profile of a student dropout could be identified,

educators could focus much of their attention on those individuals in need. Perhaps students can provide additional information in identifying those who may be in danger of leaving school.

Various researchers (S. Suh, & J. Suh, J., 2007; Azzam, 2007; Coley, 1995; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Finn, 1987; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Beck & Mulia, 1980) have looked at the common characteristics associated with those students who drop out of school. A number of common characteristics have been cited by various researchers in helping to uncover the issues associated with dropout behavior. Among researchers, various areas appear to be agreed upon and highlighted as common indicators often focused upon in relation to identifying the dropout.

Some researchers (Suh, S. & Suh, J., 2007) believe academic difficulties, behavioral issues and low socioeconomic status impact dropout. Researchers (S. Suh & J. Suh, 2007) believe, the more risk factors a student possesses, the higher the likelihood they will drop out. Researchers appear to agree that no one single factor influences a student's decision to leave school. Most appear to be in agreement that the more risk factors a student encounters, the higher the risk of their behavior to drop out of school. In lieu of this level of agreement, various individual researchers highlight their own specific theories about which risk factors appear to play a larger role than perhaps others.

One researcher (Azzam, 2007) believes many dropouts view school as being boring and fall too far behind to catch up. Another (Coley, 1995) suggests an overall dislike of school, bad grades and not getting along with staff lead to drop out. Different researchers categorize and determine which reasons for dropping out appear to be more important based on their specific findings. Some studies are more specific in looking at why students of similar backgrounds differ. Devine, 1996 "...identified parents' low educational attainment, the number of household

members, and lack of motivation as reasons why students with low socioeconomic status drop out of school” (S. Suh & J. Suh, 2007, p. 297). Findings from yet another study suggest, “...dropouts tend to be racial minorities from poor families” (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986, p. 356). The level to which the risk factors have been evaluated as contributing to the larger issue ranges greatly among researchers through this review.

It became evident through this analysis of research of who the dropout has become that although there appears to be a core group of risk factors, the manner in which the researchers places weight and devise their own theory in relation to them differs greatly. While one researcher may provide a hypothesis based on one set of risk factors, several other researchers may have looked at those same risk factors and hypothesized another theory. This makes it difficult to organize risk factors in such a manner that suggests one profile of a potential dropout.

Some researchers look at the individual's level of engagement in school or individual characteristics of the student as contributing factors. A group of researchers (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003) report students may drop out due to a low level of being involved in school. Students who fail to become members of their school suffer in more ways than just academics. Bachman 1977 suggests the “Typical affective characteristics of the drop out include low SES, little desire for self-growth, and limited commitment to accepted social values” (S. Suh & J. Suh, 2007, p.66). Research (Finn, 1987) suggests socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity are correlated with those who dropout. Students are viewed as having many risk factors that place them at a disadvantage prior to entering the school building. Other researchers (Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998) report issues such as substance abuse, child abuse, absenteeism, involvement with crime, truancy, running away and being too far behind in school to catch up as reasons for dropping out of school. When the dropout is viewed in this manner, the

characteristics are intrinsic to the student. Students who display these risk factors are faced with barriers that their peers may never be challenged by, increasing their risks for school failure.

Others view the dropout issue as being extrinsic in nature, where researchers attempt to explain dropout behavior as a means for the struggling student to escape the school environment for various reasons. Some suggest (Beck & Muia, 1980) a student leaves school because they have some conflict with the school environment. Emphasis is taken off the individual student as previously evaluated. The belief held by some researchers (Millard, 1965) is that student's who leave school do not make this decision in an impulsive manner. Rather they have displayed serious difficulties in the school environment which had led them to their decision. Students who drop out have made this decision based on years of feeling a sense of some conflict based on this belief. Many believe, "so we have the dropout or pushout. When success in school no longer seems likely, removing oneself from the setting in which failure occurs seems reasonable, almost compelling" (Mahood, 1981, p. 56).

Researchers question why a student would choose to stay in school under these conditions. Yet others point out an equally important connection between students and their learning which may contribute as well. Egyed et al., 1998, suggest some students display learning challenges and other students are bored with their curriculum. When viewed in this manner, the school ultimately holds the risk factors which the students encounter, rather than believing the student brought them with them. This is an interesting perspective and one which contradicts the former presentation of information. It is interesting to note how the various risk factors are presented in the literature.

Still other researchers believe the most important factor contributing to dropout behavior involves the time in which intervention is addressed. Some even believe dropout behavior can

be identified in the early elementary years. One researcher suggests "...the future dropout shows a clear indication of academic problems by the third grade" (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989, p. 316). Many researchers share a similar concern surrounding timing and the importance of the high school years as being a deciding factor in whether students will make a decision to drop out of school. Herlihy, 2007, suggests, "Research is clear that ninth grade is a make or break year. More students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out" (betterhighschools.org, p. 1). One researcher (Schrieber, 1964) believes failure of the eighth or ninth grade may be crucial in their decision to leave or stay. There is a belief among several researchers that intervention is too late by the middle and high school years based on the aforementioned premise. Rather, there is much emphasis placed on the importance of understanding at what point these risk factors begin to impact the student learner. Researchers (Barrington et al., 1989) report indicators such as poor attendance and poor achievement increase during the middle school years and carry over into high school which sets the student up to fail. When the profile of the dropout is viewed in this account, students begin dropping out of school well before they make the actual decision to do so. Risk factors are impacting students well before high school. Their final decision to leave school may have begun in their elementary years and carried through their school experiences.

It is so important to note when describing who the dropouts have become and what known risk factors they are commonly associated with, that their profile is ever changing. It is important to note that on occasions where researchers have interviewed dropouts, "...70% believed they could have graduated if they tried...and nearly half noted that earlier schooling had poorly prepared them for high school" (Azzam, 2007, p. 91). This is very telling in the literature.

Students have reported that their lack of preparation in lower grades has contributed to their dropout behavior in high school. Other studies indicate "...the largest percentage of dropouts are in average intelligence range, and at least 11% have the ability to complete college" (Howard, 1978, p. 223). These statistics are attention getting and discouraging at best to think that a high school dropout has such potential and the self realization that they are capable students who feel they may be in a system that fails them.

The research in this area suggests that the profile of the high school dropout is not easy to identify and is very complex. Although several students who have displayed drop out behavior in the past share various risk factors, it would be difficult to identify a student at-risk, especially in a school where many students are diverse and share the various risk factors. The at-risk dropout could potentially be *all* students based on the vast array of research available on the commonly associated risk factors. Therefore, it is essential to look for other alternatives in helping educators to identify who the potential dropouts may be.

One issue that arises from the current research involves the ease at which students are able to exit the school environment. One researcher (Mahood, 1981) holds the belief that dropping out of school needs to be made more difficult. It has been reported that many students simply sign out, others stay home and still others behave badly until they are kicked out of school. Regardless of how they leave, research suggests it is very easy for students to drop out of high school once they make this decision. Other researchers point to the role of high stakes testing and the requirements needed to graduate. They suggest school districts created new requirements for graduation. These views cause one to question if the educational system creates an environment where school is perceived by students as a place where graduating becomes more difficult than dropping out. Schools become identified as an environment that is all too

easy to leave. “Many dropouts and pushouts view themselves as born losers” (Mahood, 1981, p. 57). The complexities that surround identifying who a dropout is make the task of preventing this type of behavior to be extremely difficult. “The multiple factors associated with dropout rates suggest that no single type of intervention can end our nation’s dropout crisis...”([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), p.3-4). Rather, new thoughts surrounding prevention needs to be initiated provided the inability alone to accurately identify who the potential dropouts have become.

### **Dropout Prevention Programs**

Much research has focused on the various dropout prevention programs which have been implemented as well as their outcomes in relationship to their effectiveness in addressing the dropout issue. Some researchers hold the view “...we are doing a lot and learning a little” (Finn, 1987, p. 21). What researchers can agree on when discussing the issues associated with dropout is that “dropping out of high school reportedly has negative effects for both individuals and society” (Groth, 1998, p. 218). It is imperative that researchers continue to evaluate the various dropout prevention programs to continue learning from them what is most effective. Other researchers (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009) agree that a student’s decision to drop out of school is a devastating one due to their frustrations with school. The consequences of a student’s decision to drop out of school remind educators of the importance of studying the prevention piece and future steps that can be learned from these practices. One researcher reports, “Urban school children have approached a crisis point in terms of needs that are going unmet” (Somers et al., 2009, p. 349). The number of prevention programs available to students and the variety with which they are offered would lead some to believe that the dropout statistics would be decreasing. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Dropout prevention programs have come under intense scrutiny for their lack of success in trying to prevent dropout among a group of students who are diverse in their profile of risks. Researchers (Srebnik & Elias, 1993) suggest the manner in which dropout prevention programs are set up fail to keep students in school and send them the opposite message. The prevention programs serve to continue a lack of success for students which, perpetuates the dropout dilemma. It has become increasingly difficult for educators to prevent dropout through their efforts as a result. Many researchers have looked to school climate as an explanation for prevention programs that have met with little success. Researchers (Mayer, Mitchell, & Clementi, 1993) report that school climate is more reactive than preventative in their efforts. This suggests that prevention programs are counteracted by such actions that occur within the school setting. Other researchers (Mayer et al., 1993) concur, stating their school climate does not match their needs and sends them a message to leave. If students are met with an environment that promotes a punitive nature, they may be less inclined to stay. Based on this theory, researchers suggest, "The approach to dropout prevention should be redefined by shifting the focus of intervention from characteristics of the students to the factors in the school environment that affect the students' attachment to school" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 528). Perhaps prevention programs would be more successful if the schools in which they are inhabited are more conducive to a positive learning environment overall.

The various prevention programs are geared often toward the commonly associated risk factors of dropout. Several of these programs "...have clearly been oriented to individually based interventions. The focus on the student stems partly from a fundamental attribution error, a natural tendency to ascribe the cause of actions to the individual" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 528). Individual programs fail to look at the relationship between students and the schools which

they attend. Rather, students are targeted as having a set of risk factors that fits them into a certain prevention program as a result. The results of the effectiveness of these programs have not been as well as would be expected as a result. Some researchers (Srebnik & Elias, 1993) suggest the aim of dropout prevention needs to take aim at the larger issues rather than being designed around the characteristics of the student. Interventions need to be geared more toward helping all students to succeed. Based on this same premise, "how high schools structure and organize themselves is indicative of their values, beliefs and fundamental assumptions. School structure reveals much about a school's culture" (Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2008, p. 11). There appears to be a shift in the approach of prevention programs which is beginning to look at the school climate as a major factor for prevention. Researchers are beginning to look at the dropout issue as one which is multifaceted involving the student, school climate and the interaction between the two in helping to understand the lack of success with prevention programs.

The research surrounding prevention is extensive and what is revealed is that some programs work for some students but is not effective in addressing large volumes of students leaving school. Researchers (Srebnik & Elias, 1993) refer to the vast majority of efforts in devising dropout prevention programs based on differing needs. Dropout prevention programs have aimed to improve curriculum, the delivery of instruction, school climate, and behavior. This vast array of areas under investigation points to the complexity of the dropout issue and the questions researchers have about where to continue when developing programs of prevention. Some researchers (Groth, 1998) point to the need to provide students alternatives if there is any hope to decrease the dropout rate. It is being brought to the attention of educators that the manner in which dropout behavior is being addressed is not working and has been found to be

largely unsuccessful. This has caused researchers to constantly evaluate what is and is not working in relation to these programs and why.

Many researchers have focused on the need for prevention programs in the early formative educational years. Researchers (Srebnik & Elias, 1993) are beginning to suggest that dropout prevention needs to make a shift to engaging students in the earlier grades. This engagement needs to occur early on and carry through a student's educational experience. What has previously been a focus on prevention needs to change to student engagement. There are areas which need to be focused on earlier in this process to help students be more successful as they reach their middle and high school years. Some researchers suggest, "Primary prevention efforts need to be implemented proactively, before student disengagement occurs" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 532). Researchers warn that too many prevention programs are too late in their delivery of services. They (Srebnik & Elias, 1993) report intervention for dropout is being addressed too late. Reyes & Jason, 1991, report the importance of looking at school transitions and how this may contribute to a student's failure. This suggests that the timing of intervention is crucial if they are to be successful. What has been learned so far is that the timing of prevention is much too late and as a result lacks effectiveness for students in high school.

Another focus of research surrounding dropout prevention involves providing students with an alternative form of education. Alternative education programs have been developed in response to so many students not being able to participate in the mainstream education. Researchers (Groth, 1998) report the need for alternative schools because so many students are failing in the mainstream. There is research which confirms that alternative education programs can be effective. Several researchers (Franklin, Streets, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007) focus their attention on alternative schools and their success in reducing dropout given their lower student to

teacher ratios. These schools also make a shift away from discipline and place more focus on academics. The problem is that not all students who display some risk factor associated with dropout behavior can or will be referred to an alternative educational setting. Keeping in mind the number of students who display some risk of dropping out, it is nearly impossible to refer them all to another setting as a form of dropout prevention. The difficulty lies in replicating what is working in the alternative school and applying this to mainstream education.

This type of practice (alternative education) has also been criticized by many researchers who propose "...placing students in dropout prevention programs may be an extreme version of the tracking system...They claim the programs serve as dumping grounds for unwanted behavior problem students" (Groth, 1998, p. 221). Alternative education programs have been accused of not being preventative at all, but rather serving as reactive solutions. Simply removing students from the mainstream and calling it prevention does not serve to address the real issues surrounding dropout. More attention needs to be paid toward the mainstream setting to help engage students and help them to succeed in their schools rather than to simply reassign them to another educational setting.

Unfortunately, current programs have not always been as effective as researchers would like. It has been reported that "Despite their tremendous variety, however, few programs have had any demonstrated impact on actual drop-out rates" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 526). Rather, the success of prevention programs appears to be limited to the specific groups they are aimed at and little carry over has been observed with other groups. Researchers state "It is not generally known what works in terms of specific interventions to prevent youth from dropping out of school" (Finn, 1987, p. 21). The reality is based on the review of literature concerning the impact current dropout prevention programs have had to curb the issue of students dropping out

of school. This review suggests much more research needs to be done in the area of prevention to effectively deter dropout.

Researchers do report that what they have learned from their prevention programs offers new insights into where this research may lead with regard to the dropout issue. They suggest “Transforming the goal of dropout prevention efforts into that of enhancing school engagement implies that schools must be attractive and meaningful to students” (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 532). Schools need to attract the student-learner and engage them in learning overall while encouraging students to take an active role in their learning. Researchers (Srebnik & Elias, 1993) concur that school engagement is necessary to help students feel as if they belong to the school overall. Schools need to be seen as a place where all students can be educated.

Researchers suggest “schools must make learning more engaging and help students understand the connection between the world of work and school” (Somers et al., 2009, p. 349). If students are able to apply what they learn to their future, perhaps they will see the relevance of what they learn in the classroom and become more interested in their education.

Researchers appear to be making the transition away from the focus on prevention programs and toward learning how to better engage the student within their school environment. Researchers stress the importance of including the voices of students in this discussion. “Most studies on school dropout examine adolescents at risk and do not compare them with adolescents who appear to be succeeding in school” (Lagana, 2004, p. 211). The research suggests that it is time to take a more proactive role in addressing the dropout issue as the preventative role has been unsuccessful in its efforts. A main focus is to include students and learn how to best engage them in school and make school a place where they want to go.

**What is effective for keeping students in school?**

In continuing to evaluate why it is that students continue to drop out of school at alarming rates despite the wealth of research available pertaining to prevention and all we know of the common characteristics associated with dropout, researchers continue to struggle to find a solution. Researchers, in their efforts, have begun to look at what has and has not worked in previous efforts of addressing dropout and where to go from here. Several researchers have taken a stand that a shift needs to be made in how dropout behavior is perceived altogether. There are ongoing efforts to learn from those who graduate to see how the educational system does not fit dropouts. Others are investigating school engagement as an alternative to prevention before it may be too late. That is, how does school keep students engaged? Some researchers are reevaluating the laws surrounding dropping out of high school. Some researchers (Finn, 1989) suggest that students should not be allowed to drop out of high school until age 17 or 18. Some states have raised the dropout age to 18 as a result of this research. This follows the notion that dropping out of school has become a process that is too easy. The most difficult realization researchers are grappling with includes how schools may contribute to the problem which would be unbearable for some educators to imagine; that schools are part of the problem, rather than the solution.

Some researchers argue that "...reformers in the standards movement have been making a rather radical argument: that all students can learn..." (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001, p. 525). While it may be true that all students are capable of learning, it is quite another assumption to make that all students can learn in the same manner through the same approach. A claim has been made which accuses schools of contributing to the problem rather than helping it. Many believe the efforts fail at the onset of the movement to help students. "A Nation at Risk (1983)

stressed in its title and in its' text a *nation* at risk but paid little attention to *children* at risk” (Deschenes et al., 2001, p. 527). This statement causes one to believe that before efforts were even developed to help the problem, and that the focus was placed on the wrong aspect of the problem. Efforts were misaligned with the true issue at hand, and therefore little success has been reached. Researchers (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) warn that a shift needs to be made away from a student's attributes and placed on the school in looking at the dropout problem.

Otherwise the schools are not identified as being part of the equation. Much focus has recently been placed on the school climate and its impact on dropout behavior. Researchers are taking a hard line in identifying the role the school may play in dropout behavior. Wehlage et al., 1986, suggests the importance of looking at school policy and understanding how schools can be perceived by different students. This shift in focus has made some educators feel uneasy about the implications of these statements. Researchers remind us “...saying that schools push out some young people is a harsh statement of a painful responsibility” (Mann, 1986, p. 309). To imagine that the very schools students attend on a daily basis serve to help them drop out is a reality many educators are not ready to acknowledge.

Researchers, through this new approach to viewing the dropout issue, are beginning to look at the relationship between student learner and the environment in which they are taught as possibly having an impact on their decision to leave school. What they are finding is that “These students, we argue, are part of a mismatch between schools and groups of students who do not meet the standards of their day. Researchers (Deschenes et al., 2001) remind us to constantly evaluate our schools and the students we serve. It is becoming more and more evident through this review that some students are destined to drop out of school regardless of the risks they bring with them to school. Our schools are setting them up for failure in their structure and

organization. Further compounded by individual risk factors only increases their risk for dropping out. It is so important to reach these students and gain their perception of school for these reasons. Researchers highlight “everyone agrees that the way young people experience school is the most frequently cited reason for quitting early” (Mann, 1986, p. 309). This is a real factor that needs to be addressed given future implications for prevention. This appears to be evident given current research. Researchers (Kortering, Konold, & Glutting, 1998) identify those students who participated, became engaged, and were able to see the relevance in their learning as being more successful than those who did not. Perhaps the richest information any researcher can gain is directly from the dropout and those who graduate.

Some researchers suggest that “An alternative to trying to explain why youths drop out of school would be to establish why they come to school” (Kortering et al., 1998, p. 10). There is much to be learned from the student who stays in school. It is eye opening in the review of research how little information is available in regards to the reports from either dropouts or graduates to learn from their experiences. Researchers (Finn, 1989) report there are few reports available which explain why so many students exit the school environment early. It is necessary to learn from the dropout as to what may have led them to make their final decision to leave school. This is valuable information as it may relate to their school environment. Perhaps this will help in preventing future potential dropouts.

Many researchers believe “The key is helping youth to overcome their sense of disconnectedness. It is imperative not to isolate or alienate any students from school” ([smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu), p. 2). These researchers believe the school has a role in alienating students preventing them from engaging in their own learning. Others (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) suggest individuals drop out after a process of disengagement over the years. The role a school culture

may play seems difficult to ignore in discussions pertaining to dropout. If students feel alienated at school and not included in their school culture, this may have an impact on their decision making process. Essentially, "...factors within classrooms transform at-risk students into a discrete subculture that is functionally incompatible with school success" (Kagan, 1990, p. 108). There is still much to be learned from the student who graduates in comparison to the dropout. We are constantly reminded by researchers (Wehlage et al., 1986) that an individual who chooses to drop out of school has done so because they have not gained a sense of belonging. Rather they may hold a belief that they were rejected from the school environment. Students who feel that school has failed them are more apt to leave this environment through the act of dropping out. When research compels educators to view dropout behavior from this perspective, it becomes clearer why students disengage from their learning.

This review of the literature illustrates the need to learn from the past in efforts to tailor programs to the future if dropout behavior is to be affected. Researchers are beginning to look at dropping out of school through a series of new lenses which focus more on school engagement as a result of research completed concerning school climate and culture. If schools are found to be contributing to the issue of dropout, this is an area of concern which needs to be addressed.

### **Focus on School Engagement**

Much emphasis has been placed on school climate or school culture as well as the impact the various social interactions have on students in regard to their sense of resiliency and perseverance to complete school. Researchers have pointed out that schools may be contributing to the problem unknowingly through the culture or climate they portray to student learners. While this may alarm educators, it sheds new light on where the future focus should lie. "If schools have the ability to contribute to students' early school leaving, then schools also have the

potential to contribute to students' persistence" (Knesting, 2008, p. 4). This suggests that there is hope in combating the dropout issue within our schools.

Researchers (Doll & Hess, 2001) suggest the shift needs to be made toward encouraging students to complete school. Often, prevention programs are too late in their efforts and students have already made their decision to drop out. If the focus is aimed at engaging all students, fewer students will be lost in the educational system. Researchers agree, "Schools must accept responsibility for making changes within their own structure or climate that can support student persistence and increase the likelihood that they will finish their education" (Knesting, 2008, p. 9). Educators should not be discouraged by the notion that this behavior is attributed to them, but rather they should take the initiative within their school buildings to make positive change. Researchers (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001) report the focus needs to address how schools continue to fail students and how to encourage completion through engagement. Again, educators need to be proactive in their efforts to engage students before they disengage from the school culture.

Student persistence or resiliency is an area which has been studied extensively in regard to school completion and school engagement. "Individuals who are at risk for a particular negative outcome but do not develop the predicted outcome are described as resilient" (Worrell & Hale, 2001, p. 370). It is important to look at why some students display more resiliency than others. Researchers (Knesting & Waldron, 2006) report there are various factors that are critical to student persistence. They include being able to see the benefits of graduating, willingness to follow rules and an ability to make meaningful relationships. Focusing on the positive attributes of the student versus their risk factors enables educators to engage them. Student resiliency can be fostered through the interactions they gain in school. By placing more focus on engagement

and less blame on students, this may be more easily achieved. Researchers concur, "...it seems important that intervention programs geared toward enhancing school engagement among adolescents incorporate strategies to facilitate self-efficacy and goal orientation and to reduce fear of failure" (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003, p. 426). Students who are more confident about their abilities are more apt to be more engaged. Likewise a student who continues to set future goals for themselves is also more willing to put forth more effort. Lastly, a student who displays fear in regard to their academics is less likely to engage in school. This view helps educators to see that "School dropout is but one consequence of lack of school engagement" (Caraway et al., 2003, p. 417). Reframing the dropout issue in this way helps educators to look at the various factors that contribute to dropout behavior. Student engagement is present across grades. Perhaps this is why it becomes so important in addressing this issue. Dropout behavior becomes a result of school disengagement that has occurred for years. The final decision to drop out occurs in high school following years of schooling where students fail to engage on several levels.

Another focus of study pertaining to school engagement has to do with the attachments students form. Researchers (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001) suggest a key factor for student completion involves the number and quality of their attachments to others. Often a student needs to have made a connection with one person who makes a difference in their education. This could be a meaningful connection with anyone within the school environment. Researchers remind us, "students who drop out of school are also less attached to school and to the school enterprise" (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001, p. 431). Students who are not engaged with the school environment do not participate in any aspect of school because they don't see the relevance of school in their lives. Learning is a complex process of interactions, relationships

and reciprocity where students constantly interact with the environment in which they learn. Reports indicate that “Students who identify with school are more likely to participate in school and less likely to drop out” (Worrell & Hale, 2001, p. 375). It is difficult for a student who is engaged in some aspect of school whether it be the learning, social or other to simply leave. Likewise, if a student is not engaged with school, the decision to leave is much easier based on this research.

The voice of the students need to be heard if progress is to be made to decrease the number of students who drop out of school. Researchers (Knesting & Waldron, 2006) report there are many factors that increase student persistence, among them relationships with adults in the learning environment that may have a tremendous impact on a student. This aspect is so important in learning the importance of what impacts student engagement within the school culture. More information needs to be learned surrounding what engages students so schools can be better prepared to have a positive impact on their students. Other researchers agree that “...increased attention has been given to students’ sense of connectedness to school and its influence on their decisions to stay in or drop out” (Knesting & Waldron, 2006, p. 599). Student attachments to individuals as well as a sense of belonging to the school through extra participatory activities help the student to be engaged with school and their learning. Students connecting with others through these various means serve to improve school engagement while forming meaningful relationships.

Researchers (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001) have shown how complex and multidimensional the issue of dropout really is. This is based on much research which suggests a “theoretical explanation of early school withdrawal emphasizes that dropping out is a process of disengaging from school, not a discrete event or instantaneous decision” (Christenson et al.,

2001, p. 472). Researchers have shown through their works the various facets that comprise dropout behavior and the need for more research to learn even more about the topic. The more that is learned about the dropout raises more questions about where to go from here.

Researchers stress the importance of acknowledging what can be learned from the dropouts and the graduates in regard to persistence and school completion. They stress that "...results suggest that the graduate and dropouts differ on more than risk factors" (Worrell & Hale, 2001, p. 382). What was once thought as a simple task to address the dropout issue has become more complex as we learn all the variables that need to be taken into consideration. Risk factors alone are not viewed as pure indicators of who will drop out. Likewise, the school culture brings with it a wealth of obstacles that further complicate the issue. One researcher (Christenson et al., 2001) suggests the importance of interventions to include having students participate in their learning and become engaged in school. A comprehensive approach to dropout is much needed based on the aforementioned information supported by the research available.

It is for this reason that "...their voices must be actively recruited...ask them questions about their experiences, why they want to leave, and what would help them stay; and listen to their answers" (Knesting, 2008, p. 7). This suggests the answers lie largely in the students and their responses. Based on the research presented as well as the shift in focus on addressing the dropout issue, researchers premise new hope for success. Researchers (Christenson et al., 2001) state the importance of engaging students, supporting them and monitoring their progress to promote success. This is not an easy task, but a worthwhile endeavor if the goal is to decrease the dropout rates. The implications are so important for each individual who thinks about dropping out of high school as well as for society as a whole.

The review of literature illustrates the need for more studies which include the voices of dropouts and graduates to learn of their experiences. This is needed in hopes of developing more successful programs in the future to address the dropout issue. The following themes are clear from the current literature review: 1) Commonly identified risk factors are shared by many students who drop out of school and by many students who graduate. 2) Dropout prevention programs do not appear to be effective in reaching a large amount of students who ultimately decide to leave school. 3) School engagement increases the likelihood that students will graduate from high school. 4) Students are often left out of the conversation regarding dropout behavior. The focus on school engagement surrounding school climate or school culture stems from the perceptions of students and their interaction with the school environment. Much can be learned from the students who are affected the most and choose to make this decision to drop out. It is time that these students be included in the conversation that has all too often left them behind.

### **Chapter 3: Research Design**

The Situated Learning lens suggests that students need to see that their learning is a process involved through social interaction and collaboration. Learning is not an isolated event, rather it involves a students' ability to apply their learning in the classroom to instances outside of the classroom. The Situated Learning Theory encourages the student learner to take their knowledge to a new level where they become the expert. Self-Efficacy Theory evaluates what beliefs the student learner possesses regarding their ability to be successful academically. The two lenses help to explain how student learning is perceived as a complex process acquired in the classroom as well as how a student's self-efficacy may impact their learning. This, in turn, helps

the student learner to see the relevance and necessity of attending school, which may impact their behavior to graduate.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be explored through this qualitative study examining the impact student perceptions play on dropout behavior:

- 1) What conditions or circumstances, as perceived by students, have contributed to their staying in or dropping out of school?
- 2) As can be assessed through student focus groups, how might students' stated degree of self-efficacy and resiliency contribute to their staying in or dropping out of school?

### **Methodology**

Much of the research around dropout behavior (S. Suh., & J. Suh., 2007; Azzam, 2007; Coley, 1995; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Finn, 1987; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Beck & Mulia, 1980) has focused on the commonly associated risk factors of dropout including academic achievement, socioeconomic status, attendance and discipline issues as well as the evaluation of various prevention programs. Various studies regarding these well documented efforts are quantitative in nature. This research identifies and quantifies why some students stay in school at New Bedford High School and why others drop out. However, a limited amount of research has been able to explain why so many students with similar risk factors display different educational outcomes such as the case at New Bedford High School. Likewise, researchers display difficulty identifying how to significantly decrease dropout based on the vast expanse of information and prevention programs available.

Through the literature review, there appears to be limited research that solely focuses on student perceptions of school in relation to their decision to drop out of school or graduate. A

qualitative research study that aims to include the voice of the dropout and graduate may provide useful information as to why a student makes a decision to leave school. Their stories incorporating their perceptions of the school climate, self-efficacy and any other issues relevant to their decision making process will lead to meaningful discussions regarding another integral factor of the dropout issue.

Crewsell (2009) defines qualitative research “as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (p. 4). The purpose of this study involves understanding the meaning of the participants through their experiences as graduates, dropouts, guidance counselors and administrators in relationship to dropout behavior at this high school. A qualitative study was chosen due to the interest in how the students perceive their interaction with the school environment and others and in turn how this may or may not alter their decision to drop out of high school. It is through this type of research that students’ stories will be told in a meaningful manner to explain their life decision to drop out or graduate.

A case study approach was utilized to examine the various research questions to gain personal insight from students who have graduated and dropped out of school to better understand this type of behavior. Mertens (2005) states that “Some authors view the case study as one type of ethnographic (interpretive) research that involves intensive and detailed study of one individual or of a group as an entity, through observation, self-reports, and any other means” (p. 237). This type of approach will be useful in attaining information from two distinct groups that display very different behavior.

**Site and Participants**

The site for this research was New Bedford High School, located in New Bedford, Massachusetts. New Bedford High School is a large, urban high school made up of a diverse student body which services 2, 594 students. This site was chosen due to the high dropout rate. In the 2009-2010 school year, the dropout rate in the state of Massachusetts was 2.9%. The dropout rate at New Bedford High School is currently 6.7% which is nearly triple the state average. In a freshman class which entered with 936 students, approximately 522 will go on to graduate from this high school. The community of New Bedford continues to struggle with the dropout issue and there appears to be a culture established within the city of an overall acceptance to leave school. Dropout prevention has become the focus of the school district, New Bedford High School, the community and city officials in efforts to acknowledge the ongoing crisis this city faces in keeping its youth in school.

Interviews were conducted with three administrators from New Bedford High School to learn of their perceptions of the dropout issue as it relates to the high school students. Their input was helpful in learning what the district proposes to combat the dropout issue as well as their view of the efficacy of the current district plan. Students were comprised of two groups. One group included those students who have dropped out recently in the last 2-3 years or those students who may be earning a GED who have dropped out in the last 5-7 years. The other group included those students who have graduated from the high school. The student selection process was facilitated by the dropout prevention specialist, attendance officers as well as guidance counselors at New Bedford High School. Students who have dropped out of high school and may be attending an evening program for GED acquirement were also asked to voluntarily participate in this study. Other students who have dropped out were identified by

their former guidance counselor or the attendance officer at the high school. Students who graduated during the 2010-2011 school year as well as those who have graduated within the past 5 years were asked to participate voluntarily in this study. Graduates were identified through their guidance counselors. Students who have graduated and students who have dropped out were contacted by phone asking for voluntary participation in the study.

Another group was comprised of guidance counselors who were asked to offer their perspective as to why students choose to either graduate or drop out of school. Four guidance counselors who work at the high school were asked to participate in a focus group. Their insight was helpful in obtaining the different backgrounds and struggles students may have encountered during their years at the high school or prior to dropping out. This information was discussed in a generalized manner where student identities will not be revealed. Each guidance staff works with approximately 200 students who are enrolled at New Bedford High School. Their insights regarding students are invaluable given their experiences and contact with numerous students on a daily basis.

The sampling strategy used includes “purposeful sampling” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Maxwell (2005) states, “purposeful sampling ... is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). Fourteen dropouts and thirteen graduates were chosen comprising each group – those who are graduating and those who have dropped out - to participate in the study. Students were invited to participate in one of several times identified for the focus groups and students selected the time they would like to attend depending on their availability. Guidance counselors were invited in the same manner.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for this qualitative study consisted primarily of focus groups and interviews with students who had and had not dropped out of New Bedford High School and guidance counselors as well as interviews with administrators.

**Focus Groups.** Focus groups were conducted with the three groups: graduates and dropouts of New Bedford High School and guidance counselors. “Focus groups can be viewed as a data collection method or as a strategy for research...group interviews that rely, not on a question-and-answer format of interview, but on the interaction within the group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). As Mertens (2005) states, “This reliance on interaction between participants is designed to elicit more of the participant’s points of view than would be evidenced in more researcher-dominated interviewing” (p. 245). Information gained through student focus groups was most useful in gaining the perspective of the students in either group as to what led them to leave or not leave the school environment. Guidance counselor focus groups additionally provided information regarding students they had worked with and student stories regarding their decision to graduate or drop out.

An interview or focus group protocol was developed for each group – administrators, graduates, drop outs, and guidance staff (see Appendix A, B, C & D). The initial questions of administrators focused on steps taken by the district and the high school to address the dropout crisis as well as their view of effective and less effective measures. The initial questions in each of the student focus groups were designed to elicit students’ overall impressions of school and their experiences. A subset of questions focused on specific questions regarding each group. For example, when asking about the common risk factors for dropping out, the graduates were asked why these factors may or may not have been a concern for them. When asking about these

risk factors in the dropout groups, focus group participants were asked whether they perceived these factors as having contributed to their dropping out and, if so, how? The guidance counselors were asked a series of questions regarding student experiences that they may be aware of and how this may have impacted their decision making process regarding their willingness to complete school. The guidance counselors were also asked a series of questions pertaining to students' self-efficacy and the impact this may have on their decision surrounding dropout.

Initially it was this researcher's intent to learn of the various school experiences all of the participants have had regardless of them being a dropout or graduate. Important information can be gained through these conversations with similar questions posed to each group. Subsequent questions geared specifically to graduates and dropouts helped this researcher to look for themes present or not regarding their specific behaviors of dropping out or graduating.

Administrators, students and guidance counselors who chose to participate in the interview or focus groups were assured that any information they chose to share would be held in the strictest of confidence. Interviews and focus groups were held in a comfortable setting where their input was completely voluntary. An interview was conducted with the three administrators. Follow up questions were asked based on their responses. Questions were posed to a group of 5 or 6 students initially and any response they could provide was appreciated in helping this researcher understand their perceptions of their school experiences. Follow up questions were asked given initial responses to open ended questions. Questions followed for individual participants based on their willingness to offer more information and continue the conversation. Through a culmination of the various questions posed, this researcher gained a better sense of various student perceptions and the impact they may have on their educational decisions.

Questions were posed to a group of four guidance counselors initially to help this researcher learn more about the students' experiences at New Bedford High School. Follow up questions were asked given initial responses to open ended questions. Their responses helped this researcher to better understand the life circumstances surrounding the students who choose to graduate or drop out.

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted with three administrators from the high school. The information gained through these interviews lends additional information to this researcher regarding the efforts the school district and New Bedford High School has made toward addressing the dropout issue. Their perspective on the efficacy or lack thereof regarding the recent efforts of school personnel to address this issue was sought to gather more information surrounding the observed dropout behavior.

### **Data Analysis**

When completing a qualitative study, there are several components of thematic analysis that need to be taken into account. Creswell, (2009) states, "The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data...preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (p. 183). The researcher's role is to collect the data and look for underlying themes that may emerge as a result. There are a variety of steps which are followed when completing a qualitative analysis. Creswell (2009) outlines the following steps:

"Organize and prepare the data for analysis; Read through all the data; Begin detailed analysis with a coding process; Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis; Advance how the description and themes will

be represented in the qualitative analysis; Make an interpretation or meaning of the data” (p. 187-189). This study will follow this procedure for analysis.

The following steps are also helpful when completing qualitative data analysis. Mertens (2005) suggests the following steps: (1) Give codes to your first set of field notes drawn from observations, interviews, or document reviews; (2) Note personal reflections or other comments in the margin; (3) Sort and sift through the materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences; (4) Identify these patterns and processes, commonalities, and differences and take them out to the field in the next wave of data collection; (5) Begin elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database; and (6) Examine those generalizations in light of a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories (p. 423).

The two student groups were asked parallel questions to allow for an initial evaluation of differences or similarities in their perceptions of their school experience. More specific follow-up questions were geared toward each specific group based on their initial responses and themes that emerged through the discussion. The guidance staff was asked parallel questions initially to evaluate for differences or similarities in the experiences of the students they are willing to discuss in relation to their situations that may have led them to their decision regarding school completion. More specific follow-up questions were based on guidance counselors' initial responses and themes that emerged.

The data analysis used information obtained through interviews and focus groups. Information was audio recorded and then transcribed to complete the following processes involved with qualitative research, as explained in Maxwell (2005):

The main categorizing strategy in qualitative research is coding ... the goal of coding is not to count things, but to 'fracture' the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts. Another form of categorizing analysis involves organizing the data into broader themes and issues. (p. 96).

Themes were drawn from within and across all groups including the administrators, students and guidance counselors. Data was then looked at through the two theoretical lenses to determine if these lenses help to explain what is being observed. This process helps the researcher to challenge hypotheses, ideas, and assumptions and determine if the information gathered can be explained by a disconnect through Situated Learning Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory.

As Creswell (2009) states, "Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information" (p. 186). Coding is a complex process which is comprised of various components. Saldana (2009) states that the coding cycles are broken down into two distinct types which offer many options dependent on the study at hand. "The coding methods...are divided into two main sections: First Cycle and Second Cycle coding methods" (p. 45). The coding methods are further broken down based on the nature of the study. Saldana (2009) clarifies these cycles as follows: "First Cycle methods are those processes that happen during the initial coding of data...Second Cycle methods require such analytical skills as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building" (p. 45). Specific coding types were chosen for this qualitative study given the information attained by this researcher as well as the manner in which it was accomplished.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to collect and analyze administrators', guidance counselors', and students' perceptions regarding a student's decisions to graduate or drop out of school. To analyze participants' perspectives, the following three steps were chosen for the First Cycle of coding.

Step 1: In Vivo Coding. Saldana (2009) states, "In Vivo Coding as a code refers to a short word or short phrase from the actual language in the qualitative data record, the terms used by participants themselves" (p. 74). In Vivo Coding is useful in studies that aim at capturing the voice of the participants. This type of coding is so important because the actual words of the participants are heard which creates a better understanding of their experiences. This was achieved through the specific information obtained through the interviews and the focus groups.

Step 2: Initial Coding. Saldana (2009) states, "Initial coding is breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (p. 81). Initial coding enables the researcher to assess what direction the study is going. "The task can also alert the researcher that more data are needed to support and build an emerging theory" (Saldana, 2009, p. 82). This was achieved through the initial evaluation of the information obtained through the interviews and focus groups.

Step 3: Values Coding. Saldana (2009) states, "Values coding is the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participants values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (p. 89). Values coding is useful because it allows the very personal experiences and decisions of the participants in case studies to be explored. Participants values, attitudes and beliefs were analyzed given the data collected and compared between groups.

The following steps were then applied to the Second Cycle of Coding. Saldana (2009) states, "The primary goal during Second Cycle coding, if needed, is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the array of First Cycle codes" (p. 149). For the purposes of this study the following two steps were used.

Step 4: Pattern Coding. Saldana (2009) states, "Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation...is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs" (p. 152). Pattern coding allows the researcher to look for major themes and also look at the data in terms of why these patterns may have occurred. Interpretation of the data collected was further analyzed for themes and relationships or differences between the responses of the various groups.

Step 5: Theoretical Coding. Theoretical Coding is the last step of coding which entails reviewing the transcripts of the two groups- graduates and drop outs- in relation to the primary constructs of the two theories from which I am reviewing this study. They include Situated Learning and Self-Efficacy Theory. Through Theoretical Coding, I looked for comments that are in alignment with, reinforced in support of or are in dissonance in their viewpoint of the theories being used to help explain why students graduate or drop out of high school. Two participating themes that are important to the construct of Situated Learning include: students are participants of a community (school); students are well supported in their practice of community (school). Two participating themes that are important to the construct of Self-Efficacy Theory include: students can effectively act within the practice of school; students set goals for themselves and become active participants in their own learning.

### **Validity and Credibility**

Various areas need to be examined when assessing the validity of a proposed research project. These areas include issues of Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, Confirmability, Authenticity and Transformative Paradigm Criteria.

**Credibility.** Mertens (2005): "Identify credibility as the criterion in qualitative research that parallels internal validity...In qualitative research, the credibility test asks if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints" (p. 254). This researcher discontinued the focus groups when confidence had been reached that the themes were repeating among groups. This researcher also debriefed with professional peers as well as my advisor surrounding the themes that emerged through the research to ensure trustworthiness. This researcher summarized to the participant an overview of their responses through the focus groups to ensure their interpretation was accurate.

**Transferability.** Mertens (2005): "Identify transferability as the qualitative parallel to external validity...In qualitative research, the burden of transferability is on the reader to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context" (p. 256). The information gained through these focus groups of graduates and dropouts at New Bedford High School was used to evaluate the impact of student perceptions in other high schools with similar attributes to see if there was any similarity.

**Dependability.** Mertens (2005): "Identified dependability as the qualitative parallel to reliability. Reliability means stability over time...change is expected, but it should be tracked and publicly inspectable" (p. 257). This researcher will make all information available should another researcher desire to implement a similar study.

**Confirmability.** Guba and Lincoln (1989) identified confirmability as the qualitative parallel to objectivity. Objectivity means that the influence of the researcher's judgment is minimized. Confirmability means that the data and its interpretation are not figments of the researcher's imagination. Qualitative data is based on a source and is able to be tracked as a result. Yin (1994) refers to this as providing a chain of evidence. This researcher shared any preconceived notions or beliefs surrounding the study prior to its implementation including biases, hypotheses and underlying assumptions about either group studied in relation to the focus of the research.

**Authenticity.** Mertens (2005) states, "Authenticity refers to the presentation of a balanced view of all perspectives, values, and beliefs. It answers the question, 'Has the researcher been fair in presenting views' (p. 257). This researcher identified how themes were arrived at as well as what recommendations could be made based on the research. The researcher became more aware of how this research molded her view on the current processes involved with the environment in which the participants originated.

**Transformative paradigm criteria.** Lincoln (1995) describes the inherent characteristic of all research as being representative of the position or standpoint of the author...texts cannot claim to contain all universal truth because all knowledge is contextual; therefore the researcher must acknowledge the context of the research. This researcher reported the findings based on this particular collection of data at this time. The researcher took into account that any information obtained through this study may be pertinent to these students at this time in this place.

**Researcher's Role**

This researcher is currently employed by the New Bedford Public Schools as a school psychologist. This researcher has direct contact with the students at New Bedford High School in the role of evaluator for special education services due to emotional, behavioral or learning difficulties observed within the school setting. This researcher was responsible for conducting the focus groups. This researcher's position does not appear to threaten the validity of this study. The administration of New Bedford High School voluntarily participated their site for the purposes of this study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

**Informed Consent.** Participants were informed of the purposes of this research study. Participants were encouraged to ask questions of the nature of the research at which time answers were provided. An informed consent form was signed by each participant with an in-depth explanation surrounding the meaning of this form. Participation was completely voluntary and the option was given to decide not to participate after information has been provided pertaining to the research.

**Confidentiality.** Participants' information was held in the strictest of confidence. No other person shall see any identifying information pertinent to any participants who chose to be a part of this study. No information was discussed with any information that would allow other individuals to know who participated in this study. A coding system was used for the researcher to identify who provided information through the focus groups. The researcher was responsible for transcribing this information. Recorded information will be destroyed after the information has been transcribed in a two month period.

## **Conclusion**

The community of New Bedford is currently making a valid effort to address the dropout crisis that faces their city. Certainly, the importance of this issue in keeping students in school would be beneficial to the entire community. Students would be better educated and would be provided the opportunity to go on to further their education affording them better jobs and the ability to become productive members of society. This lifelong process begins with their high school graduation.

The educational theories posed in this research suggests that a key factor in addressing the dropout issue begins with helping the student learner to recognize the relevance of learning and making it relevant to their experiences post high school. Learning is a social process by which students take an active role in their learning and strive to reach a level where they can apply their knowledge learned in the classroom to their real world experiences.

This study was completed to draw attention to the importance of involving the students' voice when addressing the dropout issue. Research has taught us that all too often those individuals who are affected most are left out of the discussion. A main purpose of this study was to learn from the dropouts and the graduates the important factors concerning their decisions regarding school. It is time to learn as much information about the issues surrounding dropout to better address these students' needs in school before more students are left behind.

## **Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings**

### **Reporting the Findings and Analyses**

This chapter presents the key findings and analysis of the various results of this study. The chapter is organized into five sections. The first section provides a brief description of the study and its participants. The second section provides an overview of the categories developed

during the coding of interviews and focus group data. The third section looks at emerging themes from the four groups who participated in the study. The fourth section presents comparisons and contrasts found amongst the various groups. In the fifth and final section, the findings are summarized.

The data was reviewed to answer the two research questions developed at the onset of this study.

1. What conditions or circumstances, as perceived by students, have contributed to their staying in or dropping out of school?
2. As can be assessed through student focus groups, how might students' stated degree of self-efficacy and resiliency contribute to their staying in or dropping out of school?

Participants of this study consisted of 13 graduates, 14 dropouts, 4 guidance counselors, and 3 administrators of New Bedford High School. The group of graduates included those students who may have graduated this school year or as recently as five years ago. The group of dropouts included those students who may have dropped out of school within the last two to seven years. The guidance counselors and administrators currently work at New Bedford High School and chose to participate in the study. All individuals participated in either focus groups or interviews.

### **Study Context**

Various groups of individuals consisting of graduates, dropouts, guidance counselors and administrators were interviewed either in a one-to-one setting or in focus groups to gain their perspectives as to why they believe students drop out of New Bedford High School. This qualitative study was conducted to investigate students' perceptions regarding the circumstances of their decision to exit the school environment. A case study approach was utilized to learn

about various students' stated feelings of connectedness to the community and activity of school as well as their perceived self-efficacy and resiliency in relation to dropping out of high school.

All participants volunteered to answer a variety of questions pertaining to their school experiences as well as their individual outcomes of graduating from or dropping out of high school. Each individual was free to share their experience and perspective to the extent that they were comfortable doing so. Guidance counselors and administrators were also asked to contribute their unique perspectives as to what they believe contributed to students either graduating from or dropping out of New Bedford High School. They were also asked to what degree they felt the school district had found success in addressing this issue.

### **Findings and Analysis - Coding**

To provide analysis of the various interviews and focus groups, various stages of coding was conducted as described in Chapter 3. Initially, all transcripts were reviewed to look for words or short phrases from the actual language that helped to tell their story or provide their perceptions as to why students graduated from or dropped out of high school. Next, similarities and differences amongst these codes were examined to discern if any commonalities were emerging from the text. Participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs were taken into account in relation to their perspectives of the drop out issue as depicted in their responses. Emerging themes were arrived at through this iterative coding the data. This data will further be considered in relationship to the two theories from which I am reviewing this study, Situated Learning and Self-Efficacy Theory.

### **Emerging Themes**

As can be seen in Table 1, several themes were identified through this process as being a significant factor in students staying in or dropping out of high school.

Table 1

*Central Themes by Group***Graduates**

- A. Self-Efficacy
- B. Supportive Relationships
- C. Connectedness to School

**Dropouts**

- A. Lack of Connectedness to School
- B. Lack of Meaningful Relationships
- C. Perception of the school environment
- D. Lack of Alternatives
- E. Lack of Self Efficacy

**Guidance Counselors**

- A. Self-Efficacy
- B. Cultural Factors
- C. Disconnect vs. Connect to school

**Administrators**

- A. No Alternatives
- B. Self-Efficacy
- C. Disconnect from school
- F. Lack of meaningful relationships

This section hopes to bring clarity to the reader as to why the students at New Bedford High School continue to decide to exit the school environment early at alarming rates. Student and adult perceptions were explored to look for similarities and/or differences regarding this topic. Individual stories were sought to help explain this behavior that is occurring in New Bedford. The findings from this study are as follows.

**Themes of Graduates of New Bedford High School**

*Thirteen graduates of New Bedford High School shared their unique experiences and stories in hopes of shedding light on why they stayed while so many other students have left.*

The graduates of New Bedford High School explained what they feel helped them to be so successful and to persevere to reach their end goal.

**The Importance of Self Efficacy.** The graduates interviewed for the most part attributed their success in school to personal attributes. They spoke of their own self-efficacy, that is their own internal belief in themselves as students. One graduate reports, "I think a lot of it does come from within me. I've always been a really good student." Another graduate reported, "Just knowing that I wanted to be successful and that I need to do what I need to do to get there...this is why I want to graduate in four years...I want to be a doctor or I want to do these things." The graduates appeared to share a common set of goals: to do well in school and seek out supports when needed to achieve this goal. Very often students spoke of their own personal drive as a motivating factor that helped them not only to graduate, but find success throughout their school careers. In addition, the graduates spoke of their ability to seek out support when needed. This included finding their guidance counselors, advocating for courses they needed to be in to get ahead academically, and seeking help from their teachers. The graduates took it upon themselves to advocate for their own needs and were able to do so often. They stated that support was available at the school, but also said that it was up to the student to make good use of it.

Graduates also appeared to see the relevance of what they are learning. They spoke about being able to apply what they were learning to the real world and displayed an understanding of how "this one course" would impact future courses. They reported that this enabled them to facilitate their ability to set goals. They often spoke of being in a class they may not have liked, but were able to view the class as one out of a large variety of courses they may encounter while in high school. One graduate reports, "I knew I didn't like this course but I would need it for the

next one.” Despite their dislike of the subject, they were able to relate it to the future which they spoke of as playing a key role in being successful. In short, they were able to see how their courses may lead to their end goal.

Another commonality among the graduates was their desire to succeed. Failing was not an option. They did not give up easily and strived to do well even under the most difficult circumstances. Several of the graduates had one parent who did not finish high school or college. These graduates report how they wanted more for themselves and had used their parents' stories as inspiration for them to be successful. Many of the graduates came from homes with similar stressors as the dropouts. However, it appears their perception and level of self-efficacy helped them to persevere and graduate despite their challenging stories. The graduates often looked at their parents' hardships or their own as a motivating factor to do well and succeed. In some instances, graduates reported that they did not want to end up in the same job as their parent who did not complete high school. Others simply stated that they wanted more than their parents and possessed the drive from within to persevere.

Most of the graduates interviewed were very candid in stating that they never thought of giving up or dropping out of high school. They attributed this largely to their personal drive to be successful and working toward their goals. They spoke about goals that they have been setting for years for themselves in conjunction with overall positive school experiences. They tended to look at the school environment as being positive overall and viewed themselves as being good students. They displayed much self confidence in their abilities and took it upon themselves to access the support they felt was available to them. Their level of self-efficacy, meaning their belief in themselves, is what they attributed to their success in graduating.

**The Importance of Supportive Relationships.** One aspect of school that the graduates spoke about on several occasions included the meaningful relationships they encountered while at New Bedford High School. First and foremost, the graduates all spoke of the importance of being surrounded by a good social group in school. They spoke of the importance of surrounding yourself with “good friends who share similar goals.” The graduates felt that the friends they surrounded themselves with can “either make or break your experience at the high school.” They believed it was important to have friends who had similar goals and values such as the importance of education. The graduates spoke about how this value of education begins at home and extends to their friends at school. In many cases, these graduates knew of one or two individuals who may have dropped out of high school, but were not involved in their friendship because these students had different values and perceptions toward school. The two groups never met as a result. Instead, the graduates explain that they coexisted at the high school as if there were two different schools in one building.

Graduates also spoke of how important education was for their parents, from a very early age. They spoke of family support as being a crucial factor in leading to their success. Even in many of these families where only one parent graduated high school, the importance of schooling was ever-present. On all occasions, the graduates explained that there was no option for them to drop out of high school. It simply was not allowed for them to leave school prior to graduating. According to their parents, the only option was for them to graduate. One graduate reports, “my parents would never let me drop out...this wasn't an option for me.” They expressed the importance of receiving this message early on in their lives and having this ever-present expectation as they progressed through the educational system. They report that this taught them early on to access support because they had it at home and were told it was available

to them at school. They were taught early on that school was important and that they could be successful. This message was clear to the graduates and as a result they learned to persevere early on in their formative years of schooling based on parent support and involvement.

The graduates also spoke of the importance of having one or more individuals in school that they knew they could get help and support from. Students identified guidance counselors, coaches, the dean of students and teachers largely as being those individuals that they could go to for any reason. Knowing that they had an individual that would support them gave them the confidence they needed to be successful. One graduate reported, "...the relationships that I had with some of my teachers...made me want to come to class and made me want to stay there." Graduates told stories of how they would go to their coach for tutoring because she was also a teacher or how they would go to the dean of students for support in a difficult situation. Another graduate reported, "I think the coaches really, like, you know, go above and beyond to make sure you're doing your work because they even have progress reports that they send out." These students reported that they viewed some of these individuals as an extension of their family. In this way, they never felt like they were alone in school. One student stated, "It's so important for me to have a good relationship with the teacher." Another student reported, "A few teachers...my guidance counselor...she's great motivation." They always had someone they trusted and could go to if they needed them.

The combination of their family support, friends, and an influential member of the school community helped the graduates to be successful students overall, based on their stories. This also helped their perception of the school environment to remain positive throughout their school experiences. These graduates were able to make those meaningful relationships which they, in the end, contributed to their success.

**The Importance of Connection to Extracurricular Activities.** Graduates also spoke a great deal about the importance of student involvement at New Bedford High School. Each of the graduates was connected to the school in some way beyond simply taking classes. Many of the graduates played sports, while some joined clubs, or participated in other extracurricular activities. Graduates spoke about how they viewed New Bedford High School as a “community that they were a part of.” Many graduates spoke about what the students were missing that chose not to participate in any activities at school. Several graduates mentioned that “they could not imagine just going to school for the academics.” One graduate reported, “Getting involved is the most important thing.” They felt the clubs or sports they were involved in were more important than their academics because it is what helped them to get to school and stay there. Many graduates reported that “they probably wouldn’t have graduated if high school was just about going to school to learn without the social aspect.” They see being a part of the community of schooling as being as important, if not more so, than the academic piece.

The graduates also spoke of having a sense of connection to school through these extracurricular activities, which in turn helped them to become well-rounded people. One individual reported that their playing a sport helped them learn so much more about life than they had ever imagined possible. The student reported that it teaches you how to work together, solve differences, and learn more about yourself as an individual as well as to learn about others.

Graduates told story after story about the benefits they encountered through being connected to the high school in some way. Many stated that this was key to being a successful student. Several students spoke of how their grades were higher or improved when they were playing a sport or participating in a club or activity. They felt that they were more apt to do well academically because they had a goal to stay on that team or club. They were well aware that if

their grades declined they would not be able to remain on the team. This became a motivating factor for them to maintain good grades and work hard academically. One student explained that playing sports was similar to being rewarded for doing well in school. Being a part of something at the high school gave these graduates a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Graduates spoke on several occasions of the importance of student involvement and not just attending high school for the academics. They would encourage all students to participate in some activity in high school so they gain a sense of belonging and connection to the school. They felt that students who become involved have a better chance of graduating because it is harder to leave when you belong to something.

## Table 2

### *Quotes from New Bedford High School Graduates*

*"High School is what you make of it."*

*"The best feeling is to learn."*

*"You have to find your own way – seek out support, it's there – so access it."*

*"I think that I had a lot of positive peers and positive role models, and a lot of positive experiences which made my experiences positive."*

*"If they're playing sports and enjoying it, then they're more apt to continue."*

*"I never doubted my abilities."*

*"I'm motivated to accomplish my goal."*

## **Themes of Dropouts of New Bedford High School**

### ***Fourteen dropouts shared their stories to help others understand why they left.***

The students interviewed who had dropped out of New Bedford High School shed a great deal of light on the obstacles and frustrations they encountered while in school, eventually leading them to their final decision to drop out.

**Lack of Connecting to the School.** Students who dropped out of the high school spoke largely about being "the 7:30 am to 2:07 pm students." They coined this phrase because these are the hours of the normal school day. They reported that they were the students who most often

attended school, when they chose to, solely for the academics. They described themselves as the students who failed to see the relevance of their learning or the reason for being in school at all. Rather, they chose not to participate in the school environment in any manner other than for their academics. Many of the dropouts interviewed reported that they regret not getting involved in school in some way because they felt it may have given them the reason to go to school. One dropout reports, "I wish I had joined something, maybe it would have made a difference." Instead, they reported that there "was little reason to go to school" which negatively impacted their attendance and willingness to be cooperative and participate when they did go. They described themselves as the "students who didn't belong to the school, they just attended it." They perceived those students who got more involved than them as being members of the school, whereas their role was always felt to be a little different.

This lack of additional connection to the school beyond academics helped them to eventually leave school. Many dropouts believed that if they had some sense of belonging, whether it was through sports or a club or anything else, they may have been more apt to stay in school. The dropouts also said that many of them were essentially unable to join clubs because of their poor grades which was impacted by their bad decision making. Rather, by not initially becoming involved in school and hanging out with the wrong crowd who was not involved, their grades suffered and they were later not able to join a sports team or club because of their declining grades. The dropouts felt that they entered into a vicious cycle which did not allow them to become a part of the school even if those chose to do so. This is compounded by poor decision making early on which negatively affected their options later. Looking back, the dropouts reported that they would have gotten more involved in something at the start of high school to feel more connected and be a part of the school. The dropouts reported that it felt as if

there were really two schools within New Bedford High School, one for the students who got involved and one for them.

The dropouts also report that they were involved with the “wrong crowd of friends” often with students who lacked the motivation and desire to attend school and be successful. They were heavily influenced by their friends’ decisions and this made it easy for them to not attend school. Their friends often reinforced their bad decisions and supported their negative view of the school environment which led them to continue on their unsuccessful paths. Several dropouts wondered how their lives may have ended up differently if they had friends similar to the graduates who became members of the school and joined different activities. They wonder if their outcome might have been different.

**Lack of Meaningful Relationships.** Similar to not feeling connected to the school, the dropouts felt they lacked meaningful, supportive relationships with the school staff as well. They can’t remember feeling connected to any one individual staff member. Of the 14 interviewed, none of the dropouts reported knowing who their guidance counselor was or reported that they felt that they could go to them if they needed support in school. One dropout reports, “I had nobody I could go to. I never knew my guidance counselor.” The dropouts report that they felt very much alone in their school experiences. They never viewed any one member of the school staff as being there to support them. They never entertained the notion that this is why they were there at the school. Instead they viewed the school as being one sided and against them in many instances.

**An unsupportive teaching and learning environment.** Dropouts were very candid in explaining their perception of New Bedford High School overall. They perceived the school environment to be non-supportive on various levels. The first area included their perception of

the teachers at the high school. One dropout reports, "The teachers don't help." They spoke often of teachers who were not helpful and felt that they simply came to work to receive their paychecks. Another dropout reports, "I felt like I wasn't getting the proper help that I needed to get from the teachers." They spoke on several occasions of teachers who talked to each other in the teachers' rooms and judged or labeled those students that they felt were problematic in some way, either academically, behaviorally, or both. The dropouts reported that when they asked a teacher to help them in class, they were not supported in any way, especially if they had ever had a problem academically and especially behaviorally. They felt that they had already been labeled as being dumb or bad and this impacted a teacher's willingness to help them. They observed teachers to favor athletes and students who were involved in school in some way and felt that they ignored students like themselves. The dropouts viewed the teaching staff overall in an extremely negative light. They felt that the teachers were not at the high school to help everyone.

The dropouts also spoke of their view of the school environment as being extremely frustrating academically. The dropouts spoke about being placed in the wrong classes where the work load was too difficult. They reported that many of them displayed learning or behavioral issues which negatively impacted their learning. They reported that no one seemed to understand their needs as students and instead penalized them for their difficulties. Many of the dropouts were placed on Individualized Education Plans (I.E.P.) and stated that they were still misplaced in the system. Students explained that they were supposed to be placed in small classroom settings, and this was often overlooked. One dropout reports, "I had an IEP and I was supposed to be put in a small class and I had like 30 students sitting next to me." They collectively felt that their academics suffered as a result of them being in the wrong track. They

explained how easy it was for them to get lost in the system. One dropout described them as being “the lost students no one cared about.”

The dropouts were also very honest in admitting that they often were the students who had several behavioral issues and how this worked against them in school. They reported that they would become frustrated with their academics and the lack of support the school gave them and so would act out. One student reports “it is easier to look bad than to look stupid.” Of course, in hindsight, they have come to realize that through this acting out, they were often suspended out of school and missed crucial time learning which placed them even further behind when they returned. Once they fell behind it was very difficult to catch up, especially in a system that they felt was already working against them. As a result, they choose not to come to school because they felt that they were too far behind to ever catch up. The dropouts felt that they were misplaced academically and unsupported in many ways. They spoke time and time again of the many obstacles they faced at New Bedford High School and the lack of support they desperately needed.

The dropouts' view of New Bedford High School paints a very negative picture of a school environment that is not welcoming to all students and pushes them toward a decision to leave based on continual frustration and challenges. These students essentially see no positive aspects of school and little relevance to attending. Through their multiple negative experiences with teachers, being misplaced in classes with what they perceive as being little or no support in combination with falling further and further behind academically due to discipline issues helped them to make their final decision to leave all too easy. They will tell you that they had no reason to stay.

**Lack of Alternatives.** The dropouts interviewed stated that there were very few options for them other than to drop out of high school. The dropouts spoke of the lack of alternatives available to them when they were thinking of leaving school. They had bad grades, poor attendance, few credits toward graduation, and in all of these cases had repeated a grade so they were over-age. Students reported that none of them met with anyone prior to dropping out of high school. No alternatives were explained to them and none of them had an exit interview or a conversation about their decision with their guidance counselor or anyone from the school, keeping in mind none of the 14 dropouts knew their guidance counselor.

The dropouts interviewed talked a lot about the cycle that pushes one out of high school. They all reported that it seemed too easy to leave school and now regret their decision. They spoke about how they wished someone had provided them with an alternative plan. One dropout reports, "No one ever gave me any options." The dropouts also talked largely about the discipline policy at the high school and how this sets kids up to fail. In their opinion, students are sent out of school for silly reasons and suspended on too many occasions. When the students return to school, they have fallen behind academically and are eventually unable to catch up which leads them to drop out. Dropouts believe students should be held accountable for their behaviors but at the same time not set up to fail. They believe students should be made to stay at school and learn, not be sent home. The dropouts spoke about the message this sends to students and potential dropouts. It tells them "to go home and stay there, we don't want you in *our* school." They question what type of student would want to come back to this type of environment.

In all of the interviews, the dropouts spoke of the lack of alternatives that appear to be available to potential dropouts. It is powerful to think that not one of the 14 dropouts were

provided with an alternative plan prior to their exiting school. Dropouts have since learned that many of the alternative programs, had they met with someone, were not available to them because they were the students who didn't have any credits and were repeating the ninth grade because they continued to fail. They reported, "there were no alternatives for us." In some instances, dropouts were court involved and their parents were given a choice to "either sign them out of school or have their child enter the foster care system." One dropout asked, "what choice would you make as a parent?" In their opinion, the only alternatives offered were punitive in nature and not helpful toward educating students. In many instances, they felt that the school "wanted them out of there and would find any reason to have them leave." They spoke of feelings of having no option other than to leave New Bedford High School.

**Lack of Self-Efficacy.** The dropouts spoke of their unwillingness to seek out any one person to help them, which speaks to their lack of self-efficacy. They felt that the staff should find, help, and guide them to become better students. They didn't believe they could be successful in school and maintained the notion that there was very little support available to them despite their lack of taking the initiative to find it. The dropouts spoke often of not believing in their abilities as a student and spoke frequently of the difficulties they endured academically and behaviorally which hindered their ability to think of themselves as being a good student or ever being successful in school. One dropout reports, "I never liked school and I was never good in school." Success was something that was available to other students and not them. The dropouts lacked self-confidence and did not make comments about themselves that suggested they felt good about themselves as students. None of the dropouts interviewed reported that they ever felt like they were a good student in school.

The dropouts looked at their life circumstances in a negative light as well. They also had parents or siblings who had not graduated high school or gone on to college. The dropouts were not motivated to be more successful as a result. Instead, they felt dropping out of school was acceptable. Many of the dropouts came from homes where their parents wanted more for them and were very unhappy with their decision to leave school. However, few dropouts were affected by their parents' value of education. They were too overcome with the frustrations and failures of school to continue. They spoke of how they would begin to convince their parents early on that dropping out was the right decision. On some occasions, the parents themselves had become frustrated with the school environment and despite valuing education felt that leaving was the right decision. They would sign their students out of school without even a conversation about possible alternatives. The dropouts report it was easier for their parents if they dropped out as well.

The dropouts viewed the school climate as being a very negative one and appear to have lacked the self-efficacy to overcome their obstacles and achieve their goals. There were too many frustrations and no support which made their decision an easy one. They would often say, "what choice did I have but to leave?"

Table 3

*Quotes of New Bedford High School Dropouts*

*"They (school) make it difficult to do anything except leave."*  
*"They just let me leave, we (dropouts) were cheated."*  
*"No one helped me, it was the school vs. me."*  
*"But like other teachers really didn't care for like if I failed or anything."*  
*"I never really liked school throughout my whole life."*  
*"I felt like I was on my own."*  
*"The work was too hard."*  
*"One of the teachers told me that even if I tried, I was still going to stay back, so I believed that, and I just didn't want to go to school no more."*  
*"They suspend you for any reason...they don't understand."*

### **Themes of the Guidance Counselors of New Bedford High School**

*Four guidance counselors offered their insights into why they believe students graduate or dropout of New Bedford High School.*

**Self -Efficacy.** All four of the guidance counselors interviewed at New Bedford High School considered students' self-efficacy as being a significant factor as to whether they would graduate or drop out of New Bedford High School. In their experience, students who are successful in school and go on to graduate demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy. That is they believe these students are confident in their abilities and take charge of their education. One guidance counselor reports, "Some students just have that drive to do well no matter what." The graduates take the initiative to seek out the support they need and advocate for themselves in a positive manner. Oftentimes, the graduates come from homes with similar risk factors as the dropouts, however the value of education for these students has been instilled in them from a very early age. The graduates would often talk to their guidance counselors of frustrations within the school, but they never entertain the option of leaving school simply because they will report "they aren't allowed to drop out, or their parents won't allow it." They have been sent this message early on and it is a message that stays with them throughout school.

The guidance counselors reported that the graduates are typically students who demonstrate strong self-efficacy and are described as being students who feel good about themselves overall. They display self worth and respect, believing in their ability to be successful. They have received the message through their education that they are good students. They are described as being goal setters who hurdle obstacles along the way while keeping their end goal in sight. These students encounter classes or teachers they don't care for, however they

do not give up. Instead, they frequently seek out their guidance counselors for help when they need it. They may want to switch a class, but understand that this may not be an option, and that they have to look at this class in relation to their overall academic schedule and end goal to graduate. They often persevere and rise above the challenge and are able to make that connection. The graduates self direct their own learning with the help of their guidance counselor and support from the school. Students who graduate see the relevance in their learning and believe in their abilities in order to arrive at their goal of graduating.

The guidance counselors see those students who drop out as lacking the same level of self-efficacy that the graduates have. The dropouts are seen largely as being unmotivated, demonstrating a lack of effort and often appearing confused as to the purpose of school. One guidance counselor reports, "The dropout lacks that drive or purpose, they seem confused as to why they are here." The value of education may have not been instilled in these students. Many of the students who drop out have been passed through the system and arrive at the high school at a huge disadvantage. They have been socially passed along academically and they lack the basic skills to be successful. These students were not helped in lower grades. Their self-efficacy is not at the same level as the graduate as a result of their experiences in school. The guidance counselors begin to see a pattern of students who begin to choose not to come to school. They believe the dropouts' self-efficacy has been lost far before attending the high school.

In addition, the dropouts don't appear to have the self-confidence to seek out support or maybe they don't feel as if it is their right to advocate for themselves. They have been observed to lack that ability to advocate for themselves and often feel as if they cannot be successful at this school. The guidance counselors candidly report that the only potential dropouts they see in their offices are the students that have been identified as being at risk. Potential dropouts simply do

not go to their guidance counselors or staff to seek help. They have to be sought out and identified early on if they have any chance for graduating, in their opinions. The dropouts do not display the level of self-efficacy needed to take the initiative in their own learning and advocate for their needs.

The guidance counselors have had ample opportunity to work with many students throughout their careers. They have seen graduates and dropouts of this high school come from extremely similar backgrounds. One guidance counselor summarized their thoughts as follows: "They all have bad backgrounds. Some use it as an excuse. Some as a motivator. One goes on to graduate and the other drops out." The guidance counselors all feel that the students' self-efficacy is often the factor determining whether they persist or drop out of school. This can be based on their prior school experiences as to whether that individual feels that they are a good student or if they have the ability and self-confidence to persevere. Students who lack self-efficacy have little chance to graduate from high school. Their cumulative school experiences have either contributed to or taken away from the level of self-efficacy they will display in high school. This, in their opinions, will have a direct impact on their level of success to graduate.

**Cultural Factors.** The guidance counselors also spoke of the cultural factors many of the students at New Bedford High School share. They report dropping out of New Bedford High School is largely accepted by the community. Several parents and siblings of the students who attend New Bedford High School have dropped out of high school or migrated from another country where they did not complete their schooling. They have learned a trade and work to make a living for their families and education is clearly not a priority. There is little value placed on education. Students often leave school or are not in attendance at school for a variety of reasons. They may work to help support the family income. They often miss school because

they are translators for their families at doctor appointments and the like. They stay home from school because their parents work two jobs to support the family and they need to babysit for a sibling at home that is not school aged and the family cannot afford daycare. These are real life issues that some students at New Bedford High School face on a daily basis that prevent them from attending school. The real issue is that the parents do not see a problem with the students being out of school.

These life circumstances affect families of this community on a daily basis and education is not valued often where it should or needs to be to improve the dropout rate. Families are faced with these hardships that force students to stay home and miss out on their education. They are more needed at home to help pay the bills or help with family members so others can work. There are various scenarios that lead to a lack of parental involvement based on family needs as a result. Without parents being involved in their childrens' education, the guidance counselors feel that they are already at a disadvantage in trying to reach these students. Students are sent a message from early on in many cases that education is secondary in importance to these other factors. The guidance counselors report that it becomes "a game of survival and education takes a back seat."

The guidance counselors report that although they can understand the factors which may influence a parent's decision to allow a student to stay home, they are constantly educating parents and students of the importance of education. They feel that the community needs to send this message home as well. The guidance counselor can call a student into their office and talk to them about the importance of education, but until the parents at home can see the value of education over their own needs and send that message to their children, there is very little impact

this conversation at school is going to make. This is another factor that may lead a student to exit the school environment.

**Disconnect vs. Connection to the School.** The guidance counselors also spoke of the differences they have observed in graduates and dropouts in how they connect to the school community. They identified that dropouts demonstrate feelings of alienation from school and don't seem to "fit in" or get involved in school activities. Dropouts appear to come to school for academics only, which they struggle with and then their frustration level increases. These students often have no other reason for attending school. They don't join sports teams or clubs or any extracurricular activities. The guidance counselors collectively believe "they need some other reason for coming to school to get them here." The students who are often not successful in their opinions are those who do not get involved and never gain a sense that they belong to the school. Dropouts do not feel like New Bedford High School is their school, it's just a school they go to everyday. The guidance counselors believe other students feel that this is their school and they belong there.

The dropouts are also often identified as having more academic difficulties, attendance issues, mental health issues, and I.E.P.'s. Many of these students present with stressors such as substance abuse issues, gang involvement, and drug abuse that impact their ability to come to school and learn as well. The guidance counselors reported these students essentially come to school for the academics that often frustrate them and they have nothing else to look forward to.

The guidance counselors have observed the dropouts to display more behavioral issues most likely due to their frustrations with a school environment that they feel doesn't support them. They enter into a cycle where they get into trouble, get sent out of school, shut down and quickly get lost in the system. These students fall further and further behind and are set up for

failure in the process. The guidance counselors speak of the lack of family support at home when this occurs in school as well. Often times, these students' family members have had a bad experience with school themselves or through their children and are uninterested in working with the school surrounding their student's difficulties. The guidance counselors spoke to the frustration this creates in trying to reach families of struggling students. There is a resistance to working together to help the student.

The guidance counselors also spoke of the number of dropouts who have mental health issues in school. One guidance counselor reports that "educators do not understand and are not equipped or trained to handle them in the school setting." As a result, these students get lost along the way with little support. Students attending high school now have more serious issues than they did ten years ago, and the guidance counselors report, "we are no better ready to handle or understand them." This mismatch sets kids up to fail in their opinion. This further pushes kids away and makes it more difficult for them to connect to the school in some way. Another guidance counselor points out that these students with mental health issues are in the regular education setting with teachers who have little knowledge about these disorders. Students attend school with an array of diagnoses including Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. One guidance counselor states, "And they (teachers) don't have the background to understand trauma, or any other mental health issues." Yet the teachers are the individuals who spend the most time with these students.

Guidance counselors report that students who go on to graduate develop a bridge or connection to school. They get involved in sports or some club and feel a connection to the school- a sense of belonging. One guidance counselor reports, "...so if they're on the borderline, if they can reach out to someone, you know, I think that will help them...or they're involved

with an activity.” They may connect to one individual who they know will be there to support them or be available to go to them for support should they need it. Another guidance counselor reports, “I think that often times when you see students that have been at risk and then they turn things around, I think it’s because they’ve developed a bridge or a connection at school, whether it be with a counselor or a specific teacher. They’ve become involved in something that they’re interested in and they make a connection...and I think that’s critical for students to succeed. They have to make some sort of connection.” Graduates see school as a community for them, not just a building where they learn. They connect on various levels and place meaning on education. This helps them to succeed and seek out the support they need. The guidance counselors have seen how being connected to the school can have a great impact on a student’s decision to either graduate or exit early. “Kids who graduate...they’re more involved in extracurricular activities. It could be clubs...sports...community work.” They feel more needs to be done in this area to help kids become engaged in school and interested in their learning. Connectedness to the school environment is so important in the hopes of helping a student to feel like a member of the school and give them a reason to attend.

#### Table 4

##### *Quotes from New Bedford High School Guidance Counselors*

*“Dropouts come to the high school with a disadvantage.”*  
*“They lost hope in their education along the way.”*  
*“Those who graduate have that drive.”*  
*“They (dropouts) need some reason to come to school to get them here.”*  
*“They (dropouts) need that one person they can trust.”*  
*“We have to believe in these kids...we lose our sense of purpose otherwise.”*  
*“We need to try to understand their story.”*

### **Themes of Administrators of New Bedford High School**

#### *Three administrators discuss why they believe students graduate or dropout of New Bedford High School.*

**No Alternatives.** The administrators interviewed at New Bedford High School spoke of the lack of alternatives they feel they have to provide to students who are thinking about dropping out. The administrators also spoke of the alternative programs that the district has to offer. They also were very forthcoming in describing how these alternative programs work inadvertently against the potential dropout. They explain that for some students, New Bedford High School is too large a school and not a good fit. They feel that they have failed in providing all of their students with the alternatives to be successful when New Bedford High School is not working for them. One administrator reports, “this school doesn’t work for all students, we need alternatives.”

The administrators report that they have been working on addressing this issue within the school as a result. They have tried to make smaller learning communities through their Freshman Academy Program. In this program students have a pod of four teachers who get to know their students well through a built-in seminar class. The students are contained in one area of the building instead of attending classes throughout the larger high school. The duration of the class is also shorter, where students attend a class for 45 minutes versus 83 minutes. Yet, they report some students continue to fail despite this effort. The need for alternative programs within the district is much needed to meet the needs of the potential dropout.

The administrators explain that there is an alternative program known as The Twilight Program offered for students who don’t necessarily fit into the traditional comprehensive high school model. The administrators speak highly of The Twilight Program, which is an alternative

learning program, which offers students the ability to work during the traditional school day and attend class from 3-6 p.m. at night at the high school. The school day is shorter and students may be allowed to work as a result. The loophole with the Twilight Program, administrators feel, is that in order to be able to attend this alternative program, the student has to have acquired approximately 10 credits to enter. The potential dropouts often have few or no credits at the point of their exit and therefore are not eligible for this alternative program the district offers.

There are other alternative programs offered in the district. One program is the Trinity Day Academy where students who exhibit behavioral issues and are also placed on an I.E.P. may attend. Another program is the Whaling City Alternative School, which offers an alternative education to those students who exhibit significant behavioral issues and are frequently facing a felony conviction. These programs are very specific in who may attend and certain criteria need to be met or they are not available to all students. These programs are seen as having a negative connotation attached to them, given the behavioral issues which accompany the students who attend. The administrators point out that the Whaling City Alternative Program offers an online credit recovery program. No other programs in the district offer this credit recovery to potential dropouts. Another alternative program is the Night School Program, however students need to pay for this program and many potential dropouts do not attend because they simply do not have the means to pay for it.

The administrators are frustrated by the lack of alternatives that are truly available to these potential dropouts. Many of these students are over aged and under credited and have nowhere to go if they do not fit into the traditional high school model. They may simply not meet criteria for some of the other programs available. The administrators do not feel that they are capturing the whole district when trying to counteract the dropout issue. Instead they have

observed what is available to some students through one program that they don't fit into is not available in another program. Furthermore, options are limited and very dependent on factors that are missing such as credits or the ability to attend a program. The alternatives are really not alternatives to many of the students affected. One administrator reports, "a change needs to take place now."

The administrators call for a restructuring of the alternatives provided in New Bedford. They feel that if they could restructure the criteria for allowing what students can attend the Twilight Program and look at the at-risk ninth grade students who may be in danger of repeating this grade and move them into The Twilight Program without the credit criteria, they may be able to make a difference. They report students who are repeating the ninth grade for the second or third time is at such a higher risk for leaving. Yet the way the current criteria have been set for The Twilight Program, these potential dropouts are not eligible to attend. They question where is their alternative.

The administrators were encouraged to report that there is a new program being introduced in New Bedford called Jump Start. Through this program 45 at risk youth were identified from the three middle schools in New Bedford and they were placed in a four week program over the summer prior to attending New Bedford High School. Guidance counselors and attendance officers met with these students and provided them with a connection to New Bedford High School prior to their entering. This is done in hopes of helping these students connect to the high school and have that one person they know prior to entering that may make a difference.

The administrators see dropout as a district wide issue and are concerned over the lack of alternatives provided to students who are potential dropouts. They are also concerned with the

lack of continuity among programs as far as what is being offered to the students they set out to help. They believe drop out behavior begins much earlier than high school and feel that the district needs to make more of an effort to address this issue earlier on and provide true alternatives to students that will be within their reach and help them to be more successful in the future.

**Students' Self-Efficacy.** The administrators were all in agreement that a student's level of self-efficacy impacts their decision to drop out or graduate from high school. A student's belief in themselves they feel certainly contributes to their level of success in high school and in turn their desire to stay or exit the school environment. They feel an individual student's ability to be self-motivating and direct their learning plays a crucial role in how successful they may or may not be. Certainly, the administrators believe the level of self-efficacy a student possesses is a result of their cumulative educational experiences. Students with high self-efficacy are goal oriented individuals who value education. Students who demonstrate self-confidence in their abilities combined with goal setting may be more apt to graduate than to drop out of high school. The administrators have observed this in students who come from similar backgrounds where family members have dropped out of high school. In some cases, drop out becomes a vicious cycle and in other cases students who exhibit high levels of self-efficacy persevere and become the first member in their family to graduate. One administrator reports, "The drive appears to come from within the student and their desire to either overcome life's challenges or fall victim to them."

The administrators also spoke of the impact a student's perception of their school environment can make on their decision to drop out. Administrators do not feel dropouts share the same educational experiences as the graduates due to their lack of self-efficacy. They often

fail to see themselves as being good students and may have not had positive school experiences leading up to high school. They fail to see the importance of getting a good education and display an inability to see the relevance of what they are learning. They have few goals and are unable to make the connection between what they are learning and a future goal they may have. One administrator reports, "students who are successful can see the big picture and those that aren't cannot." Students who display good self-efficacy are able to see the relevance in their learning and then apply it to the goals they set for themselves which may lead them to graduate. The administrators identify the drop out as those students who were unable to see how their learning on a daily basis will lead them to success in the future. The administrators spoke of the importance of a student being able to see the relevance of their learning. They identify the dropouts as students who came to school from 7:30 am to 2:07 pm and made very little connection of their academics to the outside world. They often were unable to contextualize their learning to apply it to future goals or ambitions.

The administrators through their responses weigh a student's decision to graduate or drop out heavily on the drive that a student possesses. Embedded in this notion that self-efficacy plays an important role in their success in high school involves the perception of the individual student toward the school environment. If it is a positive one, the student may flourish and if it is negative, the student may become isolated and alienated in the same school environment. The administrators identify the dropouts as those students who lacked the ability to ask for help or seek out support. They feel this may be heavily weighed on those perceptions of school. This in turn helps to explain to what extent that student becomes involved or makes meaningful connections in school. These factors all lead a student to make a decision to graduate or exit the school environment according to the administrators.

**Disconnect from school.** The administrators describe the dropouts as those students who did not get involved at school. They often perceived the school environment overall as being a very negative one in which they didn't display a sense of belonging. One administrator reports "it's just not a good fit." The administrators could not stress the importance they feel of becoming involved in the high school setting in one manner or another. They feel this is an important asset to being successful both academically and socially.

The administrators report that students who are involved in sports, clubs or some other involvement with school often have better grades, learn organizational skills and learn how to work in a community compared to those students who neglect to get involved. The administrators see a distinct difference in the manner in which graduates and dropouts connect with their school environment or fail to altogether.

**Lack of meaningful relationships.** The other area which the administrators feel goes hand in hand with this sense of belonging entails having that one meaningful adult that students feel they can go to for support. They feel this is so important and yet so many students feel that they have no one to go to. Of course, as one administrator pointed out, there are always staff members who become involved in a student's life because they know they are struggling. But all too often there are many more students struggling that the staff are unaware of and these students never seek out help.

The administrators describe the dropouts as those students who lacked that personal connection to someone at school. One states, "...if they had one particular person at the high school level to see them through for the four years and make that personal connection...just that personal touch of asking them how are you doing or what is up in your life." Another reports, "...but if they know there's one person rooting for them wanting them to get through this..."

something that's a motivator in and out of itself for that student." The administrators feel that it only takes one individual to make a lasting impression and difference on a student. They feel students who become involved in school may perhaps be more aware and more apt to seek out help and support when they need it and before it is too late. The administrators feel that if all individuals at the high school could have one person they knew they could trust or go to, New Bedford High School would have far fewer dropouts than they do now. They collectively feel that this is an important aspect to focus on.

The administrators at one point had recommended that all freshman students be assigned an advisor so they would have one person they would know. This individual could make contact with the student and check in on them in their first year of high school to make the transition smoother. This program has not been implemented to date. The administrators are hopeful that this topic will be revisited in the near future.

#### Table 5

##### *Quotes from New Bedford High School Administrators*

*"Everyone needs one person to believe in them."*  
*"With more alternatives, we can capture more kids"*  
*"There is hope for New Bedford."*  
*"Kids don't wake up one day and drop out."*  
*"We need to make smaller learning communities."*  
*"All students don't fit into the box of a traditional comprehensive high school...not one size fits all."*  
*"Dropout is not a high school issue, it is a district wide issue."*

#### **Comparisons of the various groups**

In comparing the responses from the various groups, themes are found across groups with similar findings. The Graduates, Guidance Counselors and Administrators all saw the importance and relevance of a student's level of self-efficacy as being an important factor as to

whether they graduated or dropped out of New Bedford High School. The viewpoints shared by the various groups include the notion that a student's level of self-efficacy may be impacted by a student's cumulative educational experience, the value of education, as well as a student's perception of the school environment. The graduates and the dropouts differ in their school experiences as well as the emphasis placed at home on the importance of school. Their perceptions differed significantly based on their stories. The graduate's view of school was positive overall throughout their stories while the dropouts spoke on various occasions of their negative experiences. These are believed to play a significant role in impacting a student's decision to graduate or drop out according to these three groups.

These same three groups also shared similar opinions of the importance of student's getting involved or connected with the school or someone at the school. The various groups spoke of the importance of students having a sense of belonging or feeling part of a community of school. The three groups voiced opinions that these factors may help to influence a student to stay in school and graduate. The various groups spoke of the importance of becoming an active member of the community of New Bedford High School and how this in turn may affect their ability to make supportive and meaningful relationships.

These three groups provided much information in describing who the dropout is at New Bedford High School and how they fail to connect to the school environment, see the importance of schooling and may lack self-efficacy.

Another comparison was found between the groups of the administrators and the dropouts in their expressed concern over the lack of alternatives currently available to potential dropouts. The dropouts report that no alternatives were provided to them upon leaving. The administrators report that although alternatives appear to be in place, they are not really

accessible to potential dropouts who often do not fit into the criteria to apply to them. There do not appear to be any alternatives for the potential dropout at New Bedford High School based on these findings. An observation the dropouts unfortunately made years ago.

Another comparison was found between the guidance counselors and the graduates. These two groups feel there are many supports in placed at New Bedford High School. However, both groups on some level admit it often rests on the student to access these supports. Given the lack of self-efficacy noted in the student who drops out of high school, the likelihood they will access these supports whether available or not are unlikely. Nevertheless, these two groups have shown that students are supported and in turn graduate in the same school environment where many other students drop out.

### **Contrasting perspectives of the various groups**

One contrast that appears in the findings lies between the administrators and the guidance counselors. They differ in their viewpoint in the alternatives and supports available to potential dropouts. While the guidance counselors feel there are supports in place at the high school to reach all students, the administrators feel they are not provided in a manner that all students can attain. Part of this stems from the size of the school and the lack of staff to accomplish this. Also, the guidance counselors feel there are many alternatives for students who are thinking of dropping out of high school, while the administrators point out the flaws in the current system and how it is not accessible to all students. The two groups although working toward the same goal of preventing future dropouts do not agree on the availability of the resources at this time. The guidance counselors take the opinion that much of the burden lies on the student to access support, while the administrators see that this is not working and that more alternatives need to be developed in the district at this time.

Another contrast between groups includes the graduates and the dropouts in their perception of the school environment. The graduates all viewed the school environment as being a very positive experience, while the dropouts had a very negative view of their school environment overall. The graduates also often viewed themselves as being good students throughout their education and felt confident in their abilities. They demonstrate self-efficacy and are often goal setting individuals who don't give up easily. They often saw the relevance of their learning and were able to apply it to their future goals. The dropouts viewed themselves as students who were often unsure of their abilities and would become frustrated by the school environment as a result of academic difficulties and behavioral issues. These students often lacked self-efficacy and gave up easily as a result. They were unable to see the relevance of their learning and apply it to any future goals.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings from this study are gathered from the voices of the students. Much information has been gained surrounding the importance of viewing school as a community of practice. The findings from this study suggest that an emphasis needs to be placed on evaluating the issue of dropout from the perspective of the interaction the student has with the school environment. Looking at the dropout issue through a student's multiple facets of learning, interactions and options available to them may help one to understand how students ultimately make their decision to graduate or drop out. This study highlights the various components which comprise this viewpoint.

The participants in this study spoke of their overall perception of the school environment as well as their level of connectedness to school through activities as well as through their ability to form supportive and meaningful relationships with other individuals at school. The students

and staff also reported on how a student's level of self-efficacy may contribute to their overall decision to leave or stay. Through their stories, it became evident how a student's level of self-efficacy may also be impacted by their community of practice throughout their schooling and the level to which they were supported or encouraged to succeed. Similarly, if students are not finding success at the high school, alternatives need to be provided for these students that are within their reach. From the various perspectives gained through this study, it appears that the school climate is an important area to focus on when addressing the dropout issue.

Dropout prevention is an issue that has been addressed primarily at the high school level in New Bedford. There needs to be a shift in focus toward the elementary and middle school years to view dropping out of school as a district wide issue. Pertinent themes that emerged through this study include the importance of school engagement, school connectedness, meaningful relationships and alternatives provided for students. It is essential that students' voices be heard on this very important issue to ensure more students find success in this school setting.

## **Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings**

*“Mountaintops inspire leaders, but valleys mature them.” -author unknown*

### **Summary of the Study**

The issue of dropout is complex in that there are many facets that contribute to a student's overall education and their level of success or failure. The focus toward counteracting the issue of dropout may need to change taking into account a variety of perspectives which offer insight into needed areas of improvement. It is important to listen to the various voices and stories of students impacted by the dropout crisis. It is also important to listen to the voices of those who work so closely with these students: their observations as well as their perspectives on the effectiveness of the current programs and processes used to decrease the crisis of

dropouts. The most important facet of this issue perhaps includes listening to the voices of the students who are most affected, listening to why they choose to leave or stay. This study suggests there is no more important voice that could be heard than that of the students themselves.

According to this study, if we choose to ignore what the students who have dropped out or stayed can contribute to the research surrounding this topic, we have essentially failed as educators in addressing the issue. The answers we have been looking for may lie with their answers. There is much need to go to the source, all of the students, whether they have been successful or not to hear their stories and gather as much information as possible regarding their reasons for leaving or graduating.

Current research (S. Suh, & J. Suh, 2007; Azzam, 2007; Coley, 1995; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Finn, 1987; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Beck & Muia, 1980) suggests a variety of factors that may lead to students dropping out. In New Bedford, many of these factors are evident in the lives and perspectives of both our dropouts and graduates. Despite the district's and high school's efforts, however, New Bedford continues to face a dropout rate nearly triple the state average. These factors simply do not explain dropout in New Bedford which is one reason why this study is so important.

The need to learn more about the students in New Bedford to help them be more successful is critical. The school district and community have expressed great concern over the issue of dropouts and continues to struggle as to why so many students leave school. In this study, the perspective of the student was taken into account to help understand what is occurring in the district in hopes of preventing future potential dropouts from leaving as well.

This study was completed to provide more insight into the dropout issue from a student's perspective as well as the staff directly involved with these students. This information is aimed to help prevent more students from dropping out through making changes in the district. Two research questions were developed for the purposes of this study:

1. What conditions or circumstances, as perceived by students, have contributed to their staying in or dropping out of school?
2. As can be assessed through student focus groups, how might students' stated degree of self-efficacy and resiliency contribute to their staying in or dropping out of school?

### **Review of the Methodology**

This study consisted of a qualitative analysis where graduates, dropouts, guidance counselors and administrators of New Bedford High School participated in either focus groups or interviews to help answer these two research questions. The students which consisted of graduates and dropouts were interviewed to gain their unique perspectives regarding their decision making process to either graduate from or drop out of high school. A student's perceived self-efficacy and resiliency as well as the students' stated feelings of connectedness to the community and activity of school was explored. The guidance counselors and administrators were also asked what specific reasons they felt students at the high school may have dropped out or stayed in school. This group was also asked to comment on how effective the school district has been in addressing the issue. The data was coded and emerging themes were identified across groups.

Data was collected for this case study through interviews and focus groups. A summary of the Research Findings was presented in Chapter 4. Major themes that emerged were discussed in the previous chapter regarding the various groups interviewed as well as a

comparison or contrast between and among groups through these findings. This chapter will be organized in a manner in which the findings from this study will be summarized briefly and then examined in relation to the theoretical frameworks (Chapter 1) and the literature review (Chapter 2) that were reviewed for this study.

### **Summary of Findings**

Through the various focus groups and interviews, various themes were identified across and between groups who participated. Three to five themes were discussed in each of the various groups. The graduates identified the three major themes including (1) self-efficacy, (2) supportive relationships, and (3) their overall connectedness to school as being leading factors for their success in school. The dropouts identified five major themes as their reason for leaving. They were found to be (1) lack of connectedness to school, (2) lack of meaningful relationships, (3) their perception of the school environment, (4) the lack of alternatives provided and (5) their lack of self-efficacy as students. The guidance counselors identified their three main themes in helping to explain the difference between graduates and dropouts as including the (1) differences in the level of self-efficacy displayed by each group, (2) cultural factors of these students and (3) an overall disconnect from the school environment. The Administrators identified four main themes as having (1) no alternatives for potential dropouts, (2) the level of self-efficacy a student possesses, (3) a disconnect from school and (4) the lack of meaningful relationships as reasons why students leave school early.

Throughout these interviews or focus groups, students were eager to share their stories and have their voices be heard. Students were forthcoming with their perspectives on why they feel they were successful or not at New Bedford High School. In many cases, the students expressed concern that no one ever asked them why they left. The students, successful or not,

reported that they are the individuals they feel the school department should be paying attention to if they want to make a positive change in the area of dropout. The guidance counselors and administrators were also interested in helping to explain why they feel so many students are leaving New Bedford High School. This group was also interesting in explaining what they feel the district is doing well or could improve on to address the dropout issue.

The following is a brief summary of the various themes discussed in Chapter 4. These themes will then be applied to the theoretical frameworks and literature review in the following sections.

**Graduates.** The graduates of New Bedford High School shared common ideas in expressing to this researcher why they felt they were successful. Three themes emerged among this group of students. They include Self-Efficacy, Supportive Relationships and Connectedness to School.

The graduates spoke of their own level of self-efficacy. They all shared similar stories in how they always felt that they were good students throughout their schooling and had an inner drive to do well. These students spoke on many occasions of how they self directed their learning through goal setting and an overall desire to be successful in school. These students also did not hesitate to seek out support when they needed it either at school, home or through their friends. The graduates often had parents who had not graduated high school and used this as a motivating factor to be successful themselves.

The graduates also spoke of meaningful relationships they had formed at the high school. They perceived school as being an overall positive environment. The graduates spoke of surrounding themselves with friends who shared similar goals which they believed help school to be easier. They also spoke of the value of education instilled in them early on by their parents.

The main factor the graduates spoke of was having that one individual or more at school that they could trust.

The graduates were all connected to school in some manner as well which they report contributed to their success. The graduates perceived the school as a community which they belonged to. The graduates all chose to participate in their own way while some played sports and others joined a club, but they all felt as if they belonged to something more.

**Dropouts.** The dropouts shared their stories with this researcher in helping to explain why so many of them left New Bedford High School. The five themes the dropouts shared included Lack of Connectedness to School, Lack of Meaningful Relationships, Perception of the School Environment, Lack of Alternatives and Lack of Self-Efficacy.

The dropouts report that they lacked connectedness to school and they also lacked meaningful relationships in school. They spoke about being the students who attended school for academics only. They are the students who never gained a sense of belonging to the school. They never got involved in any other aspect of school and had little reason to go to school. The dropouts spoke of being involved with the wrong friends who also lacked motivation and a desire to attend or become a part of the school. They spoke largely about the lack of even one meaningful relationship they made while at New Bedford High School.

The dropouts also spoke of their overall perception of the school environment as being a rather negative one. The dropouts perceived the high school as being largely non-supportive. They spoke negatively about the teaching staff and their perception of the teachers' unwillingness to help them. They often felt labeled and judged by those around them in the school environment and spoke of the frustrations they endured academically. The dropouts were candid in admitting many of them displayed behavioral issues in the school environment which

did not help their learning. They also report that once they fell behind academically it was very difficult, if not impossible, to find any success from that point on in school.

The dropouts spoke of a lack of alternatives available to them when they were meeting failure at New Bedford High School. The dropouts report they found there were no options available to them when they were contemplating dropping out. Rather, no one met with them or provided them with alternatives prior to leaving. The dropouts spoke about how they felt pushed out of high school through the discipline policy which sent them out of school too often. They felt largely that any alternatives they were given were punitive and set them up to ultimately fail pushing them out of the school environment.

The dropouts spoke of their lack of self-efficacy through their unwillingness to seek out support as well as a lack of confidence in their abilities to be successful. The dropouts shared common stories in their difficulties throughout their schooling both academically and behaviorally. They had never received or sought out the support they needed and their schooling was a culmination of negative experiences. These individuals also looked at their life circumstances in a negative light. Many of these students had one parent who did not complete high school, however they did not use this as a motivator but instead they report that they believed it was acceptable to leave school. The dropouts lacked the self-efficacy to overcome any obstacles or seek out the help they needed to accomplish this.

**Guidance Counselors.** The guidance counselors identified three main themes as to why they believe some students graduate while others dropout. They include Self-Efficacy, Cultural Factors and a Disconnect or Connection to School.

The guidance counselors report that the students who drop out of New Bedford High School certainly appear to differ in their levels of self-efficacy in comparison to the graduate.

They see a tremendous difference in that the graduates are students who feel good about themselves, demonstrate self worth and respect and believe in their abilities. The dropouts are identified as being unmotivated, lack effort and are unsure of their purpose in school. The value of education appears to be different between the two groups with more emphasis being placed in the homes of the graduates. The graduates persevere in their schooling while the dropouts do not. The school experiences the two groups have had differ and the graduate becomes a confident learner while the dropout becomes less confident as the years progress.

The guidance counselors spoke of the cultural factors many of the students share. Dropping out of New Bedford High School is accepted by this community due to real life issues these students endure. There is not a high value placed on education. Families are faced with hardships that force students to stay home and contribute while missing out on their education. This is an accepted practice.

The guidance counselors identify a difference in the two groups of students' ability to connect to school. The dropouts fail to connect to the school through any activities. The dropouts do not appear to fit in or get involved in their school or even display a desire to do so. The graduates easily develop a connection to the school on multiple levels and display a sense of belonging that the dropouts do not. They connect to individuals in the school setting easier as well.

**Administrators.** The administrators offered their insight into why some students are successful at New Bedford High School while so many other students are not. They identify four themes including No Alternatives, Self-Efficacy, Disconnect from school, and Lack of meaningful relationships.

The administrators spoke of the lack of alternatives provided for the potential dropout. They also identify major flaws in the alternative programs they propose to have, which in their opinions, works against the dropout. Often students who are thinking of dropping out do not have enough credits to enter into the alternative program. Likewise, these students also do not fit the profile or meet the criteria to enter into other alternative programs. As a result, many potential dropouts have no option other than to leave.

The administrators also spoke of a student's level of self-efficacy as being a driving factor in their decision to graduate or drop out. They report the belief a student has in themselves to be successful may be the single most important factor for their reason for leaving or staying. Students who direct their own learning and are able to set goals will persevere versus the student who is unable to. Along with this notion is the student's perception of school playing a large role in their willingness to stay in or leave school. The administrators feel there is a significant difference in the school experiences these two groups share which impacts their level of self-efficacy beginning in the elementary years and carries through into high school.

The administrators spoke of a disconnect the dropouts appear to have in school as well as their lack of ability to make meaningful relationships. The dropouts lack that personal connection to someone at school and fail to get involved. The dropouts don't gain a sense of belonging. The graduates are most often connected to school in some way. They easily make meaningful relationships and seek out support. The graduates demonstrate a feeling of belonging to their school and view it more like a community in which they are a member.

There are various themes that emerged through these groups which identify similarities and differences based on their insight as to why some students graduate and others dropout.

### **Discussion of Findings in relation to the Theoretical Framework of this study**

**Situated Learning.** Situated Learning is a theory developed by Jean Lave who suggests that learning is a culmination of experiences within the school environment. Lave 1991, suggests that learning does not occur in isolation. "Situated learning emphasizes the idea that much of what is learned is specific to situations in which it is learned" (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996, p. 5). Lave discusses the importance of learning as a form of community of practice. That is, students act upon and are influenced by these communities of practice in their school settings as well. Lave suggests, "...learning is an aspect of changing participation in changing communities of practice everywhere wherever people engage for substantial periods of time, day by day, in doing things in which their ongoing activities are interdependent, learning is part of their changing participation in changing practices" (Lave, 1996, p. 150). This theory is based on the notion that developing an identity as a member of this community can be powerful in the educational setting.

Lave (1991) discusses the importance of students seeing school as a community of learning because students who become engaged in such a way are more likely to see the relevance of their learning and gain a sense of ownership in what they learn. The importance of their connectedness to learning as well as relationships while learning has a strong impact on the student learner. Lave suggests that students need to be able to connect their learning in the classroom to their individual goals and future ambitions. Learning is achieved in many ways, through the social interaction of students and the situations in which they occur which facilitates this process. Students ultimately need to be able to apply their learning to the real world setting.

The theory of Situated Learning as it relates to the issue of high school dropout may help to explain why so many students exit the school environment. Students who drop out of high school may be missing this sense of community based on their perceptions of the school environment as well as their inability to participate in the community of schooling. This theory suggests, "...conventional schooling too often ignores the influence of school culture on what is learned in school" (Brown et al., 1989, p. 32). This theory helps to frame the importance of how students perceive their school environment based on this notion of community of practice in school and their outcomes of dropping out or graduating as a result.

The findings from this study are powerful when related back to this theoretical framework of Situated Learning. The graduates in particular discussed their sense of belonging to a larger community of school. They spoke on numerous occasions of the importance of being involved or connected to their school in some manner. They chose sports, clubs and other extracurricular activities to stay connected. These individuals spoke of the ease of attending school and looking forward to being a part of the school. They spoke of having a real sense of belonging. The graduates made the school their own and took every advantage offered to them. Many of the graduates reported that it may have been difficult for them to attend school had they not felt that sense of belonging. This could be related to Lave's community of practice within the school setting. Based on these findings, the community of practice the graduates were engaged in contributed to their success and graduating.

The graduates were able to view the school environment as a community where they felt a sense of connectedness to others. They were also the group that was able to make meaningful connections with staff and other students. The graduates spoke at length about surrounding themselves with a good group of friends who shared similar goals and ambitions which made it

easy for them to succeed. They also gained a sense that individuals at the school were there to support them and they recognized this was available to them. Their meaningful relationships within the school setting helped them to be more a part of the community of school.

The graduates engaged in a community of practice where they were able to define a goal and work toward it throughout their education. Likewise, the graduates were able to make that connection of their current learning to a future goal. They display the ability to work toward a goal based on individual steps never losing sight of the end result. The graduates demonstrate this by speaking about how one course would relate to another and how they could see their cumulative coursework enabling them to reach their final goal. They were able to see the relevance in their learning on many levels.

The dropouts on all occasions report that they never gained a sense of belonging at the high school. Rather, they always felt that they were on the outside looking in to a school where they did not belong. They did not see school as or engage in the community of practice Lave speaks about. To the dropout, school was viewed in a very negative light where they met with many frustrations. School, or their community of practice, was viewed as being largely non-supportive and a place they attended but never belonged. Lave's theory highlights the importance of school as being a place where through social interactions and a sense of belonging the student becomes a member and this enables them to be successful through this experience of learning. This helps to illustrate perhaps why the dropouts are largely unsuccessful and leave the school environment.

The dropouts displayed considerable difficulty seeing the relevance in their learning as well and were ultimately unable to make that connection from their classes to the real world. They often could not see the importance of even attending school. When they did attend, they

would quickly disengage due to academic or behavioral difficulties and essentially escape the school environment once again. The dropouts never participated in the community of practice of schooling. Lave suggests that this is critically important in student success. These students were unable to develop goals or even see the importance of what they were learning and failed to see how it may connect to future learning. Lave's theory suggests that if students are unable to set their own goals and see the relevance of their learning as a means to accomplish this, then they are more apt to be unsuccessful.

The dropouts were also candid in their reporting their difficulties in lacking meaningful relationships with staff or students in school. They spoke on several occasions about surrounding themselves with the wrong group of friends who did not display any goals or ambitions toward the future. They reported that this helped them to continue to make the wrong choices in their education. They spoke of not having any one person they felt they could go to at the school. This was powerful in the dropouts reporting that none of the 14 interviewed knew who their guidance counselor was. This is very telling in their inability to see school as a community of practice which Lave and Wenger suggest is at the cornerstone of student success.

The final area based on the findings from the dropouts in relation to Situated Learning Theory has to do with the lack of alternatives the dropouts felt they had access to. Perhaps if the dropouts were provided with alternatives or a different community of practice where they felt they did belong they could have been more successful. The dropouts spoke of a feeling of being left with no options, no sense of belonging and feelings that they were pushed out of high school or left out. Providing alternatives that are within their reach to potential dropouts may help them to gain a sense of belonging to some type of community of practice where they too could find success.

The guidance counselors also support the Situated Learning Theory in their viewpoints gained through this study. They report that they see a difference in the way the graduates and dropouts see the relevance or lack thereof in their learning, respectively. The graduates were seen by the guidance counselors as being students who demonstrated a great sense of connectedness overall to the school environment and perceived school as being a positive place. The graduates easily made meaningful relationships and could clearly see the relevance in their learning to future ambitions. The guidance staff spoke on several occasions of students who would seek them out to complain about a class they did not like, however due to their ability to see how that class fit into their overall schedule for graduation, were more likely to adapt than to quit. The guidance counselors identify a graduate's connection to the school, meaningful relationships and the ability to see relevance in their learning as main factors for their success. This aligns with the Situated Learning Theory and the importance of seeing school as a community of practice where students thrive through social interaction, being able to apply their learning to real world situations and having that social reciprocity needed for learning.

The guidance counselors are able to easily identify the difficulties dropouts encounter at the high school. The dropouts, in their opinions, lack this overall connectedness to school in any way and perceive the school environment as being extremely negative and fragmented. That is, they do not feel as if they are a part of something larger, such as a community of practice identified by Lave. The dropouts have disengaged from the school environment entirely and feel no connection at all to school through extracurricular activities or to the staff. They appear unable to make meaningful relationships or choose the wrong students to use as role models.

The dropouts also failed to see the relevance of their learning at the present time to future goals. Often times, these students failed to identify future goals and saw each course as an entity

of its own. They were unable to make that connection with how what they were learning would benefit them in the future. They were often met with academic struggles and behavioral difficulties which further compounded their lack of seeing relevance in their learning. Given their lack of connecting to school or staff in conjunction with a lack of understanding the overall purpose of school, which at times came from the message they received at home, they were set up to fail in the opinion of the guidance staff. They have many obstacles to overcome and without that sense of belonging to a community are unable to seek out the necessary support to have a chance at success. The guidance counselors support the importance of Lave's theory in their belief that the level of success stems from a student's ability to engage in the community of schooling. Without this ability, students begin to engage in a process of failure at the high school.

Likewise, the administrators stated similar findings in relation to the Situated Learning Theory. The administrators highlighted the lack of alternatives in their opinion which are in reach of the potential dropout. Their findings suggest that the dropouts never have an opportunity to find their community of practice. As a result they begin a process of disengaging from the high school early on. They reported that these students do not fit in and never gain a sense of belonging. The dropouts fail to make meaningful relationships and perceive school as being negative. They display a real disconnect from school in that they don't join any clubs or sports and fail to have that one individual that they can trust. The dropouts have not been observed to set goals or see the point in coming to school or to learn. Their community of practice is nonexistent according to this theory. They don't ever appear to belong to the high school.

The graduates, on the other hand, get involved and make meaningful relationships. They set goals and are successful in obtaining them through supports they seek out and through the social interactions they develop. The graduates are very good at surrounding themselves with individuals who share similar goals which in turn helps them to stay on course and find success. This is related to Lave's Situated Learning theory in that these relationships help to support these students' goals. The graduates see the school as being a positive environment where success is attainable. The administrators spoke of the sense of community these students display which can be related to the theory of Situated Learning. Through their social interactions and becoming connected to school, these individuals demonstrate a high sense of their community of practice within the school setting which enables them to reach their goals.

**Self-Efficacy Theory.** Self-Efficacy Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, views learning based on the belief that students display differing degrees of self efficacy which affect their learning and their outcomes. Bandura 1977 defines self efficacy as personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals, and he sought to assess its level, generality, and strength across activities and context. Bandura believed that the level of self efficacy a student displays can either promote or hinder their learning. This theory is important in looking at the dropout issue because a student's perception of their own ability to either be successful or not in school may play a role in their final decision to stay or leave.

Self-Efficacy is related to the goals students are able to set for themselves and their ability to either achieve these goals or not. Those who possess high levels of self-efficacy become self-regulated learners who constantly strive to become better learners. This theory suggests that "...self-regulated learners direct their learning processes and attainments by setting

challenging goals for themselves...self-regulated learners exhibit a high sense of efficacy in their capabilities, which influences the knowledge and skill goals they set for themselves and their commitment to fulfill these challenges” (Zimmerman et al., 1992, p. 664). Students who lack self efficacy are unable to set goals and as a result become estranged from the school environment based on this theory. This theory is based on student perceptions and the degree to which a student believes in themselves to achieve their goals. These students challenge their abilities and strive to achieve more as a result. Self efficacy may be impacted by a student’s cumulative experience as well as their own perception of their abilities.

The theory of Self-Efficacy is pertinent to the dropout issue in understanding how students perceive their own abilities and motivation to achieve which may ultimately lead them to leave school. Bandura’s theory suggests that “Self efficacy measures focus on performance capabilities rather than on personal qualities, such as one’s physical or psychological characteristics” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 83). The beliefs students bring with them to school concerning their own ability to be successful may be more powerful than all the resources collectively offered to them at school. Rather, it is believed based on this theory that a “...student’s self-beliefs about academic capabilities do play an essential role in their motivation to achieve” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 89). It is important to learn how the various students affected, those who graduate and those who dropout, differ in their level of self-efficacy and to what extent this may be a factor worth focusing research on.

The various groups spoke of the importance of a student’s level of self-efficacy in relation to their level of success or failure at New Bedford High School. The findings in relation to the Self-Efficacy Theory were overwhelming based on the perceptions of the four groups who

participated. This appears to be an area that is worth focusing on in helping to explain the dropout issue in New Bedford.

The findings from the graduate group reinforced the importance of self-efficacy in achieving success and graduating. The graduates attribute much of their success as being self-driven. They demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy through their beliefs about themselves. These students have great confidence in their abilities and report that they view themselves as being good students who welcome a challenge. They are goal setters who are always striving to do well and reach an end goal. They are independent learners in that they easily overcome obstacles and will seek out individuals who may help them along the way as needed. They do not hesitate to seek support and advocate for themselves in school. They have a personal drive that sets them apart from other students. The graduates reported that they always looked at a negative situation or factors that may put them at risk and used this as a motivator to do well. An example would be graduates who had parents who had dropped out of high school. This became more of a reason for them to succeed and become the first to graduate from their family.

They often reported that failure was not an option if they were to obtain their goal to graduate. The graduates could always maintain the relevance in their learning. That is, they were able to see how their coursework wove together to meet their final goal. They see school overall as being positive and spoke often of a positive cumulative educational experience. These students began at a very early age to enjoy learning and were also reinforced along the way that they were good students. This helped them to enter into a positive relationship with the school environment.

The dropouts spoke of their lack of self-efficacy quite candidly. These students reported that they never felt as if they were a good student. They reported a rather negative cumulative

experience overall and did not see the school environment as a welcoming or positive place. They reported that they never believed in their abilities or thought they could be successful even if they tried. They never received the message in their early formative educational years that they had good ability or could be successful. Many of the dropouts reported that they had academic or behavioral difficulties throughout their school career and this hindered their ability to ever think of themselves as being a good student.

The dropouts also viewed their life circumstances as being negative. They saw family members drop out of high school and learned that this was an acceptable behavior and perhaps the only answer. They did not persevere given their situation or strive to do well. They reported lacking the self-confidence to achieve and do better than their family members. The dropouts began early on in devising a plan to exit the school environment as a result. They did not report demonstrating the self worth or confidence suggested in the Self-Efficacy Theory for them to be able to find success.

The guidance counselors identify self-efficacy as perhaps being the single most important factor in helping to explain why some students leave and others stay. They see the graduates as those students displaying high levels of self-efficacy and the dropouts as lacking this same level. The graduates are students who display much confidence in their abilities and take charge of their education. They demonstrate much self-respect and worth and feel good about themselves. These students have gone through the educational system and have received the message that they are good students. Therefore, their educational experience has been a positive one which has reinforced their learning overall and abilities as a student.

The dropouts, in the guidance counselors opinion, lack self-efficacy and have not had the same educational experiences from the beginning. These students often appear confused about

their role in school. Unfortunately, the guidance counselors point out many of these students are socially passed through the system and do not have the ability to find success. The message they have received is quite different from the graduates. Their cumulative experiences are one of years of frustration and little support. They lose their self-confidence early on and eventually give up in their schooling. Their self-efficacy has been lost many years prior to attending high school. The guidance counselors report that the dropouts' cumulative school experiences have ultimately taken away from their level of self efficacy exhibited in high school.

The administrators were all in agreement that a student's level of self-efficacy impacts their decision to either drop out or graduate, which supports this theory. The administrators spoke of a student's ability to self direct and motivate their learning which is so important in the level of success they find at the high school. They see the graduates as being those students who demonstrate high levels of self efficacy. These students set goals for themselves and self-regulate their learning. They demonstrate self confidence in their abilities and have the desire to set goals and achieve them. The graduates also have had years of schooling with positive consequences. They are students who have been sent the message that they have good ability and that they can be successful.

The dropouts lack self efficacy in the opinion of the administrators. Their educational experiences have not been positive and their message is quite different. They often have struggled and no one ever made them feel as if they were a good student. They are unable to set goals for themselves and then work toward them. The dropouts have not been observed to demonstrate the self-respect or self-worth and positive feelings about themselves as a student who takes charge of their education and finds success. The dropouts also appear unable to see the relevance in their learning. These individuals fail to see their school experiences as a process

where they are working toward an end goal. They view their learning in a segmented manner with a focus on one course at a time and all are unrelated. This makes it very difficult for them to persevere through their difficulties and work toward a goal.

**Summary of the Theoretical Framework in Relationship to the Findings of this study.** The information gained through this study supports the two theoretical frameworks of Situated Learning and Self Efficacy Theory. The different perspectives learned of through the various focus groups and interviews provide insight into the importance of communities of practice in a setting such as school as well as to what extent a student's level of self efficacy plays in a student's decision to stay in or drop out of high school. The findings from this study are overwhelming in identifying how these two theories help to explain factors that may contribute to understanding why so many students have left New Bedford High School. Many factors have been identified in contributing to how dropouts may not perceive themselves as belonging to a community of practice in school as well as how their cumulative educational experiences may play a direct role in their differing levels of self-efficacy as they enter high school.

It would be a disservice to the student learner to ignore these educational theories in helping to explain the dropout issue. This study has provided much information surrounding a student's perception of their school environment in relation to their ability to view school as a community as well as how this impacts a student's level of self-efficacy. These theories help to shed light in combination with the findings from this study in explaining why so many students find success while so many others continue to leave New Bedford High School.

**Discussion of Findings in relationship to the Literature Review**

The findings from this study relate to the literature review completed previously. The literature review was broken down into four areas at the onset of this study including: 1) Evaluating who the dropout has become in the educational system; 2) A look at the current dropout prevention programs and their focus to address this problem; 3) A more in-depth look at what is and is not working to keep our students in school; 4) A focus on school engagement as it relates to school culture and school climate.

The findings of this study are in agreement with the current research which states that “dropping out of school is not best viewed as a single event; rather is a process by which students become increasingly disaffected and alienated from school through predisposing environmental factors and stressors, academic failures, and behavioral problems that enter into a reciprocal relationship with school processes leading to drifting out” (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 527-528). This study supports the various factors, often multiple in nature, which are ultimately thought to contribute to dropout. Researchers suggest that these factors range from academic failure, low socioeconomic status, behavioral problems, disengagement from school, poor attendance, not getting along with teachers, and lack of motivation. Other researchers study how the school pushes students to leave who have no other choice. They believe, “so we have the dropout or pushout. When success in school no longer seems likely, removing oneself from the setting in which failure occurs seems reasonable, almost compelling” (Mahood, 1981, p. 56). Many researchers look at the ninth grade year of high school as having a great impact on whether they will be successful or drop out.

While researchers may lack in their agreement of which risk factors they attribute as being more important, most agree there are several factors that play into a student's decision to

drop out of school. They do appear to be in agreement that the more risk factors a student encounters, the higher the likelihood they may leave.

The findings from this study illustrate many of the thoughts reflected in the literature review in this section. The dropouts interviewed had all repeated a grade and in most instances the ninth grade. They all displayed a multiple array of risk factors ranging from attendance issues to poor grades, behavioral issues and academic difficulties. There was also a distinct difference noted between the dropouts and the graduates in their level of engagement in school. The dropouts reported through their stories how they left school to escape their difficulties which also was found in the research. Many dropouts displayed poor cumulative educational experiences which helped to portray their view of the school environment as being non-supportive and overall negative. In summary, the dropouts who participated in this study shared many risk factors highlighted by the various researchers in the literature review. The graduates did not share many of the same cumulative educational experiences or multiple risk factors as a result. Their experiences were much more positive, impacting their overall perception of school and level of self-efficacy which in turn led them to be more successful than the dropout.

The guidance counselors' perspectives supports the literature review in identifying the various risk factors the current dropouts possess. They also acknowledge other areas which need to be addressed if prevention is to occur. This involves taking into account a student's level of self efficacy, cultural factors and their overall ability to connect to the school environment as factors that contribute to their graduating or dropping out of New Bedford High School. The administrators also concur with the literature in identifying who the potential dropout is at New Bedford High School and the various risk factors they share through this study. The administrators highlight the lack of alternatives available to these students as well as their lack of

connectedness, meaningful relationships and lower level of self-efficacy which is believed to further compound their risk factors placing them at a higher chance for failure.

The only contradictory factor arrived at through this study when compared to the literature review involves the low socioeconomic factor of students believed to drop out. In New Bedford, many of the dropouts and graduates came from similar socioeconomic factors and also shared a common risk factor of a parent who had dropped out of school. The difference in their outcomes appears to be more related to their overall perception of the school environment, their level of self-efficacy in their abilities to overcome their obstacles as well as a sense of connectedness to the school environment. This, in turn, helped the graduates to use their negative experience as a motivating factor. The dropouts were unable to do this. As the literature review suggests, a student's cumulative educational experience is often used to frame these risk factors in terms of the outcome the student may display as a result.

The next part of the literature review looks at the current dropout prevention programs and their level of effectiveness. The literature review points to the lack of success in trying to prevent dropout among students who display a variety of risks. "Many dropout prevention interventions are simply attempts to keep students in schools that are not set up to serve them and in which they are not welcome" (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, p. 528). Researchers identify that "...school climate often tends to be punitive..." (Mayer et al., 1993, p. 136). There is a notion in the research that schools tend to be punitive in their discipline actions rather than preventative and suggests schools work against their own prevention programs perhaps unknowingly. Prevention programs are not working to address large groups of students. Research suggests prevention needs to begin early on in the younger grades. More alternatives need to be provided as well.

This study correlates with the research on current dropout prevention programs. The guidance counselors and administrators were very helpful in identifying the current dropout prevention programs available in New Bedford. The guidance counselors believe there are many programs available to the potential dropouts. They report that the programs are there, however the students need to access them. The administrators took a different stance and were very candid in explaining how they believe these programs work against the potential dropout. Their reports suggest many dropouts do not fit into the various dropout prevention programs supposedly available to them. Students simply are not able to attend based on a lack of credit or have not qualified for a specific program. The administrators in particular, through their responses, provided insight into flaws of the current dropout prevention programs similar to those identified through the literature review. The administrators report that many of the potential dropouts do not fit into the traditional comprehensive high school model. Efforts have been made to make smaller learning communities, however little success has been found in this effort. They spoke about how the students do not make a good connection upon their transition from the middle school.

The dropouts highlighted areas such as the discipline policy and engaging in a cycle of poor grades and absenteeism as a result of their behavior, which relates well to the literature review. The guidance counselors and the administrators reported on how the current discipline policy is punitive in nature and sends students out of school on too many occasions. They were extremely honest in explaining how this sets students up to fail because they are not in school. Students engage in a cycle of behavior and missed learning which leads them to believe they will never catch up. This leads students to give up and leave the school environment.

The dropouts also report through this study that they were never aware of their alternatives when contemplating leaving the school environment. They viewed their options as being punitive in nature as well and felt they had no option other than to leave. Their insights were much in align with the literature review related to feelings of being pushed out of the school setting and being given little option to stay.

The next part of the literature review focuses on what is effective for keeping students in school. Some researchers blame the idea that all students can learn and that educators are forcing all students to fit into a nice box of education. The sad reality is that many students are failing as a result of this type of thinking. Researchers warn that "...if the research on dropouts continues to focus on the relatively fixed attributes of students, the effect of such research may well be to give schools an excuse for their lack of success with the dropout" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 376). Researchers look at a student's perception of school and how the school itself may play a role in dropout. Researchers remind us that "...saying that schools push out some young people is a harsh statement of a painful responsibility" (Mann, 1986, p. 309). Some look to how involved a student is at school as a means of keeping students in school. Others point to disconnectedness of the school environment. Another researcher states, "An alternative to trying to explain why youths drop out of school would be to establish why they come to school" (Kortering et al., 1998, p. 10).

The results from this study align themselves with the many points illustrated through this section. The administrators and the guidance counselors highlight the importance of thinking outside of the box in creating a learning environment where all students can learn in their own manner. They can't stress enough their observations that the high school is not a good fit for all students. They report this school is not a one size fits all as far as their education.

Administrators make another point through this study that relates to the focus on the attributes of the students versus the accountability the school needs to take in counteracting the dropout issue. To the administrators' credit, through their reports, they acknowledge the flaws in how the district is addressing the dropout issue and feel there needs to be a shift in responsibility being placed on the school in many instances. New Bedford High School is comprised of many students who share similar risk factors, yet many go on to graduate and others drop out. Risk factors alone do not appear to account for their successes or failures. What has been learned through the study is that a student's perceptions play an important role as well in relation to their view of the school environment and a student's level of self efficacy contributing to their decision making process.

This study has helped to explain through the perceptions of the various groups involved to what level school connectedness and meaningful relationships impact a student's decision to stay in school. Dropouts are identified by the guidance counselors and administrators as those students who fail to connect or make these relationships within the school setting. There is rich information in looking at why students stay in school to help to understand why many leave. This study has proposed to provide such information through the stories of the graduates and the dropouts.

The stories of graduates and dropouts through this study support this section of the literature review. The graduates spoke on countless occasions of their connectedness to school as well as the meaningful relationships they made. They perceived school to be a positive, supportive place overall. The dropouts told a very different story of how they failed to connect to any part of school and also had no meaningful relationships. This group of students viewed school in a negative manner where little support was provided. The perceptions of these two

groups are very different and quite compelling in supporting how their perceptions of their school environment may have led them to graduate or drop out of New Bedford High School. Their stories are powerful in helping one to understand how the school environment may play a significant role in the issue of dropout prevention, which had previously focused their efforts on those characteristics held by the students themselves. This study supports the literature review findings in that a shift may need to take place in the manner in which dropout is viewed for prevention purposes.

The final portion of the literature review places a focus on school engagement. Student engagement rather than prevention may be a more viable area to focus on when addressing the dropout issue. This view helps educators to see that "School dropout is but one consequence of lack of school engagement" (Caraway et al., 2003, p. 417). Researchers point to the fact that students who become disengaged in their learning along the way are more likely to drop out in high school. Meaningful relationships and engagement with some aspect of school are identified as a key factor in a student's success. Researchers also believe students need to be sought out to gain their perspectives of why they graduate or leave school.

This study provides the information to support this aspect of viewing dropout prevention from a lens of student engagement. Given the various perspectives offered through their stories, it becomes clear that students who drop out of high school have disengaged from their school environment in many cases years before arriving to the ninth grade. Much of this disengagement was a result of their cumulative educational experiences which in many cases is very negative for the dropout as reported through this study. The educational experiences for the graduates were found to be very positive through this study. Many of the dropouts report that they had already made their minds up prior to attending high school to leave and it was a matter of convincing

their parents this was the right decision. This suggests they disengaged at a much earlier age and already had a plan to dropout.

There was also a clear distinction between the reports heard from the graduates and dropouts in their ability to make meaningful relationships or participate in the school environment. The graduates easily connected and made at least one meaningful relationship with a staff member as well as students who shared their goals. The dropouts interviewed for this study failed to make any one meaningful relationship, often associated with students who failed to have goals themselves and did not participate in the school environment on any level. The graduates spoke of a sense of belonging to the school that the dropouts failed to have.

The guidance counselors and the administrators also concur with the research in this area. They spoke on several occasions of the differences they observed between the dropouts and the graduates in their levels of engagement or disengagement from school. They report there is a significant difference in the level to which these two groups of students were involved or gained a sense of belonging at New Bedford High School. The graduates were observed to belong to the school and become a member through joining clubs or sports and easily made meaningful relationships with staff and students. The dropouts were observed to not appear as if they belonged and failed to connect in any way. The guidance counselors and the administrators reported their belief that if they could somehow engage all students the dropout rate would be significantly lower. They also felt this begins in the lower grades and that high school may be too late. They report that for many of these students their minds are already made up to leave.

Engaging students in school at a young age and fostering their level of self-efficacy to help all students believe they have the ability to succeed could potentially help the future dropout. This study supports the notion that student engagement is a necessary component to

addressing the dropout issue. Findings from this study have further supported the importance of looking at school climate in efforts to address student engagement through the various groups' responses. Self-efficacy is another area which relates to this aspect of engagement. The graduates demonstrate high levels of self-efficacy and the dropouts significantly differ in their beliefs about their ability to succeed. This may stem in part from their perception of their school environment and the message they have received with respect to their abilities as a student. School climate therefore appears to have a great impact on a student's level of engagement which occurs over the span of their education. Students who disengage from school appear to be at a higher risk for dropping out of school than those students who are engaged in their learning based on the findings from this study.

### **Conclusion**

The two research questions which drive this study assess a student's perceptions of their conditions or life circumstances as well as their stated degree of self-efficacy and resiliency that may contribute to their staying in or dropping out of school. Through this study, the voices of the students have been heard. Their stories help to shed light on why so many students who share similar risk factors and attend New Bedford High School choose very different paths of graduating or dropping out. What has been learned from the perceptions of the graduates, dropouts, guidance counselors and administrators of New Bedford High School is that there continue to be many factors that influence a student's decision to drop out of high school. The main factors that contribute to this behavior based on their stories include: 1) a student's level of self efficacy; 2) a student's ability to connect to their school environment; 3) a student's ability to make meaningful relationships; 4) a student's overall perception of their school environment; 5) cultural factors these students face; 6) and a lack of alternatives available to the potential

dropout. Focusing efforts to address these issues may help to decrease the number of students who drop out of New Bedford High School.

The findings from this study will hopefully shed new light on the issue of dropout at New Bedford High School. It has enabled the voices of those most directly affected to be heard and learned from, the students who have ultimately been left behind. Various perspectives have yielded similar themes in helping to explain why students choose different paths of graduating from or dropping out of New Bedford High School. While some of the information examined points to the level of self-efficacy an individual possesses, there are various factors that may contribute to a student's ultimate decision to leave school or stay. They include a student's overall perception of their school environment as well as if they have any connection to the school and their ability to make meaningful connections to individuals at school. Also of importance includes the alternatives available to students who are thinking of dropping out of school. Lastly, cultural factors and the overall acceptance of dropping out of high school by the community is another facet that needs to be addressed in order for change to occur.

What has been learned from this study is that there are many venues which need to be reexamined based on the stories of those who have graduated and dropped out and to why this behavior continues to occur. If New Bedford hopes to counteract their dropout issue, much energy and attention needs to address the concerns raised in this study. First and foremost, dropout is not a high school issue. In New Bedford, however, much of the efforts are made at the high school level. The focus needs to be made at the elementary level through middle school keeping these themes in mind: school connectedness, school engagement, meaningful, supportive relationships, and alternatives for students at all levels.

Dropout is a district wide issue and as a result there needs to be consistency and structure throughout the district beginning with students at a very young age. The importance of education needs to start young and be carried through their education. Implementing dropout prevention programs at the high school level is much too late. Too many students are already lost and so far behind that they have lost hope in their education and given up on their goals. The findings from this study are aimed to help those potential drop outs through the next steps based on the information learned from the graduates, dropouts, guidance counselors and administrators of New Bedford High School.

One unexpected finding of this study is the number of graduates and dropouts who share a commonality of parents or siblings who have not graduated from high school. It was interesting to see how this impacted their decision to use this as an excuse or a motivator. At the onset of the study I wouldn't have imagined this would be a commonality. I was interested to see how this one factor influenced their decision making through their interviews. The graduates seemed to use this as a motivator while the dropouts were unable to.

**Significance of the Study in the Field.** This study is significant to the field of education because students continue to drop out of New Bedford High School at an alarming rate. It is essential that we look to the students who are most affected by dropout to search for answers. This study is important because it begins to recognize the complexities of the student who decides to drop out of high school. It begins to touch upon the real issues students at New Bedford High School are encountering that may lead them to leave. It is important to listen closely to each of these students' stories. Despite them sharing similar risk factors at times and stories with themes that may overlap, each student's story is unique in how their decision to drop out was made. This is what sets this study apart from others in the field. Much of the current

research available makes recommendations for prevention without gathering any information from the students who leave. If we are to make a difference in the lives of students, we need to work with them in learning as much about their behavior as possible and why it occurs. This will enable us to take that information and provide them with positive, reachable alternatives that can help them to be successful. Based on this belief, it is concerning to me that more research is not focused on studying the students who choose to either stay in school or dropout to learn why this behavior continues to occur.

Another aspect of this study which is so powerful is the information gained in the role the school environment plays in a student's decision to drop out. We need to not be afraid to look at the school environment in the sense of what is and what is not working to make it more accessible to all students. There is rich information in looking at what students have reported through this study concerning their final decision to either stay or leave in relation to how they viewed their school environment prior to making their decision. In the cases of the graduates it was characterized as being positive and in the dropouts it was very negative. This is important information to gather in hopes of making a difference in the schools. A positive outcome of this study is the realization that the administrators at New Bedford High School can identify where their alternative programs are flawed and failing as a result and that there is a collective interest in combating this problem. This suggests that there is hope for change in New Bedford.

### **Final Words**

In conclusion, there is a lot of work to be done in New Bedford in addressing the dropout issue. Much has been learned from this study in relation to why students themselves believe they have graduated or dropped out of New Bedford High School. It is up to the educators of New Bedford to hear their voices and listen to their stories to create positive change. If we continue to

ignore the most important voices, then we fail to create any change at all. I believe we have the answers we need at this point, however it is time to devise a plan to lower the dropout rate based on what we know.

### **Next Steps**

In speaking to the various groups for the purpose of this study, several suggestions could be made to counteract the dropout issue at New Bedford High School. More alternative programs need to be made and the current alternative programs need to be revamped to include more options for students and potentially prevent more students from dropping out of New Bedford High School.

Many participants spoke of the discipline model and the need for change. All too often the students that need to attend school are sent out as a result of disciplinary action. These students need to be held accountable for their actions, but still remain in school to avoid further missed time on learning. One suggestion is to provide more in-school suspensions where students can work on missed assignments while being penalized for inappropriate actions in school. Students who are suspended from the school environment fall further behind academically and enter into a cycle of failure.

Another area of concern is that dropping out of New Bedford High School is too easy. There does not appear to be a process in place that keeps students in school. The dropouts interviewed for this study had no exit interview, they simply signed out and left. More effort needs to be made to provide students with an alternative prior to leaving.

Another area in which to invest energy is having students who have dropped out of New Bedford High School come back to talk to potential dropouts about their decision making and where this has led them. This may prove to be more beneficial than staff speaking to potential

dropouts because they themselves did not drop out of high school and may not truly understand the ramifications of such a decision. Students who are thinking about leaving high school may relate better to students who have left and be more apt to listen to their stories.

The final area to be discussed is the importance of student engagement in addressing the dropout issue as a form of prevention at a much earlier age- in the elementary years. Focusing on dropout prevention in high school is much too late and students are already lost. Students struggling in their elementary years by the third and fourth grade are already becoming frustrated and losing interest in the school environment. Their perception may already be changing. Dropout prevention needs to shift to school engagement in the formative years of education. Students need to perceive their school environment as being a positive one where meaningful relationships can be formed and their level of self-efficacy can be improved on through developing as confident learners throughout their educational years. If this is not accomplished early on, as students progress through their schooling, they disconnect from their school environment as have the dropouts in this study until they become those students the system has left behind.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions for Administrators

1. Why do you believe so many students have dropped out of New Bedford High School?
2. How much of that is due to the student/person vs. their circumstances vs. the school (its environment, supports, teaching and learning)?
3. If so, what leads you to think that? Can you give me some examples that show this in juxtaposition to students who have stayed and graduated?
4. Why do you believe those students who have graduated persist in school vs. those who have dropped out? Can you give me some examples?
5. How is the school district addressing the dropout issue? How long has this been an issue and when did this initiative begin?
6. How is New Bedford High School specifically addressing the dropout issue? Who are the key members involved in this process?
7. How effective do you believe are the measures taken by the school district in decreasing the number of students who drop out of school?
8. How effective do you believe are the measures taken by New Bedford High School in decreasing the number of students who drop out of school?
9. What could be done differently to address this issue?
10. What do you attribute as the most important factors that contribute to a student's decision to stay in school or leave? Can you give me some examples why you might think this?

## Appendix B

### Focus Study Protocol

#### *Parallel Questions - Dropouts and Graduates*

1. How would you characterize your overall view of the school environment?
2. Was there one particular aspect of school that you enjoyed?
3. Was there one particular aspect of school that you disliked?
4. If you had to choose one important factor that you think led you to graduate or dropout, what would it be?
5. What life circumstances made it easy or difficult for you to complete school?

#### **Graduates....**

Tell me about your school experience.

- What did you like about it?
- What did you not like about it?

Can you share with me some stories regarding aspects of school that you liked and aspects of school that you didn't like?

You obviously persisted/stayed in school? What do you attribute to that? Why did you stay in school? What helped you to stay in school? If we could say there were probably some things about you that helped you stay in school, what would those things be? If we were to say some things about school or outside of school that really helped you to stay in school, what would you say those things were?

Did you feel like a strong, confident, or good student? How so? In what ways? How do you know?

If not, why not? Why do you say not? In what ways? How do you know?

Do you think the reason you stayed in school was more about who you are, how supportive the school is, and/or how other people in your life helped you to stay in school? What do you mean? Say more? Can you give me an example?

**Dropouts....**

Tell me about your school experience.

- What did you like about it?
- What did you not like about it?

Can you share with me some stories regarding aspects of school that you liked and aspects of school that you didn't like?

So, we know that you dropped out of school. What do you attribute to that? Why did you drop out of school? What encouraged or forced you to drop out of school? If we were to say that there were some things about you, either as a student or person, that contributed to your NOT staying in school, what would those things be? If we were to say there are some things about school or outside of school that really contributed to your not staying in school, what would you say those things were?

Did you feel like a strong, confident, or good student? How so? In what ways? How do you know?

If not, why not? Why do you say not? In what ways? How do you know?

Do you think the reason you dropped out of school was more about who you are, how supportive the school is, and/or how other people in your life helped or didn't help you to stay in school? What do you mean? Say more? Can you give me an example?

## Appendix C

### *Specific Questions for Graduates*

1. What three main factors do you attribute to your reason for graduating?
2. What was it in your high school experience that best prepared you to pursue your future goals? (i.e., a particular program or area of study)
3. What specific area or areas do you feel need to be focused on in order to best assist other students to stay in school and graduate high school?

### *Specific Questions for Dropouts*

1. What three main factors contributed to your decision to drop out of school?
2. How do you feel your future goals are affected by your decision to drop out?
3. Looking back on your decision to drop out of high school, if given another opportunity, would you still follow through with this decision? Is there anything about you and/or your school environment, and/or your circumstances (parents, friends, situation or circumstance) that you feel would have possibly helped you to stay in school?

## Appendix D

### *Specific Questions for Guidance Counselors*

1. Without naming the student, can you talk about some students that you know who have dropped out of high school and why you think they dropped out of high school? Was it something about them? The school? In your estimation, why did they drop out of high school?
2. After having talked about these students, do you feel that there are some key themes or conditions that lead most of the students who drop out to drop out? What are those different themes or factors?
3. How is this different from those graduating? Why do those students stay in school? How much is that about the student/person and how much is it about their particular circumstances? Please explain. Can you give me some examples?
4. What life conditions surround the students who you have observed to dropout from high school? How do these differ from those students who graduate, if at all?
5. To what extent have you observed a student's self-efficacy to play a role in their decision making process to either graduate or leave school? What makes you think this? Can you give me some examples?
6. What is the one most important aspect of a student's school environment that you would attribute to their decision to complete or drop out of school?