Attitudes, Knowledge, and Experience with Dropout Prevention Strategies of Mississippi Teachers and Administrators

Harold Kirk Lucky
University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE, AND EXPERIENCE WITH DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGIES OF MISSISSIPPI TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

by

Harold Kirk Lucky

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2011
ABSTRACT

ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE, AND EXPERIENCE WITH DROPOUT REVENTION STRATEGIES OF MISSISSIPPI TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Mississippi has been overly burdened with a high dropout rate for generations but in 2007 began a program to correct this problem based on the requirements of No Child Left Behind that requires all school to reduce their dropout rate. The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of Mississippi teachers and administrators with the State of Mississippi’s dropout prevention efforts and ultimately determine if they are supportive of the dropout prevention efforts. The study used a questionnaire designed by the researcher. A total of 386 questionnaires were returned from school districts across the six geographic regions of the state. The dependent variables were the knowledge, attitudes, and experiences with the dropout prevention efforts, and the independent variable was the respondent’s position—teacher or administrator. A MANOVA was used to analyze the data. There was a significant difference in the attitudes, knowledge and experience of teachers and administrators with the Mississippi dropout prevention efforts. A follow-up analysis indicated that knowledge and experience had the greatest differences. These findings indicate that administrators and teachers support the states dropout prevention efforts but teachers reported that they need more training in the states dropout prevention plan.
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Approved:

Rose McNeese, Ph. D.

Director

David E. Lee, Ed. D

Thelma Roberson, Ph. D.

Kyna Shelley, Ph. D.

Susan A. Siltanen, Ph. D.

Dean of the Graduate School

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Overview

As the first decade of the twenty-first century nears a close, the United States of America is facing unprecedented challenges. The world-wide economic recession, global competition, outsourcing, and the dramatic changes in the American workplace have made the future of many Americans uncertain. This is especially true as the industries of the twentieth century face meltdown. There has never been a greater demand for an educated and technologically savvy workforce, but this need continues to be sabotaged by an unacceptably high dropout rate in many of America’s schools. In a 2006 research project commissioned for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a group of researchers determined that nearly one-third of American high school students are failing to graduate. For African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans the graduation rate is only 50% (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison, 2006). This Silent Epidemic, as the Gates Foundation labeled the dropout problem, dooms many to an unsure future.

Research indicates that individuals without at least a high school education will earn less money, and are more likely to be on welfare, to be unemployed, to be incarcerated, to have more health problems, and generally to have a lower quality of life than better educated fellow citizens (Caputo, 2005). A recent study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009) detailed the blunt facts about the life prospects faced by many young high school dropouts.
The Northeastern University (Sum et al., 2009) study, found that high school dropouts aged 16-24 have an overall unemployment rate of 54% with rates among young African American dropouts at a staggering 69%, followed by at Asians 57%, Whites at 54%, and Hispanics, who interestingly have the lowest unemployment rate, at 47%. The Hispanic rate could be explained by the fact that many are most likely undocumented immigrants that tend to have a higher employment rate. Overall the study found that young unemployed high school dropouts maintain a chronic unemployment problem with only 40% of them being able to remain employed year-round. As a result of the long-term unemployment of the young high school dropouts, they generally live in poverty-stricken families, with 39% having family incomes of under $20,000 per year.

The Northeastern (Sum et al., 2009) study found that early parenthood was another consequence of dropping out of school. According to the study, 38% of mothers aged 16-24 are high school dropouts, compared to only 6% that are college graduates. The vast majority of the high school dropouts who are mothers are single mothers, many of whom are dependent on government assistance. For males, the study found another result of dropping out to be a high rate of incarceration. The study found that generally one in ten high school dropouts are incarcerated; however, the rate for African Americans was approximately one in five. The Northeastern researchers quote Illinois state senator Emil Jones who reportedly said “dropping out of high school was an apprenticeship for prison” (p. 11).

The Northeastern (Sum et al., 2009) research confirmed what many other studies have concluded, that dropping out of high school “often leads to economic and social tragedy” (Orfield, 2004, p. 1). The consequences of dropping out often meant a life of
lower wages in dead end jobs, prison, welfare, marital problems, and even a lower life expectancy. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2009), the median income of a person 18 to 65 who did not graduate from high school was $24,000; however, a person in the same age group that did graduate high school or received a General Education Development (GED) certificate earned $40,000. The jobs of the past that may have allowed an able-bodied and hardworking individual to make a good living have all but disappeared in the twenty-first century economy. President Barack Obama (2009), in a speech to a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, stated that “three-quarter of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma” (para. 60).

According to President Obama (2009), the dropout problem “is a prescription of economic decline, because we know that countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow” (para. 61). Obama added that “dropping out of high school is no longer an option” (para. 64). He pledged that his administration would continue the efforts to keep America’s young people in school and to improve the quality of their education by providing the resources that school, teachers, and students require to be successful. Obama’s pledge indicates he will continue with much of the previous administration’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) that called for increasing school accountability and a dramatic reduction of dropout rates.

NCLB was a continuation of several government actions designed to improve education in the United States beginning in the 1950s after the Soviet Union launched the world’s first manmade satellite, Sputnik, in 1957. This achievement by the Soviet Union led to claims that the United States was falling behind in math and science, which in turn
resulted in the establishment of several programs designed to increase math and science studies (Marsh and Codd, 1999). A few decades later the Reagan administration commissioned the report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report which noted that math and science scores had decreased despite efforts to improve them. The report warned that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (p. 5). The *Nation at Risk* detailed a plan to improve public education by increasing rigor, standards, and increased use of standardized testing. The efforts toward school improvement continued in several different government acts, and in 2002 the *No Child Left Behind Act* was approved by the Congress and signed into law by President Bush. This act increased the emphasis on high stakes testing and accountability and had for its cornerstone the lofty goal of requiring all students to be on grade level by 2014. Each school would be required to maintain adequate yearly progress to be successful. Reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates were also key elements of the adequate yearly progress (AYP).

NCLB required states to develop a system of accurately reporting graduation and dropout rates since a wide variety of methods have been used, which led many to charge that the “dropout statistics are flawed to the point of being worthless” (Orfield, p. 3). Even with the requirements of NCLB, charges persist that school districts are not properly reporting the dropout statistics (Adam, 2006). The National Governors Association (NGA) addressed these concerns by adopting a set of uniform standards for reporting graduation rates on a four-year cohort model in 2005. Mississippi was one of the first states to fully adopt the NGA dropout rate standards.
Statement of the Problem

Mississippi is usually near the top of negative quality of life indicators and near the bottom on the positive ones in many statistical analyses. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty of Columbia University (NCCP, 2010), 30% of families in Mississippi do not earn enough money to provide for their basic needs. Educational researchers have clearly identified lack of education as a major cause of inadequate family income. Mississippi is one of the most undereducated states in the nation, according to the United States Census Bureau (2010). Adult Mississippian lag behind the rest of the nation in the percentage of high school graduates by over 8%. Mississippi carries the burden of a high dropout rate. In 2007, the dropout rate was 26.6% and the high school graduation rate was only 61.1% (Mississippi Department of Education, 2007).

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), over 3,000 students drop out of high school in the Jackson, Mississippi area each year. These dropouts earn about $4600.00 less annually than high school graduates in Mississippi. It is estimated that if these employed dropouts could earn a high school diploma the collective group’s income could increase by $1.8 billion annually according to a 2007 report of the Mississippi Legislature’s Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER). In response to the growing dropout rate, the Mississippi legislature enacted Title 37-13-80 of the Mississippi Code that established the Office of Dropout Prevention in the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) with the goal of increasing statewide graduation rates (PEER, 2007).
In early 2007, the Mississippi Department of Education (2007) and state Superintendent of Education at the time, Dr. Hank Bounds, announced a new dropout prevention plan that had as its capstone goal of raising Mississippi’s high school graduating rate to 85% by 2019. Mississippi based its program on the National Center for Dropout Prevention’s 15 dropout prevention strategies that are grouped into four main perspectives as summarized from page 10 and 11 of the *Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan*:

1. The school and community perspective which includes overall school improvement, maintaining a safe and orderly environment, and school and community partnership.

2. Early intervention which recognizes that family structure is a key element in a child’s success in school.

3. Basic core strategies that seek to ensure that schools are providing mentoring, meaningful learning, and after school programs to engage students in the education process.

4. Making the most of education first, this perspective involves preparing teachers and staff to meet the needs of twenty-first century students by providing the best possible education.

The public face of this program is the “On the Bus” media campaign that was funded by a grant from State Farm Insurance. This program hosted several state-wide events and is using television and radio advertising to bring public attention to the state’s dropout problem and the need to do something about it (Mississippi Department of Education, 2007). The early results from the program appear promising with a recent
announcement that the dropout rate has been reduced. The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of Mississippi teachers and administrators with the State of Mississippi’s dropout prevention efforts. Once this data is collected then it can be determined if administrators and teachers are supporting the dropout prevention efforts and if they are participating in the implementations of dropout prevention programs. Ultimately, without the support of administrators and teachers, the dropout prevention efforts will not be successful.

Research Questions

Failure of students to complete high school is a problem that locks many students into low paying jobs and lead to other undesirable consequences. The Mississippi Department of Education’s Dropout Prevention Plan (2007) recognizes that Mississippi has not always fostered positive support for education. The state’s high dropout rate is just one example of this shortcoming. Mississippi has recently launched a new dropout prevention program. This study will seek to determine if this program has had an impact on the state’s dropout rate.

The causes of students failing to complete high school are complex and have been broadly categorized into student factors and school factors. The Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan attempts to address both of these factors, although the emphasis of the program is directed toward school factors. This focus is understandable since the student factors have been widely researched and the school-related factors are less researched (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). This study will seek to address the knowledge, involvement, and attitudes of administrators and teachers toward the dropout prevention
programs by asking the following questions and addressing the corresponding hypotheses:

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs about the extent of the dropout problem of teachers and administrators and do teachers and administrators differ on these attitudes and beliefs?

2. What are the knowledge of and experience about the extent of the dropout problem of teachers and administrators and differ on this knowledge and experience?

3. Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their knowledge of dropout prevention strategies?

4. Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their attitudes toward the dropout prevention strategies?

5. Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their experience regarding dropout prevention strategies?

$H_1$: The attitudes and beliefs about the extent of the dropout problem of teachers and administrators will be statistically different.

$H_2$: The knowledge of and experience about the extent of the dropout problem of teachers and administrators will be statistically different.

$H_3$: The knowledge of dropout prevention strategies of administrators and teachers will be statistically different.

$H_4$: The attitudes of administrators and teachers will be statistically different toward dropout prevention strategies.
H₃: The experience regarding dropout prevention strategies between administrators and teachers will be statistically different.

Delimitations

This study is limited to public schools in the state of Mississippi; the participants are certified personnel in the state of Mississippi: principals, assistant principals, teachers, counselors, dropout prevention specialists, and central office personnel.

Assumptions

This study assumes that the graduation rates, dropout rates, and completion rates were reported accurately by the school districts in Mississippi, and that the participants truthfully answered the questionnaire.

Definition of Terms

*Administrator* is a person serving in a role in requiring a Mississippi School administrator license.

*Cohort* is a group of students tracked from the 9th grade to the 12th grade.

*Completion Rate* is a measurement of students who complete a high school diploma, a GED at an approve school district program, or a special education certificate (MDE, 2007).

*Common Core Data* (CCD) is a program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics that annually collects fiscal and non-fiscal data about all public schools, public school districts and state education agencies in the United States (NCES, 2009, p. A1).

*Cumulative Promotion Index* (CPI) is a system of estimating graduation rate based on a two year average of grade promotion (Swanson, 2004).
Dropout is a student who was enrolled in school the previous year, but fails to return by October 1 of the next year (NCES, 2009, p.A2).

Dropout Rate is a measure of students who leave a school during a four-year cohort period (MDE, 2007).

Event dropout rate estimates the percentage of high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent (e.g., a GED) (NCES, 2009, p.1).

Graduation Rate is a measure of the number of students who graduate within four years with some exception for students with an IEP (NGA, 2005).

On the Bus is the Mississippi Department of Education’s public information campaign designed to enlisted support for the dropout prevention plan.

Status dropout rate reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential (NCES, 2009, p.1).

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a classification of an individual based on income and educational attainment (Orfield, 2004).

Teacher is a person serving in a role in requiring a Mississippi School teacher license.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this dissertation will be based primarily on the following four thinkers: Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, James Coleman’s Social Capital Theory, J.D. Finn's Frustration-Self-Esteem Model and Participation-
Identification Model, and Russell Rumberger's Individual and Institutional perspectives.

Each of these will be discussed in depth in Chapter II.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

President George W. Bush’s *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB, 2002) has been the guiding force in educational reform in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The act called for schools to take the United States’ educational system into the future, but in light of the problems associated with high school dropouts, the goals of NCLB will be difficult to reach. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barrack Obama pledged to fix the problems with NCLB by providing schools the resources necessary to achieve the goals of the act (Highlights of Barrack Obama Education Proposal, 2008). Once in office, President Obama declared his support for continued education reforms. Linda Darling-Hammond (2009), one of Obama’s chief educational advisers, provided details of Obama’s plan in the *Harvard Educational Review* soon after he took office. In this article, Dr. Darling-Hammond affirmed Obama’s view that educating the nation’s children is a collective responsibility, and affirmed that the President will continue to view education as society’s investment in the future. President Obama made numerous references in his campaign speeches to the fact that the United States’ educational system is lagging behind much of the world, and if this problem is not addressed the future of our nation is uncertain. Darling-Hammond quotes Obama saying that “We are the nation that has always understood that our future is inextricably linked to the education of our children—all of them” (p. 214).
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on four major thinkers; Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, James Coleman’s Social Capital Theory, J.D. Finn's Frustration-Self-Esteem Model and Participation-Identification Model, and Russell Rumberger's individual and institutional perspectives.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (1970) was a psychologist who developed a theory of motivation based on the idea that the basic needs of an individual must be met before an individual can proceed to higher level needs. The first set of needs Maslow detailed are physiological needs: air, food, and water. With these needs unmet, an individual cannot progress to the next level of the hierarchy: safety needs, which represents freedom, or at least protection, from danger. Once the physiological and safety needs are satisfied in Maslow’s theory, an individual concentrates on love and belonging needs. This hierarchy includes the desires for friendship, family and intimacy that provide added protection and acceptance. The next level is esteem needs which have to do with a person being valued by others. The last and highest level is self-actualization. Self-actualization is reaching one’s potential by finding one’s place in society and achieving one’s goals. Each level of Maslow’s theory can be applied to the problem of high school dropouts. Many educators have recognized that if a student’s basic needs are not met, it is impossible to teach that child (Cole, 2008). When a child is hungry, homeless, or scared, school will not be a priority for that student. These factors are often involved in a student’s decision to drop out of school.
Poverty has long been recognized as a major factor in a student’s decision to discontinue education (Orfield, 2004). Poverty adversely impacts virtually every aspect of a child’s life, and the stress of poverty makes it difficult for a child to be successful in school (Wadsworth, Raviv, Reinhard, Wolff, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2008). In the understanding of Maslow, impoverished families that do not have their basic needs meet cannot focus on school since their main concern is securing the daily needs of life. This may mean the child lacks the necessary material and emotional support to be successful in school. Poverty directly impacts school attendance in several ways. One Mississippi teacher reported that her students often miss school since the family cannot afford to buy or wash school required uniforms (personal communication, 2011). The families of the impoverished move often and students find it difficult to establish firm relationships with peers and teachers who can encourage children to stay in school (Rumberger, 1995). Students who are in poverty often leave school for employment to meet basic needs (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005).

Safety is also a factor in students dropping out. School violence is an increasing problem. Students who are afraid of violence at school are more likely to withdraw from school (Johnson, 2009). Bullying is an example of school violence. Bullying is a form of violence that intentionally harms an individual or group by using words or acts of physical violence. Students who are victims of bullying often withdraw from school (Quiroz, Arnette, & Stephens, 2005). Townsend, Flisher, Chikovu, Lombard, and King (2008), in a South African study, found that bullying is more likely to be a factor when girls dropout of school.
Maslow’s higher order needs of love/belonging and esteem can be a positive force to hold children in school; unfortunately these forces can also be a negative influence. Staff and Kreager (2008) found that although peer influence can bring about a positive commitment to education and school, peer influence can persuade certain groups of disadvantaged youths to withdraw from school and migrate toward anti-social behavior that often is related to gangs and violence. In such groups, young people find belonging and esteem from those who are already alienated from the school culture; so in the long run these influences lead them to leave school without graduating.

Maslow’s highest need of self-actualization may not be attainable by high school students, but there is no doubt that completing high school can be the first step in gaining a career and avoiding a host of unhappy outcomes (Orfield, 2004). Whigham (2008) found that many high achieving African American high school graduates have moved into the main stream of the educational community. These African American students who as a race are at high risk of dropping out can benefit from engaging teachers, extracurricular activities, and from the chance to earn scholarships to higher education. These advantages will allow them to be role models for their peers and give them the chance to achieve their potential.

Social Capital

James Coleman is an American sociologist who has had a long career in the evaluation of education and schools. In 1966 he presented a comprehensive report to Congress claiming that poor African American students progressed academically when placed in integrated schools with middle-class white children. In the 1980s he turned his research to studying Catholic and private schools (Coleman, 1988). Coleman’s research
Coleman explained that there has been a longstanding understanding of physical capital: factories, tools, and other products that facilitate the means of production; and in recent generations the term “human capital” has come into use. Human capital refers to the skills and capabilities that a person possesses that allow him or her to create and to produce change. Social capital is based on relationships and interactions between individuals, families, communities, and institutions. These relationships must be built on trustworthiness, information sharing, and understanding obligations and expectations. Coleman states that the relationship between parents and children is the most important and this relationship will often determine a child’s educational outcome.

Coleman used his social capital theory to explain why Catholic and private schools generally have fewer dropouts than public schools. The main benefit that the Catholic and private schools have over the public schools is the family and personal investment of capital that is made into the school and the child. In Coleman’s understanding, each of the three forms of capital plays a role in a child progressing in school. A family’s physical capital refers to wealth and financial resources that may help facilitate a child’s educational progress such as “a fixed place in the home for studying, materials to aid learning [and] the financial resources that smooth family problems” (p. S109). The physical capital is also used to pay the tuition for the Catholic and private schools that for many families may represent a major investment. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2009), the average tuition at a private high school is in excess of $8,000.00. The human capital is often determined by the educational attainment of the parents and other family members and their ability to act as
role models and to actively assist a child in learning. Coleman gave the example of John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher of the Nineteenth century. Mill’s father had the resources and intellectual abilities to teach his young son Greek and Latin and a host of advanced philosophical concepts. Mill and his father spent long hours discussing and reviewing these concepts as the young Mill grew. Coleman recognized that the physical and human capital provided by a family strongly affects a child’s educational outcomes, but Coleman asserts that without social capital the physical and human capital a family provides is “irrelevant to outcomes for children if parents are not an important part of their children’s lives” (p. S110).

Coleman (1988) admitted that social capital is not an easy concept to measure and primarily relied on the physical presence or the lack of presence of the parents (and/or other adults) in the home to account for social capital. He contends that a single-parent family often represents a structural deficiency although a nuclear family can also be structurally deficient if one or both parents are excessively absent from the home for employment or other reasons, or if the relationship between the parent and child(ren) is broken for some reason. Coleman also indicates that the presence of siblings in a home can affect social capital in the sense that the parents have less time to devote to each child. The social capital gained from a family combines with the social capital from the extended family and the community to help shape a child’s educational outcome. As mentioned, Coleman’s studies were based on Catholic and private schools, but he was careful to point out that it was not necessarily the religious nature of the schools that impacted the dropout rates, as much as it was the fact that the Catholic and private schools represented a clear investment by the families and communities in the schools
and the education of the children. Coleman concludes his research with the bold statement that the development of social capital has “considerable value in reducing the probability of dropping out of high school” (p. S119).

Teachman, Paasch, and Carver (1996) confirmed many of Coleman’s finds about the importance of family connectivity, the support offered by Catholic schools, but added that changing school adversely disrupts a child’s social capital. The number of times a child changes schools increases the chance of that child dropping out. Teachman, Paasch, and Carver speculate that changing schools is an indication of family or economic problems, and that the teachers at the new schools may be less willing to committed time and energy with the new students. The students may have a difficult time making the needed social connections with the teachers and students at the new school.

Other researchers and even students recognize the importance of social capital. Brown and Rodríguez (2009) two Harvard University researchers provide a heart-breaking account of two Hispanic students Angel and Ramon, who valued education and had even passed their state high school exit exam, but without the support system to help them overcome the obstacles they faced could not graduate. They faced barriers from their family and social background and from a large urban school where they seemed to fall through the cracks and left school almost unnoticed.

*The Frustration-Self-Esteem and the Participation-Identification Models*

Finn is a professor from the State University of New York at Buffalo who has devoted much of his career to the investigation into the causes of and solutions to the problems of high school dropouts. Finn (1989) explains that dropping out of school is
not, in most cases, a single event but is most often a culmination of a series of events that began early in a student’s life that eventually results in the child withdrawing from school. He has developed two models for understanding high school dropouts: the frustration-self-esteem model and the participation-identification model. Both models recognize that dropouts often exhibit chronic absenteeism, truancy, behavior problems, and general school failure. The frustration-self-esteem model is Finn’s way of explaining the most common approach to the problem of students dropping out of school. This approach sees dropping out of school as a symptom of juvenile delinquency. In this understanding, the school dropout began with early school failure which resulted in reduced self-esteem over frustration with school problems. In order to mask the school failure, the student may begin cutting class, disrupting the learning environment, and doing other acts that lead to the student either leaving school voluntarily or forcibly by expulsion. The early school failure can be a result of the school’s failure to use proper instructional strategies or the failure to recognize a learning disability. These deficient school practices combine with other factors in the child’s life to lead the student down a path toward school withdrawal.

Finn’s (1989) other model for understanding the school dropout is the participation-identification model. This model explains in positive terms elements necessary for a child to be successful in school. This model emphasizes the importance of attachment, identification, commitment, and bonding to school and the educational process to explain why some students at risk of dropping out stay in school. Finn explains that it is vital that a student have a sense of belonging or affiliation to school that should begin early in a child’s schooling. This affiliation involves a child seeing the
school as an important part of his or her life and the idea that education is an important goal for the child. It is usually initiated by early parental encouragement and continues as the child moves through the educational process with at least a minimal degree of academic success. Finn also indicates that a child should be an active participant in the educational environment, both in class and outside of class. Finn breaks down participation into four levels. The first level is when the students respond to the information initiated by the teacher. This first level is often the only level used in the early grades, when a child progresses to the next level where the students and teachers can begin to dialogue, discuss, and interact at a higher point. In level two, the student begins to take some of the responsibility for his or her learning and often will participate in outside activities and clubs related to class work. The maturity of the child will continue into the third level, where the student’s school involvement moves beyond class work to involvement with social activities, athletics, student government, and a host of other possible extracurricular activities. Finn points out that involvement in these types of extracurricular activities boosts a student’s self-esteem, grades, overall educational attainment, and provides many positive outcomes including a reducing the dropout rate and delinquency. The fourth level of participation is participating in decision making for the school. Finn indicates that many educational professionals advocate empowering students to be involved in goal setting and student disciplinary matters as a means giving students a voice of influencing the actions of the school.

*Individual and Institutional Perspective*

Russell Rumberger is a professor at Stanford University and has done extensive research attempting to understand why students drop out of school. He understands the
dropout problem through two conceptual frameworks (Rumberger, 2004). The first is the individual perspective and the second is the institutional perspective. The individual perspective focuses on student factors such as a student’s background, values, attitudes, and behaviors. These are expressed in terms of student engagement. Rumberger builds on Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model to explain engagement as a critical element in determining success in school. Rumberger divides engagement in terms of formal aspects (classroom and social activities) and informal engagement (peer and adult relationships). The individual perspective in most cases does not alone explain why a student drops out, but it must be understood alongside the institutional perspective.

The institutional perspective encompasses a variety of variables that are totally removed from the control of the student. The first and, according to many experts, most important of these variables is a student’s family. Rumberger (2004) follows closely to Coleman (1988) in claiming that a child’s family structure “exerts a powerful, independent influence on student achievement” (Rumberger, 2004, p. 138). According to Rumberger, along with Coleman (1988), single-parent and step-parent families are more likely to produce dropouts than a nuclear family.

Rumberger added that most dropouts fall within certain socioeconomic status groups. Socioeconomic status is measured in terms of a family’s income and prior educational attainment. Along with the family factor, school factors play an important role in a decision to drop out. Rumberger identifies four school characteristics that have an impact on dropout rates: school composition, school resources, structural characteristics, and processes and practices.
Rumberger also includes community and peers in institutional perspective since a student’s environment, too has a major impact on his or her educational success. School composition includes characteristics such as the racial and socioeconomic make-up of a school. These factors have been demonstrated in numerous studies to be a major factor in predicting a school dropout rate. School resources are generally the amount of money and other community resources available to a school program and personnel.

The importance of resources has been debated but Rumberger indicates that studies have found that schools with a lower teacher/pupil ratio also have lower dropout rate. The lower teacher/pupil ratio in general means smaller classes that allow for greater student/teacher interaction that in turns promotes student engagement. School structure is related to size and location of schools and the type of control of a school either public or private. Rumberger discusses Coleman’s (1988) and others researchers that indicate private schools have lower dropout rates. Rumberger affirms that this is true but adds that often private school students transfer to public school prior to dropping out. With this fact in mind, Rumberger contends that there is no statistical difference in the dropout rate between private and public schools. Rumberger does report that in general smaller schools have a less of a dropout problem than larger schools. The dropout rate of large school is most often found to be associated with socioeconomic status according to Rumberger’s research.

School policies and practices are factors that may directly or indirectly impact the dropout problems. These are often related to school climate and culture. The Mississippi Department of Education’s Dropout Prevention Plan (2007), states that Mississippi is a state that has not always fostered a positive school climate, and that some school
practices may drive students away from school. Rumberger indicates that a positive school climate which is reflected in positive relationships between students and teachers reduces the risk of students dropping out (Rumberger, 2004).

Challenges Faced by Dropouts

One of the looming challenges of the American educational system is the problem of high school dropouts. The April 17, 2006 cover story of *Time Magazine* was entitled “Dropout Nation,” written by Nathan Thornburgh. This article focused on the alarming dropout rate that still haunts the United States as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, a time when education is critical to personal and national success. In the past, a high school dropout could find employment in factories, construction, and a number of other trades that could offer a good living and an acceptable lifestyle, but in today’s high-tech economy these jobs are becoming increasingly hard to find for the high school dropout (Thornburgh, 2006). President Barrack Obama (2009), in his first State of the Union address, declared that “dropping out is no longer an option.” Obama recognized there is an increasing amount of global economic competition between the United States, Asia, Europe, and the rest of the world.

*The Need for an Educated Workforce*

The United States was founded at the birth of the Industrial Age, and soon the United States became the world’s leading industrial power (Hunter, 1979), but today the Industrial Age has passed. The world is deep into the Information and Technological Age where a strong back is not as important as a strong mind in finding success in the highly competitive job market. Many of the low-wage entry-level jobs have gone overseas, and it appears that this trend will continue in the future as China, Japan, Indian
and many other nations continue to increase their economic output. These countries are not only taking the lead in manufacturing but are now threatening to challenge the United States in the information and technology quarter. The economy of the United States continues to create many jobs, but these increasingly demand a higher educational level than the entry-level jobs of the past (Thornburgh, 2006).

Business groups are finding it increasingly difficult to find trained and qualified labor (Day and Salzman, 2009). One survey found that rural manufacturers specified that finding educated, quality workforce availability is their most pressing concern. The new manufacturing technologies that have developed with the new global economy require factories to use robots, computers, and a host of other advanced technologies that need well-educated and skilled labor forces (McGranahan, 1998).

In the *Time* article, Thornburgh (2006) states the following:

Dropping out of high school today is to your societal health what smoking is to your physical health, an indicator of a host of poor outcomes to follow, from low lifetime earning to high incarceration rates to a high likelihood that your children will drop out of high school and start the cycle anew (Thornburgh, 2006).

**Consequences of Dropping Out**

*Cost to the Individual*

Dropping out of high school is costly for society and the individual. It is important to understand the consequences of not completing high school. The earning power of high school dropouts has been proven time and time again to be less than that of the high school graduate. Statistics show that the lifetime earnings of the high school
dropout are far less than that of the high school graduate. The earning power of the high school dropout who is employed full-time has decreased 35% in the past thirty years (Barton, 2006). The Brookings Institution (Belfield & Levin, 2007) found that in 1964 a non-high school graduate could expect to earn 64% of what a high school graduate would earn but by 2004 this had been reduced to 37%. Overall, the dropout is more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, spend time in prison, suffer from health problems, and even divorced (PEER, 2007). One study even found that students who dropout have decreased verbal skills that makes it difficult to communicate which further compromises one’s chances for success across all areas of life (Vaughn, Beaver, Wexler, DeLisi, & Roberts, 2011). And in too many cases, dropping out of high school becomes a family tradition that is passed on from one generation to another. Basically every social problem is associated with the problem of school dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

**Societal Cost of Dropping Out**

Becoming a high school dropout is costly for the individual and it is also costly for the society. Research indicates that high school dropouts, may cost the nation up to $300 billion per year. Dropouts have a higher arrest rate than high school graduates, and most prison inmates are high school dropouts (Darling-Hammond, 2009). This does not mean that most high school dropouts are involved in crime, but dropping out of high school often leads to involvement in criminal activity (Staff and Kreager, 2008).

Dropping out of high school also is a predictor of dependence on public assistance since dropouts are twice as likely to receive welfare benefits as high school graduates. Their dependence costs taxpayers untold billions of dollars and this cost does not include
the loss of earnings and tax revenue that could have been produced by the individuals who failed to be graduated (Bridgeland et al, 2006). Belfield and Levin (2007) in a Brookings Institution study found that being a high school dropout not only reduced one’s lifetime income but also cost taxpayers far more than high school graduates. Since the average earnings of high school dropouts are less, they pay an estimated $50,000 less in taxes in a lifetime and cost the taxpayers more in increased welfare, healthcare, and correctional costs. The Brookings Institution study also found that a single mother who is a high school graduate is 50% less likely to be on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families than a high school dropout. Over the course of his or her lifetime, a dropout is expected to cost the government an additional $39,000 in healthcare expenditures (Belfield and Levin, 2007).

How Dropout Rate is Determined

Understanding the consequences of dropping out of school are important, but it is equally important to understand how the dropout rate is determined, since there is a debate on what the actual number of dropouts is each year. In the article, “Dropout Nation,” Thornburgh (2006) focused on the small town of Shelbyville, Indiana, which is about 30 miles southeast of Indianapolis. This school had 315 students beginning the ninth grade in 2002, but only 215 of these were expected to be graduated. Thornburgh stated, “The 100 others have simply melted away, dropping out in a slow steady bleed that left the town wondering how it could have let down many of the kids” (p. 31).

This number of 100 dropouts appears to be close to the national average of one out of every three or four students who do not complete high school that many experts recognize as a close estimate of the dropout rate (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Gerald Bracey
(2009a) points out the general assumption that the graduation rate should be calculated by counting the number of students entering ninth-grade and dividing by the number of students receiving a diploma four years later to find the graduation rate. The inverse would be the dropout rate. Bracey points out that this formula does not work since the ninth-grade is often disproportionally larger than other classes due to the fact that many students transfer to the ninth grade from private schools and students are often retained in the ninth-grade. Also, some students with disabilities may complete high school but are not awarded a regular diploma, and are not counted as a graduate.

Calculating the Dropout Rate

Calculating the dropout rate is a difficult process since almost every school system and agency uses different data in making the determination. The United States Census Bureau for many decades has provided information on the population’s educational attainment and has maintained statistics on the percentages of the population that has a high school diploma. The Census Bureau data is gathered via the Current Population Survey (CPS) that indicates the number of 16-24 year olds who report having a high school diploma. The CPS is a monthly survey of about 50,000 homes in the United States that has been taken for over 50 years (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Kena, Kewal-Ramani, Kemp, Bianco, & Dinkes, 2009). The CPS indicates that dropout rates have been trending downward for the past few decades and the 2007 rate was estimated at 9% (Planty et al, 2009).

Unfortunately the CPS data is not considered reliable by many scholars for various reasons. First, it does not include individuals that are institutionalized such as in a hospital or correctional institution and it does not include individuals in living military
barracks although service members living in family or off-base housing may be included. Secondly, it is based on the self report of respondents. The respondents may not always provide accurate information. One example would be a person who may have completed 12 years of high school but received a special education certificate. This person may report that he or she is a high school graduate but in reality he or she is not considered a high school graduate based on the NCLB regulations. Others may be embarrassed about being a high school dropout and are not truthful in answering the questions (Barton, 2009). To counter some of the problems with the CPS, a group of scholars with the Urban Institute, lead by Swanson (2004), developed a measure called the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), a system of estimating graduation rate based on a two-year average of grade promotion.

The CPI uses the Common Core Data (CCD) that is collected from the U.S. Department of Education and state education departments and compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Swanson’s group does not use dropout statistics in their calculations since they do not trust the reliability of the reported dropout rates. Swanson claims that since the CPI data are gathered over a shorter timeframe, it is a more accurate tool for accountability, and thus the CPI can help schools improve their graduation rates in a manner more effective than other graduation rate reporting systems that require data to be collected over a long period of time. According to Swanson, the national graduation rate is around 70% (Swanson, 2004).
Overestimating the Dropout Rate

Labor economist Mishel and Roy (2006) contend that Swanson and many others over-estimated the dropout rate since most of the current calculations of the dropout rate compare the ninth grade class to the graduating class four years later. Mishel and Roy indicate that since more students are retained in the ninth-grade than in the other high school grades; comparing the ninth-grade class to the graduating class is not an accurate measure of the graduation rate. They would prefer to compare only incoming freshman, and not repeaters, but there are not any statistics kept with this measurement. Mishel and Roy defend the Census Bureau CPS data that reports a continued reduction of the high school dropout rate. Mishel and Roy state that while it is true that the CPS does not included the prison population with its a large number of dropouts, this data is balanced by the fact CPS also excluded most young military men and women who are most often high school graduates. Mishel and Roy report there is no evidence that the responders give false information on the CPS and this is speculation on the part of those who wish to discredit the CPS data. Mishel and Roy contend that the CPS is consistent with the decennial census of 2000 that collected data from the entire population that shows the overall education level of the nation continuing to rise.

It is interesting to point out that Mishel and Roy (2006) found at one point the CPS data may overestimate the number of high school dropouts by including recent immigrants in the data. This inclusion unfairly skews the estimate of the dropout rate since most of these recent immigrants are coming from improvised third world counties that do not have a comparable educational system to the United States and many never enroll in schools in the United States.
No Child Left Behind Act Requirements

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires states to adopt a standard graduation reporting policy to include the number of students that graduate in the standard four years with a regular high school diploma. NCLB is an example of the increased role of federal government in education that has taken place over the past few decades. Since the 1994 Improving America’s School Act, the federal government has been playing a major role in standards-based educational accountability with the goal of enhancing the achievement of students and schools (Goertz, 2005). NCLB includes an emphasis on increased accountability, highly-qualified teachers in the classroom, scientifically research-based educational programs, expanded local control, and increased parental involvement with schools. NCLB also mandates that states take steps to improve their yearly progress on test scores and high school completion rate (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004).

In an effort to comply with the NCLB mandates, the National Governors Association (NGA), adopted a uniform standard to calculate high school graduation rates and dropout rates (2005). The National Governors system is based on a cohort of enrolling ninth-graders and following their progress toward graduation four years later. In the governors system, certain students with disabilities would be considered on-time graduates even if they required longer than four years.

All of the systems for tracking high school graduation and dropout rates have their limitations. The only fool-proof system would be requiring all students to have a nationwide identification number and then have that number tracked each year to
determine the student’s academic progress, but this system does not exist (Rumberger, 2004).

**Distorting the Dropout Rate**

Paul Barton (2009) points out that even when states and school districts develop sound means of reporting dropouts there is always the possibility of “deliberate distortion” (p. 17) of the dropout rates. Barton based his explanation on Campbell’s Law that states “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressure and the more apt it will be to be distort and corrupt the social process it is intended to monitor” (p. 17). NCLB requires a series of possible sanctions if states and school districts do not improve their graduation and dropout rates and to avoid these sanctions, states and school districts may be tempted to distort the graduation and dropout data. Barton points out Texas as an example of manipulating the statistics to make their data look better. Texas developed a classification of “school leavers” that were not counted in the statistics. The “school leavers” were students who were withdrawn by parents for home school, removed by Child Protective Services, moved to another state, expelled, and several others categories that were difficult, if not impossible, to verify. These numbers allowed Texas to report in 2006 a graduation rate of 80.4%, but this was done by counting 65,877 students as “school leavers” and 6,608 as “data errors” not dropouts. The use of these numbers allowed schools with 1000 freshman and only 300 seniors to report no dropouts (Bracey, 2009a).
Low Promoting Power

Researchers Balfanz and Legters (2004) developed a slightly different strategy of discussing graduation and dropout rates using the term “promoting power.” They took the Common Core Data (CCD) available from the Nation Center of Education Statistics and compared the number of freshman to the number of seniors four years later. This ratio would be the promoting power. This is based on the assumption that as school with a similar ratio of freshmen to seniors would have a low dropout rate and a high graduation rate. Balfanz and Legters used this system to identify schools with low promoting power. They found 2000 high schools in the United States with promoting power of less than 60% and these schools produce half of the dropouts in the country. These schools are found throughout the country but are concentrated in 17 states that have a number of schools with low promoting power (Balfanz, Alameida, Steinberg, Santos & Fox, 2009). These 17 states are Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee. In Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee, the dropout crisis is primarily in large metropolitan areas. In the others states, the dropout problem is spread across the entire state, although most of dropouts come from urban areas. In Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina, over half of the dropouts come from rural areas.

Reasons Students Dropout

Drawing on Rumberger’s (2004) individual and institutional perspectives of understanding dropouts, Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, and Thompson (2004) indicate that they have determined that most research has focused on common factors that are
predictors and variables associated with students who become a high school dropout. The factors are divided into two categories: status variables and alterable variables. The status variables such as socioeconomic status are generally set and are difficult to change. The alterable variables such as attendance and school engagement are easier to influence and are the focus of most dropout prevention programs. The status variables include a host of possible causes including poverty, family issues, race, and many other possible variables. The alterable variables that are considered school factors by many researchers include school organization and size, location, high stakes testing, teacher quality and school engagement. Most often, these variables are inter-related and difficult to separate. The research has found that there is generally not a single factor that leads a student to dropout, but a variety of factors working together.

Socioeconomic Status

It is widely recognized that high school dropouts come from a lower income socioeconomic background (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Poverty is the one variable that almost every study finds with the strongest correlation to students dropping out of high school. It is generally recognized that poor children do less well in school than other children at all economic levels. Poor children suffer from inadequate food, shelter, safety, and health care and these problems often carry over into the educational system: virtually every other factor associated with the dropout problems is exasperated by poverty (Christle et al., 2007).

According to the Mississippi Economic Policy Center (Fact Sheet, 2010), the poverty rates in Mississippi continue to increase to a rate of 23.1%, compared to the previous year’s rate of 18.1%. This data means that many families are unable to meet
their basic needs, and based on the understanding of Maslow (1970) that if the basic needs are not being meet, higher level needs cannot be obtained. The dropout rate among low-income students is 25%, compared to middle-income families at 13%, and 8% for high income families (Christle et al., 2007). All too often, poverty is linked with single parent households headed by females who for a multitude of reasons tend to be mired in poverty (Coleman, 1988; Staff & Kreager, 2008).

The socioeconomic background is coupled with ethnic/racial background in the discussion of high school dropout rates since there is a high poverty rate in minority communities (Rumberger, 1995). Allensworth’s study of Chicago schools was referenced by Barton (2006) to discuss the racial differences in graduation rates. Thirty-nine percent of African American male students graduated by age 19, compared to 51% of Latino male students, and 58% of white male students. In all categories females fared better: 57% for African American, 65% for Latino, and 71% for white. Other studies place the dropout rate for whites at 6.9%, and this is doubled in the African American population to 13.1%, and doubled again in the Latino community to 27.8%. Students whose native language is other than English also have a tendency to drop out (Brewster and Bowen, 2004). Asian Americans tend to have the lowest dropout rate at less than 5%, and they have the highest overall educational achievement in the United States as compared to all other groups (Mishel & Roy 2006; Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Mobility of Students

One factor directly related to family socioeconomic status is the mobility of students, which is a major predictor of increased risk of dropping out (Teachman et al., 1996). The factor of mobility encompasses both the student’s moving residences and
moving schools. Students who trend to move around even in the same city are more likely to drop out as well as those who move from school to school. Students who move often do not have the school and community support network that is essential for maintaining a healthy attachment to the school environment (Rumberger, 2004). Student mobility is often associated with problems of family structure and poverty (Davis, 2006).

*Family Structure*

Children who come from single-parent families, families with alcohol/drug abuse, domestic violence, or a host of other family problems have the tendency to drop out at a far greater rate than children from stable two-parent families. Like many social problems, the problem of dropping out has become a family tradition (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students who have a parent or sibling that dropped out are at a greater risk of dropping out (Coleman, 1988). Family factors associated with the increased risk of children dropping out include health problems, literacy and education level of the parents, low expectation, permissive parenting, and abusive parenting (Reschly and Christenson, 2006). Parental unemployment may also raise the risk of students dropping out of school (Lehr et al, 2004), due to the child’s needing to work to support the family or not having the money to buy clothing and other necessary school items.

*Employment*

Almost all high school students today work at some point in their high school career, but researchers have found that work does have an impact on a student’s risk of dropping out. Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2005) found in a study in the high poverty environment of intercity Baltimore, that when 15-year-olds took adult-type jobs in manufacturing or business, they were more likely to drop out than 15-year-olds who held
teenage-type jobs such as lawn care or babysitting. They found at age 16 this was reversed and the teens with the adult-type jobs were more likely to stay in school. They surmised the reason for this contradictory data is that a 15-year-old is just entering high school and when he or she holds an adult-type job the stress may be too much to handle along with the stress of school. The 16-year-old has already made the transition to high school and may be able to better handle the responsibility of work and high school.

Hispanic Students

Ream and Rumberger (2008) report that almost half of Hispanic students fail to graduate high school. Many Hispanic families have come to the United States to work and they expect their teenage children to join them in the workforce to help support the family. Many of the Hispanic families come from Mexico where the vast majority of the population receives only a minimal education and the opportunity to work in the United States is seen as more valuable than continuing in school. Furthermore, Ream and Rumberger indicate Mexican Americans often lack the peer social capital, the informal network of friends, which could help them complete high school. Dr. H. Broome, (personal communications, November 30, 2009) of the Hattiesburg Public School District reports Hispanic students often leave school to enter the full-time work force due primarily to family expectations. Broome stated many of the migrant families come here for the purpose of working and when a student, particularly a male is able to work, he is expected to work to help support the family.

Premature Adulthood

Related to employment studies is the concept of premature adulthood. In females this generally results from early sexual activity and pregnancy. Studies have indicated
many of the socioeconomic and family factors that place students at risk for dropping out also place teenage girls at risk for pregnancy. Teenagers from lower socioeconomic status generally begin sexual activity earlier and are less likely to use contraception. Teen mothers have lower educational attainment than other women and drop out at a higher rate than non-teen mothers (Manlove, 1998). In a detailed longitudinal study of almost 5000 females, researchers found that women who began sexual activity prior to the age of 16 had a 23% lower high school graduation rate than women who did not have sexual relations prior to age 16 (Steward, Farkas, & Bingenheimer, 2009). In a Texas study that interviewed 225 high school dropouts, 25% of the students reported that pregnancy was the reason they dropout and remarkably even seven men report this as the reason they dropout (Meeker, 2005). In one of Mississippi’s One the Bus student meetings in 2008, a survey was conducted and the respondents to that survey report that pregnancy was one of the top three reason students leave school, with lack of support and drug use the other reasons (Teen Submit Summary, 2008).

For males, premature adulthood often reflects the way they are viewed by the school system, their family, and society. Many young African American youth report they were treated as adults when in reality they were only boys. This may come from a society that views them as potentially violent and dangerous. Premature manhood may also result from the need and desire of these young men to produce an income to help support themselves and in some cases their families (Davis, 2006).

Drug and Alcohol Problems

Premature adulthood is also seen with problems of tobacco, drug and alcohol use among teenagers. As previously mentioned, Mississippi students report that drug abuse
is one of the top three reasons that students dropout out of high school (Teen Submit Summary, 2008). In an extensive review of the literature related to the issue of substance use and school dropouts, Townsend, Flisher, and King (2007) found that the evidence was clear that students who drop out are more involved with the use of substances than their peers who remained in school although they stopped short of establishing a direct casual relationship between substance use and dropping out. This study concluded that because of the complex nature of the dropout issue the direct link between substance use and dropping out could not be made, but the statistics did indicate that dropouts used substances at a higher rate than those teenagers that remained in school.

Often, substance use is linked with juvenile delinquency. Historically, juvenile delinquency has been the major explanation of why students drop out of school (Finn, 1989). Finn indicates that students who exhibit deviant behavior often leave school without graduating voluntarily or by expulsion. In the twenty-first century context, substance use is often linked with gang activity. The increasing problem with gangs and the associated violence is aggravating the dropout problem (Staff & Kreager, 2008). Violence in and around schools is another factor in students dropping out of school for the victims who are afraid of going to school in a violent neighborhood and for the perpetrators who are often involved in a host of anti-social behaviors that make school attendance unlikely (Johnson, 2009).

Students with Disabilities

Students who suffer from disabilities are at a greater risk of dropping out, especially those with emotional/behavior problems (Lehr et al, 2004). Students with learning disabilities (LD) and emotional or behavior disorders (EBD) are at the highest
risk of all student populations of dropping out of school. The dropout rates among
students with disabilities for all categories of disability combined is roughly double that
of general educational peers. The importance of this group completing their education is
even more important than in the general education population since studies have found
that students with LD and EBD who drop out fare worse in employment prospects and
opportunity for postsecondary education. Students with disabilities are less likely to
receive the GED than compared to the non-disabled (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In
the past some studies have shown that gifted students are at risk of dropping out but
recent studies have shown this not to be the case (Matthews, 2006)

Alterable or School Factors Related to Students Dropping Out

There are many school-related factors which contribute to students competing
high school. School factors can be understood as aspects related to the organization of the
school such as school location, size, resources including leadership and teachers, the
impact of high stakes testing, and student engagement.

School Location and Size

Research generally finds that smaller schools have a lower dropout rate (Werblow
& Duesburg, 2009). Many large urban schools carry the weight of being in high crime
areas where often the students feel unsafe, the community may not value the educational
system, and these schools generally have high minority populations. Urban centers
generally produce more dropouts than their surrounding suburban neighbors and
unfortunately (Rumberger, 2004), the urban dropout rate shows no sign of improvement
(Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004). John Alspaugh (1998) found that school systems
with the largest number of transitions from school to school have the largest dropout rate.
Schools with the last transition in the 10\textsuperscript{th} grade had the highest dropout rate. The lowest dropout rate occurred in school districts that maintain a K-6 and 7-12 attendance center format. Other research has found that when schools can be broken down into small learning communities with interdisciplinary team teaching, they can overcome some of these problems (Kerr & Legters, 2004). Many schools systems have found that using a ninth grade academy type structure will ease students through the often rocky transition from middle school to high school (McCullumore & Sparapani, 2010).

\textit{Student Engagement}

Dropping out of school is a process, and usually there is not any single event that precipitated the student leaving school without graduating. The academic and behavioral problems of students are links in the process of disengagement from the educational and school environment. School engagement includes a sense of belonging, attitudes toward school, participation in extracurricular activities, relationship with peers, and relationship with teachers. Engagement involves emotional identification with school that leads to motivation for learning, success, and ultimately graduation. Disengagement is characterized by separation, disaffection, detachment, and in some cases hostility (Lehr et al, 2004). The most influential explanation of school engagement comes from Finn (1989) with his participation-identification model. Finn indicates that students must actively participate in school, and have a strong personal attachment to the school environment. Finn’s model indicates that a student’s positive feelings of belonging are vital to the engagement process. Attending school is the basic level of participation, but this should advance to include participation in the classroom and extracurricular activities.
Truancy is often the first sign of student/school disengagement. Many studies have found the major predicting factor of students dropping out is truancy. Truancy is staying away from school without permission. It is often seen as early as elementary school and naturally lends to a domino effect of lower achievement and eventually failure and retention. Truancy can also be associated with a host of other problems such as family problems, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, and criminal activity. Truancy indicates a lack of engagement and attachment to school. The causes of truancy echo those of the dropout: lack of school, community, and family support (McCray, 2006). Truancy is often an indicator of larger problems in a student’s life that makes academic success difficult to achieve (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Lehr et al. (2004) indicates that students with a history of low achievement and grade retention are exhibiting critical early warning signs of the risk of dropping out. This can be recognized early in a child’s educational experience, especially when a child has trouble reading and working basic math. Students who drop out have reported that they did little or no homework and generally their parents did not oversee their study habits. Teacher assigned grades and cumulative grade point averages are good identifiers of students at risk of dropping out (Bowers, 2010). These academic problems that lead to a student’s becoming at risk of dropping out are often detected as early as the first grade (Reinke, Herman, Petras, & Ialongo, 2008). Students who drop out often not only exhibit academic problems, but also exhibit by behavior and disciplinary problems, and in many cases have faced numerous suspensions (Lehr et al, 2004). Some charge that often the disciplinary system is unfair and thus drive some students out of school (Fine, 2005).
Participation in extracurricular activities has proven to be a powerful motivator to keep students engaged in the educational process, and in the long run students engaged in extracurricular activities maintain better attendance and grades (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In a recent study of North Carolina high school students, Stearns and Glenne (2010) confirmed that participation in extracurricular activities benefited educational outcomes and academic achievement. The research determined specifically that sports and vocational activities benefited students at risk of dropping out. Ream and Rumberger (2008) state “the student who feels attached to school is often the very student who participates in school activities” (p. 112). Disengaged students often have peer associations that do not cultivate academic culture and may lead them to drop out, while engaged students tend to develop friendships that make school a priority (Ream and Rumberger, 2008).

The Silent Epidemic (Bridgeland et al, 2006) indicated that boredom and the lack of relevance are major reasons that students lose interest in school and eventually drop out. Other studies also report that boredom is a contributing factor to students dropping out (Barack, 2006). In order to overcome this problem, teachers need to learn how to make the assignments and lessons appropriate for students who lack motivation and interest in learning. Unfortunately students will not be fascinated with every lesson, but according to Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) there are several steps that can be used to engage students in learning and break the failure curve that often leads down the road to becoming a dropout. They assign work that is worthy of the effort. So much school work is busy work, but students need to have work that is “authentic and engaging” (p. 9) that will be of benefit to the students to learn. Long-term inquiry
projects in which the students become deeply involved and which motivate the students to stay after school, go to the library, and spend energy and brain power make excellent assignments. Buildings classrooms around small learning communities are an effective means of improving achievement and reducing the dropout rate (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2007).

The next suggestion Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) make is to make the work doable. The student must be able to complete the task with a reasonable effort. One way to do this is to have the students get started under direct supervision of the teacher and not to assign new material for homework. It has been found that successful schools add homework time before and after school to assist students who need extra help. This time could be made a requirement for students who are falling behind. Engaged students are often described by their teachers as active participants who pay attention, complete their assignments, and try hard. Disengaged students are described in the opposite manner as inattentive, refusing to complete assignments, and lacking a good attitude (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). This description by teachers may reveal the “push out” factor that several researchers have identified as a contributing factor to students dropping out.

High Stakes Testing

One of the “push out” factors that schools and students have to deal with is high stakes testing. According to the Center of Education Policy, 26 states now have some form of high school exit examinations that are required in order to receive a high school diploma (Zabala, Minnici, Hill, Bartly, & Jennings, 2007). According to several researchers (Fine, 2005; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2005) high school graduation exams are a
contributing factor to students dropping out of school. Shriberg and Shriberg claim they have collected reports from students that indicated some students were encouraged to leave school rather than drive down the school’s test scores which could pose the threat of adverse consequences to the school administration. Shriberg and Shriberg also cite statistical information to back up their claim that graduation exams are encouraging students to drop out of school. More students are being retained, especially in the ninth grade. This reduces the number of students subject to testing since commonly testing begins in the tenth grade for most students. Grade retention is a major risk factor associated with students who drop out and the ninth grade is often the grade in which students depart school. Shriberg and Shriberg report that research in Florida found that increasingly students with marginal grades who in the past would have been able to graduate are now more likely to drop out. They speculate it is because these marginal students believe or have been led to believe that they will not be able to pass the graduation exams, and thus drop out to avoid the test. Some of these students may opt to take the GED based on the impression that it is easier than taking the graduation exams (Fine, 2005). Unfortunately, these students will discover that even if they successfully pass the GED, it is not an exact equivalent to a high school diploma (Caputo, 2005).

Other researchers indicate they have not found any evidence that supports the conclusion that high stakes testing leads to an increase in the dropout rate (Zabala & Minnici, 2007). According to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz (2009), most teachers and principals feel that high stakes testing is not a major factor in the dropout problem. Gerald Bracey (2009b) indicates that the evidence is clear that exit exams discourage many students from completing high school. It is clear that failing to pass the state test is
causing seniors not to be able to graduate (Menzer & Hampel, 2009). In 2011, the Clarion Ledger, Mississippi’s largest newspaper, reported that 3000 Mississippi seniors need to pass one or more state tests in order to graduate (Brown, 2011). In most cases these students will be considered dropouts unless they were disabled students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) who were eligible to receive a Certificate Attendance but even these students would not be included in the graduation rate (NGA, 2005).

Student Teacher Relationships

Black (2002) has determined that most research on reasons students drop out focuses on three categories of risk factors.

- Social background, including race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic residence. Academic performance, including scholastic ability, test scores, and grade retention. Academic behaviors, including school engagement, grades, courses failures, and discipline problems (p. 2).

These factors focus the blame for the problem on the students and families, but according to Black, a new look needs to be given at the school to determine if some of the children are “pushed out” of school. School size, academic curriculum, and student-teacher relationships are factors that should be included in the causes of problem. Black (2002) added that the accepted idea that the student and their families are responsible for the dropout problems tends to let schools off the hook (p. 3). The school dropouts often report that teachers and administrators do not care about them. Students that face social isolation, peer pressure, and bullying, and who fail to receive proper attention from the school staff are more likely to be pushed out of school. Students from disadvantaged
backgrounds are likely to stay in school when they receive positive reinforcement from
the school.

Scott (2005) is another researcher who discovered that the relationship between
students and teachers is a prime factor causing students to drop out of school. Scott said
“Most dropouts can’t identify one teacher to whom they could go for help, and most
believe that no one at school cared about them” (p. 39). She conducted interviews with
many dropouts and found similar stories among them. They reported teachers who would
not help them, teachers who embarrassed them, and these dropouts perceived that the
school wanted them to drop out. Scott added, “As adults, we do not continue to go places
where we are embarrassed or treated rudely. Students eventually make the same choice.
They come to believe that they are unliked, unwelcome, and incapable of succeeding in
school” (p. 40). Adults in the schools may make disparaging remarks out of momentary
frustration that they do not remember, but unfortunately the students do remember and
over time, these comments build up in the student’s mind until they come to the
conclusion that they are not welcome in the school. Scott indicated that students may not
understand cause and effect and cannot comprehend that their own actions may have
caused the adults to react negatively to them. Scott calls for teachers to treat students
with respect, even when their behavior may not deserve respect, to offer help, and
encouragement. In some sense, teachers need to find a way to go the extra-mile to reach
some students.

Dropout Prevention Programs

Dropout prevention programs across the nation generally follow the formula laid
out by the National Center for Dropout Prevention of Clemson University and this is the
model Mississippi is following (Mississippi Department of Education, 2007). There are four important elements to the *Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan* (2007): early intervention, parental and community involvement, credit recovery, and school based General Education Development (GED) classes.

*Early Intervention and Parental Involvement*

Researchers have established for years that early intervention and parental involvement can decrease the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school (Temple, 2000). Along with requiring states to improve the dropout situation, NCLB also requires that schools receiving federal funds make efforts to keep parents informed about the schools and seek to involve the parents in decision making whenever possible. This is based on the concept that children perform at higher levels when their parents are active partners in the education of their children. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), the evidence is overwhelming that families have a major impact on a child’s success in school and life. Henderson and Mapp stated “When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.” McConaughy, Kay, Welkowitz, Hewitt, and Fitzgerald (2008) detailed the importance of early intervention and parental involvement. They provided a plan entitled “Achieving-Behaving-Caring.” They report that when parents and teacher collaborate, students have a greater chance of school success and in the long run obtain a higher graduation rate. In a 2009 study by Civic Enterprise found that the vast majority of teachers and principals believe that increased parental involvement was a key element to reducing the dropout rate (Bridgeland et al., 2009).
Credit recovery

As a component of the *Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan* (2007) a system of credit recovery was developed so that students who have failed courses can seek to retake part of the course if the student has a reasonable chance of passing the course. If the student is successful, full credit for the course can be earned. This type of credit recovery is part of a nationwide strategy that hopes to prevent students from getting too far behind that they give up and drop out (Dessoff, 2009). Wilhelm (2009) detailed the success of this strategy in Riverside, California, where many students who had actually dropped out have returned to school and completed their high school diploma; others who were at risk of dropping out were encouraged to stay in school and graduate as a result of the credit recovery opportunities. Credit recovery is very important to seniors who are at risk of not having enough credits to graduate (Menzer & Hampel, 2009).

School Based GED

Another component of the *Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan* (2007) is the implementation of school based General Educational Development (GED) classes in order to retain students who have been determined to be of high risk of dropping out. These students have usually failed several grades and are older than their grade level peers. The GED was designed during the Second War World to give military personnel and veterans the opportunity for continued education. The GED gave the veterans the ability to take advantage of the GI Bill that would pay for college and made a college education a reality for a segment of the population that never had the prospect of attending college before. Most of the GED candidates viewed the test as a means of furthering their education, with 29% stating they plan to attend a two-year college, and
21% indicating they plan to attend a four-year college. But research reports that only 10% actually earn a degree, and they are not significantly more likely to find a job or to earn a higher hourly wage (Miller, 2006). Tyler and Lofstrom (2010) followed up this research with a detailed analysis of eighth-grade Texas students deemed at risk of dropping out in the 1990s and tracked their academic progress. They determined that although the GED plays an important role in allowing dropouts an opportunity for post-secondary education, unfortunately these high risk students who did dropout had a 29% less chance of enrolling in post-secondary education when compared to the high risk students who managed to graduate with a high school diploma.

Today, 30% of GED candidates are under 19 and many are as young as 16. GED centers have been filled with students leaving traditional high schools seeking to get what some see as an easy way to high school equivalency, but the GED is not easy for most students although many dropouts report they thought getting the GED was easier than continuing in high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Unfortunately for many, the ability to take the GED may actually be a contributing factor that encourages some students to drop out (Rachel & Bingham, 2003). At best the GED should be considered a second chance and not a means of replacing a high school education (Miller, 2006). Even with the limitations, the GED is an important aspect of the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan (2007). Many schools across Mississippi have implemented the GED option in an effort to retain some potential dropouts.

Conclusion

The research on high school dropouts indicate that it is a complex problem involving the students, families, schools, and the community. The solution to the
problem is equally complex. Teachers and other school personnel are on the front line of the dropout prevention efforts across the nation. This study will focus on the knowledge of the education community of the problems and interventions that hope to offer a solution to the dropout prevention crisis. The next chapter will include a discussion of the methodology of this research project.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of Mississippi teachers and administrators with the State of Mississippi’s dropout prevention efforts and ultimately determine if they are supportive of the dropout prevention efforts. The study involved the use of the Questionnaire on Dropout Prevention Programs (Appendix A) to collect information from Mississippi teachers, administrators, counselors, and dropout prevention specialists regarding their attitudes, knowledge, and experience with the dropout prevention plan. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Southern Mississippi (Appendix B) approved the data collection and the use of the information in accordance with the university’s regulations.

Research Design

The research methodology was a quantitative study using a retrospective method based on the following research questions and corresponding hypotheses:

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of teachers and administrators about the extent of the dropout problem and do teachers and administrators differ on these attitudes and beliefs?

2. What are the knowledge and experience of teachers and administrators about the extent of the dropout problem and do they differ on this knowledge and experience?

3. Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their knowledge of dropout prevention strategies?
4. Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their attitudes toward the dropout prevention strategies?

5. Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their experience regarding dropout prevention strategies?

H1: The attitudes and beliefs of administrators and teachers about the extent of the dropout problem will be significantly different.

H2: The knowledge and experience of administrators and teachers about the extent of the dropout problem will be significantly different.

H3: The knowledge of dropout prevention strategies of administrators and teachers will be significantly different.

H4: The attitudes of administrators and teachers will be significantly different toward dropout prevention strategies.

H5: The experience regarding dropout prevention strategies between administrators and teachers will be statistically different.

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of Mississippi teachers and administrators with the State of Mississippi’s dropout prevention efforts and ultimately determine if they are supportive of the dropout prevention efforts. As a part of the study it was important to determine whether certified school personnel’s job description, administrator or teacher, makes a statistically significant difference in their attitude toward the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan, their knowledge of the problem, and their experience implementing the dropout prevention plan. The participant’s job description was the independent variable (attribute variable) but cannot be manipulated since they are preexisting groups. The responses to
The research questions were the dependent variables. The study also collected three status variables: race, gender, and years of experience in education.

Participants

The population for this study was certified public school personnel in the state of Mississippi: teachers, administrators, counselors, central office staff, and dropout prevention specialist. Rather than using a stratified sample the researcher, instead, divided the state into six regions: Delta, the River and Capital, Northeast, Central, Southern, and Coast (Appendix C). These regions represented both rural and urban, high and low socio-economic status, and the coastal and inland areas of the state. The researcher sought to enlist at least four school districts from these regions to participate in the study although all school districts in the state will be given the opportunity to be involved. The researcher also collected samples from certified school personnel at meetings of educational related organizations: Mississippi Professional Educators, Mississippi Department of Education, and Kappa Delta Pi and graduate education classes at the University of Southern Mississippi and William Carey University

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was a 40 item Likert type scale questionnaire, designed by the researcher after review of the literature on dropout prevention and a careful examination of the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan (2007). The researcher made determination that a new instrument was required to gather the data necessary to answer the research questions posed by this study. The researcher consulted with a panel of experts in education that included professors, central office personnel, principals, counselors, and dropout prevention specialists who helped determine content and face
validity. The instrument design to test five constructs of the research questions. The research questions were matched to the following survey questions:

- Research Question 1: 5, 9, 12, 13, 16, and 22
- Research Question 2: 3, 4, 23, 28, 31, 33, and 34
- Research Question 3: 1, 6, 7, 10, 11, 15, 17, 19, 26, 29, 32, 38, and 39
- Research Question 4: 2, 20, 21, 24, and 25,
- Research Question 5: 8, 14, 35, 36, 37, and 40

Questions 18, 27, and 30 are general questions that dealt with specific reasons a student may drop out or opinion questions that did not directly address the proposed research question, but may reveal useful information about the respondent’s understanding of the dropout problem, and may be used for future research.

The instrument used a standard Likert scale format with the participants rating their responses to the questions using a five-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Questions 10, 16, and 25 were reverse coded to control for repetitive responses. A pilot study with a group of Mississippi educators was conducted to test the reliability of the instrument. After the pilot study the instrument was found reliable based on test of internal consistency of a value greater than 0.7 using Cronbach’s alpha during the pilot study.

Procedures

The first step in the process of this study was to seek permission to survey school personnel from school district superintendents and in some cases from school principals. A letter was sent to each superintendent (Appendix D) seeking permission to gather data within that district. When the permission letter was returned, the superintendent’s office
was contacted to establish the protocol he or she would like to follow for the individual schools. In most cases the superintendents asked the researcher to contact the school principals directly to arrange for the distributions of the questionnaires. A permission letter was by email to the principals (Appendix E). Once all necessary authorizations were received, the principal’s office was contacted to establish a protocol for that school. In most cases, a packet of questionnaires was sent to the school principal or representative who distributed the questionnaires at a staff meeting or by placing them in the staff mail boxes. A few schools used email to distribute them to the teachers and administrators. The researcher relied on the schools staff to distribute the questionnaires and has no record of the method that the schools used. After the questionnaires were completed the principal, secretary, or other designated person collected them and returned to the researcher. The researcher provided a return postage paid envelope to the school to ensure that the school did not have to expend any funds in the processing of the questionnaires. The return envelope also ensured the confidentiality of the respondents since the school's name was not listed on the return envelope so there was no way of identifying a particular school. The informed consent document (Appendix F) was attached to each questionnaire to inform participants that this was an anonymous voluntary study.

Data Analysis

As questionnaires were returned to the researcher, the data were entered into an Excel file. Once all questionnaires were returned the data were transferred to the SPSS program for analysis. Descriptive and frequency analyses were performed, and then a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted on the data. The
MANOVA was appropriate for the study which involved multiple independent and dependent variables. Assumptions and diagnostics were tested to determine if they were normal. Missing data were appropriately addressed. Outliers were examined on a case-by-case basis but after review the outliers were retained in the data.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

Mississippi and many states across the nation continue to struggle with an unacceptable high dropout rate. Numerous educational researchers have recognized that teachers and administrators are on the frontlines of dropout prevention efforts (Bridgeland et al, 2009). The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of Mississippi teachers and administrators with the State of Mississippi’s dropout prevention efforts and ultimately determine if they are supportive of the dropout prevention efforts. The participants in this research provided detailed information about their views on Mississippi’s dropout prevention efforts. The results of this research are presented in this chapter to test the hypotheses proposed by the research questions presented in Chapter III.

Sample Characteristics

Approximately 2000 questionnaires were mailed out to over 40 schools throughout the six geographic regions of Mississippi (Appendix C). Three hundred and eighty-six of the questionnaires were returned for a 20% rate of return. The researcher generated a frequency table to review the data and to check for possible input errors. The demographic responses of the participants were as follows. The race ($N = 384$) of the respondents was 85 African American (22.1%), three Asian American (.8%), five Hispanic (1.3%), and 289 white (75.3%); two listed other (.5%), and two (.5%) failed to report a race. The gender of the respondents was 323 female (83.7%), 58 males (15%), and five (1.3) failed to report a gender. On the years of experience question, 9 (2.3%)
reported less than a year, 33 (8.5%) reported one to two years, 45 (11.7%) reported 2-5 years, 73 (18.9%) 5-10 years, 79 (20.5%) 10-15 years, 141 (36.5%) reported more than 16 years, and six failed to respond to the experience question. Three hundred and seventeen (82.1%) of the respondent were teachers, 41 (10.6%) administrators, 9 (2.3%) counselors, 7 (1.8%) dropout prevention specialists, 11 (2.8%) listed other, and 1 (.3%) failed to report a job title. Table 1 contains a breakdown of the demographic information reported on the questionnaires.
Table 1

*Demographic Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial/Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>22.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
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<td>.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>75.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years in Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a year</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5 years</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>20.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 and over</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
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<td>1.6</td>
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<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout Prevention</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = 384*
Questionnaire Items

The instrument contained 40 Likert-type response items answered as strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neutral (N), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA). These responses were coded in SPSS with a value of 1 for SD, 2 for D, 3 for N, 4 for A, and 5 for SA. The mean of each item was calculated in SPSS; the higher mean indicates a higher level of agreement. The inverse is also true, the lower the level of agreement, the lower the mean. Of the 40 Likert-type questions on the instrument, three were reverse coded; items 10, 16, and 25. These were transformed into new variables in SPSS (10REV, 16REV, and 25REV, respectfully) in order to conduct statistical analyses. The overall descriptive statistics of the demographic and the 40 Likert response items are presented in Appendix G.

Overall Constructs

As explained in Chapter III, the 40 Likert-type items were divided into five constructs that corresponded to the research questions. Cronbach Alpha was calculated for each of these constructs to test for reliability and internal consistency. Unfortunately, Construct 1 (items 5, 9, 12, 13, 16REV, and 22), which related to attitudes and beliefs to the extent of the dropout problem, and Construct 2 (items 3, 4, 23, 28, 31, 33 and 34), which related to knowledge and experience to the extent of the dropout problem, did not achieve an alpha of at least .70 so these items were omitted from further analysis. The other three constructs demonstrated an acceptable alpha level. Construct 3 (items 1, 6, 7, 10REV, 11, 15, 17, 19, 26, 29, 32, 38, and 39), which related to knowledge of dropout prevention strategies achieved a Cronbach Alpha of .710, Construct 4 (items 2, 20, 21, 24, and 25REV), which related to the attitude toward dropout prevention strategies
achieved a Cronbach alpha of .733, and Construct 5 (items 8, 14, 35, 36, 37, and 40), which related to experience with the dropout prevention strategies achieved a Cronbach alpha of .716. The overall Cronbach of the retained items was .815.

**SPSS Procedures**

Because of the low reliability of the items related to research questions 1 and 2 based on the alpha coefficients this study did not statistically address those questions and only descriptive data could be used from those items. Questions 3, 4, and 5 had acceptable alpha coefficients so these questions were tested using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). After the test of internal consistency was completed, new variables were formed in SPSS to continue with the statistical test.

The first step was to create the independent variable for the test based on the job position of the respondents. Due to the small sample size ($n=9$) for school counselors, they were coded as missing along with the category “other” since their job position is not known and were not included in the new variable that was tested. Several of the “others” indicated that they were teachers’ assistants. These individuals may have valuable knowledge of schools and students, but it cannot be assured they have education and training related to the subject of this study. The new variable *Position* was created (*positioncollapsed in SPSS*) that would include teachers as one category and combine administrators and dropout prevention specialist into a single category. This was done because in most cases a dropout prevention specialist is required to have a state of Mississippi administrator’s license.

After SPSS created the independent variable, SPSS then created the dependent variables: *Knowledge Strategies (knowstrat3 in SPSS)*, was created to address Research
Question 3 related to the knowledge of dropout prevention strategies using items 1, 6, 7, 10REV, 11, 15, 17, 19, 26, 29, 32, 38, and 39. The descriptive statistics for this variable were \( N=386, M=3.77 \) \( (SD=.478) \). Then: *Attitudes Strategies* \( (attStrat4 \text{ in SPSS}) \) was created to address Research Question 4 related to attitudes concerning dropout prevention strategies, using items 2, 20, 21, 24, and 25REV. The descriptive statistics for this variable were \( N=386, M=3.73 \) \( (SD=.637) \). Finally, *Experience Strategies* \( (expStrat5 \text{ in SPSS}) \) was created using items 8, 14, 35, 36, 37, and 40 to address Research Question 5 related to experience with dropout prevention strategies. The descriptive statistics for this variable were \( N=386, M=3.15 \) \( (SD=.710) \). The item descriptive statistics for teachers and administrators can be found in Appendix H.

**MANOVA Results**

The Box’s M Test revealed equal variances can be assumed, \( [F (6, 38724.84) =.564, p=.760] \); therefore Wilks’ Lambda was uses as the test statistic. Then a one-way MANOVA was conducted to determine if job position (teacher or administrator) would have a significant difference on three dependent variables; knowledge of dropout prevention strategies- *Knowledge Strategies*, attitudes toward dropout prevention strategies- *Attitude Strategies*, and experience with dropout prevention strategies- *Experience Strategies*. A significant difference was found \( [Wilks’ \Lambda=.717, F (3, 361) =47.81, p<.001, \text{ partial } \eta^2=.283] \). Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics. A follow-up univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on each dependent variable.

The ANOVA indicates that teachers and administrators significantly differ on knowledge of dropout prevention strategies- *Knowledge Strategies* \( [F (1,363) = 89.09, p<.001, \text{ partial } \eta^2=.197] \). The second ANOVA indicates that administrators significantly
higher means on attitudes toward dropout prevention strategies—*Attitude Strategies* [F (1, 363) = 14.72, p<.001, partial η²=.039]. Similarly, the final ANOVA indicates that administrators had significantly higher means than teachers on experience with dropout prevention strategies—*Experience Strategies* [F (1, 363) = 123.58, p<.001, partial η²=.254]. Table 3 provides the results on the ANOVA tests.

**Table 2**
*Descriptive Statistic of Variables*

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<th>SD</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Administrators</td>
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<td>.42616</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>.48115</td>
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<td><strong>Attitude Strategies</strong></td>
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<td>.63100</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.05</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>3.73</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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Table 3

**ANOVA Results**

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<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>partial ( \eta^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Strategies</td>
<td>16.606</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.606</td>
<td>89.094</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Strategies</td>
<td>5.777</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.777</td>
<td>14.722</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Strategies</td>
<td>47.543</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47.543</td>
<td>123.583</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Error</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge Strategies</td>
<td>67.660</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>.186</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude Strategies</td>
<td>142.440</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>.392</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Strategies</td>
<td>139.646</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>.385</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As an additional follow up to the MANOVA a discriminant analysis was performed, which confirmed the results of the MANOVA. The Box’s M verified that the assumption for equality of covariance matrices was met \( F (6, 38724.84) = .564, p = .760. \) The structure matrix revealed that the ability to discriminate is highest for Knowledge Strategies (.789), and Experience Strategies (.929), but not as high for Attitude Strategies (.321).

**Hypotheses Results**

As mentioned previously hypotheses 1 and 2 could not be tested statistically due to the lack of internal consistency of the related questionnaire items, but 3, 4, and 5 could
be tested. The MANOVA did reveal significant differences in each these hypotheses. Here are the results for each of these:

H₃ stated: The knowledge of dropout prevention strategies of administrators and teachers will be significantly different. Therefore, based on the MANOVA results this hypothesis is supported.

H₄ stated: The attitudes of administrators and teachers will be significantly different toward dropout prevention strategies. Therefore, based on the MANOVA results this hypothesis is supported.

H₅ stated: The experience regarding dropout prevention strategies between administrators and teachers will be statistically different. Therefore, based on the MANOVA results this hypothesis is supported.

Ancillary Findings

Imbedded with the questionnaires were several questions related to the respondents overall impression of the Mississippi dropout prevention efforts, items: 2, 33, 37, 39, and 40. These items had an overall mean of 3.01. Teachers again scored lower than administrators on these items as shown in Table 4. Table 4 also shows that most respondents answered negatively in relation to the item on the positive impact of NCLB.
Table 4

Questions Related to the Overall Effectiveness of the Dropout Prevention Efforts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 Plan is yielding positive results</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q33 Dropout rate declining in Mississippi</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q37 &quot;On the Bus&quot; is having a positive impact on the dropout problem</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q39 NCLB is having a positive impact on the dropout problem</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q40 I know a student that has return to school</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>1.810</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M 3.01 2.88 3.75
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The Bill and Linda Gates Foundation astutely used medical terminology when they coined the name, *Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, 2006) for their significant study on the dropout problem (Russell, 2009). Since lack of a basic high school education is truly dooming many Americans and Mississippians to a life of poverty, ill health, and even incarceration as close to a quarter of high school students fail to graduate with a diploma. Without a high school diploma the chance of reaching for the American Dream is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible in the technology era where jobs and careers demand an educated workforce. In an effort to stem the tide of this epidemic, the *No Child Left Behind Act* has required schools across the nation to take action to improve the high school graduation rate and to decrease the dropout rate (MDE, 2007).

Mississippi developed a dropout prevention plan in 2007 and began a media campaign entitled *On the Bus* that sought to involve business leaders, parents, students, and school officials in an effort to reduce the dropout rate. School districts across the state adopted their own version of the dropout plan, all with the well-intentioned goal of improving graduation rates and reducing the dropout rate.

Summary of Procedures

The purpose of this study was to determine if teachers and administrators differed on their knowledge, attitudes, and experience with the Mississippi dropout prevention efforts using a questionnaire to gather data from Mississippi teachers and school administrators. The researcher developed the questionnaire after conducting a literature
review and consulting with experts in the field of education and research. After the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern Mississippi approved the research project, the researcher conducted a pilot study in January, 2011 with two schools in south Mississippi and then in April and May of 2011, the full study with schools across Mississippi was conducted. Prior to the collection of data permission letters were secured from the superintendents or a designee, from 28 school districts across the state who agreed to allow their schools to participate. Even with the permission of the superintendent, each school’s participation was based on the discretion of the principal, so not all of the 28 districts participated and several districts had more than one school to participate. Several of the principals told the researcher based on the demands of state testing and other considerations he or she could not allow the study at this time. A few suggested the opening of school in August as a better time to conduct the study.

As the principals agreed to participate by phone or email in most cases, the questionnaires were sent to the schools with a return envelope addressed to the researcher. Unless the participating school identified themselves on the envelope, no record of the school returning the questionnaires was kept by the researcher to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. If the return envelope contained identifying information, it was immediately destroyed. A total of 386 questionnaires were collected.

As schools returned the questionnaires, the researcher numbered the questionnaires by hand and then entered the raw demographic data and Likert responses data into an Excel file. Once all the forms were collected the data were transferred from the Excel file to SPSS for statistical analysis. The data analysis began with frequency distributions to check for errors. A few input errors were noted and corrected. After the
corrections were made descriptive statistics were calculated. Before any actual statistical analyses were done, the Cronbach alpha was calculated to test the five constructs for consistency and reliability. The results of the Cronbach alpha indicated that the constructs representing Research Questions 1 and 2 could not be tested statistically since these constructs failed to achieve an acceptable alpha. The constructs representing Research Questions 3, 4, and 5 did receive an acceptable alpha so a MANOVA was conducted to test these questions.

In reviewing demographic data of the respondents it was clear that most of the respondents were white female teachers with many years of experience. While only 48 administrators responded to the questionnaire, according to Field (2009) MANOVA is robust and can deal with unequal group sizes.

Summary of Results

As reported in Chapter IV, the results of the MANOVA found that teachers and administrators have significant differences in their knowledge, attitudes, and experience with dropout prevention strategies. On each of the three statistically tested research questions administrator’s means were higher than the means of the teachers. It appears that administrators generally answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to most questions while the teacher’s responses varied, but trended toward the lower end of the response items, thus indicating a “neutral,” “disagree”, or “strongly disagree.” The constructs related to experience with dropout prevention strategies reflected the greatest difference while the constructs related to attitudes toward dropout prevention strategies had the least difference. This finding was also reflected in the discriminant analysis of the results.
Research Question 3 stated: “Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their knowledge of dropout prevention strategies?” This question was addressed using the construct built around the questions related to knowledge of dropout prevention strategies. The results indicated that administrators have more knowledge of the dropout prevention strategies than teachers. For each item in this construct administrators had a higher mean although on items related to early intervention (Q6), extracurricular activities (Q10REV) and communicating with parents (Q15) there was only a slight difference. This is not surprising since these three strategies are widely accepted in educational circles and are an integral part of the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan. Some of the differences on the knowledge of dropout prevention strategies may be explained by the responses to Q38 regarding having received training on dropout prevention. Teachers generally answered in the negative in regard to having received training while administrators answered in the affirmative.

Research Question 4 stated: “Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their attitudes toward the dropout prevention strategies?” This question was addressed by items related to attitudes and attitude questions are difficult to interpret (Tfaily, 2010) since the responses are generally opinion based. The responses to these questions were similar to one another with the greatest discrepancy in Q2 that asked if the dropout plan was yielding positive results. Administrators again answered in the affirmative while teachers were not so positive. This is reflected in the ancillary findings of this study that indicates teachers expressed concern that the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan is not being successful. Based on the most recent statistics released by the Mississippi Department of Education the teachers concerns are based in fact. The dropout rate for
2011 had slightly increased to 17% compared to 16.8 for 2009. The graduation rate was 78.9 for 2010 compared to 79.3 for 2009. In the same press release the state Superintendent of Education, Dr. Tom Burnham, reminded everyone that this data was self reported and he was working with the state auditor to verify the information (MDE, 2011).

The literature review of this study pointed out that it is difficult to verify the dropout statistics since they are self reported by the schools and by individuals who respond to the U. S. Census questionnaires. Mishel and Roy (2006) are two researchers who propose that the dropout rate is over estimated and they offer a strong argument in defending the Census data that the dropout rate is not 30%. Their argument is primarily built on the belief that schools and individuals are truthful in their responses to surveys about their educational obtainment and graduation rates. Other researchers found that this data cannot always be trusted. Individuals are often embarrassed about the lack of education or report a special education certificate or GED as a high school diploma. School districts may also provide less than honest information about their graduation and dropout rates. This is one reason Swanson (2004) and Barton (2009) have called for additional means verifying schools graduation and dropout rates. It is important to point out that no matter what the overall national dropout rate may be, Mississippi teachers and administrators in the study confirmed that the Mississippi dropout rate is a major concern (Q16 with a mean of 4.19). It is certainly a serious problem for the student who drops out and has to enter adulthood without the education to earn a decent wage.

Research Question 5 stated: “Do administrators and teachers significantly differ on their experience regarding dropout prevention strategies?” These questions were
designed to assess the respondent’s personal experiences with the dropout prevention strategies. The statistical test explained in Chapter IV found that this construct yielded the greatest difference between teachers and administrators. This was evident on the responses to Q8, “I have received training in recognizing risk factors that may lead students to drop out of school.” Teachers were neutral or negative on this item while administrators were positive.

Discussion

The research questions and hypotheses of the study theorized that teachers and administrators had different knowledge, attitudes, and experiences with the dropout prevention strategies utilized in Mississippi schools, and the research confirmed these hypotheses. Based on this data it is apparent that teachers and administrators often have a different perspective on the dropout problem. Teachers may be focused on their own classroom while administrators are responsible for the big picture of an entire school. Balfanz (2011), a well respected expert on dropout prevention programs, stated that one of the first steps in creating a successful dropout prevention program was designing a structure where teachers’ and administrators’ share a common goal. This study points out that Mississippi schools need to be working on this concept so teachers and administrators knowledge, attitude, and experience with dropout prevention strategies can align. A major finding in this study was that teachers have received little or no training on dropout prevention programs and few have attended the meetings related to the On the Bus campaign. It can be inferred from the results of this study that administrators have received training on the dropout prevention plans but this information has not been transmitted to the teachers. Without adequate training teachers cannot become a full
partner in the efforts to reduce the dropout rate. The training teachers need should help them understand the complexities of the dropout problems and more importantly their role in helping students stay in school.

One step in aligning the knowledge of teachers and administrators is to understand some of the reasons that lead students to dropout. Regrettably, the questions related to this on the study’s questionnaire did not have an acceptable Cronbach alpha and were not considered reliable so the literature review will have to stand to explain some of the reasons that cause students to dropout. The research indicates that causes of dropping out are a twofold problem (Rumberger, 2004). First, researchers must examine the student and family problems, and second, researchers need to examine school and teacher factors. Many of the students who drop out come from families that live in almost constant crisis. This makes it difficult to learn and to stay in school. These students may live in families with drug and alcohol problems, child abuse, and long-term poverty. Often, the children come from families with a history of dropping out of school. None of these are a direct cause of the school problems, but Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs theory must be remembered, realizing that a student who is in survival mode cannot go on to focus on higher-level needs. Unfortunately, addressing the family and social factors faced by at-risk students is a daunting task and schools need to focus on the factors within their control.

Schools should seek to train teachers to identify at-risk students early and develop programs to provide needed educational and social services to keep the young student learning and in school (Balfanz, 2011). A large majority of the respondents in this study recognized the important to early intervention by agreeing with Question 6. If a student
is not reading by the third grade, every effort should be made to provide intensive tutoring and family outreach to that student (Morris, 2011). When a student can stay on grade level early, it is much more likely that the student will stay on grade level and be able to graduate. Schools need to also be on the lookout for students who are isolated, bullied, and not achieving so that plans can be made to reach these students.

Bridgeland et al (2006) reported that students often felt a lack of connection to the adults in their school as one component to their decision to drop out of school. To address this concern the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan (MDE, 2007) included a focus on mentoring and tutoring students. Mentoring has been found time and time again as vital to student success (Jakacki, 2011). This study found that teachers and administrators recognized the importance of teacher/student relationships by responding in agreement to Question 9. This is a essential ingredient of the social capital that Coleman (1988) pointed out as a vital component to student success in school. The importance of teacher/student relationships also correlated with Finn (1989) participation-identification model for understanding school dropouts. Finn points out that student needs attachment to the educational process to be successful. Attachment, a sense of belonging at a school, can often be provided by positives relationships with adults in the school.

Finn (1989) and Coleman (1988) also recognized that parental involvement as another essential ingredient in student achievement. In this study the respondents overwhelming agreed that parent support is important part of the dropout prevention efforts. The Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan (2007) called for increasing parental
and community involvement. Both teachers and administrators scored high on the questions related to parental involvement. Bridgeland et al. (2009) found that “74% of teachers and 69% of principals felt that the parents bore all or most of the responsibility for children dropping out” (p. 22).

This study did not seek to place responsibility for students dropping out, but the results indicate parental involvement is an important issue; it can be implied that parental involvement is often missing based on some of the comments written on some of the questionnaires by some of the respondents. Lyttle-Burns (2011), in a recent study confirmed the fact that parental involvement is vital to a student’s success in school and in graduating high school. Schools must continue to find ways to involve parents in their children’s education and develop community-based family service programs to intervene and try to aid the entire family structure. Teachers need to recognize that many of the family and social problems that students come to school with each day cannot be easily resolved and many of the students need a great deal of support to make it to graduation. This again, is a confirmation of the social capital theory of Coleman (1988) that points out that students need a great deal of parental, school, and community support in order to be successful in school.

In the long run one solution to the dropout problems is resigning high schools with different graduation options and alternative learning environments. This study did not address this issue directly, although a slight majority of the respondents indicated they believe the State Subject Area Test may encourage students to dropout on Question 27. Mississippi Superintendent of Education Dr. Tom Burnham indicated that Mississippi is investigating different graduation options (MDE, 2011). This could
include an alternative environment such as evening school and a highly structured environment for students with severe behavior problems such as the Youth Challenge Program, a nationwide program sponsored by the National Guard that provides a second chance to many high school dropouts (Price, 2008). Bridgeland et al. (2009) found that teachers and administrators strongly favor alternative learning environments for troubled students. This is one reason that GED programs have become common place in Mississippi schools. In this study the majority of the respondents agreed with Question 17 that the GED was a useful tool in dropout prevention programs. Not all teachers and administrators support school based GED programs and some point out that access to the GED program by teenagers may actually lead some students to drop out of traditional education programs as McCree (2009) has discovered in a review of data from 2005-2008 in New York state. Another researcher in Texas concluded that the GED did not contribute to students dropping out (Meeker, 2005). Research continues to find that the GED is not equivalent to a traditional high school diploma especially when considering post secondary education (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). The GED does given thousands dropouts the opportunity for a second chance at an education that can help them enter higher education, receive job training, enter military service, and for entry level employment.

Limitations

This study’s findings were limited by several factors. The instrument used in the study was developed by the researcher when no appropriate instrument could be located to address the research questions. But within the statistical test of the instrument it found that the reliability of a section of the instrument could not be verified. So, the first
two research questions could not be addressed statistically. The instrument was
developed after a careful literature review, but it appears that several of the items could
be improved.

Another limitation of the study is the fact that so few administrators, counselors,
and dropout prevention specialists responded to the questionnaire. This may lead the
results to be questioned but the results did have a clear pattern that administrators,
tended to rate items higher than teachers on this instrument. This pattern was also found
in Bridgeland et al (2009) study of teachers and administrators. Although the research
made an effort to sample schools throughout the state, some might question that the
sample was not representative since the majority of the respondents were white females.
It must be remember that the majority of teachers are white females.

Recommendation for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study that teachers and administrators have different
knowledge, attitudes, and experiences with the dropout prevention strategies indicate that
more training is required to ensure that teachers and administrators are systematically
trained in the Mississippi Dropout Prevent Plan. Professional development is a
component of the dropout prevention plan (MDE, 2007). School districts need to make
wise use of all the monies and time invested on professional development to ensure that
the goals of the dropout prevention plan can be achieved.

The Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan (MDE, 2007) has attempted to adopt
many ideas of Coleman (1988), Finn (1989), and others and hopefully will yield position
results in the years to come. The results of this study indicates that teachers need
additional training in the understanding and implementing the goals of the dropout
prevention efforts. The training needs to provide a comprehensive approach such as the, Diplomas Now program developed by Balfanz (2011) of John Hopkins University in cooperation with several other community organizations.

The Diplomas Now programs has four major components. The first element is effective whole school reforms. A high dropout rate is but one of many symptoms of serious school problems that require the overall school improvement. Balfanz (2011) stated the Diplomas Now program is “designed to raise student achievement, promotion, and graduation rates in the nation’s most challenged high-poverty secondary schools” (p. 55). A variety of strategies are used to reduce class size, prepare interdisciplinary lessons, and to make best use of the teacher’s abilities. Second, Balfanz’s program requires that schools design an early warning system that will help identify students at risk of dropping out so early interventions can be made to prevent the student from falling through the cracks. The early warning system included academic factors such as reading levels and social and behavioral factors such as attendance and disciplinary problems. The third part of the program is “strategic deployment of near peers” (p. 57). A near-peers are young mostly recent college graduates that can mentor and tutor the students not only the at-risk students, but the general student body. The students identified as at-risk of dropping out do receive special attention from the mentors. The Near peers serve as a resource and role model for the students. The final aspect of Balfanz’s program is a team-based approach where teachers and administrators work together in a structure that facilitates school and students' success. Balfanz asserts that with these elements even schools mired in poverty with a history of failure can overcome
the label of dropout factory and lead their students into the future with a high school diploma in hand.

One of the most important strategies that Mississippi and states across the nation that struggle with the dropout problem should consider is several true alternative paths to graduation. Mississippi has embraced the GED and credit recovery as second chances for dropouts and for at-risk students, but before students get to this stage, they should have more options. Currently, Mississippi, and in fact, the nations educational system is built around the “college for all, mantra” (Hoffman, 2011, p. 10) when in reality most high school students will never graduate from college and, incidentally, the national economy does not need all students to attend college. Students who know they have no plans for college are often the ones who will dropout because they feel high school is not relevant. Many dedicated educators have strong belief in a well-round education that embraces all subjects from classic literature to modern technology as the best options for all students, and in the long run this is the case, but in order to keep all students engaged and to ensure they have a proper education, other options need to be explored. Hoffman proposes that the Unites States should look to Europe and other counties that have built vocational education and training (VET) into their high school educational programs.

In Europe and many other counties around the world, the VET programs provides tertiary training and recognized certification in actual occupations so that a student can walk out of high school in a career-oriented job (Hoffman, 2011). In Mississippi, dozens of community colleges provide such training. High schools could form cooperation agreements to begin and/or expand such programs although some of the community
college officials may feel this is infringing on their area of responsibility so a legislative mandate may be required to facilitate these type programs.

VET programs will undoubtedly help keep students engaged in school but waiting until high school to make sure students are engaged in learning is often too late. The risk factors begin long before high school so interventions must begin before high school. Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, and Pagani, (2009) reported that their research confirmed that most engaged, successful, and motivated students will graduate from high school while many alienated, detached, and troubled students will not graduate. They found that lack of engagement is expressed in academic and behavioral problems that gradually lead them to withdraw from school. These researchers prescribed training to help teachers and administrators understand the process of school engagement and for early interventions that includes mental health care, along with academic and behavioral supports to the students who exhibit signs of disengagement. This may necessitate the employment of more social workers and counselors since this has proven to help reduce the dropout rate (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008).

Recommendations for Future Research

The first recommendation for future research would be to refine the instrument to ensure reliability of the questions. This could be done based on the information gained in this study. This would result in an instrument with fewer questions that might be more likely to be completed by a greater number of respondents. The demographic information could be revised to included information about school size since some research has found that to be a factor in the dropout problem (Werblow & Duesburg, 2009) and it could include a question about the education level of the respondent since
Chiasson (2009) found that degree obtainment by teachers is associated with a higher graduation rate. The redesigned instrument could also be given a place for comments since a number of respondents wrote comments to the questionnaire. This could be used as a first step in a qualitative study that would gather detailed information of teachers and administrators views on dropout prevention programs and strategies. This coupled with data from the questionnaire and comprehensive quantitative data on the dropout and graduations rates in Mississippi could be used to completely evaluate the progress of the On the Bus campaign in Mississippi. Future studies should examine school districts and individual schools that have been successful in reducing the dropout rates to find out the best practices that could be incorporated in schools across the state.

This study also needs to be compared to other states that, like Mississippi, are considered “dropout factories” to determine if they would have similar results. Alabama, Mississippi's neighbor, also embarked on a very similar plan to that of Mississippi in 2007 so this would be the logical choice to find comparisons. Preparing Alabama Students for Success (PASS) is based, like Mississippi’s plan on the 15 effective dropout prevention strategies recommended by the National Dropout Prevention Network. Alabama’s efforts have recently received high marks from General Colin Powell’s Alliance for American for moving their graduation rate from 62% to 68% in the years 2002 to 2008 (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010).

Summary

All professional educators recognize that dropping out of high school is a major problem for the student and society in general who will be burdened with high taxes for the remedial education, welfare, healthcare expenses, and even correctional cost for the
dropout. Additionally, all professional educators are committed to reducing the dropout problem. This study found that teachers and administrators have different perspectives considering the dropout problem. One of the first steps in curing the dropout epidemic is making sure that teachers and administrators have the proper training to recognize the risk factors and to provide proper interventions to help the potential dropouts. State officials, community leaders, and school leaders have the responsibility to make sure this is done because in the twenty-first century, as President Obama (2009) states, “dropping out is no longer an option.” It is scary to like that there are so many young people leaving school every day without the basic means to find a job, support themselves, and not to mention the ability to support a family. Reducing the dropout rate needs to be the top priority of those educators, government officials, community leader and parents who care about the future of our young people.
APPENDIX A

INSTRUMENT

QUESTIONNAIRE ON DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Directions: Read each of the following questions and circle the best answer. Do not write your name on the questionnaire. Your participation is completely voluntary. Your participation may help in designing and evaluating dropout prevention programs.

Part I: Demographic Information (for statistical purposes only)
1. Racial/Ethnic background:
   - African American
   - Asian American
   - Hispanic
   - White
   - Other

2. Gender
   - Male
   - Female

3. Years in education,
   - Less than a year
   - 1-2
   - 2-5
   - 5-10
   - 10-15
   - 16+

4. Position
   - a. Teacher
   - b. Administrator
   - c. Counselor
   - d. Dropout Prevention Specialist
   - e. Other

Part II: Read the following statements about your knowledge of dropout prevention programs and circle whether you strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), are neutral (N), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA)

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>My school district has a dropout prevention plan.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>My school district’s efforts to reduce the dropout rate have yielded positive results.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Most students dropout due to family and personal issues unrelated to school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I have taught students that have dropped out of school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Teachers play a major role in preventing students from dropping out.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Early intervention is vital in a dropout prevention plan.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The No Child Left Behind law requires states to improve the dropout problem.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I have had training on recognizing the risk factors that may lead students to drop out of school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Teacher/student relationships are an important factor in keeping students from dropping out of school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Extracurricular activities are NOT important in keeping students in school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Credit recovery is a useful tool in reducing the dropout rate.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>My school has a climate that supports student’s efforts to complete high school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Parental involvement is an important element in a dropout prevention plan.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Communicating with students’ parents and/or guardians is vital in reducing the dropout rate.</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>The school based GED programs is a useful tool in reducing the dropout rate.</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>My school maintains high expectations for all students.</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>My school has a parent involvement coordinator.</td>
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<td>My school’s leadership is committed to reducing the dropout rate.</td>
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<td>The teachers in my school are committed to reducing the dropout rate.</td>
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<td>Students’ dropping out of school has negative consequences for the community and the students.</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>Most students dropout due to school related issues.</td>
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<td>The community environment around my school encourages students to complete high school.</td>
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<td>The community around my school does NOT support the efforts to reduce the dropout rate.</td>
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<td>High stakes test such as the SATP may encourage some students to dropout.</td>
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<td>I know several students in my school that are at risk for dropping out of school.</td>
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<td>My school has programs in place to assist potential school dropouts.</td>
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<td>Teenage pregnancy is a major cause of students dropping out of school.</td>
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<td>Absenteeism and truancy are major concerns at my school.</td>
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<td>My school has programs in place to address the problems of absenteeism and truancy.</td>
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<td>The overall dropout rate is declining in Mississippi.</td>
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<td>34.</td>
<td>Most students who dropout come from low-income families.</td>
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<td>My school employs a variety of strategies that keep students involved and connected.</td>
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<td>I attended an “On the Bus” meeting.</td>
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<td>I have had training on my school’s dropout prevention plan.</td>
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<td>The No Child Left Behind law is having a positive impact on the dropout problem.</td>
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<td>40.</td>
<td>I have known a student who has returned to school as a result of dropout prevention efforts.</td>
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APPENDIX B
IRB APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

Institutional Review Board
118 College Drive #5147
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Tel: 601.266.6820
Fax: 601.266.5509
www.usm.edu/irb

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION REVIEW COMMITTEE
NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Human Subjects Protection Review Committee in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Event Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 10102506
PROJECT TITLE: Analysis of the Attitudes, Knowledge, and Experience with Dropout Prevention Programs by Mississippi School Personnel
PROPOSED PROJECT DATES: 10/15/2010 to 10/14/2011
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: Harold Kirk Lucky
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education & Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership
FUNDING AGENCY: NIA
HSPRC COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 02/07/2011 to 02/06/2012

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
HSPRC Chair
APPENDIX D

PERMISSION LETTER

Harold Kirk Lucky
107 North McNair Street
Purvis, MS 39475

Superintendent of Education
Mississippi School District
Dear ___________________

I am a doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi in the Department of Educational Leadership and School Counseling. I am conducting research on the effectiveness of the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan. I would like to survey members of your staff with a brief questionnaire in regards to this topic. I have enclosed a copy of the questionnaire for you to review. The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes. Please call me at 601-794-8714 if you have any questions.

If you grant permission for me to conduct the research I will contact the principals of your schools to arrange for the distribution of the surveys. I will send a postage paid envelope for them to be returned to me. All data collected will be strictly confidential and not traceable to any participant. My dissertation chair is Dr. Rose McNeese. She can be reached at 601-266-4579 if you have any questions for her.

This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

Sincerely

Harold Kirk Lucky

Please sign below and return in the postage paid envelope if you grant permission for the study.

I hereby grant permission to Harold Kirk Lucky to conduct research in accordance with the regulations of The University of Southern Mississippi and this school district.

______________________________  _______________________
Signature                                                                  Date
APPENDIX E

PERMISSION LETTER

Harold Kirk Lucky
107 North McNair Street
Purvis, MS 39475

Principal Mississippi School
Dear ___________________

I am a doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi in the
Department of Educational Leadership and School Counseling. I am conducting research
on the effectiveness of the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan. I would like to survey
members of your staff with a brief questionnaire in regards to this topic. I have enclosed a
copy of the questionnaire for you to review. The survey should take no longer than 10
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If you grant permission for me to conduct the research I will contact you to
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participant. My dissertation chair is Dr. Rose McNeese. She can be reached at 601-266-
4579 if you have any questions for her.

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Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal
regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be
directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern
Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

Sincerely

Harold Kirk Lucky

Please sign below and return in the postage paid envelope if you grant permission
for the study.

I hereby grant permission to Harold Kirk Lucky to conduct research in accordance
with the regulations of The University of Southern Mississippi and this school district.

________________________________________ ___________
Signature                                                                  Date
Dear School Employee,

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern Mississippi, and I am conducting a study concerned with the knowledge and experience of school employees with the Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan. The attached questionnaire should take approximately ten minutes to complete. I am quite aware of the demands on your time and would greatly appreciate you completing this instrument. Also attached is a self-addressed envelope for you to use in returning the completed questionnaire to me.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and I want you to feel free to decline participation or to discontinue participation at any point. All data collected will be completely anonymous. For this reason, I ask that you put no identifying information on the questionnaire. Any information inadvertently obtained during the course of this study will remain completely confidential. Following data analysis, questionnaires will be destroyed by shredding.

By participating in this study, you will help me to better understand the role of teachers, administrators, and other school staff in dropout prevention efforts. It is hoped that this study will be of practical as well as theoretical benefit. The results of this study may be useful, for example, in developing more effective dropout prevention programs. This in turn could benefit both students and society in general as graduation rates are improved. I would anticipate presenting the aggregated results of this study at a professional conference and publishing them in an appropriate refereed journal as well as my doctoral dissertation. Neither you, nor your school will be identifiable within these published findings.

By completing and returning the attached questionnaire, you are granting permission for this anonymous and confidential data to be used for the purposes described above.

This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

If you have any questions concerning this research project, please feel free to contact me at the address below or my dissertation chair, Dr. Rose McNeese at the above address. Thank you for considering helping us with this research.

Harold Kirk Lucky, Ph.D. candidate
107 North McNair Street
Purvis, MS 39475
### APPENDIX G
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF INSTRUMENT

### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

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### APPENDIX H

#### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS-TEACHERS

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## Descriptive Statistics Administrators

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