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## **Administrators' Perceptions of Alternative School Characteristics and Their Relationship with Recidivism**

Lori Elaine Burkett  
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The University of Southern Mississippi

ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL  
CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH RECIDIVISM

by

Lori Elaine Burkett

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

May 2012

## ABSTRACT

### ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH RECIDIVISM

by Lori Elaine Burkett

May 2012

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. The administrator groups were in agreement that 25 of the 26 characteristics were important; they also agreed that the characteristic *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, was not important. Significant differences were identified between the administrator groups on reported existence of the characteristics; alternative administrators reported the existence of the characteristics to be significantly higher than the secondary administrators reported. Overall, there were no correlations identified between administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of the characteristics and alternative school recidivism rates. A few individual correlations were identified related to community support, teacher to student ratio, and student access to medical care. To further develop the purpose of the study, three short answer questions were asked of the administrators. These questions were used to compare and report administrator responses to questions on other characteristics that may be important for alternative schools, transition supports utilized in alternative and secondary schools, and reasons why students return to the alternative school for multiple assignments.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

According to Neumann (2003), the social and political environment of the 1960s led to a cultural reform which greatly influenced the development of private and later public alternative schools in the United States. Freedom schools, one of the first non-public alternative schools, began in Mississippi in 1964 (Neumann, 2003). These schools offered minority students educational opportunities in lieu of the mediocre educational services provided through segregated public education (Neumann, 2003). The freedom schools movement gave rise to free schools which encouraged the belief that American democratic values could be promoted by focusing on educating for the democratic whole (Neumann, 2003). Later public alternative schools emerged to address the individual learning needs of at-risk students who are not successful in the traditional school environment (Raywid, 1981).

President Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 in response to the post World War II political climate and the launch of Sputnik by Russia (Lange & Sletten, 2002). He wanted to ensure that American students were receiving the best possible education in order to compete with students around the world. The ESEA promoted conformity within America's public schools which led to a focus on the whole student body (Lange & Sletten, 2002), rather than student's individual educational needs (Armstrong, 1973). Raywid (1981) noted that the shift towards mass education, rather than serving individual learning needs, impacted the development and growth of public alternative schools.

The transition from the free school movement to the public alternative school movement, according to Levin (1979), was defined by the decline of the civil rights movement, the end of educational expansionism, and lack of adequate funding to support the private alternative schools. Raywid (1999) wrote that the first public alternative schools were founded mainly in urban and suburban areas. Urban alternatives focused on students who were struggling in the traditional setting, while suburban alternatives emerged in an effort to search for new approaches to educating students (Raywid, 1999). Neumann (2003) did not delineate by urbanicity, but agreed with Raywid when he stated that some alternative schools focused on continuing traditional education objectives; others promoted an innovative, student-centered learning environment that encouraged individuality.

Characterizing and defining alternative schools is often difficult due to the individualized nature of services provided. Barr (1981) wrote that over 150 different types of schools had been referred to as alternative and noted that despite the differing types of alternative schools that existed, the underlying purpose was to meet the learning needs of diverse students. Despite the difficulty with accurately characterizing their diversity, Raywid (1999) stated that there was agreement on two long standing alternative school characteristics. First, alternative schools were created to meet the needs of students who struggled in the regular school environment, and second, the curriculum and programming of alternative schools were not conventional or traditional (Raywid, 1999). Lange and Sletten (2002) argued that alternative schools had been in a state of refinement for 40 years and were in agreement with Raywid and Barr when they wrote that the

underlying purpose of alternative schools was to meet the learning needs of at-risk, disenfranchised students.

Alternative schools were mandated in Mississippi in the 1993-1994 academic school year by Mississippi Code 37-13-92. The Mississippi Code requires all districts in Mississippi to provide alternative education services for students who are suspended more than ten days, whose parents choose an alternative setting due to ongoing behavioral concerns, who are sentenced to an alternative setting by a youth court judge or who are deemed to be a disruption to the regular education classroom by a principal or superintendent. Mississippi alternative school guidelines are included in the *Alternative Education Guidebook* from the Mississippi Department of Education (2010). These guidelines require that alternative schools in Mississippi work with the student to create an individual instructional plan which sets academic, behavioral and functional goals for their students at enrollment. These goals are reviewed regularly by student, parent, administration, teachers and counselors from the regular school and alternative school setting in order to assess each student's progress and determine criteria for return to the regular setting.

After successful completion of the alternative program, alternative school students who are unsuccessful in the traditional setting are at greater risk of dropping out of school (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004). It is critical that all stakeholders, including alternative school leaders and regular school leaders, work closely to ensure student success throughout the transition back to the regular school (Valore, Cantrell, & Cantrell, 2006). Fullan (2005a) stated that the leaders within the system and individual schools must work together, collaborating with one another and building capacity, to ensure the

success of students. Mississippi secondary and alternative school administrators are responsible for the students they serve and are also responsible for managing the transition process to and from the alternative and regular education setting (*Alternative Education Guidebook*, 2010).

### Literature

A review of alternative school descriptive studies in the United States found several common themes (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). Enrollment criteria for alternative schools were dependent upon a variety of factors shared by students at risk of dropping out (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998). Sometimes enrollment was voluntary (Foley & Pang, 2006) but more often enrollment was a mixture of voluntary and involuntary (Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Alternative schools had small school environments, with total enrollments from 50 to 150 students (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). These small schools were often able to provide instruction in small group settings which provided one-on-one student to teacher interaction (Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004).

According to the descriptive studies, administrators and teachers of alternative schools reported that they had autonomy and could make decisions about curriculum and programming of their schools (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Academic curriculum in the alternative school often followed the regular curriculum (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Flexibility within the curriculum allowed for a variety of instructional methods to be used and for students to have learning opportunities to make better choices (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004).

Despite Lange and Sletten's (2002) research synthesis which argued that a supportive environment was a requirement for alternative programs, the descriptive studies noted that support services in the alternative schools were limited (Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). Another concern discussed in the descriptive studies was the large numbers of students with emotional behavioral disorders served in the alternative settings and the limited resources available to meet these students needs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Both of these concerns may be more accurately understood through noting the repeated theme of budget and financial constraints described as a major concern by teachers and administrators in the alternative settings (Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004).

Gooden (2009), McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996) conducted similar studies on alternative schools to identify the importance and existence alternative school effectiveness characteristics. Alternative school teachers and administrators were asked if each characteristic was important and to what extent the characteristic existed at their alternative school. The results of these studies found that alternative school administrators and teachers consistently reported the importance of alternative school effectiveness characteristics to be higher than the existence of the characteristics in their schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Likewise, Burnett (2002) agreed when he found that secondary administrators also reported higher levels for importance compared to existence in their schools on a separate but similar set of alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

Alternative school administrators and teachers agreed that the leadership sub-category was most important (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Only in

Gooden's study did alternative school administrators indicate the characteristic, *the principal believes in the ability of the staff to reach their goals*, to be of high importance, while alternative school teachers in each study rated this characteristic to be highly important (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). The characteristic, *the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning*, was identified by alternative school administrators as most important for two studies (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996), although only alternative school teachers from Wiseman's study found this characteristic to be equally as important.

Alternative school administrators' and teachers' reported perceptions on least important characteristics were described by McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996). Administrators agreed in both McAfee's and Wiseman's studies on the four least important alternative school characteristics from the subcategories for student needs, student services and student attitudes. When comparing teachers' results on characteristics of least importance, alternative school teachers and administrators were in agreement on two of the characteristics reported to be of least importance: *daycare is provided for children of students* and *the alternative school provides extracurricular activities* (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Teachers from McAfee's study were also in agreement with administrators from McAfee's and Wiseman's studies that the characteristic, *students can choose to attend traditional or alternative school*, was not important. Secondary administrators in Burnett's (2002) study agreed when they also reported low importance for *student enrollment at the alternative school is by choice, not a mandate*. This finding indicated that although researchers (Fantini, 1973; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003) indicated that student choice was an important



characteristic for alternative schools to have in place, alternative school administrators and teachers reported that student choice was not important for their alternative schools (Burnett, 2002; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative school teachers and administrators consistently rated the existence of characteristics lower than reported importance, meaning that while the characteristics were reported to be important they were not necessarily present in their school (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Alternative school teachers were in agreement on two characteristics for high existence in their schools; *teachers monitor and report student progress to students* (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996) and *the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals* (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999). *The principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals* was also in high existence in each study according to administrator reports (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Despite this, Wiseman's study found that although teachers also reported the characteristic, *the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals*, to be of high importance it was not considered by the teachers to be existent.

Characteristics alternative school administrators and teachers reported to be in low existence in their schools closely resembled those characteristics that were reported to be low for importance (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman 1999). Alternative school teachers and administrators in the McAfee and Wiseman studies reported the same characteristics for lowest existence in their schools. These schools, according to administrator reports, do not provide daycare, extracurricular activities or medical care for students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Teachers reported these characteristics, with the exception of medical care, to be of least importance for their alternative schools (McAfee, 1999;

Wiseman, 1996). In each of the studies alternative school administrators often, but not always, rated the alternative school effectiveness characteristic slightly higher than teachers' ratings on existence in their schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Therefore, administrators reported that the characteristics were in greater existence than teachers' reports indicated (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Burnett (2002) created the instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A), in order to analyze secondary administrators' reports on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in Mississippi Schools. Burnett (2002) located the effectiveness characteristics through a review of the literature as well as through identifying characteristics required for Mississippi alternative school programs by the Mississippi Department of Education. Burnett's (2002) study found no significant differences between middle school and high school principals on their reported perceptions of the 26 effectiveness characteristics in Mississippi alternative schools. There also were no significant differences found among middle school and high school principals reported perceptions based on school level (middle school or high school), years experience as administrator, or degree earned (Burnett, 2002).

Like Gooden (2009), McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996), Burnett's (2002) study found that administrators often rated importance higher than existence for the characteristics in their alternative schools, indicating that although these characteristics were perceived as important, they were not necessarily in existence in their schools. One characteristic was rated low for importance and existence: *students are enrolled by*

*choice, not a mandate.* The administrators' responses indicated that they did not feel this effectiveness characteristic was important for their alternative school and likewise, it was not in existence. This effectiveness characteristic can be compared with other studies which also indicated that student choice was not important to alternative school teachers and administrators (Burnett, 2002; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

In addition to identifying characteristics which described successful alternative schools, alternative school success was also measured by recidivism and drop-out rates (McCall, 2003; Reubel, Reubel & O'Laughlin, 2001; Valore et al., 2006). Students who were attending alternative schools were at higher risk of dropping out of school according to a descriptive national study by Lehr et al. (2004). Students who became disengaged from their schools academically and socially were more likely to drop out of school when compared to peers who had better grades and friends at school (McCall, 2003).

Alternative student drop-out also was associated with a history of prior drop-out (Reubel et al., 2001). Once students have attended and successfully completed the alternative school, researchers argued that both the alternative school and regular school should work together to provide supports during the transition (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009; Valore et al., 2006). McCall (2003) argued that school districts should reconsider policies on student transition back to the regular setting. Students with the risk factors described needed to be given extra academic and social supports during their transition in order to ensure success and decrease recidivism (McCall, 2003).

Valore et al. (2006) agreed with McCall (2003) when they stated that for alternative students to be successful with reintegration to the regular setting all stakeholders must be involved in the transition process. Valore et al. promoted a three

phase reintegration process which utilized stakeholders and necessary school resources, alternative and regular, to support the student throughout the transition phases. In a qualitative study of student reintegration, Carpenter-Aeby and Aeby (2009) were in agreement when they stated that all stakeholders must be involved in the student's transition in order to ensure success and decrease recidivism. Carpenter-Aeby and Aeby also promoted a fluid transition process that utilized school, family and community resources with stakeholder input and encouragement to foster student success.

Drop-out prevention research studies reviewed found that at-risk students simply were in need of more resources and supports in order to be successful (Lever et al., 2004; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004). Raywid (1994) agreed when she stated, "More challenging students are just more dependent on a good education" (p. 26). In order to provide these students with the supports needed, they must first be identified as at-risk. Risk factors identified in the drop-out literature included low academic achievement (McCall, 2003; Suy & Suy, 2007), poverty (McCall, 2003; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007), absences (Reubel et al., 2001; Suy & Suy, 2007), single parent homes (McCall, 2003), student expectation to remain in school (Suy & Suy, 2007), previous history of drop-out (Reubel et al., 2001), suspension history (Suy & Suy, 2007), minority status (McCall, 2003; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004), student younger at time of enrollment to the alternative setting (McCall, 2003), and student's friends were drop-outs (McCall, 2003). The drop-out studies indicated that at-risk students' chances for drop-out decreased as they participated in such support systems as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, advocate assistance, and transition services (Lever et al., 2004; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004).

## Statement of the Problem

Alternative school research was located through a literature review which described and characterized alternative schools at the state and national levels. This research compared alternative school administrators and alternative school teachers (Foley & Pang, 2006; Gooden, 2009; Lange, 1998; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996), described alternative schools at the national level (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004), and compared middle school and high school administrators' perceptions on alternative school effectiveness characteristics (Burnett, 2002). No research was located that compared alternative school administrators to secondary school administrators. In addition, descriptive studies on alternative schools by Lange (1998) and Lehr et al. (2004) indicated that data on graduation rates for alternative schools and students served by alternative schools had not been consistently collected. Due to this inconsistency, it was difficult to accurately describe alternative school recidivism rates, graduation rates and alternative school outcomes (Lehr et al., 2004).

Raywid (1994) argued that for alternative schools to be successful, total system support must be in place. Fullan (2005a) agreed when he wrote that sustainable change must come from the leaders within the system through schools working together and collaborating with one another. He noted that in order to build capacity, leaders must learn from one another within and between schools and districts. Fullan (2006) asserted that as leaders learned from one another, there was an increase in the exchange of meaningful information; this exchange would eventually lead to improved instruction.

The literature review revealed a gap in research, with no alternative school research located on administrators in both the alternative school and secondary school

settings. Carpenter-Aeby and Aeby (2009) and Valore et al. (2006) argued that for alternative students to be successful with reintegration to the regular setting, all stakeholders must be involved in the transition process. The stakeholders included the student, family, administrators and support staff from both the alternative and the home-school setting (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009). Valore et al. (2006) noted that student success was more probable when a cohesive approach was utilized. Stakeholders, including school administration from both the alternative and secondary school, should work together to ensure that students are successful during and after transitioning (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009; Valore et al., 2006).

Studies on alternative school recidivism, transition programs, and programs for at-risk students provided insight to the importance of identifying at-risk students and providing effective interventions and transition programs to enhance academic and behavioral success (Lever et al., 2004; McCall, 2003; Reubel et al., 2001; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007; Valore et al., 2006). Lange and Sletten (2002) noted that drop-out prevention programs were a critical component to prevent students from dropping out of school due to failure in the regular setting. Descriptive studies on alternative schools noted that alternative school outcome data had not been consistently collected (Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Due to this inconsistency, it was difficult to accurately describe alternative school recidivism rates, graduation rates and alternative school outcomes (Lehr et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the

administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. Burnett's (2002) instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A), was used to collect information and analyze differences between secondary and alternative school administrators in Mississippi on their reported perceptions of the importance and existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics for their district. Each administrator participant was asked the importance that they place on the specific characteristic and the extent to which the characteristic exists in his/her alternative school. The *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B) asked administrators to provide information on their years experience, licensure level, consortium status, school type, school size, and recidivism rate.

Alternative school recidivism rates were calculated for each administrator's school. The recidivism rate is the rate at which students are assigned to the alternative school for multiple disciplinary infractions. Administrators were asked for the total number of students from their schools who served in the alternative setting for the 2010-2011 school year and the number of those students who were assigned to the alternative school multiple times. The alternative school recidivism rates were analyzed to determine if there was a relationship between the importance each administrator placed on the characteristics, the existence of the characteristics in their district, and the alternative school recidivism rate.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the

administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. Research questions are included below.

*Research Question 1:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics?

*Research Question 2:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics?

*Research Question 3:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

*Research Question 4:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

*Research Question 5:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

*Research Question 6:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

*Research Question 7:* In addition to Burnett's 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics, are there other characteristics that are important for an effective alternative school?



*Research Question 8:* What transition support services are provided for students who have successfully completed their alternative assignment?

*Research Question 9:* Why do students who have successfully completed the alternative school return for multiple assignments?

#### Definition of Terms

*Alternative school-* according to the *Mississippi Alternative Education Guidebook* (2010), “An alternative education program involves temporary authorized departure from the traditional school setting. It is designed to provide educational and social development for students whose behavior places them at risk of not succeeding in the traditional school structure and/or in adult life without positive interventions” (p. 5).

*Alternative school administrator-* a licensed school administrator who provides primary oversight for an alternative school, often called a principal or a director.

*Alternative school effectiveness characteristics-* the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics were located through a review of the alternative school research and are included in the *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* instrument created by Burnett (2002).

*Alternative school consortium-* An alternative school consortium is an alternative school that serves multiple districts’ alternative students at the same alternative school setting. Most often one district operates the alternative school while other participating districts purchase slots in order to provide educational services to their students assigned to the alternative setting.

*Licensure level*- Mississippi teacher licensure or certification is based upon degree level. The A license indicates the respondent has a bachelor's degree; AA license, a master's degree; AAA license, a specialist degree; AAAA license, a doctoral degree.

*Drop-out*- any compulsory school age child who is not attending school.

*Recidivism Rate*- for the purposes of this study, the recidivism rate is the rate at which students are reassigned to the alternative school for repeated incidents. The following equation was used:  $(\text{total number of students serving multiple assignments} / \text{total number of students served in the alternative setting}) \times 100 = \text{recidivism rate}$ .

*Secondary administrator*- any licensed school administrator who provides primary (principal) or secondary (assistant principal) oversight for a secondary school.

*Secondary School*- any school traditionally serving students from grades seven to 12, but may also include schools serving students in the sixth grade in a middle school setting.

#### Delimitations

1. The study was delimited to focus on public alternative schools in Mississippi.
2. The study was delimited to public schools in Mississippi.
3. The population chosen for the study was delimited to secondary principals, secondary assistant principals, and alternative school principals in Mississippi's public schools.
4. The study was delimited to the alternative school effectiveness characteristics included on Burnett's (2002) instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A).

5. The study was delimited to the sample of questionnaires returned within four weeks of mail-out.
6. The study was delimited to the alternative school student information for the 2010-2011 academic school year.

#### Assumptions

1. It was assumed that all administrators who chose to participate in the study answered their questionnaires honestly and accurately.
2. It was assumed that all administrators who worked in the alternative or secondary setting were aware that alternative school education is mandated by the Mississippi Code 37-13-92.

#### Justifications

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. During a review of the literature on alternative schools, no alternative school research was identified that included both secondary and alternative school administrators. In addition descriptive studies on alternative schools found that outcome data, including graduation and recidivism rates, for alternative schools had been inconsistently collected (Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004).

While discussing alternative school transitions, Valore et al. (2006) noted the importance that all stakeholders, including administrators from the alternative and regular education settings, be involved in the transition process for alternative students. Fullan

(2006) stressed the importance of leaders working with and learning from one another to exchange meaningful information. Identifying differences in alternative school and secondary school administrators' perceptions of alternative schools may provide insight to differences that could interfere with or help to facilitate a supportive transition process. Collecting recidivism rates for Mississippi alternative schools and comparing these rates to perceptions of effective alternative school characteristics could assist with identifying characteristics that are associated with low recidivism rates.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### History of Alternative Schools

The modern alternative school concept emerged in the late 1960s in response to the educational needs of students who were not successful in the traditional educational setting (Armstrong, 1973; Barr, 1981; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1999). Neumann (2003) addressed the 1960s era's contribution to the alternative school movement in *Sixties Legacy: A History of the Public Alternative Schools Movement, 1967-2001*. Neumann discussed the social context within which the Civil Rights Movement, 1960s counterculture, feminist movement, and response to the Vietnam War challenged the social disparity and inequalities that existed in American culture. According to Neumann, these movements led to the development of a cultural reform which, in turn, greatly influenced the development of private and later public alternative schools in the United States.

Neumann (2003) argued that social injustices in American culture contributed to the creation of non-public alternative schooling options. According to Lange and Sletten (2002), freedom schools began in Mississippi in 1964 and were intended to offer minorities an enhanced educational experience in comparison to the mediocre educational services provided by segregated public education. Freedom schools provided African American children with educational opportunities such as survival skills training (Neumann, 2003) and also promoted community organization for social causes (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003). The freedom schools' focus on community organization gave rise to free schools which additionally endorsed the belief that American culture and

ideologies could be altered through the American educational system (Neumann, 2003).

According to Neumann (2003),

They were convinced that if young people were provided an opportunity to learn and grow in a cooperative, democratic, and substantially participatory context, they would take these values and ways of living and learning experienced in schools to the work-world and greater society, and generate change. (p.11)

According to Neumann (2003), the free school movement was focused on educating for the democratic whole in order to promote democratic values; however, the alternative school community focus gradually shifted, according to Lange & Sletten (2002), towards meeting the needs of the individual learner.

The movement within alternative schools towards student-centered learning approaches was noted by Armstrong (1973), Fantini (1973), Kozol (1982), Lange and Sletten (2002) and Neumann (2003). Kozol stated that the free school movement was child-centered, open-structured, individualized and un-oppressive. Neumann (2003) agreed with Kozol when he discussed the free school movement which revisited the child-centered approaches of Dewey. Like Kozol and Neumann, Fantini (1973) considered the alternative school movement to be student centered when he wrote “alternatives also enable a more humanistic process of education to evolve” (p. 448). Fantini went on to state that the alternative movement was a response to the mass education of students which failed to meet individual student learning needs. The alternative movement’s drive towards more individualized, student-centered learning was largely a response to the traditional or conventional mass schooling methods of the post

World War II era and can be more accurately understood within the political and historical context of the 1960s.

In response to disparities in the American society of the 1960s and in light of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, President Johnson began a war on poverty and, according to Lange and Sletten (2002), “named the public school system the front line of attack” (p. 3). President Johnson’s education focus led the way for public alternative schools to emerge (Lange & Sletten). Armstrong (1973) stated that the Sputnik launch, which greatly contributed to President Johnson’s response, also encouraged schools to promote conformity. Armstrong stated it was the teacher’s responsibility to instill the knowledge; what was relevant to the child was not important. According to Armstrong, this super-ordinate to sub-ordinate teacher to student relationship led to support within the alternative schools movement for a more student-centered curriculum which promoted individualized instruction. Sixteen years after President Johnson began his war on poverty, Raywid (1981) wrote that an ongoing evaluation and critique of public education caused a shift in educational ideology that supported serving individual student needs. This ideological shift began to impact the development and growth of public alternative programs.

#### Types of Alternative Schools

Deal and Nolan (1978) stated that diverse alternative school types developed out of the free school movement, but while some were public, many remained private. The transition from the free school movement to the public alternative school movement, according to Levin (1979), was defined by the decline of the civil rights movement, the end of educational expansionism and, most importantly, lack of adequate funding to

support the private schools. Raywid (1999) wrote that the first public alternative schools were found mainly in urban and suburban areas. Urban alternatives were more focused on those students who were struggling in the mainstream environment; suburban alternatives emerged in an innovative effort to search for new approaches to educating students (Raywid, 1999).

Neumann's (2003) description of the two distinctions in alternative schools did not delineate by urbanicity like Raywid (1999), however his views of the two early alternative approaches were similar. Neumann stated that some alternatives focused on continuing traditional education objectives while providing a behavioral focus that demanded student conformity. Other alternatives were more innovative and promoted a student-centered learning environment that encouraged individuality. These innovative alternatives were described as open schools which contributed to the development of multiple types of alternative options: schools without walls (Barr, 1981; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002), schools within a school (Barr, 1983; Fantini, 1973; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003; Raywid, 1999), multicultural schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003), continuation schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003), learning centers (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003), magnet schools (Barr, 1981; Gable et al., 2006; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994) and charter schools (Neumann, 2003).

Open schools were schools of choice for teachers, parents and students; these schools tended to take a child-centered approach to curriculum (Neumann, 2003). School autonomy was paramount as students needed to learn at their own pace (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003). Classrooms in open schools were often multi-aged with separate



resource centers utilized to focus and individualize instruction (Neumann, 2003).

Resource center learning strategies originally used by open schools were adopted by many conventional schools (Neumann, 2003).

Schools without walls were community based learning programs; students participated within the school setting but were encouraged to go out into the community to learn as well (Neumann, 2003). Community members who were experts in specific learning areas were the teachers (Barr, 1981; Gable et al., 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Students who attended the most well-known schools without walls program, Parkway School, went to museums, banks, newspaper offices, insurance companies and other businesses to learn through hands-on teaching (Neumann, 2003). The Parkway School received significant media attention during the 1970s and subsequently was used as a model for other schools without walls programs through the United States (Neumann). Neumann noted that by the middle of the 1970s the number of schools without walls programs had begun to decline.

Schools within a school were usually larger schools that were subdivided into smaller learning clusters that could provide differentiated learning opportunities. These small clusters met educational learning needs while taking into consideration individual student interests. Grouping students around specific interests allowed for smaller student support networks within the larger school setting (Barr, 1981; Fantini, 1973; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003; Raywid, 1999).

Multicultural schools incorporated diverse cultural learning experiences into the school curriculum. Students were able to participate in cultural experiences outside their own culture as well as share their own cultural experiences with others. The student

curriculum encouraged cultural acceptance and diversity for individual differences of others. Depending on the make up of the student body, these schools sometimes focused on one individual culture such as Hispanic or Native American (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003).

Continuation schools usually had an individualized approach for at-risk students who may be facing issues such as drop out, pregnancy, and failure (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003). These schools provided flexible, ongoing educational opportunities as an option to staying in school. The focus of continuation schools was often on remediation of basic skills and behavior modification (Neumann, 2003). A fundamental principal of continuation schools was choice, but sometimes disruptive students were assigned or referred to these schools (Neumann, 2003).

Learning centers offered students a curriculum in specific content areas. Often these centers had a focus that was on vocational or technical instruction (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003). According to Neumann, these schools also provided resource centers which were focused on specific learning areas of interest. During the 1970s, learning centers broadened their instructional and vocational focus to include such subjects as health, journalism, and media studies. Sometimes students would attend the regular setting for core academic courses and then attend the learning center for one or two courses where they could receive technical or vocational training tailored to their specific interests (Neumann, 2003).

Magnet schools were a reaction to the years of segregation in public schooling and were initially created in an effort to encourage a more diverse student body by offering a variety of learning themes that drew on the students' interests (Barr, 1981;

Gable et al., 2006; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994). Magnet schools' innovative nature developed out of the open-schools movement (Raywid, 1994). These schools had a variety of themes including visual and performing arts, communication and science (Neumann, 2003). The thematic focuses of each school were intended to attract students who had specific interests in these areas. These schools began in the 1970s and were primarily schools of choice (Neumann, 2003).

Charter schools developed out of both the alternative school movement and the 1980s and 1990s school choice movement (Neumann, 2003). These schools initially had their start at a 1988 conference in which Albert Shanker spoke about creating more choices in education. In 1991, Minnesota was the first to pass a charter school bill followed by California in 1992. Neumann pointed out that over 300 charter school options were established in 25 different states by 1996. Charter school laws were not bound by conventional education laws, varied from state to state, and were supported by the ideology that students deserved choice. Usually these schools had more autonomy and were independent of school district board authority. Charter schools often do not want to be referred to as an alternative (Neumann, 2003).

Flexibility and autonomy were characteristic of alternative schools from their inception and have lead to multiple alternative school types which served diverse purposes (Raywid, 1999). Barr (1981) wrote, "In a little more than a decade, the concept of alternative schools has changed from a radical idea to a conservative response to a local school problem" (p. 570). This change lead to a nationwide alternative school movement in which many states mandated alternative programs (Barr, 1981). Lange and Sletten (2002) estimated that approximately 20,000 alternative schooling options existed

in the United States. Due to the broad range of alternative schools and programs serving multiple purposes, it was difficult to assign a single definition to alternative schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Despite this, alternative schools can more accurately be defined through a discussion on the types of alternatives that have evolved out of the open schools movement.

Raywid (1994) suggested three types of alternatives that have been accepted and discussed by researchers (Foley & Pang, 2006; Gable et al., 2006; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002). As Raywid (1994) asserted, these descriptions were so-called *pure* types, and alternative programs were a mixture of these types dependent upon the culture, beliefs and leadership of each school. Type I programs were identified by Raywid as innovative programs that allowed for student choice. Many Type I programs such as magnet schools developed out of the open-schools movement. In Type II programs, Raywid stated that students were most often assigned and followed the regular school curriculum as well as a behavior modification program. Type III programs had a remediation focus in academics and behavior (Raywid, 1994). Type III programs asserted that after a period of rehabilitation, students could return to the regular setting (Raywid, 1994). Lange (1998) and Lange and Sletten (2002) appeared to agree with Raywid's three alternative school types in their discussion, but they also proposed a fourth type that incorporated choice, innovation and remediation. Defining alternative schools was a difficult task given the diversity of schools described above. In order to more accurately study and assess alternative school learning environments, effective characteristics and practices of alternative schools should also be determined.

## Characteristics of Alternative Schools

Determining the characteristics of alternative schools is a daunting challenge given the diversity that exists from one alternative school to another. As early as 1973, Fantini indicated that before an alternative school could be considered justifiable by public schools, student choice, a comprehensive curriculum that meets student individual needs, equal access, and financial feasibility must be in place. Barr (1981) wrote that over 150 different types of schools had been referred to as alternative. He noted that regardless of the differing types of alternative schools that existed, the underlying purpose was to meet the learning needs of diverse students. Despite the ongoing challenge to characterize alternative schools, Raywid (1994) argued that there was agreement on two long standing characteristics. First, according to Raywid, alternative schools were created to meet the needs of students who struggled in the regular school environment, and second, the curriculum and programming of alternative schools were not conventional or traditional. Lange and Sletten (2002) also noted that alternative schools had been in a state of refinement for 40 years and were in agreement with Raywid and Barr when they wrote that the underlying purpose of alternative schools was to meet the learning needs of at-risk, disenfranchised students. In order to more accurately determine the characteristics of alternative schools, descriptive studies of alternative schools were examined and discussed.

### *Descriptive Studies of Alternative Schools*

In a study conducted by Lange (1998), alternative school administrators and teachers were surveyed to determine alternative school characteristics in Minnesota. Lange described Minnesota as a leader in providing alternatives for students who were at

risk of dropping out. As early as 1987, Minnesota created the High School Graduation Incentives (HSGI) Program which provided multiple schooling opportunities for at-risk students, such as students who were pregnant or parenting, two or more years behind academically, or had been expelled from school. Lange stated that before the efficiency and success of these programs can be determined, key identifying characteristics of these alternative schools must be identified. This study gave descriptive information on Minnesota's alternative schools including the types of schools, enrollment criteria, school size, appropriateness of placement for students with disabilities, school evaluation tools used, and schools' organization and decision making characteristics (Lange, 1998).

The types of alternative schools included in the Minnesota study, as reported by the administrators surveyed, were a mixture, according to Lange (1998), of Raywid's (1994) three types of alternative programs: innovative (Type I), last chance (Type II) and remediation (Type III). Of the administrators who responded, 60% stated that their students were at risk of not finishing school. Seventy percent of administrators reported that criteria for student enrollment was based upon the Minnesota High School Graduation Incentives Program criteria which included students who may be two or more grade levels behind, pregnant or parenting, substance abusers, victims of physical or sexual abuse, suffer mental health concerns, homeless, excluded or expelled from the regular school environment, and referred by the home school. According to Lange, 30% percent of the schools used additional criteria to determine if a student qualified for enrollment. These criteria included age, student motivation and student's at-risk status (Lange, 1998).

The alternative schools ranged in size from eight to 648 students with the highest percentage, 34%, having from eight to 50 students; 26% reported having 101 to 150 students (Lange 1998). Lange attempted to study graduation rates of these schools; however data systems were not available to accurately measure drop-outs and graduates. Sixty-nine percent of administrators reported that their schools were appropriate for some students with disabilities. Alternative school administrators indicated that the lack of adequate special education personnel limited their ability to serve students with disabilities; however 57% did provide special education services on-site. Most of the schools responded that they had resources in place to provide special education assessments as needed upon referrals from teachers or parents. Eighty-six percent of the schools measured student progress according to the state graduation requirements, although different methods of student evaluation, testing and assessment were utilized in each school (Lange, 1998).

Lange's (1998) study results indicated that school level administrators reported that their building space, budget and funding issues would be the largest concern over the next three years. These issues were also considered by administrators to be issues over which they had little control. Teachers, like administrators, reported that one of their most pressing concerns in the next three years would be funding and budget (44%), while enrollment (24%) and space (20%) were also concerns (Lange, 1998).

According to Lange (1998) most teachers, 98%, voluntarily worked at the alternative programs; 69% of these teachers had taught at the schools for less than five years and only eight percent had taught in an alternative school for more than 10 years. Most teachers, 86%, felt they had autonomy over their own curriculum decisions.

Seventy-three percent of teachers also reported high levels of freedom and satisfaction at the alternative school compared to their jobs at previous traditional settings. With regards to special education services at the alternative schools, teachers' reports were varied. Fifteen percent of teachers reported concerns with students with emotional behavioral disorders, while teachers also reported concerns with having resources to appropriately follow student individual education plans (Lange, 1998).

Lange (1998) concluded that the alternative schools in Minnesota were small and administrators and staff had autonomy with regards to decision making for their schools. Teachers chose to teach in these schools and students often, but now always, chose to attend. Support services within the schools were limited although many of these schools were resourceful with utilizing community resources available. Administrators reported that their largest concerns, budgeting and space availability, were the concerns with which they had the least autonomy. Curriculum differences indicated that teachers more often used one on one instruction, small groups, computer instruction, career counseling and academic counseling at the alternative setting than in the traditional setting. There was also a significant decrease in the use of homework at the alternative setting as compared to the traditional setting. Lange (1998) wrote, "The success of these programs is vital to consider for two reasons: (1) In order to understand their role in school choice movement, we must evaluate them and their effectiveness, and (2) they are addressing the needs of our most disenfranchised from the system" (p. 197).

In a 2002 research synthesis, Lange and Sletten discussed the ever changing nature of alternative schools and noted that this change made alternative schools difficult to characterize. Lange and Sletten (2002) reviewed literature on alternative education



from the 1960s through 2002 which focused on dropout prevention, special education and at-risk youth. Five common alternative school characteristics were found through the literature synthesis: maintaining a small environment, providing one-on-one teacher to student interaction, creating a supportive environment, providing opportunities for student success, and emphasizing flexibility that included teaching students to make better choices (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Lehr et al. (2004) conducted a National Survey of Alternative Schools, sent to state level alternative school leaders in 2002. Seventy-nine percent of the surveys were returned from 39 of 50 states. The purpose of the survey was to provide descriptive information about alternative schools in the United States. Lehr et al. (2004) stated that in 1998 only 22 states had alternative school legislation; however, by 2002 this number had risen to 48. This survey was conducted in the summer and fall of 2002; subsequently it can be assumed that the majority of states at the time of the survey had alternative school legislation that mandated alternative options for students who were disruptive or struggling in the traditional setting. The survey collected information in six main areas including structure and governance of alternative schools, characteristics of alternative schools and students served, staffing at alternative schools, curriculum and instruction at alternative schools, alternative school outcomes, and students with disabilities being served in alternative schools (Lehr et al., 2004).

Lehr et al. (2004) initially discussed alternative school structure and governance in three main sections defining alternative schools, enrollment criteria and funding sources. The results of the survey indicated 59% of states had definitions for their alternative schools or programs. These definitions differed from state to state depending

upon the mission (therapeutic, disciplinary, remedial), duration of stay (short term, long term), enrollment status (choice, court mandated, school placement), and school outcomes (graduation, return to home school). Forty-four percent of states reported having enrollment criteria for alternative schools. Enrollment criteria covered a variety of at-risk factors including potential drop outs, disruptive students, substance abusers, students suffering from abuse, students behind academically, students parenting or pregnant, students who need to be employed, students on probation, and students who had been suspended or expelled. In addition to defining alternative schools and determining enrollment criteria, Lehr et al. (2004) also discussed concerns with funding as alternative schools continue to grow. Seventy-one percent of alternative school funding was reported to be from state appropriations, while 25% reported that the majority of funding for alternative schools came from local dollars. Only four percent of states reported that the majority of funding came from grants. No states reported that their primary funding came from federal sources (Lehr et al., 2004).

The second section of the national survey completed by Lehr et al. (2004) asked questions concerning alternative school characteristics and information about the students being served in these settings. The respondents reported that 58% of the states had separate alternative schools, and 36% had a mixture of separate schools and programs within existing traditional schools. Alternative schools were most often located in urban and suburban areas and served secondary students in grades 9-12. The average state enrollment in alternative schools for the 2001-2002 school year was 51, with a median 2.17% of students in each state attending alternative schools. Fifty-three percent of states indicated that alternative school enrollment had been on the rise over the past five years

with a typical enrollment between 26 to 75 students. Fifty-eight percent of states served students who had been voluntarily and involuntarily enrolled, with short and long term placements. Students being served in these settings were most often at risk of dropping out and having poor attendance and behavior problems. Fifty-two percent of states reported that alternative education settings were designed for dropout prevention, while 33% reported that alternative settings were most often utilized as a consequence for discipline problems (Lehr et al., 2004).

Staffing characteristics results indicated that 94% of states required teachers to be fully licensed in order to teach at the alternative school, and 75% of the time, licensed teachers were on-site providing services to students (Lehr et al., 2004). On the other hand, support staffing such as mental health counselors, career counselors, and social workers were on site only 25% of the time. Lehr et al. (2004) raised this as a major concern given the at-risk student populations being served in alternative settings.

The survey also requested information on teacher to student ratios; 52% of states reported having teacher: student ratios of 1:10 (Lehr et al., 2004). These results indicated that in most states alternative students were receiving academic instruction from certified personnel in a small group instruction setting, although support services such as counseling and social work were available to students only on a limited basis (Lehr et al., 2004).

The fourth section addressed in the national alternative school study by Lehr et al. (2004) was curriculum and instruction. Almost all states (97%) reported using basic academic courses in their alternative schools; 94% also reported having a supporting curriculum which teaches interpersonal skills. Thirty-four of 36 states reported that the

alternative setting curriculum was aligned with the common standards for the state.

According to Lehr et al., this alignment indicated that alternative schools' curriculum had been impacted by the accountability standards movement and that these students were being tested on the standards with their grade equivalent peers in the traditional school setting. Ninety percent of the states reported utilizing more traditional exit documents such as high school diplomas, GED diplomas, and certificates of attendance. Overall, these results indicated that traditional curriculum standards were being used in 97% of alternative schools, although non-traditional instruction techniques were used in the classroom (Lehr et al., 2004).

Alternative school outcomes were the fifth section addressed in the national survey (Lehr et al., 2004). Only about half of the states who participated in the survey had a system in place for alternative school data collection. Subsequently, this section provided minimal results as the authors indicated that many respondents left these questions empty because they had no systems in place for data collection. Sixty-four percent of the states reported that alternative school students usually returned to the regular or home school setting. Forty-three percent of the states indicated that alternative students graduated from the alternative school. About 16% of the states reported that the alternative school was utilized as somewhat of a revolving door with students returning two and three times due to disciplinary infractions. The summary section of the report indicated that 46% of states reported critical concerns with regard to exit from the alternative schools. These results indicated that transition and follow up services at the home school needed to be improved in order to ensure student success (Lehr et al., 2004).

The national survey conducted by Lehr et al. (2004) also collected data on students served at alternative schools who received special education services. Similar to districts that collected alternative school outcome data, 53% of reporting states also collected data on individuals with disabilities attending alternative schools.

Approximately 12% of students attending alternative schools, according to the reporting states, received special education services. Forty percent of states indicated that alternative school settings were utilized as Interim Alternative Education Settings (IAES) to provide services to special education students for up to 45-day placements. Students with disabilities served in the alternative setting most often had emotional and behavioral disorders but also were reported to have learning disorders and other health impairments. Upon transfer to the alternative setting, 65% of states reported that individual education plans were modified to reflect services needed by the student in the new alternative setting. While most states reported providing services to students with disabilities, 38% of states reported that students with disabilities were discouraged from attending alternative schools. The three most important special education issues faced by alternative schools were reported to be the availability, quality and licensure of staff; provisions and quality of special education services; and ensuring procedures and services were in place to facilitate success (Lehr et al., 2004).

The results of the national study by Lehr et al. (2004) indicated that most states had alternative schools serving at-risk student populations, including special education students with emotional behavioral disorders. Alternative schools may be defined slightly differently from state to state. Funding for these schools came primarily from state resources. Most alternative schools in the United States primarily served secondary

students from grades nine to 12 on separate sites from the regular school setting. These schools were small with fully licensed teachers. Limited resources were available from support services such as counselors and social workers. Lehr et al. noted this as a major concern because the students being served in these settings were at risk and would need additional support. Although a traditional curriculum was in place, non-traditional strategies were utilized in the classroom setting. Overall, the schools surveyed had many similarities but also had different focuses. For example, some schools noted that the primary purpose of the alternative school was for drop-out prevention while some noted that the alternative school purpose was punitive in nature (Lehr et al., 2004). The national alternative schools survey conducted by Lehr et al. (2004) provided descriptive information on alternative schools across the United States. The authors stated that there should be some caution with generalizing the results to the entire nation due only 39 of 50 states responding to the survey (Lehr et al., 2004).

An Illinois study by Foley and Pang (2006) examined characteristics of alternative schools as reported by a selected group of alternative teachers and administrators. Foley and Pang (2006) stated that the results of this study indicated that Illinois's alternative schools were "schools of choice primarily serving at-risk students through flexible, innovative programming" (p. 197). The purpose of the study was to identify physical site characteristics, administrative structures, student services and populations served in alternative schools in the state of Illinois (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Foley and Pang (2006) discussed two different alternative options in Illinois, including alternative schools that provided oversight through the local school districts' special education cooperatives and alternative schools that were overseen through the

Regional Offices of Education. Alternative programs were developed in response to a 1997 Illinois law which mandated alternative options for disruptive students. Twenty percent of the survey respondents were from rural schools, 20% were from schools in urban areas, and 28% were from schools in suburban areas (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Foley and Pang (2006) wrote that 75% of the respondents in the study reported the main administrative structure for their school was site-based management. This indicated a high level of autonomy within alternative programs in Illinois for school staff to make decisions about school programming, behavior planning, and curriculum. Funding for the alternative programs in Illinois was reported to be 50% through state grants while state and district appropriations accounted for the other funding sources. Most alternative programs in Illinois were located in separate school facilities. The physical separation of the alternative school from the traditional or conventional school setting often limited specific school supports such as library resources, physical education facilities and science and computer laboratories. Most often these supports were not available in the separate alternative setting. Parent involvement was also limited within the alternative settings in Illinois. According to Foley and Pang, only one-third of the respondents stated that there were ongoing efforts to improve parental involvement in their schools. Students in these smaller programs with less than 100 students were more likely to be secondary with an average age of 15. The study indicated that the majority of students being served in alternative programs in Illinois were Caucasian, although Foley and Pang reported that this result may not necessarily agree with other research. Foley and Pang stated that most often the ethnicity of students in alternative programs correlated with that of the traditional school setting within the same community (2006).

Foley and Pang (2006) wrote that alternative programs served large numbers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders and stated that the main admission criteria for these schools was most often a history of social-emotional concerns, truancy, and home-school referral. The curriculum in most of these schools followed the general education state requirements for curriculum. In addition to the regular curriculum, vocational programming and career readiness programming were also available in many schools. The alternative schools utilized community resources such as juvenile justice programs and health and human service programs to provide additional support services to students (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Several themes were common among alternative schools according to the descriptive studies by Foley and Pang (2006), Lange (1998), Lange and Sletten (2002), and Lehr et al. (2004). Enrollment criteria in the alternative schools were dependent upon a variety of factors which deemed students at risk of dropping out (Foley & Pang, 2006, Lange, 1998). Sometimes enrollment was voluntary (Foley & Pang, 2006) but more often was a mixture of voluntary and in-voluntary (Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Alternative schools in the studies had small school environments, with total enrollments from 50 to 150 students (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). These small environments were often able to provide instruction in small group settings which provided one on one student to teacher interaction (Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al (2004).

Administrators and teachers of alternative schools reported that they had autonomy with regards to making decisions about curriculum, instruction and programming of their schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Foley & Pang, 2006). Academic



curriculum most often followed the regular curriculum and/or traditional graduation outcomes (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Flexibility within the curriculum and instruction allowed for a variety of instructional methods to be used and for students to have learning opportunities to make better choices (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al, 2004).

Despite Lange and Sletten's 2002 research synthesis which suggested a supportive environment was a requirement for alternative programs, the descriptive studies noted that support services and resources in the schools were limited (Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al, 2004). Another concern discussed in the studies was the large numbers of students with emotional behavioral disorders served in the alternative settings and the limited resources available to meet these students needs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004). Both of these concerns may be more accurately understood through identifying the repeated theme of budget and financial constraints described as a major concern by teachers and administrators (Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004).

#### *Alternative School Administrator and Teacher Perspectives*

Alternative school studies conducted by Gooden (2009), McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996) used the same instrument developed by Wiseman to identify the importance and existence of alternative school effectiveness characteristics. Teachers and administrators from alternative schools reported their perceptions on each characteristic. The respondents were each asked if the characteristic was important and to what extent the characteristic existed at their alternative school. The results of these studies found that alternative school administrators and teachers consistently reported the

importance of the 40 effectiveness characteristics to be higher than the existence of the characteristics in their schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). A similar study by Burnett (2002) which analyzed secondary administrators' perceptions of effective alternative school characteristics on importance and existence also found that administrators and teachers reported higher levels of importance than existence in their schools, on a separate but similar set of alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

### *Importance*

According to alternative school administrators in Gooden's, McAfee's and Wiseman's studies, the most important characteristics were

1. Leadership: the principal encourages the staff to develop new ideas to improve the school (Gooden, 2009).
2. Leadership: the principal is an advocate for the school within the district and community (Gooden, 2009).
3. Leadership: the principal believes in the ability of the staff to reach their goals (Gooden, 2009).
4. Leadership: the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
5. Leadership: the faculty shares resources, ideas and strategies with each other (McAfee, 1999).
6. Leadership: faculty and staff share goals and visions (Wiseman, 1996).
7. General Perceptions: teachers provide opportunities in which students will succeed (McAfee, 1999).

8. Student attitudes: student attendance at the alternative school is regular (Wiseman, 1996).

The characteristic, *the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning*, was identified by alternative school administrators as most important for two studies (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Six of the nine most important characteristics identified by alternative administrators came from the sub-category leadership, indicating that alternative administrators more often reported leadership to be an important characteristic in alternative schools compared to the other sub-categories. Other characteristics were also identified by administrators as most important in the sub-categories general perceptions and student attitudes (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative teacher perceptions on the most important effectiveness characteristics were similar to that of the administrators (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). According to alternative teachers, the characteristics which were most important included:

1. Leadership: the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
2. Leadership: the principal is a good communicator (Gooden, 2009).
3. Leadership: teacher's have the freedom to make instructional decisions (Wiseman, 1996).
4. Leadership: the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning (Wiseman, 1996).
5. School Climate: teachers and staff choose to work at the alternative school (Gooden, 2009).

6. General Perceptions: teachers believe students can achieve (McAfee, 1999).
7. General Perceptions: teachers provide opportunities in which students will succeed (McAfee, 1999).

Agreement between alternative school teachers and administrators was found on three of the characteristics rated as most important (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). These characteristics came from the sub-categories general perceptions and leadership. While alternative school administrators from McAfee's (1999) and Wiseman's (1996) study found the leadership characteristic, *the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning* to be important; only alternative school teachers from Wiseman's study found this characteristic to be equally as important. Alternative school teachers and administrators in McAfee's study found the general perceptions characteristic, *teachers provide opportunities in which students will succeed*, to be important. The characteristic, *the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals*, was rated by alternative school teachers in each of the three studies rated to be highly important (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996), while only alternative school administrators in Gooden's study indicated the characteristic to be important. The alternative school teachers' characteristics rated as most important were found to be within similar sub-categories as the administrators. Like alternative school administrators, teachers reported that the leadership category was most important with four leadership characteristics being rated as most important among the studies (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative school administrators reported perceptions on least important characteristics were described by McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996). Gooden (2009)

did not identify a research question which addressed the least important questions and subsequently did not provide results for alternative school administrators' reports on least important characteristics. Administrators agreed in both McAfee's and Wiseman's studies on the four least important alternative school characteristics. These characteristics were:

1. Student Services: daycare is provided for children of students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
2. Student Services: there is ongoing availability of medical health care (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
3. Student Needs: the alternative school provides extracurricular activities (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
4. Student Attitudes: students can choose traditional or alternative school (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

It should be noted that characteristics for subcategories student needs, student services and student attitudes were found to be of least importance indicating that alternative school administrators reported that the characteristics related to these subcategories were not necessarily important for their alternative schools (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative school teachers reported perceptions on least important characteristics were described by McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996). Gooden (2009) did not identify a research question which addressed the least important characteristics and subsequently did not provide results for teachers on the least important characteristics. Teachers reported perceptions of characteristics with the lowest importance included:

1. Student Services: daycare is provided for children of students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
2. Student Needs: the alternative school provides extracurricular activities (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
3. Student Needs: students with like ability are grouped together for instruction (Wiseman, 1996).
4. Student Attitudes: students can choose to attend traditional or alternative school (McAfee, 1999).

When comparing results on characteristics of least importance, alternative school teachers and administrators were in agreement on two of the characteristics reported to be of least importance, *daycare is provided for children of students* and *the alternative school provides extracurricular activities* (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Teachers from McAfee's study were also in agreement with administrators on the characteristic, *students can choose to attend traditional or alternative school*. This finding indicated that although researchers (Fantini, 1973; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003) indicated that student choice was an important characteristic for alternative schools to have in place, alternative school administrators and teachers repeatedly reported that student choice was not important for their schools (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

#### *Existence*

Alternative school administrators also reported their perceptions on the existence of the effectiveness characteristics in their schools in each of the studies (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). The characteristics reported to be in highest existence in each of the studies included:

1. Faculty Needs: the faculty shares resources, strategies and ideas with each other (Gooden, 2009).
2. Faculty Needs: teachers provide positive reinforcement to students (Gooden, 2009).
3. Instruction: technology is available and used as part of the instruction (Gooden, 2009).
4. Leadership: the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
5. Leadership: the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning (McAfee, 1999).
6. Leadership: teachers make instructional decisions (McAfee, 1999).
7. General Perceptions: teachers meet regularly with students to provide academic help and support (Wiseman, 1996).
8. School Climate: teachers are responsive to students' academic and social needs (Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative school administrators' reports indicated that characteristics reported to be in highest existence in their schools came from the sub-categories faculty needs, instruction, leadership and general perceptions (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman 1996). *The principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals* was in high existence in each study according to administrators' reports (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). When comparing reported importance to existence, administrators in only Gooden's study rated the characteristic, *the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff to reach their goals*, to be of highest importance, although

teachers in Gooden's, McAfee's and Wiseman's study all rated this characteristic to have high importance. Administrators reported that characteristics were in existence across the subcategories, as compared to reported importance, where administrators tended to rate the leadership sub-category slightly higher (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative school teachers also reported their perceptions on the existence of characteristics in their alternative schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). The characteristics they rated as having the highest existence were

1. Leadership: the principal has a positive attitude (Gooden, 2009).
2. Leadership: the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999).
3. Leadership: teachers have the freedom to make instructional decisions (McAfee, 1999).
4. Student Needs: teachers provide positive reinforcement to students (Wiseman, 1996).
5. School Climate: students and teachers speak freely to each other (Wiseman, 1996).
6. School Climate: the school has a mission statement used to guide the school in decision making and evaluation (Gooden, 2009).
7. General Perceptions: teachers monitor and report student progress to students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Alternative school teachers were in agreement on two characteristics in two studies. These characteristics were, *the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff*



(Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999) and *teachers monitor and report student progress to students* (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). In relationship to reported importance of the characteristic by the teachers, teachers in the Gooden, McAfee and Wiseman studies reported the characteristic, *the principal believes in the ability of his/her staff*, to be of high importance while teachers only in Gooden and McAfee's study reported that this characteristic was in high existence. This indicated that although in Wiseman's study teachers also reported this characteristic to be of high importance, it was not considered by the teachers to be existent in their schools. McAfee and Wiseman also identified agreement on one leadership characteristic which teachers reported to be in high existence in their schools, *teachers monitor and report progress to students*.

Characteristics alternative school administrators reported to be in low existence in their schools closely resembled those characteristics that the administrators also reported to be of low importance (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman 1996). Gooden's study reported low levels of existence but did not report low levels of importance. This made it difficult to compare with the other studies. The characteristics reported to be in low existence in each of the studies included:

1. Student Services: daycare is provided for children of students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
2. Student Services: there is ongoing availability of medical health care (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
3. Student Needs: the alternative school provides extracurricular activities (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

4. School Climate: the students can choose to attend either the alternative school or the traditional school (Gooden, 2009).
5. Curriculum: instruction and curriculum are individualized for students (Gooden, 2009).
6. Faculty Needs: teachers work together to develop curriculum (Gooden, 2009).

Alternative school teachers and administrators reported their perceptions on effectiveness characteristics that were in least existence in their schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1996; Wiseman, 1996). These characteristics were similar to the teacher's reported characteristics for low importance (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1996; Wiseman, 1996). Gooden's study reported low levels of existence but did not report low levels of importance. This made it difficult to compare with the other studies. Teachers reported characteristics which were in least existence in their schools included:

1. Student Services: daycare is provided for children of students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
2. Student Services: there is ongoing availability of medical health care (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
3. Student Needs: The alternative school provides extracurricular activities (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
4. Faculty Needs: teachers work together to develop the curriculum (Gooden, 2009).
5. Faculty Needs: professional development targeting the needs of alternative schools and the students is provided (Gooden, 2009).
6. Community Support: service learning is part of the curriculum (Gooden, 2009).

Alternative school teachers and administrators in the McAfee (1999) and Wiseman (1996) studies reported the same characteristics for lowest existence in their schools. These schools, according to teachers' and administrators' reports, do not provide daycare, extracurricular activities or medical care for students (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Teachers reported these characteristics, with the exception of medical care, to be of least importance for their alternative schools. Administrators' characteristics rated lowest in importance were also their lowest reported existence characteristics for their schools. It should be noted that the McAfee and Wiseman studies were conducted in 1990s and Gooden's more recent study, conducted in 2009, found different characteristics to be of least importance.

In each of the studies, alternative school administrators often, but not always, rated the alternative school effectiveness characteristic slightly higher than teachers' ratings on existence in their schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). This finding indicated that administrators reported that the characteristics were in greater existence than teachers reports indicated. A few characteristics in each study had significant differences among administrators and teachers reported existence and importance, although there were not commonalities found among the studies adequate to discuss. This may be indicative of the teachers and administrators responses being related to their own alternative schools.

#### *Secondary School Administrator Perspectives*

Burnett's (2002) dissertation study used a self-made instrument which he titled *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A). The study analyzed perceptions of high school and middle school principals on the

importance and existence of 26 effectiveness characteristics of alternative schools in Mississippi. Burnett (2002) located the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics through a review of the literature as well as through identifying characteristics required for Mississippi alternative school programs by the Mississippi Department of Education. The secondary administrators reported their perceptions on the importance and existence of each alternative school effectiveness characteristic on a five point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates *strongly disagree* and 5 indicates *strongly agree*. Each administrator rated the 26 characteristics on importance, existence in district, and existence in Mississippi alternative programs (Burnett, 2002).

Burnett's (2002) conclusions noted that there were no significant differences found among middle school and high school principals on their reported perceptions of the 26 effectiveness characteristics in Mississippi alternative schools. There also were no significant differences found among middle school and high school principals' reported perceptions based on school level (middle school or high school), years experience as administrator, or degree earned (Burnett, 2002).

According to Burnett (2002), the effectiveness characteristics rated by secondary administrators to be of most importance in their alternative schools were:

1. There is a clearly defined mission and discipline code.
2. The alternative program is housed in a separate and adequate facility.
3. School size is less than 250.
4. Students have an opportunity to graduate or earn a GED.
5. There are well-defined rules and expectations.

While the secondary administrators rated these effectiveness characteristics high for importance for their alternative schools, they did not rate these characteristics to be equally as high for existence in their schools. Only two characteristics that were rated as high for importance were also rated high for existence. These characteristics according to Burnett (2002) were:

1. School size is less than 250.
2. The alternative program is housed in a separate and adequate facility.

The only effectiveness characteristic rated low for importance by secondary administrators in Burnett's (2002) study was also rated low for existence: *students are enrolled by choice, not a mandate*. The administrators' responses indicated that they did not feel that this effectiveness characteristic was important for their alternative schools and likewise, it was not in existence in their alternative schools. This effectiveness characteristic can be compared with other studies which also indicated that student choice was not important to alternative school teachers and administrators (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

Burnett's (2002) 26 alternative school characteristics are listed below with literature and research applicable to each characteristic.

1. The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly, and flexible (Armstrong, 1973; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; McAfee, 1999; Raywid, 1994; Wiseman, 1996).
2. Teachers work in the alternative school because they choose to work there (Fantini, 1973; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004; Raywid, 1994).

3. Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate (Fantini, 1973; Foley & Pang, 2006; Gooden, 2009; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004; Raywid, 1994).
4. There are well-defined standards, rules and expectations (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Harrington-Lueker, 1995; Gooden, 2009; Wiseman, 1996).
5. The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and non-competitive (Armstrong, 1973; Cohn & Finch, 1975; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004).
6. There is a sense of community between staff and students (Armstrong, 1973; Dewey, 1900; Domina, 2002; Raywid, 1994).
7. Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health (Harrington-Lueker, 1995).
8. The total school size is less than 250 (Barr, 1981; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Harrington-Lueker, 1995; Lang, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004; Raywid, 1994).
9. The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility (Castleberry & Enger, 1998; Fantini, 1973).
10. Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or earn a GED (Castleberry & Enger, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004).
11. Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop-out rate (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lever et al., 2004; McCall, 2003; Reubel et al., 2001; Valore et al., 2006).
12. Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absenteeism (Castleberry & Enger, 1998; Wiseman, 1996).

13. There is group and individual counseling in the alternative program (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Valore et al., 2006).
14. There is a teacher to student ratio of no more than 1:12 (Barr, 1981; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Harrington-Lueker, 1995; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004; Raywid, 1994).
15. Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions (Foley & Pang, 2006; Gooden, 2009; Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McAfee, 1999; Raywid, 1994; Raywid, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
16. The alternative school utilizes community resources to support the curriculum (Deal & Nolan, 1978; Domina, 2002).
17. There is school commitment to have each student be successful (Barr, 1981; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; McAfee, 1999).
18. The staff has continual staff development (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Harrington & Leuker 1995).
19. There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Domina, 2002; Gooden, 2009; Wiseman, 1996).
20. Students have access to medical care (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).
21. There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Gooden, 2009; Harrington-Lueker, 1995).
22. Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication (Barr, 1981; Harrington-Leuker, 1995).

23. The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences (Barr, 1981; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Raywid, 1994).
24. There is administrative and community support for the program (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Raywid, 1994).
25. The staff is motivated and culturally diverse (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).
26. There is an advisory committee for the alternative program (Gable et al., 2006; Nathan & Kohl, 1981; Quinn et al., 2006; Rogers & Polkinghorn, 1990).

### Recidivism

In addition to identifying characteristics which described successful alternative schools, recidivism and drop-out rates were also considered as a measure of alternative school success (McCall, 2003; Reubel et al., 2001; Valore et al., 2006). As noted in separate national studies by Lange (1998) and Lehr et al. (2004), data on graduation rates had not been consistently collected across states. Subsequently, it was difficult to accurately describe national recidivism rates, graduation rates and alternative school outcomes (Lehr et al., 2004). Despite this, studies on alternative school recidivism, transition programs and programs for at risk students provided insight to the importance of identifying at-risk students and providing effective interventions and transition programs to enhance academic and behavioral success (Lever et al., 2004; McCall, 2003; Reubel et al., 2001; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007; Valore et al., 2006).

Reubel et al. (2001) analyzed traditional risk factors for high schools including student grade point averages, student engagement, psycho-pathology and grade level at alternative school entrance to predict alternative school attrition. Reubel et al. (2001) wanted to know if traditional high school risk factors for drop-out could be used to



predict alternative school drop-out. According to the results, alternative school drop-out was not predicted by traditional risk factors; however, alternative school drop-out did appear to be associated with a history of prior drop-out among alternative students. Reubel et al. (2001) stated that 35% of the students in the study dropped out while 64% continued in school. Students who dropped out were also absent at higher rates than students who stayed in school. Although student engagement was not found to be significantly related to student drop-out in alternative schools, it should be noted that as student absences increased, student engagement decreased (Reubel et al., 2001). McCall (2003) discussed student engagement in relationship to risk factors associated with students' disengagement from the regular setting.

In a 2003 study, McCall analyzed factors that lead to drop-out from the regular setting for students who had successfully completed an alternative school program. According to McCall's study, students who became disengaged from the regular setting upon return from the alternative school were more likely to be students of color, who lived with one parent, and had low achievement scores, with significantly lower math scores. McCall also found that students who dropped out were younger at the time of enrollment to the alternative program. McCall noted that this indicated an earlier on-set of problems for these students. A final descriptive indicator for drop-out students was poverty; the majority of drop-out students' families had annual incomes of less than \$10,000 per year (McCall, 2003). Students more likely to stay in school, upon return from the alternative setting, were more often white, had two parents in the home and had higher achievement levels. Follow-up questionnaires for students provided insight on the student perspective and reasoning for drop-out (McCall, 2003).

According to McCall (2003), students who dropped out noted the main reason for dropping out was that teachers did not care whether or not they stayed in school. Students also indicated they most often dropped out because they needed to make money. Student drop-outs often stated that their friends were drop-outs. This indicated low student engagement with pro-social peers and teachers, perhaps according to McCall because they did not feel accepted. The majority of students who dropped out stated that they felt the school had labeled them. McCall (2003) argued that school districts should reconsider policies on student transition back to the regular setting. Students with the risk factors described needed to be given extra academic and social supports during their transition in order to ensure success and decrease drop-out (McCall, 2003).

Likewise, an article by Valore et al. (2006) stated that alternative students may be more successful with their reintegration process if a more cohesive approach was utilized during transitions. A three-phase transition approach utilized a liaison teacher counselor who took on the main role of managing the student's transition process back to the regular school environment. A team of individuals (family, counselors, teachers, and administrators) worked with the student to make the decision concerning student readiness to begin the transition (Valore et al., 2006).

Valore et al. (2006) noted that the liaison teacher counselor collaborated with stakeholders throughout the student's transition process. These stakeholders were referred to as the student support team; the entire team provided input throughout the student's transition. There were three phases suggested to promote successful reintegration. Phase one included planning and preparation. The student was assigned a building advocate at the home school who provided support during and after the

transition process. The student could meet with the building advocate as problems or concerns arose and the advocate could check on the student periodically and follow up with administrators and counselors on the student's progress. During phase one, the liaison teacher worked with the home school counselors to create a tentative schedule and the student wrote an essay on personal interests to be used by the student support team for making decisions concerning the student's academic and extra-curricular needs (Valore et al., 2006).

During phase two of the transition, the student support team met to make a transition plan (Valore et al., 2006). The student's progress at the alternative school was reviewed and student needs and strengths were assessed. The liaison teacher/counselor took the student on the school tour, transportation arrangements for the transition were considered and finalized, the student was acclimated to the home school's rules and procedures, and student and family questions were answered (Valore et al., 2006).

Transition phase three began after the student had transitioned to the home school full-time (Valore et al., 2006). This phase included follow up with the home school to ensure the student's needs were being met. The liaison teacher/counselor was the primary contact with the home school and conducted observations of the student as well as stayed in contact with the student's building advocate to assess progress and make suggestions that may be helpful. After two or three weeks the liaison teacher counselor made an evaluation of the student's progress and met with the student support team to make suggestions. Alternative school supports began to be withdrawn and the building advocate would begin to collaborate with home school staff to ensure that a resource

safety net was in place to meet the student's needs and ensure success (Valore et al., 2006).

Students who were attending alternative schools were at higher risk of dropping out of school according to Lehr et al. (2004). McCall's (2003) study noted that students who were at higher risk of dropping out after successful completion of the alternative school program were students of color, from one parent homes, who had low achievement, lived in poverty and were often younger at their time of enrollment to the alternative school. These students were not engaged in their school environment and subsequently were more likely to drop-out (McCall, 2003). According to student reports, students who were more likely to drop-out felt their teachers did not care. They also were more likely to be friends with other drop-outs and did not have pro-social friends in the school setting (McCall, 2003). These factors enabled the students to become disengaged from the school environment both academically, due to low achievement, and socially due to limited friendships with pro-social peers (McCall, 2003).

Valore et al. (2006) argued that for alternative students to be successful with reintegration to the regular setting all stakeholders must be involved in the transition process. In a qualitative study of student reintegration, Carpenter-Aeby and Aeby (2009) were in agreement with Valore's findings when they stated that all stakeholders must be involved in the student's transition process in order to ensure success. This included the student, family, administration and support staff from both the alternative and the home-school setting. The guidelines suggested in the three phases by Valore et al. (2006) should be followed throughout the transition process and staff responsibilities should be clear to ensure support and successful implementation.

## Drop-out Prevention

Research supported providing at-risk students additional academic and social supports in order to promote drop-out prevention (Lever et. al, 2004; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007). Studies also found that as students were provided with mentors, academic supports and tutoring, their drop-out rates decreased (Lever et al., 2004; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004). McCall (2003) stated that alternative students who had successfully completed the alternative program and returned to the regular setting but later dropped out, reported that their teachers did not like them and that they felt labeled by others at their school. Lever et al. (2004) discussed an intervention program for at-risk youth which provided extra academic supports as well as advocates, counselors and mentors. These supports were provided more intensely at the ninth grade level but continued across the student's academic career. The at-risk students in this study were less likely to drop out, according to Lever et al., than their peers who had not completed the program.

Lever et al. (2004) discussed the Futures Program for at-risk students which began in the summer before the ninth grade and continued through one year past graduation. Students received basic skills enhancement, work experience, motivation and leadership development, student support, and transition services. During the ninth grade year, at-risk students in the program had smaller classes, although some students attended a mixture of classes (regular and Futures Program). Throughout the program, students received support from advocates, counselors and teachers, and also received enrichment, character development and career preparation activities (Lever et al., 2004).

According to Lever et al. (2004), the findings of the study indicated that the Futures Program, which provided services to eligible at-risk students, had lower drop-out rates, 6.8%, for the 1998-1999 school year compared to the Baltimore City drop-out rate of 10.98%. The following year, the drop-out rates were again lower for the Futures Program, 5.12%, compared to the Baltimore City drop-out rate of 8.14%. During the 1999-2000 school year 85.2% of the Futures Program graduates were in college, vocational school or employed (27% were in college, 8.2% were in college or vocational school and 49.2% were employed). The Futures Program reduced drop-out rates for the students served and had lower drop-out rates, despite the fact that at-risk students were being served, than both the school in which the program was housed and the overall drop-out rate for the Baltimore City Schools. This study provided support for a comprehensive high school intervention program for at-risk students and noted that as at-risk students in this study were provided adequate support systems, their rate of drop-out fell below the average drop-out rate for their school and city (Lever et al., 2004).

Somers and Pilawsky (2004) conducted a study to assess a different drop-out prevention program that provided after school tutoring services and supplemental enrichment to at-risk ninth graders. The tutors provided students with tutoring three days per week in the afternoons, two hours per day. Monthly enrichment programs on self esteem, self efficacy and motivation were also provided. The student sample was chosen from a Midwestern city that was rather racially segregated. Ninety-one percent of the students were African American and four percent were white. Forty-four percent of the students lived in poverty while 70% of the students were eligible for free school lunch. The tutors were university students who were paid (Somers & Pilawsky, 2004).

The results of the tutoring and enrichment study, according to Somers and Pilawsky (2004), found that there were no significant changes after one year of tutoring and enrichment interventions for the control group in student grade point averages (GPA). Although the student GPAs did not improve, students participating in the program were more likely to stay in school. Only 7.7% of program completers dropped out during their 10th grade years, while the school drop-out rate was 13% and the district drop-out rate was 15%. Somers and Pilawsky (2004) noted in the discussion of the study findings that school transitions can be difficult for students, particularly high risk students. They argued that the tutors and the supplemental enrichment program may have had an important impact on a student's decision to stay in school. Results from interviews indicated that the tutors stated although students may not have stayed engaged academically, they would often continue the tutoring program for the relationship and mentoring that it provided. Somers and Pilawsky (2004) asserted that the tutoring program provided students the support necessary for them to remain in school.

Suy and Suy (2007) conducted a study to determine whether 16 specific risk factors accelerated student risk for dropping out. Data used for this study came from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Suy and Suy (2007) found that students who had even one risk factor had an 89.3% greater chance of dropping out of school than students with no risk factors. The factors associated with the highest risk of dropping out when considered independently were low GPA, which increased the likelihood of dropout by 115.9%; low socio-economic status, which increased the likelihood of dropout by 75%; and suspension which increased the likelihood of dropping out by 77.5% (Suy & Suy, 2007).

Suy and Suy (2007) also considered whether or not multiple risk factors increased the likelihood of dropping out. Three separate models were created to analyze the impact of multiple risk factors on drop-out. The findings of the study indicated there were similar risk factors for students in both the zero-risk and one-risk models. The results of the two-risk model included the risk factors from both the zero and one models, but differed in that the number of peers going to college was no longer significant. For the three-risk model, the only significant risk factors were living with biological parents, house size, region and absences. Suy and Suy noted that as the number of risk factors increased, intervention strategies were less effective. Early intervention efforts to decrease drop-out rates were critical because as students increased their risk factors, intervention efforts had less effect and drop out increased (Suy & Suy, 2007).

Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1997, Suy and Suy (2007) were able to find that as students' risk factors began to increase, the likelihood of dropping out also increased, although the number of predictors for drop-out decreased. On the other hand, students with fewer risk factors were more likely to drop-out for multiple reasons. Suy and Suy (2007) asserted that multiple intervention methods were needed to address the needs of these students because their reasons for drop-out were quite diverse. While most students who dropped out had some risk factors associated with their drop-out status, the authors noted that 4.3% of students drop-out with no risk factors. The only significant predictor, according to Suy and Suy (2007), for continued school attendance was whether or not students expected to stay in school the next year.

Drop-out prevention research studies reviewed indicated that at-risk students simply were in need of more resources and supports in order to be successful (Lever et



al., 2004; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004). Raywid (1994) agreed when she stated, “More challenging students are just more dependent on a good education” (p. 26). The drop-out studies discussed indicated that students’ likelihood of dropping out of school decreased as they were provided with much needed supports such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, advocates, and transition services (Lever et al., 2004; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004). In order to provide these students with the supports needed, they must first be identified as at-risk. Several identifying at-risk characteristics were found in the literature on alternative school recidivism and drop-out prevention. In order to best assess which students were most in need of extra supports, these characteristics are noted below:

1. The student had low academic achievement (McCall, 2003; Suy & Suy, 2007).
2. The student’s family had a low socio-economic status (McCall, 2003; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007).
3. The student had a large number of absences (Reubel et al., 2001; Suy & Suy, 2007).
4. The student lived in a single parent home (McCall, 2003).
5. The student expected to stay in school next year (Suy & Suy, 2007).
6. The student had a previous history of dropping out (Reubel et al., 2001).
7. The student had a history of suspension from school (Suy & Suy, 2007).
8. The student was a minority (McCall, 2003; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004).
9. The student was younger at enrollment to the alternative school (McCall, 2003).
10. The student’s friends were also drop-outs (McCall, 2003).

## Theoretical Framework

### *Dewey*

Many researchers have attributed alternative school development to the theory of Dewey (Domina, 2002; Neumann, 2003; Raywid, 1983; Rogers & Polkinghorn, 1990). The belief that the ultimate goal for education concerned the student's ability to gain economic success was a driving force in curriculum development (Proefriedt, 2010). It was this driving force, according to Proefriedt, that promoted a focus on academic "practices that diminish learning" (p. 85). Proefriedt discussed Dewey's *double-consciousness* as striving to meet standards set by society while failing to acknowledge the student's individual desires. Once students were taught to conform to society's expectations, their comfort level with the norm would not allow them to think for themselves as future life problems arose (Fishman & McCarthy, 1996). Dewey (1917) promoted individualized, relevant learning. This approach was in opposition to more traditional educational methods discussed by Fishman & McCarthy (1996) and Neumann (2003). The alternative school movement grew out of the belief that not all students were successful in the traditional setting and some of these students may benefit from more individualized, relevant and hands on learning approaches.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1917) argued about the importance of individual interest and relevance in education. Dewey asserted that as societies grew in complexity, there was an increasing gap between relevant learning experiences and the more specific and rigid technical skills being taught in schools. Dewey asserted that student interest and relevance was a key factor in student success and without it there would be little individual desire to invest effort in learning. Fishman and McCarthy

argued that rather than lecture and teacher-led instruction, students should be actively engaged in their learning; the teacher should provide indirect guidance while students found answers through personal inquiry. Alternative-school learning environments were often described as student centered and focused on the learning needs and interests of the individual child (Fantini, 1973; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003). Domina (2002) discussed Sullivan House Alternative School which successfully utilized a Deweyan student centered approach to provide relevant learning experiences for students.

Domina (2002) conducted a qualitative descriptive study of Sullivan House Alternative School which was described as following the approaches of Dewey's laboratory school. Domina (2002) discussed *The School and Society* in which Dewey (1900) argued that four student instincts, social, constructive, investigative, and expressive, should drive educational curriculum and programming. From these instincts, Dewey developed six tenants used to create his laboratory school. These tenants, according to Domina, were utilized effectively by Executive Director Janice Greer at the Sullivan House Alternative School in Chicago. Domina wrote that students who attended Sullivan House had limited social and emotional skills and needed to develop good work habits, responsibility and hope for their future. Greer used Dewey's six tenants as a basis for developing the Sullivan House School's culture and curriculum (Domina, 2002).

The first tenant, according to Dewey (1900), asserted that students must feel they are valuable members of the school community. Students at Sullivan House were given opportunities to make breakfast and lunch, work in the office and the daycare, and serve as custodians. These opportunities allowed students to develop ownership of their school as well as to build much needed skills and responsibility (Domina, 2002).

Tenant number two stated that the school teachers must have adequate time to show and feel genuine concern towards their students (Dewey, 1900). Showing concern for students' well being creates a warm and caring environment. Greer worked to instill a sense of mutual respect among staff and students at the school. Each classroom had approximately eight to 12 students per teacher. Safe and orderly learning environments were utilized as teachers helped students develop mastery at specific skills of interest. Teachers ate lunch with the kids each day and served as student mentors (Domina, 2002).

Tenant number three required that students solved relevant real world problems (Dewey, 1900). Students at the school were encouraged by their teachers through guided teacher assignments to solve relevant academic and interpersonal problems with their peers. Students were encouraged to go on internships and school field trips in Chicago that were focused on students career interest areas to assist with developing their hope for the future (Domina, 2002).

Tenant number four stressed the importance of developing healthy habits for learning and constructive work (Dewey, 1900). Teachers used a variety of teaching strategies including art, graphics, computer displays, time lines, scrap books, photo journals, school news paper, dramatic presentations and debates in order to create relevance and spark interest for their students. Hands-on projects helped to provide relevance with regards to student lives, career planning, functional living skills, and personal cultural, geographical and historical relevance. Students were required to accept responsibility for their assignments, learn from new situations and cooperate with others to solve every day problems (Domina, 2002).

Tenant number five addressed the importance of creativity in the curriculum (Dewey, 1900). Students were assigned to hands-on creative classes such as woodshop and internships. These courses helped to enrich the curriculum and provided differentiated learning to meet the diverse learning styles of students at the school (Domina, 2002).

Tenant number six encouraged student led communication that taught appropriate interpersonal skills through informal classroom conversations and staff role modeling (Dewey, 1900). Students discussed movies, television shows, student experiences and community issues. Teachers indirectly guided the student towards developing communication skills that were healthy and constructive (Domina, 2002).

According to Domina (2002), Greer followed Dewey's (1900) disciplinary ideology by first helping students to take ownership in their school home. Once discouraged students felt a part of the school, they learned skills and could create, clean up and follow through with important tasks for job skill development such as monitoring the temperature of the ovens. Domina (2002) noted that there were large improvements in student behavior and attitudes towards the school and schooling at Sullivan House as compared to the traditional schools (Domina, 2002). Like Sullivan House, alternative schools often provided supportive environments which offered student centered individualized and relevant learning experiences (Fantini, 1973; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Neumann, 2003).

### *Fullan*

In *Leadership and Sustainability*, Fullan (2005a) noted that there had been progress in education, mostly with regards to gains at the elementary levels in literacy

and numeracy, but he did not state that this progress had been deep or sustainable. The ability of leaders and schools to build capacity, or the know-how to act in collaboration with one another in order to bring about positive change, was essential to sustaining improvements (Fullan, 2005a). School success, including alternative school success, was dependent upon systems change, according to Raywid (1994). In order for schools to be successful, total system support must be in place (Raywid, 1994). Fullan noted that reform that was centrally driven, from the district or state, was a first step towards improvement; however, centrally driven reform could not be sustainable. Fullan asserted that sustainable change must come from the leaders within the system and individual schools working together, collaborating with one another and building capacity (Fullan, 2005a).

According to Valore et al. (2006), it was critical that alternative school leaders and regular school leaders worked closely with all stakeholders (parents, students, counselors, advocates, principals) as students transitioned back and forth between schools. It was also critical that these leader partnerships were dedicated to working with one another to improve alternative student outcomes. Alternative schools must include all stakeholders (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009; Valore et al., 2006) to promote student success during transitions. The leaders of the schools, alternative schools and regular setting schools, set the tone for working with one another to promote student success. The total system support, across teachers, leaders, parents and students must be in place to ensure students are receiving the supports necessary (Raywid, 1994).

In “Resiliency and Sustainability,” Fullan (2005b) defined sustainability as the chance that the system can improve through the renewal process. According to Fullan

(2005a) in *Leadership and Sustainability*, plateaus will naturally occur. Fullan suggested that in order to move beyond the plateau, professional learning communities at the local level must engage in capacity building that utilizes effective resources, skills, knowledge and motivation. It was important, according to Fullan, for leaders to work in collaboration with other leaders and for teachers to work with other teachers through professional learning communities (PLCs). Fullan (2005b) argued that schools must have PLCs, not only within the individual school, but also between schools to promote depth of learning. Increasing communication between the alternative and regular school setting could promote learning among teachers in both settings that may benefit the students who transition between the schools.

Fullan (2005a) considered the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and noted that this law required states to have achievement systems in place which measured annual progress. The NCLB law is punitive in nature with increasing consequences for schools that failed to improve (Fullan, 2005a). Fullan (2005a) stated, “There is little investment in capacity building and it places people in a high alert dependency mode, jumping from one solution to another in a desperate attempt to comply” (p. 11).

According to Fullan (2005a), solutions should be both theoretical and practical. He noted that with respect to large scale reform in education, nothing attempted to date has worked; therefore, effective solutions must incorporate important complex theory but also practical application for that theory. Fullan developed eight elements of sustainability to assist with whole scale reform. He noted that when working on creating new systems, hands-on experiences are critical. The eight elements of sustainability were public services with a moral purpose, commitment to changing context at all levels,

lateral capacity building through networks, intelligent accountability and vertical relationships, deep learning, dual commitment to short-term and long-term results, cyclical energizing, and the long lever of leadership (Fullan, 2005a).

Leaders learning from one another through collaboration within and between schools and districts was an integral part of the third sustainability element, lateral capacity building through networks (Fullan, 2005a). As leaders learned from one another, there was an increase in the exchange of meaningful information. Fullan (2006) discussed lateral capacity building in an article titled, *Leading Professional Learning*. He noted that teachers, leaders, schools and districts must network with one another in order to maximize learning potential. Fullan (2006) wrote that innovative strategies for learning and teaching develop from cultures that encourage collaboration and enable schools to build capacity for improvement. Professional learning communities should be a tool utilized to bring about culture change within the school system and should not be viewed as the latest innovation. Fullan applied lateral capacity building to teachers and leaders within and between schools, although he noted that leadership was the driving force behind the capacity building. The goal was for leaders to work together and collaborate in order to learn from one another and improve instruction (Fullan, 2006).



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. Questionnaires, including *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A) and *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B), were mailed to 695 secondary and alternative school administrators in Mississippi. All alternative school administrators, 145, and a purposeful selection of secondary school administrators, 550, were mailed questionnaires.

#### Research Design

The design of the study was mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative design used causal comparative and correlational methodologies; while the qualitative design analyzed the respondents' short-answer responses to four open-ended questions. Causal comparative design was used to determine if differences existed between the two administrator groups, alternative and secondary school administrators, on their reported perceptions of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. Correlational design was used to determine if there was a relationship between the administrators' reported perceptions and alternative school recidivism rates at their schools. Qualitative design was used to compare and report administrator responses to open-ended questions on other effectiveness characteristics that may be important for

alternative schools, transition supports utilized in alternative and secondary schools, and reasons why students return to the alternative school for multiple assignments. The independent variable for the study was the administrator type, with two independent groups, alternative and secondary administrators. The dependent variables were the administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

### Participants

Alternative and secondary school administrators were purposefully selected from each district within the state of Mississippi. According to national alternative school studies conducted by Lehr et al. (2004) and Foley and Pang (2006), most alternative schools in the United States primarily served secondary students from grades 9 to 12 on separate sites from the regular school. Due to this, only secondary and alternative school administrators were chosen to complete the questionnaires. All alternative school administrators in the state were included along with a representative sample of secondary school administrators, purposefully selected from each public school district. Contact information for each participant was gathered by using the Mississippi Department of Education website, [www.mde.k12.ms.us](http://www.mde.k12.ms.us), to locate each district's website. The researcher is an alternative school administrator in south Mississippi. All schools and districts associated with the researcher's alternative school were excluded from this study.

Alternative education in Mississippi is provided through alternative schools operated at each school district; however, some districts participate in consortiums through which the financial responsibility of the alternative school may be shared. Often

in a consortium, one district operates the alternative school while another district purchases slots for alternative students. One district may contract with another district to pay a fixed amount annually for a set number of alternative students to be served. They may also contract to pay a daily rate for each alternative student served. Due to districts participating in consortiums, not all districts have an alternative school administrator. All alternative school administrators in Mississippi were selected to participate in this study. Alternative school administrators were located through each school district's website located on the Mississippi Department of Education website, [www.mde.k12.ms.us](http://www.mde.k12.ms.us). When no alternative school administrators were located on the school district's website, districts were mailed one alternative school administrator questionnaire with the heading alternative school administrator. In total, 145 alternative school administrator questionnaires were mailed.

Secondary administrators were selected across the state. When possible, four administrators were purposefully selected from each public school district website: two principals (high school and middle school) and two assistant principals (high school and middle school). For larger districts, only two secondary principals and two assistant principals were purposefully selected; while for smaller districts, available secondary principals and assistant principals were purposefully selected. When more than two schools were available, schools were chosen by rotation using odd, then even numbers. After the schools were chosen, the principal and assistant principal were chosen from each school. Questionnaires were mailed to 550 secondary administrators across Mississippi. Collectively, 695 surveys were mailed to alternative school and secondary school administrators in Mississippi. Questionnaires returned represented a volunteer

sample and indicated that the individuals who returned completed questionnaires volunteered to participate in this study.

#### Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to collect the necessary information for the purposes of the study; *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A) and *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B). Burnett (2002) gave permission (Appendix C) to use the instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* in order to measure alternative and secondary administrators' perceptions of effective alternative school characteristics on importance and existence in their alternative schools. With permission, two modifications were made to the instrument for the purposes of this study. First, the demographics collected by Burnett were removed. The *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* was used to measure descriptive characteristics of the alternative and secondary schools of the administrators who chose to participate in the study.

The second change to Burnett's instrument included the removal of the section of the instrument which measured the existence of the characteristics state-wide. In Burnett's (2002) study, he analyzed secondary administrators' perceptions on the importance of characteristics, the existence of characteristics in their own alternative schools and the existence of the characteristics statewide. Burnett noted in his dissertation that most often administrators chose (3) not sure, for existence of the characteristics statewide in Mississippi. Due to this, the existence of characteristics statewide was removed from the questionnaire for the purposes of this study.

The instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs*, was created by Burnett for his 2002 dissertation study. Burnett located the effectiveness characteristics through a review of the literature as well as through identifying characteristics required for Mississippi alternative school programs by the Mississippi Department of Education. Burnett addressed the validity and reliability of his instrument and discussed the methods used to ensure each in his methodology section (2002). Upon initial creation of the instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs*, a panel of experts was used by Burnett to assess the validity of the instrument and make suggestions for any changes or revisions needed (2002). The experts in Burnett's study included two secondary principals, a behavioral specialist, and a university professor in school psychology. The expert panel provided input and suggestions for necessary improvements to the instrument. Subsequently, changes were made by Burnett. Next, Burnett conducted a pilot-test of the instrument to ensure reliability. Fifteen secondary principals were selected by Burnett to complete the pilot-test. A Chronbach's alpha was used to determine reliability. An alpha of  $\alpha = .9073$  was calculated by Burnett which indicated that the instrument, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs*, was reliable (Burnett, 2002).

Alternative and secondary school administrators who chose to participate in the study rated their perceptions on the importance they place on each of the 26 effectiveness characteristics and the existence of each of the 26 effectiveness characteristics in their alternative schools, using a Likert-type scale. The Likert-type scale ranges from 1 to 5: *strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, and strongly agree*. Burnett's (2002) 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics are:

1. The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible.
2. Teachers work in the alternative school because they chose to work here.
3. Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate.
4. There are well-defined standards, rules, and expectations.
5. The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging, and noncompetitive.
6. There is a sense of community between staff and students.
7. Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health.
8. The total school size is less than 250.
9. The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility.
10. Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or earn a GED.
11. Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop-out rate.
12. Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absenteeism.
13. There is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.
14. There is a teacher to student ratio of less than 1:12.
15. Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions.
16. The alternative school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.
17. There is school commitment to have each student be successful.
18. The staff has continual staff development.
19. There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.
20. Students have access to medical health care.
21. There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.

22. Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.
23. The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.
24. There is administrative and community support for the program.
25. The staff is motivated and culturally diverse.
26. There is an advisory committee for the alternative program.

The second instrument used in this study was the *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B). This instrument was used to gather information that would add to the descriptive quality of the study. This questionnaire collected the following information: the administrator's years of experience, highest licensure obtained, school type, school size, alternative school consortium status and alternative school recidivism rate.

Administrator experience level was collected according to the following groups: one to five years experience, six to 10 years experience and 11 or more year's experience. Highest licensure obtained will be measured by the Mississippi state education licensure levels (AA, AAA, or AAAA). The A license indicates the respondent has a bachelor's degree; AA license, a master's degree; AAA license, a specialist degree; AAAA license, a doctoral degree. The selections given for administrator's education licensure level begin at AA because it is a requirement for Mississippi administrators to hold at least a master's degree.

The school type was measured by administrator selection of the non-alternative school (K-12), middle school/junior high school, high school, alternative school (K-12), alternative school (6-12), alternative school (9-12), or other. School size was measured

by asking the administrators to provide the total number of students served at their schools for the 2010-2011 school year.

Alternative school consortium status was measured by asking the participants whether or not their district's alternative school participates in an alternative school consortium. An alternative school consortium is an alternative school that serves multiple districts' alternative students at the same alternative school setting. Most often one district operates the alternative school while other participating districts purchase slots in order to provide educational services to their students assigned to the alternative setting.

Alternative school recidivism was determined by asking each administrator the total number of students (from his/her school) served in the alternative setting for the 2010-2011 school year and the number of those students served who had returned to the alternative school for multiple assignments. The following equation was used:  $[(\text{total number of students serving multiple assignments} / \text{total number of students served in the alternative setting}) \times 100 = \text{recidivism rate}]$ . Alternative school and secondary school administrators were asked to provide the information necessary to calculate recidivism rates for their schools. All demographic information was requested for what was in place at the administrator's school during the 2010-2011 school year.

#### Procedures

Once permission (Appendix D) from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Southern Mississippi was received, the Administrator Informed Consent Letter (Appendix E), *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* Instrument (Appendix A), the *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B), and a self-addressed stamped envelope was mailed to alternative school



administrators and purposefully selected secondary administrators in Mississippi. Data collection procedures included:

1. For the purposes of the mail-out, an administrator name and school address list was generated using the Mississippi Department of Education Website to locate all alternative school administrators and a selection of secondary administrators. The researcher's alternative school and schools involved with the researcher's alternative school were excluded from the study.
2. The Administrator Informed Consent Letter (Appendix E), *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* Instrument (Appendix A), and the *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B) was copied and color coded by administrator type to enhance ease of mail out as well as to quickly determine the administrator type upon return of the questionnaire. Secondary school administrators' questionnaires were light blue while alternative school administrators' questionnaires were lavender.
3. Administrators were informed about the purposes of the study in the Informed Consent Letter (Appendix E) which was attached to the top of the mailed questionnaires. Return of the questionnaires represented a volunteer sample of selected administrators, indicating that the administrators returning their questionnaires volunteered to participate in the study.
4. A self-addressed and stamped envelope was included with each of the mailed questionnaires in order to promote ease of return of the questionnaires for the administrators choosing to participate.

5. As questionnaires were returned, data were entered into an excel spreadsheet. Data were later transferred to SPSS statistical software to conduct analysis.
6. No identifying information was being asked of the administrators; however, for purposes of confidentiality and for general safety of the data, returned questionnaires were locked in a secure filing cabinet at the home of the researcher.
7. Questionnaires were kept, for purposes of ensuring correct data entry and for data analysis, until the study was completed. At that time, all questionnaires were destroyed.
8. After a short time period, approximately four weeks, data were transferred to the SPSS statistical software and analyzed to address the research questions.

#### Data Analysis

Data were collected and entered into the SPSS statistical package for analysis. Research questions 1 and 2 were analyzed using independent samples *t*-tests with a criterion for significance set at an alpha of .05. Research questions 3 through 6 were analyzed using Pearson correlations with a criterion for significance set at an alpha of .05. Research questions, 7 through 9 were analyzed using qualitative analysis of short answer open-ended questions. Research questions and analyses are discussed below.

*Research Question 1:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics?

Research Question 1 was analyzed using the independent samples *t*-test to determine if differences existed between alternative school and secondary school

administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. A criterion alpha of .05 was used to determine significance. The independent variable for this independent samples *t*-test was the administrator type, with two independent groups: alternative administrator and secondary administrator. The dependent variables were administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

*Research Question 2:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics?

Research Question 2 was analyzed using the independent samples *t*-test to determine if differences existed between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. A criterion alpha of .05 was used to determine significance. The independent variable for this independent samples *t*-test was the administrator type, with two independent groups: alternative administrator and secondary administrator. The dependent variables were the administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

*Research Question 3:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

Research Question 3 was analyzed using a Pearson correlation to determine if there was a relationship between alternative school administrators' reported perceptions

on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates. A criterion alpha was set at .05 to determine significance.

*Research Question 4:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

Research Question 4 was analyzed using a Pearson correlation to determine if there was a relationship between alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates. A criterion alpha was set at .05 to determine significance.

*Research Question 5:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

Research Question 5 was analyzed using a Pearson correlation to determine if there was a relationship between secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates. A criterion alpha was set at .05 to determine significance.

*Research Question 6:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

Research Question 6 was analyzed using a Pearson correlation to determine if there was a relationship between secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates. An alpha will be set at .05 to determine significance.

*Research Question 7:* In addition to Burnett's 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics, are there other characteristics that are important for an effective alternative school?

Research Question 7 was analyzed using qualitative analysis of participants' short-answer responses to the question, are there any characteristics NOT listed above that are important for the alternative setting?

*Research Question 8:* What transition support services are provided for students who have successfully completed their alternative assignment?

Research Question 8 was analyzed using qualitative analysis of participants' short-answer responses to the questions: after successful completion of an alternative school assignment does your school provide transition support services for students returning to the regular education setting, and please list any supports your school has in place to assist students with transitioning successfully back to the regular setting after successful completion of an alternative school assignment.

*Research Question 9:* Why do students who have successfully completed the alternative school return for multiple assignments?

Research Question 9 was analyzed using qualitative analysis of participants' short-answer responses to the question, what is the most common cause for student return to the alternative school for multiple assignments?

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### Introduction

Questionnaires including *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A), and the *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B) were mailed to 695 secondary and alternative school administrators in Mississippi. Alternative school administrators returned 29 of 145 questionnaires while secondary administrators returned 112 of 550 questionnaires. A total of 141 questionnaires were returned, for an overall return rate of 20%. Seven percent of the secondary administrators responding indicated that the alternative school was on their campus. For the purposes of this study, these questionnaires were identified as secondary administrators. Missing data were minimal; all returned questionnaires were used for analysis.

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. Nine research questions were proposed to address the purpose of the study. Following descriptive information on the population participating in the study, the research questions are addressed.

#### Descriptive

Table 1 shows results for secondary and alternative school administrators' years experience (1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11 plus years), highest licensure earned (AA, AAA,

AAAA), and school district consortium status (yes, no). For secondary administrators, years experience was fairly equally spread across each group; 1-5 years experience, 37.5%; 6-10 years experience, 30.4%; and 11 plus years experience, 32.1%. Alternative school administrators participating in the study reported higher percentages for 11 plus years experience, 51.7%; while the groups 1-5 years experience (20.7%) and 6-10 years experience (27.6%) were lower.

Highest licensure earned was divided into three groups (AA, AAA, AAAA). The AA license indicated that the administrator had completed a master's degree. The AAA license indicated that the administrator had completed a specialist degree. The AAAA license indicated that the administrator had completed a doctoral degree. Overall, the majority of administrators participating in this study held an AA licensure, with 59.5% of alternative administrators and 69% of secondary administrators reporting AA. The percentage of administrators holding higher licenses, AAA and AAAA, decreased for alternative and secondary administrators, as licensure earned increased. Most administrators participating in the study held an AA license, indicating they had completed at least a master's degree; while fewer administrators held an AAA and even fewer held an AAAA license.

An alternative school consortium is an alternative school that serves multiple districts' alternative students at the same alternative school. Most often, one district operates the alternative school while other participating districts purchase slots in order to provide educational services to their students assigned to the alternative setting. Alternative school and secondary school administrators participating in the study reported that the majority of their schools did not have an alternative school consortium, with

89.7% of alternative school administrators and 67.6% of secondary administrators reporting *No* for consortium. Slightly more secondary administrators, 32.4%, indicated that their districts did participate in an alternative school consortium while alternative school administrators reported *Yes* only 10.3% of the time.

Table 1

*Percentages for Administrators' Demographic Data*

		Secondary (n = 112)	Alternative (n = 29)
Experience	1-5 years	37.5	20.7
	6-10 years	30.4	27.6
	11 plus years	32.1	51.7
Highest License	AA	59.5	69.0
	AAA	23.4	17.2
	AAAA	17.1	13.8
Consortium	Yes	32.4	10.3
	No	67.6	89.7

School type was requested in order to describe the types of schools of the participating administrators. For secondary schools, school type had four options (K-12 campus, junior high/middle school campus, high school campus, other). For alternative schools, school type also had four options (K-12 campus, 6-12 campus, 9-12 campus, other). Table 2 indicates that the majority of secondary administrators participating in this study worked at junior high/middle school campuses (35.7%) and high school



campuses (34.8%). Fewer secondary administrators chose K-12 campus (16.1%); while an even smaller percentage of secondary administrators chose other (13.4%).

For school type, a large percentage of alternative school administrators (44.8%) reported that their alternative school served students grades 6-12, while a slightly smaller percentage of alternative school administrators (31%) reported having a K-12 campus. Only 3.4% of alternative school administrators reported having a 9-12 campus while 20.7% reported other. Of the 112 participating secondary administrators, eight secondary administrators, 7%, indicated that they had an alternative school housed on their campus.

Table 2

*Percentages of School Type by Administrator*

		Secondary ( <i>n</i> = 112)	Alternative ( <i>n</i> = 29)
Secondary School	K-12 Campus	16.1	
	Jr.High/Middle School	35.7	
	High School	34.8	
	Other	13.4	
Alternative School	K-12 Campus		31.0
	6-12 Campus		44.8
	9-12 Campus		3.4
	Other		20.7

School size was requested from both alternative and secondary school administrators. Table 3 presents the results for school size for the alternative and

secondary school administrators who participated in the study. The average secondary administrator participating in the study worked at a school that had 656 students while the average alternative administrator worked at a school that had 140 secondary students. For alternative schools, administrators were not asked a total school size but rather were asked the total number of secondary students, grades 6-12, served at their school. Both secondary and alternative school size varied greatly. Alternative school size ranged from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 980 students; while secondary school size ranged from a minimum of 115 to a maximum of 1700.

Table 3

*School Size by Administrator Type*

Administrator	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Secondary	103	115	1700	655.84	325.76
Alternative	28	3	980	140.00	232.45

In order to determine the recidivism rate for each school, administrators were asked to give the total number of students served at the alternative school and the total number of those students who had served multiple alternative school assignments. Table 4 shows the total alternative students served and the total number of alternative students who served multiple assignments for both alternative administrator's and secondary administrator's schools. Secondary school administrators participating in the study indicated that on average 15.72 students were served in the alternative setting while 3.21 students had been assigned to the alternative school multiple times. Alternative school

administrators indicated that on average 140.04 secondary alternative students were served while 55.43 students had been assigned to the alternative school multiple times.

Recidivism rates were calculated for each administrator's school by calculating the following equation: [total number of students serving multiple assignments / total number of students served in the alternative setting x 100 = recidivism rate]. Table 5 presents mean recidivism rate percentages for secondary and alternative school administrators. On average, secondary school administrators reported 20.84% of alternative students had served multiple assignments at the alternative school, while alternative administrators reported 19.88% of alternative students had served multiple assignments at the alternative school. This indicates that the administrator groups were in agreement on the average number of students in their alternative schools serving multiple assignments.

Table 4

*Total Alternative Students and Alternative Students Serving Multiple Assignments by Administrator*

Administrator		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Secondary	Total Alt. Students	0	87	15.72	15.86
	Multiple Assignments	0	15	3.21	3.83
Alternative	Total Alt. Students	3	980	140.04	232.45
	Multiple Assignments	0	900	55.43	19.64

Table 5

*Alternative School Recidivism Percentages by Administrator*

Administrator	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Secondary	0	100	20.84	21.98
Alternative	0	92	19.88	19.64

## Importance and Existence

Descriptive statistics were run to analyze Burnett's 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics by secondary and alternative school administrator groups. These descriptive statistics presented in Tables 7-10 provide the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for the alternative school effectiveness characteristics from most to least important and most to least existent for each group. Burnett's (2002) 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics are provided in Table 6 in order to more easily compare the characteristics and descriptive statistics presented in Tables 7-10.

Table 6

*Burnett's 26 Alternative School Effectiveness Characteristics*

Number	Responding Characteristic
C1	The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible.
C2	Teachers work in the alternative school because they choose to work there.

Table 6 (continued).

Number	Responding Characteristic
C3	Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate.
C4	There are well defined standards, rules and expectations.
C5	The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and noncompetitive.
C6	There is a sense of community between staff and students.
C7	Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health.
C8	The total school size is less than 250 students.
C9	The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility.
C10	Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED.
C11	Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate.
C12	Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.
C13	There is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.
C14	There is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12.
C15	Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions.
C16	The school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.
C17	There is school commitment to have each student to be successful.
C18	The staff has continual staff development.
C19	There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.
C20	Students have access to medical care.

Table 6 (continued).

Number	Responding Characteristic
C21	There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.
C22	Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.
C23	The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.
C24	There is administrative and community support for the program.
C25	The staff is motivated and culturally diverse.
C26	There is an advisory committee for the alternative program.

Table 7 and Table 8 show the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for the 26 alternative school characteristics on reported importance for the secondary and alternative school administrators' alternative schools, respectively. Secondary and alternative school administrators consistently gave high ratings, means at or above 3.92, to all alternative school effectiveness characteristics except one, *C3: student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*. On a 5 point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates *strongly disagree* and 5 indicates *strongly agree*, secondary administrators on average reported a 2.21 for *C3: student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, while alternative administrators on average reported 2.35.

Table 7

*Characteristics Rated Most to Least Important by Secondary School Administrators*

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C10	1	2	4.75	0.63
C4	1	5	4.69	0.71
C19	2	5	4.67	0.65
C9	2	5	4.64	0.76
C14	2	5	4.61	0.65
C17	2	5	4.56	0.73
C13	1	5	4.53	0.80
C21	2	5	4.52	0.74
C24	2	5	4.51	0.68
C22	1	5	4.47	0.79
C18	1	5	4.45	0.80
C8	1	5	4.44	0.99
C20	1	5	4.43	0.75
C5	1	5	4.34	0.92
C1	2	5	4.34	0.76
C23	1	5	4.30	0.92
C25	2	5	4.25	0.93
C6	1	5	4.25	0.98
C11	1	5	4.23	1.08

Table 7 (continued).

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C26	1	5	4.22	0.98
C12	1	5	4.17	1.05
C2	1	5	4.15	1.00
C15	1	5	4.10	1.01
C16	1	5	4.09	1.03
C7	1	5	4.01	1.21
C3	1	5	2.21	1.25

Table 8

*Characteristics Rated Most to Least Important by Alternative School Administrators*

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C17	4	5	4.96	0.20
C19	4	5	4.88	0.33
C24	3	5	4.84	0.47
C13	4	5	4.81	0.40
C4	2	5	4.81	0.63
C1	4	5	4.78	0.42
C22	3	5	4.76	0.52
C9	2	5	4.70	0.72



Table 8 (continued).

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
C20	3	5	4.68	0.55
C11	3	5	4.67	0.56
C10	2	5	4.65	0.80
C25	3	5	4.64	0.57
C8	1	5	4.63	0.88
C5	2	5	4.63	0.69
C18	2	5	4.63	0.77
C21	2	5	4.60	0.82
C14	2	5	4.56	0.89
C12	3	5	4.56	0.75
C6	3	5	4.48	0.64
C2	2	5	4.48	0.85
C16	2	5	4.44	0.82
C15	2	5	4.41	0.93
C23	2	5	4.36	0.91
C7	1	5	4.08	1.38
C26	1	5	3.92	1.29
C3	1	5	2.35	1.44

Data in Table 7 and Table 8 show that secondary and alternative administrators agree that 25 of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics were important. Secondary administrators rated all effectiveness characteristics, except C3: *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, above or equal to 4.01; while alternative administrators rated all effectiveness characteristics, except *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, above or equal to 3.92. The secondary administrators mean range for the importance characteristics was 4.01 to 4.75, with *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, removed. The alternative administrators mean range for the importance characteristics was 3.92 to 4.96, with *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, removed. Overall, the two administrator groups, secondary and alternative agreed that 25 of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics were important.

Table 9 and Table 10 show the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for the 26 alternative school characteristics on reported existence in the secondary and alternative school administrators' alternative schools, respectively. Administrators rated each alternative school effectiveness characteristic for existence in their alternative school on a 5 point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates *strongly disagree* and 5 indicates *strongly agree*. Secondary and alternative school administrators were in agreement on the least and most existent characteristics in their alternative schools. Alternative administrators consistently rated each characteristic higher for existence, with the exception of C3: *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*.

Secondary and alternative school administrators rated C3: *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, as the least existent characteristic in their alternative schools and the C8: *total school size is less than 250 students*, to be of greatest existence in their

alternative schools. Secondary administrators on average rated the existence of *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, to be 1.80; while alternative administrators on average rated the existence of *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, to be 1.70. *Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, was rated the lowest for importance and existence by secondary and alternative school administrators. Administrators' reports indicated that *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, was not an important characteristic for their alternative schools and subsequently it was not in existence.

Both administrator groups rated C8: *the total school size is less than 250 students* to be of greatest existence. On average, secondary administrators reported 4.50 while alternative administrators reported 4.76. When comparing the means for each administrator group, the alternative school administrator means for existence were higher for all characteristics, except C3: *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*. The mean range for secondary administrators on the existence of the 26 characteristics was 1.80 to 4.50; while the mean range for the alternative administrators was 1.70 to 4.76.

Table 9

*Characteristics Rated Most to Least Existent by Secondary School Administrators*

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C8	1	5	4.50	1.00
C9	1	5	4.42	1.12
C14	1	5	4.28	0.96
C4	1	5	4.10	1.05
C10	1	5	3.98	1.37

Table 9 (continued).

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
C19	1	5	3.97	1.13
C1	1	5	3.73	1.04
C20	1	5	3.70	1.28
C15	1	5	3.70	1.14
C21	1	5	3.68	1.13
C13	1	5	3.64	1.33
C17	1	5	3.63	1.14
C24	1	5	3.57	1.13
C22	1	5	3.50	1.15
C11	1	5	3.41	1.31
C25	1	5	3.36	1.13
C2	1	5	3.31	1.31
C12	1	5	3.26	1.27
C18	1	5	3.22	1.19
C26	1	5	3.18	1.38
C6	1	5	3.16	1.16
C23	1	5	3.11	1.14
C5	1	5	3.03	1.25
C16	1	5	2.97	1.20
C7	1	5	2.50	1.24

Table 9 (continued).

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C3	1	5	1.80	1.18

Table 10

*Characteristics Rated Most to Least Existent by Alternative School Administrators*

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C8	1	5	4.76	0.79
C17	3	5	4.59	0.64
C9	1	5	4.57	0.96
C19	2	5	4.56	0.89
C4	2	5	4.55	0.91
C21	2	5	4.41	0.89
C13	2	5	4.39	1.03
C22	2	5	4.37	0.88
C1	2	5	4.34	0.86
C14	2	5	4.31	1.04
C10	1	5	4.18	1.44
C6	1	5	4.14	0.99
C18	2	5	4.12	1.03

Table 10 (continued).

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
C20	1	5	4.11	1.25
C12	2	5	4.10	1.01
C11	2	5	4.10	1.08
C24	1	5	4.04	1.26
C15	1	5	3.93	1.33
C23	1	5	3.89	1.12
C25	2	5	3.81	1.11
C5	1	5	3.79	1.01
C16	1	5	3.67	1.27
C2	2	5	3.59	1.05
C26	1	5	3.26	1.53
C7	1	5	2.54	1.37
C3	1	4	1.70	1.03

### Statistics

*Research Question 1:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics?

Research Question 1 was analyzed using an independent samples *t*-test to compare the combined importance means of secondary and alternative administrators.

On a 5 point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates *strongly disagree* and 5 indicates *strongly agree*, secondary administrators rated the importance of the alternative school effectiveness characteristics ( $m = 4.32, sd = .51$ ) similarly to the alternative administrators ( $m = 4.49, sd = .48$ ). There was no significant difference ( $t(137) = -1.618, p = .108$ ) between secondary and alternative administrators on the combined importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

Independent *t*-tests were also used to individually compare secondary and alternative school administrators' reported importance on the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. The results of the independent *t*-tests are in Table 11 below.

Table 11

*Independent Samples t-tests Comparing Administrators' Reported Importance*

Characteristic	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
C1	-2.87	136	.005*
C2	-1.57	135	.119
C3	-0.48	128	.635
C4	-0.75	135	.454
C5	-1.52	136	.130
C6	-1.17	133	.245
C7	-0.26	134	.792
C8	-0.91	132	.365
C9	-0.39	136	.693
C10	0.65	135	.515

Table 11 (continued)

Characteristic	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
C11	-2.00	136	.047*
C12	-1.79	136	.076
C13	-1.79	136	.075
C14	0.35	135	.724
C15	-1.45	136	.151
C16	-1.58	131	.117
C17	-2.73	132	.007*
C18	-0.95	130	.342
C19	-1.56	132	.121
C20	-1.59	131	.114
C21	-0.48	131	.628
C22	-1.73	131	.086
C23	-0.31	131	.755
C24	-2.29	132	.024*
C25	-1.99	130	.049*
C26	1.31	131	.194

\* $p < .05$ .

Table 11 shows that significant differences were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for reported importance on five of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. On average, alternative administrators reported greater



importance for these characteristics than the secondary administrators reported. These characteristics are listed below.

1. Significant differences ( $t(136) = -2.88, p = .005$ ) were identified on reported importance between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C1: *the climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.78, sd = .424$ ) reported this characteristic to have greater importance than secondary administrators ( $m = 4.34, sd = .757$ ).
2. Significant differences ( $t(136) = -2.001, p = .047$ ) were identified on reported importance between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C11: *attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.67, sd = .555$ ) reported this characteristic to have greater importance than secondary administrators ( $m = 4.23, sd = 1.087$ ).
3. Significant differences ( $t(132) = -2.73, p = .007$ ) were identified on reported importance between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C17: *there is school commitment to have each student be successful*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.96, sd = .200$ ) reported this characteristic to have greater importance than secondary administrators ( $m = 4.56, sd = .726$ ).
4. Significant differences ( $t(132) = -2.288, p = .024$ ) were identified on reported importance between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C24: *there is administrative and community support for the alternative school*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.84, sd = .473$ ) reported this

characteristic to have greater importance than secondary administrators ( $m = 4.51$ ,  $sd = .675$ ).

5. Significant differences ( $t(130) = -1.99$ ,  $p = .049$ ) were identified on reported importance between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C25: *the staff is motivated and culturally diverse*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.64$ ,  $sd = .569$ ) reported this characteristic to have greater importance than secondary administrators ( $m = 4.25$ ,  $sd = .933$ ).

*Research Question 2:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics?

Research Question 2 was analyzed using the independent samples *t*-test to determine if differences existed between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the combined existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. There was a significant difference ( $t(139) = -3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ) between secondary and alternative school administrators on the reported combined existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. On a 5 point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates *strongly disagree* and 5 indicates *strongly agree*, alternative administrators reported the average existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their alternative schools ( $m = 3.99$ ,  $sd = .57$ ) to be significantly more existent than the secondary administrators reported ( $m = 3.49$ ,  $sd = .67$ ).

Independent *t*-tests were also used to individually compare secondary and alternative school administrators on reported existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their districts' alternative schools. Table 12 indicates

significant differences between secondary and alternative school administrators for reported existence on fourteen of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

Table 12

*Independent Samples t-tests Comparing Administrators' Reported Existence*

Characteristic	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
C1	-2.94	138	.004*
C2	-1.06	137	.293
C3	0.39	131	.694
C4	-2.12	138	.036*
C5	-3.05	138	.003*
C6	-4.18	136	< .001**
C7	-0.12	135	.908
C8	-1.26	134	.210
C9	-0.66	136	.508
C10	0.67	137	.504
C11	-2.63	137	.010*
C12	-3.30	138	.001*
C13	-2.80	138	.006*
C14	-0.14	137	.889
C15	-.944	136	.347
C16	-2.65	133	.009*
C17	-4.22	134	< .001**

Table 12 (continued).

Characteristic	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
C18	-3.51	132	.001*
C19	-2.50	134	.014*
C20	-1.48	133	.141
C21	-3.12	133	.002*
C22	-3.67	133	< .001**
C23	-3.19	133	.002*
C24	-1.89	134	.061
C25	-1.90	132	.060
C26	-.273	133	.785

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 12 shows that significant differences were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for reported existence on 14 of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. On average, alternative administrators reported significantly greater existence than secondary administrators for 14 characteristics.

1. Significant differences ( $t(138) = -2.95, p = .004$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C1: *the school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.34, sd = .857$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.73, sd = 1.04$ ).

2. Significant differences ( $t(138) = -2.12, p = .036$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C4: *there are well defined standards, rules and expectations*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.55, sd = .910$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 4.10, sd = 1.05$ ).
3. Significant differences ( $t(138) = -3.05, p = .003$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C5: *the instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and noncompetitive*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 3.03, sd = 1.25$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.79, sd = 1.01$ ).
4. Significant differences ( $t(136) = -4.18, p < .001$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C6: *there is a sense of community between staff and students*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.14, sd = .990$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.16, sd = 1.16$ ).
5. Significant differences ( $t(137) = -2.63, p = .010$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C11: *attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.10, sd = 1.08$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.41, sd = 1.31$ ).
6. Significant differences ( $t(138) = -3.30, p = .001$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C12: *attendance at*

*the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.* On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.10$ ,  $sd = 1.01$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.26$ ,  $sd = 1.27$ ).

7. Significant differences ( $t(137) = -2.79$ ,  $p = .006$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C13: *there is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.* On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.39$ ,  $sd = 1.03$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.64$ ,  $sd = 1.33$ ).
8. Significant differences ( $t(133) = -2.65$ ,  $p = .009$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C16: *the school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.* On average alternative administrators ( $m = 3.67$ ,  $sd = 1.27$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 2.97$ ,  $sd = 1.20$ ).
9. Significant differences ( $t(136) = -4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C17: *there is school commitment to have each student to be successful.* On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.59$ ,  $sd = .636$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.63$ ,  $sd = 1.14$ ).
10. Significant differences ( $t(132) = -3.51$ ,  $p = .001$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C18: *the staff has continual staff development.* On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.12$ ,  $sd = 1.03$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.22$ ,  $sd = 1.19$ ).

11. Significant differences ( $t(134) = -2.50, p = .014$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C19: *there is a clearly stated mission and discipline code*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.56, sd = .892$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.97, sd = 1.13$ ).
12. Significant differences ( $t(133) = -3.12, p = .002$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C21: *there is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 4.41, sd = .888$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.68, sd = 1.134$ ).
13. Significant differences ( $t(133) = -3.67, p < .001$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C22: *parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication*. On average, alternative administrators ( $m = 4.37, sd = .884$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.50, sd = 1.148$ ).
14. Significant differences ( $t(133) = -3.19, p = .002$ ) were identified between secondary and alternative administrators for the characteristic C23: *the curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences*. On average alternative administrators ( $m = 3.89, sd = 1.12$ ) reported this characteristic to have higher existence than secondary administrators ( $m = 3.11, sd = 1.14$ ).

*Research Question 3:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

As shown in Table 13, according to alternative administrators' reports for importance, two alternative school effectiveness characteristics were significantly correlated with recidivism: C14: *there is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12*, and C16: *the school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum*. Alternative administrators' reports for importance on the characteristic *there is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12*, was significantly related to recidivism,  $r = -.483$ ,  $p = .013$ . This finding indicates that as alternative administrators were in greater agreement on the importance of the characteristic, *there is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12*, the recidivism rate in their schools decreased. Alternative administrators' reports for importance on the characteristic, *the school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum*, was also significantly related to recidivism rates,  $r = -.433$ ,  $p = .035$ . This finding indicates that as alternative administrators were in greater agreement on the importance of the characteristic, *the school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum*, the recidivism rate in their schools decreased. Table 13 provides the Pearson's correlation coefficients for alternative administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and their relationship with recidivism.

*Research Question 4:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?



Research Question 4 was analyzed using Pearson correlations to determine if there was a relationship between alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism. Table 13 shows that no significant correlations were found between alternative administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates.

Table 13

*Pearson's Correlations between Alternative Administrators' Reported Importance, Existence and Recidivism Rates*

Characteristic	Importance <i>r</i>	Existence <i>r</i>
C1	.165	-.050
C2	.142	.154
C3	-.231	-.318
C4	-.130	-.164
C5	-.224	-.210
C6	.173	.222
C7	-.037	.255
C8	-.012	-.184
C9	.099	.176
C10	.110	.042
C11	-.104	.067
C12	.205	.269

Table 13 (continued).

Characteristic	Importance <i>r</i>	Existence <i>r</i>
C13	.265	.327
C14	.483*	-.357
C15	.020	.053
C16	-.433*	-.055
C17	.212	.350
C18	-.092	.122
C19	.047	.070
C20	.047	-.023
C21	.194	.269
C22	.179	.268
C23	.221	.253
C24	.264	.190
C25	.341	.385
C26	.102	.188

\* $p < .05$ .

*Research Question 5:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

Research Question 5 was analyzed using Pearson correlations to determine if there were relationships between secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates. Table 14 shows that no significant correlations were found between secondary administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates.

*Research Question 6:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates?

Research Question 6 was analyzed using Pearson correlations to determine if there were relationships between secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism. Table 14 shows that according to secondary administrators' reports for existence characteristic C20: *students have access to medical care* was found to be significantly correlated with recidivism,  $r = -.221, p = .030$ . This finding indicates that as secondary administrators were in greater agreement on the existence of the characteristic, *students have access to medical care*, the recidivism rate in their schools decreased.

Table 14

*Pearson's Correlations between Secondary Administrators' Reported Importance, Existence and Recidivism Rates*

Characteristic	Importance <i>r</i>	Existence <i>r</i>
C1	.070	.028

Table 14 (continued).

Characteristic	Importance <i>r</i>	Existence <i>r</i>
C2	.060	.137
C3	.047	.002
C4	-.048	-.009
C5	.023	-.111
C6	-.031	-.016
C7	.012	.108
C8	.035	.034
C9	-.030	.099
C10	-.005	.032
C11	.121	-.019
C12	.162	.008
C13	.098	.094
C14	.103	.121
C15	-.072	.089
C16	.040	-.112
C17	.016	-.139
C18	.054	-.092
C19	.035	-.070
C20	.034	-.221*

Table 14 (continued).

Characteristic	Importance <i>r</i>	Existence <i>r</i>
C21	.106	.050
C22	.112	-.066
C23	.000	.082
C24	.061	-.094
C25	.126	.062
C26	.145	.018

\* $p < .05$ .

### Qualitative Findings

Four open-ended questions were asked of secondary and alternative administrators which addressed research questions seven to nine. Of the 112 secondary administrators returning questionnaires, six left no responses to these questions. The 106 secondary administrators who did respond answered many of the questions but sometimes left portions of the questions blank or incomplete. Of the 29 alternative administrators returning questionnaires, two provided no responses to these questions. The alternative administrators more often completed all of the open-ended questions as compared to the secondary administrators. The answers provided by both administrator groups are addressed below in the findings on research questions, 7 to 9.

*Research Question 7:* In addition to Burnett's 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics, are there other characteristics that are important for an effective alternative school?

Research Question 7 was analyzed using qualitative analysis of participants' short-answer responses to the question, "Are there any characteristics NOT listed above that are important for the alternative setting?" Thematic coding was used to determine specific themes that occurred within each administrator group and overall for both administrator groups. Alternative school administrators ( $n = 11$ ) focused on the need to provide a safe and conducive learning environment at the alternative school. According to alternative school administrators, mandatory uniforms, separate transportation for alternative students, and security were characteristics not listed in Burnett's 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics that were necessary in the alternative setting. Only one secondary administrator was in agreement with the alternative administrators that security was a concern and should be included as a characteristic not listed, that was important for the alternative setting.

Secondary administrator ( $n = 17$ ) responses differed from alternative administrators and focused on two themes including improving alternative school curriculum and providing higher expectations for alternative students. The first theme addressed by secondary administrators focused on an increase in academic rigor and curriculum as a necessary characteristic for alternative schools. Secondary administrators' responses that supported this theme included the need for higher expectations for academics, increased rigor, the use of curriculum frameworks, strong teachers, and differentiated instruction. The second theme addressed by secondary

administrators focused on structure, consistency, and strict adherence to rules. This theme appeared to address a need for increased behavioral expectations. No alternative administrator responses overlapped with the secondary administrator responses.

*Research Question 8:* What transition support services are provided for students who have successfully completed their alternative assignment?

Research Question 8 was analyzed using qualitative analysis of participants' short-answer responses to the questions: "After successful completion of an alternative school assignment does your school provide transition support services for students returning to the regular education setting?" According to administrator responses, 45% of responding secondary administrators' schools and 31% of responding alternative administrators' schools provided no transition support services to alternative school students who successfully completed the alternative program and returned to the regular setting. Additionally, administrators were asked to "list any supports your school has in place to assist students with transitioning successfully back to the regular setting after successful completion of an alternative school assignment." Thematic coding was used to determine specific themes that occurred within each administrator group and overall for both administrator groups. These findings are included below.

Responses for transition support services provided by secondary ( $n = 56$ ) and alternative ( $n = 21$ ) administrators' schools were divided into five themes which are listed below from greatest to least frequency of administrator reports including counseling, check-ins, transition meetings, behavior contracts and behavior intervention plans, and teacher support teams. Individual administrators often gave multiple responses to this question. For this research question, administrator groups had more similarities among

responses. For each of the five groups listed below, secondary and alternative school administrators both provided similar responses.

1. Counseling was listed by both secondary and alternative school administrators and was defined in a variety of ways. Principals, social workers, academic counselors and behavior intervention specialists were all listed as counseling providers. The frequency of counseling visits was sometimes listed such as weekly or daily. Most often, the answer provided by the majority of secondary and alternative school administrators was simply “counseling.” Twelve alternative administrators and 29 secondary administrators responding reported that counseling was used as a transition support service.
2. A check-in process was described by both secondary and alternative school administrators as a transition support service. Check-ins was more often completed by administrators and/or behavior specialists. Daily behavior logs were also reported to be used to assist students, teachers and administrators with daily check-ins. Eight alternative administrators and 16 secondary administrators reportedly used a check-in process as a transition support service.
3. Transition meetings were reportedly used by both alternative and secondary administrators as a transition support service. A variety of answers were given on who is invited to attend these meetings including administrators from the regular and alternative school, students, parents, counselors, and behavior specialists. Three alternative administrators and 14 secondary administrators reported using transition meetings as a transition support service.



4. Behavior contracts and behavior intervention plans were reportedly used by both secondary and alternative school administrators as a transition support service. A behavior contract was described as an agreement that the student would follow school rules while a behavior intervention plan would address the student's target areas or individual behavior problems. Three alternative school administrators and 8 secondary administrators reportedly used behavior contracts and behavior intervention plans as a transition support service.
5. Teacher support teams (tier teams) were used as a transition support service. These teams used the tier process for both academic and behavioral supports. Three alternative school administrators and 4 secondary administrators reportedly used teacher support teams as a transition support service.

Secondary administrators (n = 12) also noted that transition support services were provided in the area of academic support including advisement, graduation coaches, remediation, and tutoring. This can be compared to Research Question 7 where secondary administrators also reported that an increased academic focus was a necessary characteristic for alternative schools. No alternative school administrators listed academic supports as a transition support service provided. Other transition support services reportedly used by both secondary and alternative school administrator groups included mentors for returning students, providing a gradual transition back to the regular setting, providing rewards and recognition upon return to the regular setting, and providing transition visits to the regular setting, prior to the transition.

*Research Question 9: Why do students who have successfully completed the alternative school return for multiple assignments?*

Research Question 9 was analyzed using qualitative analysis of participants' short-answer responses to the question, "What is the most common cause for student return to the alternative school for multiple assignments?" Secondary ( $n = 102$ ) and alternative ( $n = 26$ ) school administrators' responses to this question were in agreement on 6 reasons why students return to the alternative school for multiple assignments. Administrators often provided more than one response to this question. Administrator responses are listed in order of greatest to least frequency of response below.

1. Habitual misconduct had the greatest frequency of responses by both secondary and alternative school administrators. Both administrator groups gave varied responses that were grouped as habitual misconduct including discipline infractions, behavior, repeat offences, negative behavior, and discipline/behavior. Twelve alternative administrators and 55 secondary administrators reported that habitual misconduct was the most common cause for student returns to the alternative school.
2. Non-compliance. Most often administrators reported that students refused to follow the rules or school conduct policies. Five alternative school administrators and 15 secondary administrators reported that non-compliance was the most common cause for student returns to the alternative school.
3. Fighting. Three alternative school administrators and nine secondary administrators reported that fighting was the most common cause for student returns to the alternative school.

4. Lack of parental support. Four alternative administrators and three secondary administrators reported that lack of parental support was the most common cause for student returns to the alternative school.
5. Drugs. No administrators differentiated between alcohol and drugs for this response. Four alternative administrators and three secondary administrators reported that drug use was the most common cause for student returns to the alternative school.
6. Breaking probation. Two alternative school administrators and seven secondary administrators reported that breaking probation was the most common cause for student returns to the alternative school.

Other areas of agreement between secondary and alternative school administrators in order of decreasing frequency of reports, included lack of academic success, no supports in the regular education setting, weapons possession, students being labeled in the regular education setting, difficulty with adjusting to large campus rules, students' preference for the alternative school because they feel safe/have a sense of belonging and offensive language.

The following reasons were included in the responses of secondary administrators only.

1. No self motivation, student apathy. ( $n = 4$ )
2. Verbal or physical assault and or threats to a staff. ( $n = 2$ )
3. Alternative school is a holding place with no rehabilitation. ( $n = 2$ )

#### Ancillary Findings

On average, responding secondary and alternative school administrators' reports on the total number of alternative students served and the total number of those students who had served multiple assignments produced roughly equal recidivism rates for both administrator groups. This indicates that responding secondary (20.84%) and alternative school administrators (19.88%) were in agreement on the average number of alternative students serving multiple assignments in alternative schools.

Research Question 8 findings indicated that 45% of secondary and 31% of alternative administrators' schools who responded did not have transition supports in place to assist students with returning to the regular setting. The lack of transition support services available to students is concerning as the research indicated that upon successful completion of the alternative program, alternative school students who were unsuccessful in the traditional setting were at an even greater risk of dropping out of school (Lehr et al., 2004).

Habitual misconduct was the number one reason provided by both secondary and alternative school administrators for the main reason that students serve multiple alternative assignments. When considering this response, it should be noted that the tier process or teacher support teams was only reportedly used by seven administrators' schools, three alternative and four secondary, as a transition support for alternative students returning to the regular setting. This is concerning as the tier process is a mandatory behavioral and academic intervention program that provides students with supports necessary to be successful.

## CHAPTER V

## DISCUSSION

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and if the administrators' perceptions were related to alternative school recidivism. Burnett's (2002) questionnaire, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs* (Appendix A), was used to determine administrator perceptions on the importance and existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. The *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire* (Appendix B) collected information on each administrator, their school and their school's alternative school recidivism rate. One concern was identified in the *Administrator Demographics Questionnaire*. The total number of secondary alternative students was requested for each secondary school but the total number of alternative students served for each alternative school also should have been requested. The recidivism rates collected were analyzed to determine if a relationship existed between the administrator perceptions on the importance and existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism.

Four open-ended questions were also asked of the administrators which requested information on important alternative school effectiveness characteristics not included in the survey, transition support services provided by secondary and alternative schools, and common causes for student returns to the alternative school for multiple assignments. Of 695 questionnaires mailed, 141 questionnaires were returned by secondary and

alternative school administrators, for an overall return rate of 20%. The data collected was analyzed in order to answer the nine research questions which addressed the purpose of the study.

### Conclusions and Discussion

Demographic information collected provided descriptive information for secondary and alternative school administrator groups participating in the study. For both administrator groups, the majority of administrators responding reported holding an AA license for highest licensure earned. Secondary administrators' experience was fairly equally spread across the three groups (1-5 years experience, 6-10 years experience, 11 plus years experience), while alternative school administrators more often reported having 11 plus years experience. The majority of administrators, secondary and alternative school, also responded that they did not participate in an alternative school consortium. Secondary administrators most often reported that their schools were *Jr.High/Middle School* or *High School* while alternative school administrators most often reported they had a *K-12 campus* or a *6-12 campus*. School size for both administrator groups varied greatly with a secondary school size average of 655.84 students and an alternative school size average of 140.00 students. For both administrator groups, the administrators provided the total number of alternative students served and the total number of those students who were serving multiple assignments for the 2010-2011 school year. These numbers were divided to produce a recidivism rate for each school. Secondary and alternative school administrators, on average, reported that their recidivism rates were about 20%.

### *Importance of Alternative School Effectiveness Characteristics*

Secondary and alternative school administrators were in agreement that 25 of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics were important. They were also in agreement on the most and least important characteristics. The characteristic with the greatest importance for both secondary and alternative school administrators was C8: *the total school size is less than 250 students*. Alternative administrators in this study reported that their alternative schools on average had approximately 140 students (secondary alternative school students, grades 6-12). This average was considerably lower than 250 students described in the characteristic, *the total school size is less than 250 students*. This finding agreed with the research that often described alternative schools as small schools (Barr, 1981; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Harrington-Lueker, 1995; Lang, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004; Raywid, 1994).

Both secondary and alternative school administrator groups agreed, on average, that C3: *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, was lowest for importance. This was not surprising considering that Mississippi students are assigned to alternative schools by district disciplinary committees after committing serious offenses. Mississippi alternative schools are used to serve students who have been expelled from the regular school setting. The students who are assigned to alternative schools are not allowed to return to the regular school campuses until behavioral, academic and attendance goals have been met. Subsequently, the majority of students assigned to alternative schools do not have a choice to attend, unless the family chooses to home school or to place the student in a local private school setting. As these options often

require more family resources, the majority of students assigned to alternative schools in Mississippi do not have a choice to attend or not attend. A few alternative students do attend alternative schools in Mississippi by parent request, rather than disciplinary assignment. In these cases, the student may or may not have chosen to attend the alternative school. The responses of the secondary and alternative school administrators on the characteristic, *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*, may be a function of the Mississippi system which does not allow for student choice. Other studies which surveyed alternative school administrators and alternative school teachers as well as secondary administrators also found *student choice* to be low for importance (Burnett, 2002; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

*Research Question 1: Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics? There were no significant differences identified between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the combined importance of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their district's alternative schools. Overall, secondary and alternative school administrators agreed that 25 of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics were important for their alternative schools. Alternative school administrators rated the alternative school effectiveness characteristics slightly higher for importance than the secondary school administrators' reported.*

When comparing secondary administrators and alternative administrators on importance for each characteristic individually, significant differences were identified on five characteristics for importance. Alternative school administrators on average rated



these 5 characteristics significantly greater for importance when compared to the secondary administrators. These characteristics are discussed below.

1. Alternative administrators reported the characteristic, C1: *the climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible*, to be significantly more important than the secondary administrators reported. Caring and supportive alternative school environments were supported by the literature (Armstrong, 1973; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McAfee, 1999; Raywid, 1994; Wiseman, 1996). Additionally, other studies with a separate but similar set of alternative school effectiveness characteristics found characteristics that address school climate to be high for importance. Alternative school teachers (Gooden, 2009) and alternative school administrators (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996) in similar studies rated the characteristic *the principal sets a climate that supports teaching and learning*, to be high for importance. While teachers reported the characteristic, *school climate: teachers and staff choose to work at the alternative school*, to be high for importance (Gooden, 2009).
2. Alternative administrators reported C11: *attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop-out rate*, to be significantly more important than the secondary administrators reported. Alternative school enrollment is often considered to be a deterrent to drop-out (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lever et al., 2004; McCall, 2003; Reubel et al., 2001; Valore et al., 2006). Additionally, alternative administrators reported *attendance at the alternative school is regular* to have high importance in a study that had a separate but similar set of alternative school characteristics (Wiseman, 1996).

3. Alternative administrators reported C17: *there is school commitment to have each student be successful*, to be significantly more important than the secondary administrators reported. The literature supports alternative schools' commitment to student success (Barr, 1981; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; McAfee, 1999). Additionally, alternative administrators in McAfee's (1999) study reported the characteristic *teachers provide opportunities in which students will succeed*, to be high for importance. While teachers in McAfee's (1999) study reported the characteristics, *teachers believe students can achieve* and *teachers provide opportunities in which students will succeed* to be high for importance.
4. Alternative administrators reported C24: *there is administrative and community support for the alternative school*, to be significantly more important than the secondary administrators reported. The literature supports the importance of administrative and community support for the alternative school (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Raywid, 1994). Additionally, alternative administrators in Gooden's (2009) study reported the characteristic *the principal is an advocate for the school within the district and community*, to be high for importance. Alternative schools often had limited support services resources available (Lehr et al., 2004). Due to this, it is important that alternative schools supplement their services with community resources such as juvenile justice programs and health and human service programs to provide additional support services to students (Foley & Pang, 2006).

5. Alternative administrators reported C25: *the staff is motivated and culturally diverse*, to be significantly more important than the secondary administrators reported. The literature review supported this characteristic (Gable et al., 2006; Nathan & Kohl, 1981; Quinn et al., 2006; Rogers & Polkinghorn, 1990). No other similarities, which addressed the importance of alternative school effectiveness characteristics, were identified between similar studies and this characteristic.

#### *Existence of Alternative School Effectiveness Characteristics*

Secondary and alternative school administrators were in agreement on the most and least existent characteristics in their alternative schools. The most existent characteristic was C8: *total school size is less than 250 students*, while the least existent characteristic was C3: *student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate*. Both administrator groups rated importance higher than existence for the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. These findings were consistent with similar studies which found that alternative school administrators and teachers consistently reported the importance of alternative school effectiveness characteristics to be higher than the existence of the characteristics in their school (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). Burnett (2002) analyzed secondary administrators' perceptions on the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and found that secondary administrators also reported higher levels for importance than existence in their schools. These findings should be considered alongside the budgetary challenges faced by alternative schools. Alternative schools have limited financial resources and subsequently may not have the funding necessary to implement the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics to

the extent required for optimal student success. Studies found that alternative schools often had limited resources and budgetary restraints; these were a reported top concern among alternative school administrators and alternative school teachers (Lange, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). Subsequently, although the secondary and alternative school administrators reported that the alternative school effectiveness characteristics were important, they were not necessarily in existence in their alternative schools.

*Research Question 2:* Are there any differences between alternative school and secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics? There were significant differences identified between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the combined existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their districts' alternative schools. Alternative school administrators, on average, reported the characteristics to be significantly more existent in their alternative schools than the secondary administrators reported. Additionally, studies which rated a separate but similar set of alternative school characteristics found that alternative school administrators often, but not always, rated the alternative school effectiveness characteristic slightly higher than teachers' ratings for existence in their schools (Gooden, 2009; McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996). When compared to alternative school teachers and secondary administrators, the alternative school administrators perhaps are more knowledgeable with regards to accurately interpreting existence of the alternative school effectiveness characteristics. Teachers may not be aware of programs not affecting their

own classrooms likewise; secondary administrators may not be aware of programs which do not directly affect their own school.

When comparing secondary and alternative administrators on existence for each characteristic individually, significant differences were identified on 14 of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics. Alternative school administrators reported significantly higher existence than the secondary administrators reported. These 14 characteristics are listed below.

1. C1: the climate is caring, supportive, friendly, and flexible.
2. C4: there are well defined standards, rules, and expectations.
3. C5: the instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging, and noncompetitive.
4. C6: there is a sense of community between staff and students.
5. C11: attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate.
6. C12: attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.
7. C13: there is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.
8. C16: the school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.
9. C17: there is school commitment to have each student to be successful.
10. C18: the staff has continual staff development.
11. C19: there is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.
12. C21: there is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.
13. C22: parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.

14. C23: the curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.

*Recidivism and Drop-out Prevention*

*Research Question 3:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates? Alternative school administrator reports for importance on two characteristics were significantly related to recidivism. As alternative administrators were in greater agreement on the importance of two characteristics, C14: *there is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12* and C16: *the school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum*, the recidivism rate in their schools decreased.

The literature review supported the importance of a small teacher to student ratio for alternative schools (Barr, 1981; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; D'Angelo & Zamanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Harrington & Leuker, 1995; Lange, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004; Raywid, 1994) and the importance of alternative schools utilizing community resources (Deal & Nolan, 1978; Domina, 2002). Despite this, the findings for Research Question 3 should be carefully considered, as the recidivism rates were found to decrease only as administrators' reports indicated the above characteristics to be important. It should be noted that although this correlation was identified, alternative school administrators, on average, reported these characteristics to be rated lower, 10th and 22nd respectively, for existence in their schools.

*Research Question 4:* Is there a relationship between the alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates? There were no significant relationships

found between alternative administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism.

*Research Question 5:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates? There were no significant relationships found between secondary administrators' reported perceptions on the importance of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism.

*Research Question 6:* Is there a relationship between the secondary school administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism rates? There was one significant relationship found between secondary administrators' reported perceptions on the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics and recidivism. As secondary administrators were in greater agreement on the existence of the characteristic, *C20 students have access to medical care*, the recidivism rate in their schools decreased. The secondary administrators who reported that their students had greater access to medical care more often had lower recidivism rates in their schools. The characteristic, *students have access to medical care* was supported by the literature review (McAfee, 1999; Wiseman, 1996).

The relationship identified in Research Question 6 may be a function of the secondary administrators' access to resources. If secondary administrators had more access to support services such as medical care, their students may also have had more access to other support services such as counselors or school social workers that may provide additional supports to students in the regular education setting. Research

supports the importance of identifying at-risk students and providing effective interventions and transition supports to promote their academic and behavioral success (Lever et al., 2004; McCall, 2003; Reubel et al., 2001; Somers & Pilawsky, 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007; Valore et al., 2006).

Overall, the findings were not significant for the relationships between reported administrator perceptions on the importance and existence of the 26 alternative school characteristics and recidivism rates. Both administrator groups reported that on average the recidivism rate for their schools was 20%. This finding indicates that on average, for the participating administrators' schools one in five students attending alternative school will return in the future. This finding is difficult to interpret because it must be taken into consideration that although 20% of these students may return to the alternative setting, there is no tracking mechanism for those students who return to the regular setting and then drop-out of school. Lange (1998) and Lehr et al. (2004) noted that data on graduation rates had not been consistently collected across the states for students who had attended an alternative school or program. While drop-out rates are collected in Mississippi and individual students are tracked by school and drop-out status, there were no data collected which indicates whether or not these students once attended an alternative school. This makes it difficult to accurately provide outcome data and interpret the relative long term success or failure of an alternative school or transition support services provided in Mississippi.

In order to decrease recidivism rates, research supports the use of transition support services. Transitions should include all stakeholders, including the parent, student, regular school and alternative school administrators, counselors and teachers



(Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009; Valore et al., 2006). Transitions should occur in phases to allow time for the student to adjust to the new environment and all stakeholders at both the regular setting and the alternative school setting should work together to create a plan that supports the student through the transition (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2009; Valore et al., 2006). It is ultimately the responsibility of the administrators at each school, regular school and alternative school, to work together to promote effective transitioning practices. Once these practices are in place and the expectation is held that they will be followed, the opportunity for student success may be enhanced and alternative school recidivism and student drop-out may decrease.

### *Qualitative Findings*

*Research Question 7:* In addition to Burnett's 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics, are there other characteristics that are important for an effective alternative school? Secondary and alternative school administrators were not in agreement on characteristics that may be important for the alternative school that were not included in the survey. Alternative school administrators focused on ensuring the safety and security of the alternative school; while secondary administrators focused on improving curriculum and providing higher academic expectations for alternative school students in academics and behavior. These differences may be attributed to the different roles that secondary and alternative school administrators engage in on a daily basis.

The differences noted between the administrator groups for this question are in agreement with the findings on Research Question 2 where significant differences were identified, using independent *t*-tests, between alternative and secondary school administrators' responses on the reported existence of the characteristics in their

alternative schools. As administrator groups differed on the characteristics that were in existence at their alternative schools, they also differed when asked what other characteristics may be necessary in their alternative schools that were not listed in the questionnaire. Administrators were not in agreement on what characteristics were existent and likewise did not agree on what characteristics were needed that were not listed in the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics.

*Research Question 8:* What transition support services are provided for students who have successfully completed their alternative assignment? While the majority of administrators from secondary and alternative schools participating in the study responded that they do provide some type of transition support service, 45% of secondary administrators responding and 31% of alternative school administrators responding reported that their schools provided no transition support services. This finding is concerning given research which indicated students who attended alternative schools were at higher risk of dropping out of school (Lehr et al., 2004). In Mississippi, transition support services are required, yet much autonomy is given as to what an appropriate transition plan actually necessitates (Alternative Education Guidebook, 2010). Despite the requirement from the Mississippi State Department of Education, many administrators from this study responded that no support services are currently in place to assist students through difficult transition times.

Students who transition from a warm and inviting, small alternative school where they are accepted despite their behavioral issues may quickly find themselves lost and unwelcome in a large, cold and unforgiving secondary setting. Research indicated that often times these students simply felt that their teachers did not care (McCall, 2003).

These students also reported more often that their friends were drop-outs and that they did not have pro-social friends in the school setting (McCall, 2003). These factors may have enabled the students to become disengaged from the school setting both academically, due to low achievement, and socially, due to limited friendships with pro-social peers (McCall, 2003). Studies found that as these students were provided with mentors, academic supports and tutoring, their drop-out rates decreased (Lever et al., 2004; Suy & Suy, 2007).

Secondary and alternative school administrators in this study were in agreement on the most used transition support services including counseling, check-in process, transition meetings, behavior contracts/behavior intervention plans, and teacher support teams. One interesting finding included the low reported use of teacher support teams. The teacher support team, or the tier process, is an intervention process which is a Mississippi State Department of Education requirement for all public schools (SBE 4300, 2005). Students who are struggling with behavior or academics are provided with appropriate interventions and/or strategies through the tier process. As a student's needs increase, higher levels of intervention are provided by the teacher support team and school administration. The teacher support team is able to incorporate and utilize all school resources and make a plan that is best for each child.

According to the findings of this study, only three alternative school administrators and four secondary administrators responding reported using the tier process to provide both academic and behavioral interventions for students in transition. This finding is notable; of 141 administrators responding, only seven reported using the tier process. According to the Mississippi State Board of Education Policy 4300 (2005),

teachers support teams are a state-wide requirement. These teams could be utilized between secondary and alternative schools to enhance transition support services. Teacher support teams do not appear to be used to support students in transition as reported by administrators in this study.

One alternative administrator acknowledged the lack of transition support services provided in his/her school when he/she commented “it is a bad point that we do no transitioning back,” while another alternative administrator did not when they stated that the transition support service used at their school is to “wave goodbye.” Some administrators, however, gave more detailed information that offered insight into the transition process at their school. For example, a secondary administrator reported “the school team meets with the alternative team and parents to discuss and work out transitioning steps and continue working with the student on a daily basis.”

*Research Question 9: Why do students who have successfully completed the alternative school return for multiple assignments?* Secondary and alternative school administrators were in greater agreement on six reasons why students return to the alternative school for multiple assignments. These reasons included habitual misconduct, non-compliance, fighting, lack of parental support, drugs and breaking probation. The top reason for multiple assignments, habitual misconduct, should be taken into consideration.

Students who attend alternative school for habitual misconduct should first receive interventions in the regular setting through the teacher support team. Although the tier program is required (SBE Policy 4300, 2005), it is evident from the discussion in research question eight that most often this is not occurring in the responding

administrators' schools. Therefore, students may be placed into an alternative setting without interventions or support provided in the regular setting that may have assisted the child to be successful and averted their alternative school assignment.

Although secondary and alternative administrators often agreed on the most common causes for student returns to the alternative school, their responses often highlighted differences between the administrator groups. Alternative administrators sometimes focused on the alternative environment being safe and students having a sense of belonging; while the secondary administrators focused on the students' inability to conform to rules and expectations in the regular setting. For example, one alternative administrator reported that "student's parents request they return or students misbehave with the intent to return. They express that they feel more welcomed and safer here. They say they do not mind the strict rules because they have a sense of belonging here." One secondary administrator, on the other hand, reported that the most common reason for student returns was "acting a fool," while another reported "(mis) Behavior," and a third stated that the "student is on probation 18 weeks after returning to school. Student can be placed back in alternative school for any trouble caused."

#### Limitations

Limitations to this study included a limited population of administrators, a limited geographical area, a limited response rate, a diverse group of school types, and the total number of students collected for secondary and alternative schools. These limitations are discussed below and should be considered when discussing the findings of this study.

The population was initially limited by the researcher's decision to send questionnaires to only secondary and alternative school administrators at public schools

in Mississippi. Additionally, the population of administrators was limited by those who chose to respond to the questionnaires. Of administrators receiving questionnaires, 20% chose to respond. Perhaps the administrators who have specific concerns with, or are especially interested in their district's alternative school's success or failure are those who chose to respond. If so, it should be considered that these administrators' perceptions of alternative schools could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

The study was also limited by the variety of school types at which the administrators worked. A few secondary administrators responded that the alternative school was on their campus (7%) and they were the administrator responsible for the alternative school. The researcher did not take this type of alternative school into consideration. Subsequently, for the purposes of analysis in this study, these administrators were coded *secondary*. It should be considered for future studies that alternative schools may be housed on the regular campuses and overseen by the secondary administrators.

One additional limitation included the researcher's decision to request the total number of secondary students, grades 6-12, for alternative schools rather than requesting the total number of students served. Therefore, for the results section for school size, the average total for secondary school size was provided and the average total for alternative school size, grades 6-12 was provided. This limits the results as the total school size for alternative school administrators' schools who choose to participate in the study can not be provided.

## Recommendations

### *Policy*

Significant differences were identified between secondary and alternative school administrators for reported existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their alternative schools. These differences may simply be the result of the different roles that each administrator, secondary or alternative, participates in daily. Staff Development could be required by the Mississippi State Department of Education for secondary and alternative school administrators that focuses on minimizing these differences. This training could provide research-based information on at-risk students, as well as alternative school requirements and the referral and transition process. Trainings such as this may help administrators to build a knowledge base for the role each administrator is responsible for with regards to student referrals and transitions to and from the alternative setting.

Both secondary and alternative school administrators in this study reported that the recidivism rates for their schools was on average, 20%. Despite this finding, there is no way to measure the students who have attended alternative schools, transitioned back to the regular setting and then dropped out of school. While these students are considered in the drop-out numbers for each specific high school, there is no way to identify these students as having attended the alternative school. Improved alternative school outcome tracking could be required by the Mississippi Department of Education. Information gathered should include the total number of students served at the alternative school, reason for referrals, total number of students transitioned back to the regular setting annually and the annual recidivism rate for each alternative school. Additionally,

alternative school students could be coded in the Mississippi Student Information Systems (MSIS) database in order to provide a means to track the drop-out rate of these students. This could provide additional outcome data on the success and/or failure of alternative schools and transition support services provided by the regular and alternative school setting. Additionally, this information could be utilized by the state department to determine areas that may need additional training and support.

According to the findings from Research Question 8, the tier process was used as a transition support service by only seven out of 141 schools that participated in this study. As the tier program is a requirement for all schools (SBE 4300, 2005), tier program audits could be conducted on a regular basis to ensure that students in Mississippi schools are receiving the required supports in order to enhance their success. While allowing each school and district the autonomy and flexibility to create a tier process that is unique to their school, it is critical that the Mississippi Department of Education ensure that the schools are following through with the tier requirements. The findings of this study indicate that many schools may not be using tier to support students who are struggling.

### *Practice*

Although both administrator groups, secondary and alternative, rated importance higher than existence for the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics, there were significant differences identified between secondary and alternative school administrators' reported perceptions on the combined existence of 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their districts' alternative schools. Fullan (2005b) argued that schools must have professional learning communities within and between schools to



promote depth of learning. Increasing communication between the alternative and regular school setting could promote learning among secondary and alternative administrators that may benefit the students who transition between the schools. Alternative school administrators could work to educate secondary administrators on the purposes and function of the alternative school, needs of at-risk students, transition services necessary to enhance success, and support needs of alternative students once they return to the regular setting. Collaboration may be a missing component with regards to the differences identified within this study between secondary and alternative school administrators on the reported perceptions of the existence of the 26 alternative school effectiveness characteristics in their district's alternative school. Fullan (2005a) stated that the ability of leaders and schools to build capacity, or the know-how to act in collaboration with one another in order to bring about positive change, was essential to school improvements.

Districts could implement an effective and cohesive tier program that provides academic and behavioral supports and interventions. Research Question 8 found that only seven of 141 schools in this study reported using a tier program as a transition support service. This finding is concerning as the tier program is a requirement for all schools (SBE 4300, 2005). If appropriate and individualized interventions are in place for students who have habitual misbehavior, some alternative student placements or returns may be averted. Administration and teachers could be trained on the district expectations and requirements for the tier process. Secondary and alternative administrators could work together to support the tier process within and between schools

in order to enhance the success of students as they transition to and from the alternative school.

Research Question 8 identified transition supports that are most often used to assist students with transitioning from the alternative to the regular school setting. These supports included counseling, check-ins, transition meetings, behavior contracts and behavior intervention plans, and teacher support teams. Secondary and alternative administrators could work together to define transition support services that will be used and made available to students as they move to and from the alternative school. A list of available supports (check in process, building advocate, adult mentor, student mentor, academic counseling, behavioral counseling, incentive plan, etc.) could be made and discussed with the transition team to identify what may work best for the individual student.

#### *Future Research*

This study found that the majority of schools of responding administrators offered some type of transition supports including counseling, check-ins, transition meetings, behavior contracts and behavior intervention plans, and teacher support teams. It may be helpful to know if there is a relationship between the transition support services provided to alternative school students and recidivism or drop-out rates of the returning alternative school students. Determining the supports that are most effective may assist with allocating limited resources more efficiently.

The results of this study found that only seven of 141 responding administrators' schools noted that the tier process is used to support students during transitions. The tier process and its relationship to alternative school referrals for habitual misconduct could

be explored. Behavioral intervention plans and supports in the regular setting are required before assigning a student to the alternative school for habitual misconduct (SBE 4300, 2005). Questions that could be answered include do the schools that have a tier program in place have lower or higher referrals to the alternative school for habitual misconduct and are tier supports continued if a student is referred to the alternative setting after being unsuccessful in the regular setting?

In order to more effectively impact student outcomes and decrease recidivism, the students who have experienced successful and non-successful transitions could be interviewed. Alternative school student interviews about successful and non-successful transitions and what occurred to help or harm each student's progress. Students' stories may provide insight into the transition process that could assist secondary and alternative administrators with gaining a perspective from the students' point of view and implementing transitions that may be more successful.

APPENDIX A  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MISSISSIPPI  
ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

**Directions:**

Under Importance for Effective Alternative schools, rate your perception with an X or a Check Mark for the importance you place on the characteristics for effective alternative schools. Under Existence in Your District, rate your perception with an X or a Check Mark for the characteristics as you feel they exist in your district's alternative school.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Not Sure (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

	Importance for Effective Alternative Schools					Existence in Your District's Alternative School				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible.										
2. Teachers work in the alternative school because they chose to work here.										
3. Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate.										
4. There are well defined standards, rules and expectations.										
5. The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and noncompetitive.										
6. There is a sense of community between staff and students.										
7. Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health.										
8. The total school size is less than 250 students.										
9. The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility.										
10. Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or earn a GED.										
11. Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate.										
12. Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.										
13. There is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.										

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Not Sure (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

	Importance for Effective Alternative Schools					Existence in Your District's Alternative School				
14. There is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12.										
15. Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions.										
16. The school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.										
17. There is school commitment to have each student to be successful.										
18. The staff has continual staff development.										
19. There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.										
20. Students have access to medical care.										
21. There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.										
22. Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.										
23. The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.										
24. There is administrative and community support for the program.										
25. The staff is motivated and culturally diverse.										
26. There is an advisory committee for the alternative program.										

**Please write in your responses below:**

27. Are there any characteristics **NOT** listed above that are important for the alternative setting?

28. After successful completion of an alternative school assignment, does your school provide transition support services for students returning to the regular education setting?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ yes      \_\_\_\_\_ no

29. **If you selected YES for #28**, please list any supports your school has in place to assist students with transitioning back to the regular setting after successful completion of an alternative school assignment.

30. What is the most common cause for student return to the alternative school for multiple assignments?

## APPENDIX B

## ADMINISTRATOR DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

**Directions:**

**Choose the answer which most closely fits you and your school for 2010-2011.**

**All ADMINISTRATORS:**

1. Administrator years of experience: \_\_\_\_ 1-5 years \_\_\_\_ 6-10 years \_\_\_\_ 11+ years
2. Administrator Degree Level by Licensure: \_\_\_\_ AA \_\_\_\_ AAA \_\_\_\_ AAAA
3. Does your school or district participate in an alternative school consortium (alternative school that serves multiple districts)? \_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_ no
4. What type of school do you work in?
 

____ K-12 School (Non-alternative)	____ Alternative School (K-12)
____ Jr. High/Middle School	____ Alternative School (6-12)
____ High School	____ Alternative School (9-12)
____ Regular Setting Other: _____	____ Alternative Setting Other: _____

**Only SECONDARY ADMINISTRATORS**

5. How many total students attended your school during 2010-2011? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How many students from your school were served in the alternative setting during 2010-2011? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many of the alternative students during 2010-2011 were assigned to the alternative setting multiple times? \_\_\_\_\_

**Only ALTERNATIVE ADMINISTRATORS**

5. How many students were served at your alternative school, between the grades 6-12, during 2010-2011? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How many of these students were assigned to the alternative setting multiple times? \_\_\_\_\_

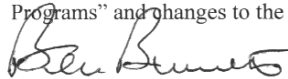
## APPENDIX C

## PERMISSION TO USE INSTRUMENT LETTER

October 23, 2011  
Lori Burkett  
103 Hilltop Dr.  
Carriere, MS 39426

Dear Lori Burkett,

I give you permission to use and reproduce my 2002 dissertation instrument titled "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs" with modifications, including removal of the section titled "Existence in Mississippi Programs" and changes to the demographics section.



Ben Burnett, Ph.D.

## APPENDIX D

## HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION REVIEW COMMITTEE APPROVAL


**THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI**

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39405-9000  
Phone: 601.266.6520 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/irb

**NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION**

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board 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 Effect 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: **11091902**  
PROJECT TITLE: **Administrators' Perceptions of Alternative School  
Characteristics and Their Relationship with Recidivism**  
PROJECT TYPE: **Dissertation**  
RESEARCHER/S: **Lori Burkett**  
COLLEGE/DIVISION: **College of Education & Psychology**  
DEPARTMENT: **Educational Leadership**  
FUNDING AGENCY: **N/A**  
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: **Exempt Approval**  
PERIOD OF PROJECT APPROVAL: **09/22/2011 to 09/21/2012**

*Lawrence A. Hosman*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chair

*9-23-2011*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE



APPENDIX E  
INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

October 7, 2011

Dear Administrator,

I am an alternative school administrator in Pearl River County and am conducting my dissertation study on alternative school and secondary school administrators' perceptions of alternative schools in Mississippi. The attached questionnaires contain questions on effective alternative school characteristics and questions that describe you and your school. The questionnaires will take about fifteen minutes to complete. Also, included is a self-addressed, stamped envelope which you may use to return the questionnaires.

Your participation in completing the questionnaires is completely voluntary. Please feel free to decline or discontinue participation at any point. All data collected will be completely anonymous; therefore, please do not place identifying information on the questionnaires. Any information inadvertently obtained will remain completely confidential. Upon completion of the study, questionnaires will be destroyed.

By participating in this study, you will help me to better understand any differences that may exist between alternative school and secondary school administrators' perceptions concerning alternative schools in Mississippi, and if there is a relationship between those perspectives and alternative school recidivism rates. The results of this study may be useful to gaining insight into differences that exist between alternative school and secondary school administrators. Better understanding of administrator perspectives on alternative schools may help to improve transition services provided to alternative school students. It is critical that these students be provided proper support in order to promote student success and prevent drop-out.

This dissertation study 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 (USM), 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

If you have any questions concerning this dissertation study, please feel free to contact me at 601-590-5589 or [lori26hancock@yahoo.com](mailto:lori26hancock@yahoo.com). You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Rose McNeese at USM by calling 601-266-4580.

Your consent to participate in this study is implied by your return of completed questionnaires. Thank you for your consideration in helping me with my dissertation.

Lori Burkett

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