

5-20-2005

The Impact of Accountability on School Dropouts: The Students' Voices

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THE IMPACT OF ACCOUNTABILITY ON SCHOOL DROPOUTS:
THE STUDENTS' VOICES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Administration

by

Shannon Mulkey d'Hemecourt

B.S., University of New Orleans, 1995
M.ED., Southeastern Louisiana University, 2000

May 2005

Dedication

To my husband-

Thanks for sharing your life and your gumbo with me.

I love you!

Shannon

To Sarah-

If mommy can do this, then you can do anything!

Acknowledgements

There are many people who I must thank because their support throughout this process has been incredible. First, I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Peggy Kirby, Dr. Juanita Haydel, Dr. Brian Riedlinger, and Dr. Carmen Riedlinger. I will be eternally grateful for all of their help and guidance. I appreciate all that they did to help me accomplish this enormous task. I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Kirby, who stayed up late nights to make sure that I could graduate.

My friends and family have always been a source of love and support throughout my schooling and for this I must thank them.. I would like to especially like to thank my parents, Shelton and Merle Mulkey, for teaching me the value of hard work without which I would not have been able to persist in this accomplishment. A special thanks goes to my sister, Sheri Lang, who was always right around the corner, literally, no matter what the crisis. She and her family spent countless hours watching my little one so I could work without interruption and for that I am grateful. I must also thank three wonderful ladies--Kit d'Hemecourt, Kathy Monson and Kristen Remkes, who selflessly brought my daughter into their loving homes and took care of her so that I could attend classes. Finally, I must

thank my best friend, Margaret Westmoreland, who helped to calm my nerves before every big defense. I couldn't have done it without her.

Throughout my journey through the doctoral program I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by an incredible group of people who became great friends and mentors to me. It was a pleasure taking classes with them and I appreciate all the hours in the library, on email, and on the phone when we dared discussed the possibility of actually getting out of school. I especially would like to thank Latisha Meyer. I will always be thankful for the encouragement that Latisha provided me when I was convinced that I wouldn't finish this monumental task. Her friendship has been truly a gift and I will always be thankful that I was able to share this experience with her.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Ed; without his support I could not have accomplished all the things that I have in such a short period of time. His unconditional love for me is more than I deserve and his talent for cooking a fabulous dinner every night is a gift for which I will always be grateful. I would like to thank my daughter Sarah for her patience and understanding when mommy had to work at the computer. I hope that my accomplishments will always inspire her to follow her dreams.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influenced students of one suburban Louisiana school district to leave school prior to obtaining a diploma. Qualitative methods were used to investigate the reasons that students gave for what influenced them in making their decision to leave school. Additionally, it was the intent of the study to determine if the Louisiana school accountability program had any influence on the students' decisions. Interviews were conducted with 11 students who dropped out of school in the 2003-2004 school year. Within case and cross-case analyses were performed and themes were developed to illustrate the responses given by the participants during their interview. The data suggest students leave school because they face personal obstacles that they cannot overcome. Additionally, participants of this study cited a lack of alternative schooling and disappointment with the systems as other factors that influenced their decision to drop out of school. Furthermore, participants did not feel that school accountability had an influence on their decision to leave school.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Why do students choose to leave school prior to earning their diploma? Do high-stakes testing and school accountability have an effect on students' decisions to drop out? Proponents of testing believe that graduation tests provide students with motivation to study, thereby improving academic achievement and performance (Jacob, 2001). Logically following this argument one would assume that high-stakes graduation tests would have a positive impact on diploma attainment. However, research has found that higher graduation requirements correspond to higher dropout rates (Jacob; Lilliard, 2001).

Those who find themselves without a diploma at the end of their schooling many times also find themselves at a disadvantage in the workforce. Research has shown that dropouts historically earn less than their peers with high school degrees (Rumberger, 1987). In addition, dropouts are more likely to live in poverty and to commit crimes (Alspaugh, 1998; Cassel, 2003). Concerns over the effects of dropouts on the community have prompted studies that identified characteristics of potential dropouts in addition to developing programs that are designed to prevent youth from dropping out (Woods, n.d.).

Pittman (1991) found that students who drop out cite poor performance as one of the factors in their decision to leave school. For the lower-achieving student, graduation tests may become a barrier to graduation instead of a motivation. In a comparison of students from states with and without graduation tests, Jacob (2001) found that students who are academically ranked in the lower quintile of their class were 25% more likely to drop out when faced with having to pass an exit exam.

Despite this cost of graduation tests, many states not only implemented exit exams but also instituted high-stakes minimum competency exams in lower grades (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). By 2008, it is expected that students in 28 states will have to pass an exam in order to obtain a diploma (Goertz & Duffy, 2003). Recent federal legislation requires that schools test students yearly and show adequate yearly progress on these tests. Supporters of this type of testing argue that the threat of high-stakes and school accountability sanctions will force schools to improve the quality of instruction given by their teachers. These proponents also believe that students will be motivated to work harder to obtain the basic skills needed if they are required to pass a test to be promoted to the next grade level or to earn a diploma.

The Louisiana Accountability Program requires that all students in public schools pass the Louisiana Educational

Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP21) in grades four and eight in order to progress to the next grade level. In addition, high school students must successfully complete four of the five components of the Graduate Exit Exam for the 21st Century (GEE21) to earn their diploma.

While studies have shown that mandatory exit exams and minimum-competency tests contribute to higher dropout rates, the data are mainly from quantitative research and do not represent the voice of those students who discontinue their quest for a diploma (Jacob, 2001; Lilliard, 2001). Previous researchers often combined participants from all states in their studies by using a national database. While this provides generalizability, it does not take into account the inconsistencies in reporting dropout rates and the varied testing requirements across the nation. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that cause students to drop out and their relationship to the school accountability program from the students' perspective.

Significance of the Study

The present study was designed to investigate the factors that led youth from one Louisiana public school district to drop out of the public school system and determine in what ways the Louisiana School Accountability Program contributes to the decision to leave school. This study addressed deficiencies of previous research on dropouts by studying the effect of school

accountability from the student's perspective. The student's voice is rarely heard on issues such as the policies governing school reform (Noguera, 2001). Therefore, this study sought to provide a gateway for students to express their views on how the accountability program impacted their decision to leave school.

By conducting this study, the researcher hoped to provide an extension of understanding to the dropout phenomenon for parents, teachers, and policymakers. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide the necessary information to stakeholders who wish to assist students in completing the requirements for a high school education. Furthermore, the researcher anticipates the results of this study will provide the School District authorities with the desired data to support the development and implementation of dropout prevention programs and curriculum.

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological inquiry used the lens of the students' perspective to focus on the factors that led to the participants' decision to resign from secondary school. For the purpose of this study, the dropout phenomenon was defined as the act of leaving school without the intent to pursue alternative high school credentials. A survey (see Appendix B) was conducted of students who indicated to school personnel that they were leaving school and would not be enrolling in any other

educational institution. Shortly after survey results were obtained, interviews of a quota sample of students were conducted to investigate the factors that contributed to the students' decision to leave school. An examination of the influence of school accountability on the student's decision was pursued throughout the study.

Research Questions

This study explored two central questions:

1. What factors influenced students from one suburban district in Louisiana to drop out of school?
2. In what ways did the Louisiana School Accountability Program influence the decision of students to drop out of school?

Definitions of Terms

Achievement Ratings - Labels given to describe the level of performance that a student demonstrates in each area of the LEAP21 and GEE21 tests. The five ratings are advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory (Louisiana Department of Education [LDE], n.d. (b)).

Advanced - A label given to students who perform at a superior level by demonstrating on the LEAP21 or GEE21 that their level of knowledge in a specific subject is beyond proficient (LDE, n.d. (b)).

Approaching Basic - A label given to students whose performance on the LEAP21 or GEE21 test demonstrates that they do not fully have a fundamental knowledge or the skills needed for the next grade level (LDE, n.d.(b)).

Basic - A rating to describe students whose scores indicate that they only have fundamental knowledge of the subject being tested on the LEAP21 or GEE21 (LDE, n.d.(b)).

Dropout- A student who indicates to school personnel at the time of resignation that they are leaving school without intention of entering an alternative diploma program or enrolling in another school, public or otherwise, in any other location. For the purpose of this study, dropout does not include students who left school due to pregnancy.

Graduate Exit Exam for the 21st Century (GEE21)- A criterion-referenced test given to Louisiana students in their sophomore and junior year of high school to determine eligibility for a high school diploma. Students must earn a rating of approaching basic or above on the English, writing, and mathematics portion. Additionally, students must earn a rating of approaching basic or above on either the science or social studies sections of the test (LDE, n.d.(a)).

Louisiana School Accountability Program- This program involves the use of high-stakes testing for promotion in the fourth and eighth grades (LEAP21), as well as an exit exam (GEE21) given in

tenth and eleventh grades. Students must pass the language arts, mathematics, writing, and either social studies or science portions of the exam in order to graduate. In addition, the Louisiana Accountability Program ranks each school using a School Performance Score.

Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st

Century (LEAP21) - A criterion-referenced test given to students in Louisiana in fourth and eighth grade. As of 2005, a student must earn a rating of approaching basic or above on the English/language arts and mathematics segments of the test, in order to be eligible to pass to the next grade (LDE, n.d. (a)). The acceptable level for passing is expected to increase within the next few years to Basic.

Mastery - A label students may obtain on the portions of the LEAP21 or GEE21 tests if they demonstrate that their knowledge of the subject is competent. Students receiving the rating of mastery are well prepared for the next grade level (LDE, n.d. (b)).

Promotional Gate Grade - The school year wherein a student must achieve a minimum score on a standardized test in order to be promoted to the next grade level (Allenwort & Miller, 2002).

School Performance Score (SPS) - A score given to Louisiana Public Schools based on their students' test scores, attendance, and the dropout rate from their school.

Unsatisfactory - Students performing at this level have not demonstrated that they have the skills or knowledge needed for the next grade level of school (LDE, n.d.(b)).

Overview of Methodology

A phenomenological study was conducted through the use of surveys and phone interviews. The School District agreed to mail a survey to all 354 students in their database that are coded as a dropout for the 2003-2004 school year. A letter from the superintendent accompanied the survey requesting that students complete and return the survey to the school board office. The students were provided with a stamped envelope to be used when returning their survey. At that time consent to participate in a follow-up interview was requested. Two weeks after the first mailing, a postcard reminder was sent to students who did not return the survey in an effort to obtain data from the entire population. When consent was received, telephone interviews were completed with 11 students. Interviews were recorded and an independent person contracted by the researcher completed verbatim transcriptions. Both within-case and cross-case analyses were used in order to identify themes that emerged from the interview data. The focus of the interview was to gain insight into the factors that influenced the student's decision to drop out of school. While interview data were the focus of

this study, the data obtained through the survey also were reported through basic descriptive statistics.

Delimitations

The scope of this study was delimited to students who were coded as dropouts in the database of one Louisiana Public School System. Due to the diverse implementation of school accountability programs in various states across the nation, a focus on one state's program enabled the researcher to determine the consequences of the implementation of that particular state's program on dropouts. This specific school district was chosen because of the interest of the school district to have a study such as this completed and the convenience of the district to the researcher.

Despite the convenience factor, the district provided a unique opportunity to collect a wealth of information from students coming from various backgrounds. The district encompasses an extremely large geographical area and includes urban, suburban, and rural communities. The necessity of the school district to service so many diverse populations is unique and the data collected from this area will afford the researcher the opportunity to gather evidence from students living in all types of communities.

Additionally, this study was delimited by the chosen definition of a dropout. For the purpose of this study the

researcher chose to define a dropout as a person who indicates to school personnel that he or she is leaving school without the intention of continuing his or her education at another school or through an alternative diploma program. The decision to define dropouts this way was determined by the accessible population. While students who simply choose not to return to school are also considered dropouts in the state of Louisiana there was no way to track these students or obtain data from them.

Students who choose to obtain a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) are also considered dropouts by the state of Louisiana until the G.E.D. is obtained. Due to the change in status once the diploma is obtained, it was decided by the researcher not to include these students in the study.

Finally, students were not interviewed if they indicated on the survey that they left school because they were pregnant. Research has shown that students who are pregnant are much more likely to drop out than those who are not pregnant (Anderson, 1993). Therefore, it is presumed that the Louisiana School Accountability System did not influence the decision of pregnant students to leave school. Therefore, the existence of testing policies may not have encouraged nor prevented students to make the decision to drop out of school.

Organization of the Report

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that influence students in their decision to drop out of school and to investigate the role of the Louisiana School Accountability Program in the student's decision. In Chapter 2 a review of the literature details the history of the school dropout phenomenon. Also, a discussion of the recent research on the dropout dilemma is presented. The literature also is utilized to examine the recent movement towards school accountability and high-stakes testing. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and sample used in the study. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 examines the implications of this study for practice, policy and future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

School accountability has focused new attention on the high school diploma and the number of students failing to earn this credential despite the fact that more students than ever are graduating from high school or earning a legitimate equivalent (Schoenlein, 2004). A facet of many school accountability programs, including in Louisiana's program, is high-stakes testing. It has been suggested that dropping out may be the effect of the implementation of high-stakes testing even if indirectly (Dorn, 2003). This chapter will provide a history of the dropout problem as well as a review of the literature that discusses the dropout phenomenon. A discussion will follow that details an account of the circumstances that led to the implementation of high-stakes testing. The Louisiana School Accountability Program will be explained prior to the conclusion of the chapter, which will synthesize the literature linking high-stakes tests and dropouts in an attempt to provide a rationale for the study.

The Dropout Problem

The phrase "to drop out" can be traced back to the writings of Mark Twain who first used these words when mentioning soldiers who dropped out of formation (Dorn & Johanningmeier,

1999). Although the phrase was more prevalent in the military for some time, it is believed that the Utopian writer, Edward Bellamy first used the phrase in reference to schools (Dorn, 2003). However, it would not prevail as the description of someone leaving school until the 1960s (Dorn; Dorn & Johanningmeier).

The twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in students not only attending, but also finishing high school (Dorn, 2003; Rumberger, 1987). The enormous number of students enrolling in high school during the years between 1910 and 1940 became known as the high school movement (Goldin, 1998). This increase in attendance can be attributed to, in part, the change in labor policies that altered the number of teenagers who left school for the workforce before obtaining a high school degree (Rumberger). The Employment Act of 1946 was instrumental in the boost of high school graduates as it was the document that assured education would be forever in the forefront of public policy concerns when it spelled out the federal government's responsibility for economic development (Berg, 1971).

The somewhat new attention being paid to student dropouts, along with the declaration of the dropout "problem," is certainly associated with the increased importance of the high school diploma during the past several decades (Dorn, 1993, 2003). Employers have become partially responsible for the new

significance of the high school diploma through the raising of job requirements to include high school credentials, however, post-high school educational institutions share this responsibility through the establishment of the high school diploma as a gateway to admission (Dorn, 1993, 2003). The high value of the diploma has sparked the interest of educators, policy makers, and researchers who wish to aid society by reducing the number of dropouts (Dorn, 2003; Rumberger, 1987). These factors attribute to the current focus on the dropout phenomenon and on finding ways to assure that all students complete high school. The literature on dropouts can be broken into four areas: incidence, causes, consequences, and solutions (Rumberger). The following literature review will focus on three of these areas: incidence, causes, and consequences.

Defining Dropout

Articles written on the incidence of dropping out reveal that neither researchers nor state governments share a consensus on the definition of a dropout (Kominski, 1990). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) adds to the confusion by reporting not only the high school completion rate but also three types of dropout rates: event, status, and cohort rates (NCES, 2001).

The rates reported by NCES vary according to age ranges and whether the student later enrolls in an alternative diploma

program. There exist substantial differences between the types of rates reported by the NCES (NCES, 2001). These differences include age of students, grade of students, and the time period analyzed to determine the rate. The event rates describe the portion of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 who dropped out of grades 10th, 11th, or 12th during the period of one year. During the 2000–2001 school year, the national event rate was 5% while Louisiana's rate was reported to be 8.3%(National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004).

The status dropout rate represents the portion of students who have not earned a high school diploma and are not enrolled in a school during the period of one year. Anyone between the ages of 16 and 24 who falls into this category is considered in this rate regardless of when they last attended school. NCES does not report the status rate by state, but instead provides a plethora of charts indicating rates by ethnicity and race. In 2001 the status rate for the United States was reported to be 10.7%(National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003).

The high school completion rate measures the number of students between the ages of 18 and 24 who have earned a diploma or an equivalent credential. The 2001 rates for the nation and Louisiana were 86.5% and 65% respectively. The four-year high school completer rate was also reported to be 65% for Louisiana in the same year. Although NCES reports this rate as the four-

year high school completion rate, it has in the past tracked students over longer periods of time and reported their cohort rate. The cohort rate is used in longitudinal studies to describe the number of students completing their high school education over a certain period of time (NCES, 2004).

Due to these discrepancies, the information gathered is highly unreliable and, therefore, it is difficult to assess trends (Kominiski, 1990; Rumberger, 1983). The most reliable rate, according to Kominiski, is the yearly rate, which is determined by comparing the number of students enrolled over one year from October 1st to October 1st. Using this approach for calculating a dropout rate has lowered the reported dropout rate to a relatively small number. Louisiana's dropout rate is recorded in this manner and was calculated to be 8.3% in 2000 (NCES, 2001). However, even a small dropout rate means hundreds of thousands of students do not receive diplomas. Thus researchers have focused their efforts on identifying potential dropouts and evaluating programs designed to prevent students from leaving (Kominiski).

The Causes of Dropping Out

Although there is much debate over the definition of a dropout, the literature is fairly consistent when it comes to the factors that contribute to a student's decision to leave school. The education, economics, and psychology communities

widely accept these factors and cite them often in modern literature. The causes identified are community-related, family-related, student-related, and school-related (Bearden, Spencer & Moracco, 1989; Cairns, Cairns & Neckerman, 1989; Dryfoos, 1990; Dupper, 1993; Quinn, 1991; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Each of these individual categories represents several specific characteristics that would indicate whether a student should be considered at-risk of dropping out of school. For example, a community-related reason is demographics. Students in urban school settings are more likely to drop out than their rural counterparts (Alspaugh, 1998). Family-related indicators include household income-level and individual educational attainment of the student's parents (Jacob, 2001). In a 2000 study, it was discovered that students who live in households reporting income in the bottom twenty percent were six times more likely to drop out than their peers from families with incomes in the top twenty percent of the nation (NCES, 2001). Students from low-income families may find it necessary to leave school in order to get a job and contribute financially to the household. It has been shown that the number of hours a student works per week is directly correlated to the probability that a student will drop out of school (Mann, 1986, 1989). Additionally, the same students may have parents and siblings

who have not earned a diploma and may not value a high school education. This is another indicator that a student should be considered at-risk of leaving school early (Jacob).

Researchers have found several personal or student-related reasons that have contributed to the premature ending of a school career (Jacob, 2001; Pittman, 1991; Rumberger, 1987; Quinn, 1991). Many studies cite findings that minorities are more likely to drop out (Clarke, Haney & Madaus, 2000; FairTest/Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education [FairTest/CARE], 2000; Gonzalez, 2004; Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator & Madaus, 1996; Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1996). The NCES has found consistently higher dropout rates among Hispanic immigrants than any other ethnicity (NCES, 2003). In 2000, Haney reported that only 50% of minorities enrolled in ninth grade in Texas schools were graduating from high school. This is extremely disturbing considering the increasing diversity of the schools and communities in this nation.

Another group considered at-risk is students with disabilities. Graduation rates of students who have been classified as needing special education services are lower than those of regular education students (Quinn, 1991). Unfortunately, these are traits that students are unable to control, but yet still must overcome.

Other student-related factors that were found to impact diploma attainment were preventable. One indicator, which has recently been on the rise, is teenage pregnancy (Rumberger, 1987). Often young girls leave school because they find it too difficult to finish while raising a child. Other adolescents choose to quit after being encouraged by their peers who have previously dropped out.

However, school-related factors are most often cited as reasons for leaving school early (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986; McDill, Natriello, Pallas, 1985; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). More than half of dropouts cite dissatisfaction with school as a reason for not returning to finish their education (Ekstrom, et. al.; McDill, Natriello, Pallas). The reasons that students are so unhappy with their schools vary from person to person. Many students find the lessons too difficult, have poor academic grades, and fail to see the congruence between the subject matter and real life (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988; Tinto, 1987). Many students regard school as dull or boring and felt simply that school was not for them although they gave no specific indication as to why they did not like it (Tanner, 1990). Others feel isolated and have a difficult time adjusting, especially after changing schools. One study found that the frequency of changing schools is related to the likelihood of a student finishing his or her education.

Schargel and Smink (2001) suggested that students would be less likely to drop out if they felt a connection to their school. Students who felt that the teachers cared about them and also those students who got involved in school activities were also more apt to graduate (Tinto, 1975). One indirect impediment to this was the size of the school because larger schools did not afford students the same opportunity for personal contact with teachers and staff (Pittman & Haughwout).

Despite the vast number of reasons given, there exists a significant number of students who give idiosyncratic or no reason for leaving school early, providing little insight into potential causes of dropout for these students (Rumberger, 1983).

Consequences of Dropping Out

Students who choose to discontinue their formal schooling find themselves at a great disadvantage when entering the job market. Research has found that high school achievement can predict wage earnings in the work force (Miller, 1998). Consequently, it has been discovered that a lack of high school credentials contributes to higher crime rates, higher poverty rates and lower salaries (Alspaugh, 1998; Cassel, 2003). This fact is very important to the national economy. McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1989) predict that 500,000 student dropouts represent a 50 billion dollar loss in lifetime earnings

and consequently, tax revenue (not to mention the dollar value of any social or economic support services dropouts might require). Prevention is the only key, but there is not a consensus as to the types of strategies that are most successful.

High-Stakes Testing

The nation has been on a journey towards high-stakes testing from the moment the Russians launched Sputnik into space. In response to losing the space race, the U.S. Congress passed the National Defense Act of 1958. Title V of this act allocated money for testing that would identify students with outstanding aptitudes and ability in math and the sciences (United States, 1958). Years later Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 that allocated funds for testing that would enable districts to document their educational performance (United States, 1965). This early form of accountability was amended several times between its establishment in 1965 through 1994, with each successive amendment having an impact on testing as we know it today, by providing funding and encouraging assessment that would provide information on the students' mastery of basic skills. The amendment of 1978 required that systems share the results of these assessments (United States, 1978).

The past twenty years have seen three major education initiatives that paved the road for high-stakes testing. The first was the Education for Economic Security Act of 1984, which was passed in response to the National Commission of Excellence in Education's Report, A Nation At Risk (U. S. Department of Education [USDE], 1983). This provided incentives to individual schools that raised student achievement in basic functional skills (United States, 1984). The second initiative was President Clinton's in Goals 2000: Educate America Act (United States, 1994). These goals specifically called for students to leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in the core subjects, as well as foreign language and the arts. Finally, "No Child Behind" (NCLB) (United States, 2001) requires that students be tested once between grades 3 and 5, again between grades 6 and 9, and finally between tenth and twelfth grade in at least language arts and mathematics. The intent of this testing is for students to show competency in the state's standards of the grade tested.

Although the federal government does not require high-stakes policies, it does however require states to create a program for accountability. Some states have chosen to hold students accountable by withholding their diploma if they do not pass the state's standardized tests regardless of their grades in their academic classes. However, high-stakes testing is not

unique to the exit exam alone; many states have policies that retain students based on test scores at certain checkpoint years in the elementary grades as part of their accountability program.

Despite the introduction of NCLB, high-stakes testing and school accountability is not a new concept. Some states implemented exit exams and minimum competency tests as early as the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s school districts created and implemented accountability programs in response to the standards-based reform movement. During this time 50 states focused on higher educational standards and content through the use of various initiatives. By 2001, 48 states required statewide assessments in reading and mathematics while the remaining two states required testing yet allowed for district discretion in choosing the assessment tool. Eight states currently have promotion policies in the elementary and middle school levels contingent on student's test scores and 11 states require students to pass an exit exam prior to graduation. By the year 2008, students in 28 states will be required to pass a state administered test in order to graduate (Goertz & Duffy, 2003).

The Louisiana Accountability Program

The Louisiana Accountability Program was adopted after it became clear to the legislature that education was a major

concern among Louisiana citizens. Although Louisiana students had been required to pass the LEAP test since 1991, legislation was passed six years later that mandated several significant changes in public education for grades kindergarten through 12. Consequently, the School and District Accountability Commission was formed and was charged with the responsibility of recommending to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) a statewide system of accountability for public education in Louisiana. As a consequence, the School and District Accountability System were developed, and the first School Performance Scores were issued to Louisiana Schools in 1999 (Louisiana Department of Education [LDE], n.d.).

The Louisiana Accountability Program holds schools accountable by ranking them using the School Performance Score. Four components are calculated to obtain a School Performance Score: (a) Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP21) or Graduate Exit Exam for the 21st Century (GEE21) test scores, (b) Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) test scores, (c) attendance rate, and (d) the schools dropout rate.

In addition, the State of Louisiana holds students accountable for their education by requiring them to pass the LEAP21 in grades four and eight in order to be promoted to the next grade. Through 2005, students were tested in the four core subjects but are only required to achieve an academic rating of

approaching basic or above in the English/Language Arts and mathematics components. The criterion-referenced tests assess students' level of fundamental knowledge through the use of multiple choice, short answer, and essay style questions. Students who fail the test by receiving an unsatisfactory score in either language arts and/or math are given an opportunity to attend summer remediation free of charge and retest in July in order to earn a passing score and be promoted to the next grade level with their class. However, students are not required to attend the summer class to be eligible to retest (LDE, n.d.).

Students who do not obtain a passing score on the LEAP21 after the summer session are required to repeat the grade that they were supposed to exit (i.e., fourth or eighth grade). These students are given the opportunity to retake the test in the spring and again in summer if necessary. However, if the student earns a passing score on either the English/Language Arts or the mathematics component, the student may be promoted to the high school but remains as a transitional eighth grader. These students are required to take a remedial class focused on the component of the test that they failed. Also, these transitional eighth graders must retake the component of the test on which they scored unsatisfactorily in addition to all of the parts of the ninth grade ITBS.

The GEE21 is comprised of five components: English/ language arts (ELA), essay, mathematics, science, and social studies. Each test is scored and each student is given a label of either advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, or unsatisfactory in each subject area. Louisiana high school students must pass four of the five components of the GEE21 in order to graduate. As of 2005, students must earn a score of approaching basic or above in the essay and English portion as well as the mathematics component. However, students must only score approaching basic or above on only one of the science or social studies test to earn their diploma. The State of Louisiana requires that school districts offer students summer remediation in addition to retesting them in the fall and the spring of each successive year (LDE, n.d.). Remediation classes are also offered as electives in some high schools and many times after-school tutoring is provided. Students who are not successful in earning their diploma are allowed to continue testing as long as they wish or until they pass the necessary parts.

The high-stakes placed on the test score has garnered controversy and passionate discussions can usually be heard from either side of the disagreement. Advocates of high-stakes testing believe that such testing will increase motivation, resulting in higher achievement and diploma attainment (Jacob,

2001). However, students who show improvement on high-stakes testing show little to no improvement on other tests (i.e., ACT, SAT, and NEAP) (Sheppard, 2002).

Also, it has been concluded that students will be more likely to drop out given higher graduation requirements (Bishop, Mane, Bishop, & Moriarty, 2001). Eighty-eight percent of the states with high-stakes testing have higher dropout rates than states without this type of testing policy (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). In 2000, Clarke, Haney, and Madaus reported that there exists a correlation between high-stakes testing programs and high school completion rates. They concluded that high-stakes testing programs were associated with a decrease in the rates for high school completion. They found that 9 of 10 states with the highest dropout rates also used tests as a form of graduation requirement.

Additionally, retention of students has been found to be disadvantageous when it comes to increasing the likelihood of earning a diploma. Students who have been retained in grade 8 are more likely to drop out by grade 10 (FairTest Examiner, 2000). In fact, findings have shown that the more often a student is held back, the more likely he or she is to drop out of school (Quinn, 1991).

High stakes tests directly increase the number of students retained as illustrated in the Chicago Public School System

(Allenwort & Miller, 2002). Chicago public schools noticed a decrease in high school enrollment by as much as 11% in the last four years of the 1990s. It was determined that this decrease was a direct result of the implementation of promotional gate grades introduced in the 1995-1996 school year. More students were being retained because of failing test scores resulting in smaller freshman classes in the Chicago high schools. Research found that Chicago students retained prior to high school were 12 percent more likely to drop out before graduating. In fact, 29% of students retained in eighth grade in 1997 had dropped out of school two years later.

Many states have felt the impact of high-stakes testing when calculating the number of students who drop out of school (Gonzalez, 2004; Haney, 2001). Walt Haney's (2000) work "The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education" noted the great disparity between reported and actual dropout rates in the state of Texas. Haney noted that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was reporting the dropout rate in 1996-1997 as extremely low (1.6 percent) while he calculated it to be somewhere between 20 and 30 percent. After comparing and contrasting five different sources of completion rates, he determined that only about 70 percent of students in Texas actually earned a high school diploma, however, the number of students receiving an equivalency diploma, G.E.D., was sharply on the rise in the

1990s. Due to the TEA policy, which chose not to report students who earned G.E.D.'s as dropouts, the researcher found that this accounted for the differences between reported and actual dropout rates.

Texas is not the only place that has faced scrutiny over the reporting of testing data. Both Minnesota and Chicago have been ridiculed in the press for erroneous reporting of data including such things as higher than actual passing rates and failure notifications sent to students who passed. Quinn's (1991) work, entitled "The Influence of Policies and Practices of Dropout Rates," calls for continued scrutiny of school institutions in determining if their policies or practices have a detrimental effect on student success. This dissertation attempts to assist in that scrutiny by investigating why students drop out and determining if the accountability program had any effect on their decision.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

In today's society students who drop out of high school often find themselves at a disadvantage in the workplace. With the end of the industrial age came many changes, including a new emphasis on the importance of a high school degree. Employers' increased demand for workers who possess a diploma, constitutional changes which provide all races and genders free and equal education, and a focus on higher standards, have lowered the dropout rate but have not eliminated it. Research has found a multitude of factors that contribute to students' decisions to leave school, including socio-economic status (s.e.s), parental education level, and performance in previous grades. While these studies, both qualitative and quantitative, seek to derive a list of risk factors for which preventative measures could be developed, few studies focus on the potential impacts of the newest accountability policies that have been implemented in schools around the nation on the country's dropout rates. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influenced one public school district's students in their decision to drop out of school and to investigate the role of the Louisiana School Accountability

Program in the students' decisions. The following chapter will outline the methods that will be used to accomplish this study.

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research paradigm was used in this study because it allowed the researcher to evaluate the social actions, values, opinions, and perceptions of people (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). A qualitative design allowed me as the researcher the opportunity to listen to the students' voices as they divulged information on the factors that influenced their choice to drop out of school. More specifically, I was able to focus on the following: (a) obtaining first-hand accounts of the factors that influence students' choice to drop out of school, (b) recognizing why they came to view those factors as influential, and (c) understanding the role of the high-stakes testing in their decision to leave school. Therefore, qualitative research was determined to be the best possible method of inquiry for this study because of the researcher's intentions to give meaning to the experiences of the participants as well as the attempt to generate new understandings of those meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Questions

The major research questions for this study were:

- What factors influenced one public school district's students to drop out of school?

- In what ways did the Louisiana School Accountability Program influence the decision of students to drop out of school?

Design

Given the various types of qualitative approaches, phenomenological research is the most appropriate for this study. Phenomenology's primary focus was the description of the participants' experiences and their perception of their experience with the phenomenon (Glesne, 1999). This allows the researcher to examine "the 'essence' of human experiences concerning a phenomenon as described by participants in a study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). By bracketing (Nieswiadomy, 1993) or setting aside my experiences and beliefs, the phenomenon will be permitted to reveal itself through the understanding of the participants' views in their social realities.

This particular study used survey and interview data to provide a method of examining the participants' perception of the factors that led to their dropping out of school.

Role of the Researcher

Phenomena are said to be apodictic or self-revealing, therefore, the researcher in a phenomenological study should be prepared to listen as the phenomenon divulges itself (Boeree, 1988). Additionally, the researcher's role in a qualitative study is that of the instrument. The researcher should not only

listen and note all behaviors but also do so with the knowledge of one's own biases. These biases should be monitored and accounted for throughout the course of the study. Therefore, the following story is told to develop an understanding of the researcher's previous experiences and possible biases.

My Story

My school days started at the age of five when I was enrolled at a local elementary school in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. My mother has often remarked to me how lucky I was to be chosen for a "full-day" kindergarten program that was new the year I started school. I remember many things about school that year. I loved being there and I remember feeling upset when report cards came out and mine did not have all smiley faces, which were used in lieu of letter grades.

I also remember my best friend was a boy. His father worked with my father and he was the class clown. Years later when I was in high school, I remember the television reports that told of his arrest for killing a man during a robbery. He had dropped out of school. I remember thinking, "That doesn't surprise me; he was bad in kindergarten."

The summer prior to my first grade year my family moved to St. Tammany Parish in pursuit of better public schools. Although I spent one year at Mandeville Elementary while my parents built

their dream home, the rest of the years until high school were spent at Abita Springs Elementary and Junior High.

Abita was small. A typical grade level would only have 60 students. Of course, in a school that small, everyone knew everyone else. I was not aware of anyone dropping out of school although I knew students who had failed several grades and were much older than my friends and me.

It was not until tenth grade at Covington High that I started noticing people dropping out of school. Covington High was extremely large compared to Abita Junior High. The tenth grade class was comprised of students from six different feeder schools, all approximately the same size as Abita. Although the school was large, I did notice that some of the students I grew up with had not made it to the high school and did not show up in subsequent years. Through conversations with friends I was told that they had dropped out of school. Again, I was not surprised because they were poor students who came from families dealing with issues such as divorce or alcoholism. The students usually drank or smoked so they were considered "bad kids" in the eyes of my parents. Also, they usually had working class parents so they easily got a job working with a contractor building houses or doing some other labor-intensive task that did not require a high school diploma.

At the end of my tenth grade year one of my close friends found that she was pregnant and dropped out of school when she began to "show." She never returned to complete school. As the years progressed, she, too, found trouble with the law and spent time in jail for writing bad checks.

An ex-boyfriend of mine also dropped out of school after feelings of frustration with teachers and class work. Although he had planned to return to graduate with his younger sister, he was killed in a car accident that summer. He never got a chance.

In addition to my new knowledge of dropouts, I started to notice another trend happening in schools during this time. During my sophomore and junior years, my class was required to take an exit examination. I don't recall it being a major concern in my life although one of my best friends failed a portion and had to go to after-school tutoring before taking that section over for a second time. I also recall that the coaches were concerned that their star football player would not pass the test. This was worrisome as he had already signed with a college and was in line for a scholarship to play football there. However, he did pass the test sometime during our senior year.

Years later, I became a Louisiana-certified teacher. After numerous workshops and in-services I am well aware of the school accountability program. Although the test has changed somewhat

in the types of questions asked, I have always felt a connection to the students I teach because I can empathize with having to take the test. As a teacher in the junior high and high school settings, I have had the opportunity to be on the staff of schools that have been rated and held accountable for their test scores, attendance, and dropout rate by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. I have also been a teacher and tutor to students who have taken and failed the test.

Although the participants to be interviewed are not dropouts of the system in which I am employed, the district selected as the study site employs my husband. I have knowledge of the programs that this district has instituted to ensure the education and safety of their schools and, often through conversation with my husband, compare their policies with that of my own district.

The school district where I am employed is ranked as the best school district in the state. The test scores and school performance scores in the district are well above the state average. As a teacher in the school district I enjoy working in schools where resources were plentiful. Most of my students came from upper-middle class families and their parents were extremely involved in the education process. Additionally, the parents are demanding of the school district and the school

board and central office personnel strive to meet all of their demands.

Although the district's schools were very rural when I was a student, extreme growth in population has changed the make-up of the schools dramatically. Most of the schools in the area are suburban schools servicing mostly middle-class white families. Even though there still exist a few rural schools, many of the students who attend these schools are from affluent families.

Careful analysis of the story that was just shared has yielded knowledge of my beliefs and assumptions of students who drop out of school. After reflecting on my experiences I've discovered that I bore the assumption that school dropouts are "bad" kids. My personal relationships with these people were experiences riddled with disappointment and loss. I believed that these people were not always the most trustworthy and often lied to get their way. I noticed that dropouts often become laborers or criminals and I felt that this was the consequence of not valuing an education. I found myself measuring success by level of education, yearly income, and prestige in the community, and, on my value scale, a person who dropped out of school would most likely be considered unsuccessful.

Methods for Keeping my Biases in Check

Several activities were completed in order to keep my biases in check. The previous summary of my personal experiences

was part of an exercise in a research class in which I was asked to list my beliefs and the reasons that led me to believe them to be true. This exercise was designed to help novice researchers discover their own biases. A second exercise was then completed, which was intended to force the researcher to think of alternative possibilities to his/her beliefs.

As an instrument of qualitative research I must act with awareness and monitoring of my own subjectivity when interviewing and analyzing data. These activities permitted me to freely analyze the possible biases that could stand in my way. Therefore, I used these exercises to aid me in thoroughly thinking through my experiences and the assumptions that I hold as a result of these events. The exercises also helped me to think of other points of view that my interviewee may hold which may not align with my own.

Site Selection

The district chosen for the research was largely undeveloped prior to the 1950s; it was once a predominantly rural area consisting of mainly farms and dairies. Between the 1950s and 1970s, it began to see its first large influx of migrants from New Orleans. As with other cities around the United States the suburban population of New Orleans increased by well over 60%. While the total population of the nation's cities, including New Orleans, stagnated, the number of African

American in the cities increased substantially, instigating an urban depopulation by whites who migrated to the suburban fringes. However, the most recent census shows a new trend towards urbanization of this bedroom community (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The population of the District has increased in the past decade after a decline in the 1980s (Scallan & Torres, 2001). This population was found to be more diverse than ever before with its percentage of minorities increasing by approximately 10 percent in the 1990s (Scallan & Torres). This sudden change in the population has created a unique situation in the schools of the district. Many of the schools in the district are not only servicing a higher number of minority students than ever before, but are also confronted with problems that mimic the problems of the neighboring metropolis, including high crime and low parental involvement. However, there still exist areas in the district that are traditional 1950s style suburban communities populated by white middle to upper-class families. Finally, the extremely large geographical boundaries of the district create a situation in which the district includes small rural fishing communities fairly far removed from the metropolitan area. The necessity of the school district to service urban, suburban, and rural populations is unique and provided the opportunity to collect a wealth of information from students coming from various backgrounds.

The site selected for this study is a suburban-going-urban school district. The schools in this district are very diverse because they include suburban and rural schools. In addition, the communities surrounding many of these schools have begun to witness an increase in crime and poverty parallel to those problems in true urban areas. This "urbanizing" has not stopped at the schoolhouse gate. Many of the schools in the district have characteristics of an urban school. Therefore, this site was selected because of its ability to provide urban, suburban, and rural data within one system.

In addition and perhaps most importantly, the site allowed for easy access to the participants. The District's interest in a study of why their students are dropping out assured cooperation on the part of school system.

Sample Selection

In this study I have defined the "case" to be a student who chooses to drop out of school. In order to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of dropping out it is necessary to speak to students who have made the decision to no longer be enrolled in school. Due to the difficulty in tracking students once they have left school, a convenience sample was used in order to make it easier to find willing participants.

The decision to have this sample chosen from one particular school district was two-fold. First, the district had an

interest in this study and was willing to help me accomplish this task. Second, this district is extremely large and includes communities that are urban, suburban, and rural so it is likely a wide variety of information can be obtained from students who decide to drop out of the various schools that service these communities.

This study was completed using two phases of data collection. In the initial phase, I attempted to have responses from all students filing papers to drop out of the District Public Schools during the period of the study. In order to accomplish this, I used data obtained by the district through a survey that had previously been mailed to the students' homes. The survey consisted of six questions. The first question asked students to choose their level of agreement with several statements on why they left school. The remaining items included open-ended questions on the topic of their present and future.

The District sent out the survey to the homes of the students who were coded in their database as dropouts during the 2003-2004 school year. This survey was mailed to the students in August 2004 and a follow-up postcard was mailed two weeks later as a reminder to those students who had not returned the survey. At the time of the survey, the students were asked for consent to be contacted at a future date by an independent researcher so that an in-depth interview could be conducted to discuss the

answers provided on the survey. If the dropout was under 18 years old, he or she was asked to provide a parental signature as part of the consent process. District school board officials agreed to allow the researcher to analyze these pre-existing data and also afforded the researcher permission to contact those participants willing to be contacted.

For the purpose of my study I only contacted students who gave permission to be contacted as indicated by a provided signature and telephone number. If parental signatures were not provided, I obtained proper parental consent before interviewing the minor. I expected there to be four dropout groups: (a) pregnancy, (b) dislike of school, (c) low academic achievement, and (d) retention at grade level. Due to the low response rate on the initial questionnaire, I chose to sample all 29 participants who returned the survey.

Data Collection

Interview Protocol

Qualitative research enables us to learn of others' interior experiences through the use of the interview (Weiss, 1994). The interview was chosen because it allowed the researcher to obtain meaningful data on participants' experiences in school and the influences on their decisions to leave school.

Gaining access to the students whom I intended to study was done with the help of the school system's Assistant Superintendent. Participants were asked to complete the survey and to return it to the Assistant Superintendent of the District School System, in the return envelope provided to them. Those indicating by a signature their willingness to participate in an interview were called by telephone and asked to participate in one individual telephone interview. At the time of the initial contact, a date and time were arranged for the interview. Additionally, the address of the participant was obtained so that the letter of consent and a resource list for dropouts could be mailed to the participant prior to the interview.

The interview was estimated to be approximately 15-20 minutes in length. The interview was audio taped and transcribed by a professional typist, with subjects' consent. An interview guide was used during each interview and follow-up questions were utilized as needed. Pilot testing of the interview protocol was completed with one subject prior to the remaining data collection.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were examined through the use of within-case and cross-case analysis. A within-case analysis is commonly used in qualitative research to aid the researcher in understanding the

reality of the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, the cross-case analysis technique is useful in examining similarities and differences across the cases. Cross-case analysis not only allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of the topic being studied, but also enhances the generalizability to the findings. In order to perform a cross-case analysis, a content-analytic summary table was utilized. The researcher first categorized, synthesized, interpreted the data, and finally looked for emerging patterns (Glesne, 1999). This helped the researcher to determine how many cases shared similar characteristics (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The researcher concentrated on classifying and categorizing the data in order to make meaning of the thousands of words collected (Glesne, 1999). In this phase, the data were condensed (Glesne; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were divided into categories that reflected the purpose of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These categories, or broad concepts, of data were modified throughout the study to give direction to the data collection, however, themes were expected to surface as a deeper knowledge of the categories emerges throughout the interview process.

In the interest of time, all interviews were dated and transcribed by a professional typist. However, the researcher

remained close to the data, as she had the opportunity to listen to the tapes and read the transcribed notes and examine the notes taken throughout the interview (Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

Coding

In research it is necessary to identify, arrange, manage, and retrieve the most significant fragments of data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Codes allow the researcher to organize the massive amount of data collected in a qualitative study by providing a tool to systematically sort through the stories of the participants. Each code identified represents a general idea or concept of the study (Glesne, 1999). Codes "...are usually attached to 'chunks' of varying size-words. Phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. They can take the form of a straightforward category label or a more complex one" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56).

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis the researcher used codes to interpret the data. Codes were constantly updated as new themes emerge from the data. Concept matrices were used as a tool to illustrate the data so that common patterns, themes, and ideas could easily be seen. The answers to the interview questions from each participant were clustered together by topic and within-case and cross-case analysis techniques were utilized (Patton, 1990). Detailed

descriptions of the findings including quotes from the participants were used in the presentation of the data.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness gives credibility to the findings of a qualitative study. Four criteria are traditionally used to ascertain trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following section describes how the researcher strove to meet these criteria.

Credibility is established when the researcher adequately communicates the participants' reality. This was accomplished by including their voices in the findings by using direct quotations from the participants. Another strategy that was utilized to ensure credibility was the use of a peer de-briefer. A peer de-briefer assists by exposing aspects of the study that remain only implicit to the researcher. A peer de-briefer is a trusted and qualified third party who does not have any interest in the study at hand. This person serves as a reader and offers suggestions to the researcher throughout the course of the data analysis process. A fellow doctoral student was chosen to serve as a de-briefer for this study. This colleague provided objectivity to the study by providing input on data analysis and coding procedures. Finally, disclosing of information incongruent with the themes of the study allows

readers the ability to determine if the study is credible (Creswell, 2003). Naturalistic inquiry comes from real life and all perspectives and experiences are not equal in real life, consequently, the researcher is obligated to disclose those divergent views.

The final strategy used to ensure credibility was the identification of research subjectivity. In an effort to reduce this subjectivity, a self-reflective narrative was included in the study with the intent of identifying my biases, values and personal interest about the research topic I am writing. This, along with the other strategies presented, helped to ensure trustworthiness.

Transferability, the second of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, is the ability to relate these findings to similar contexts. In order to improve transferability of findings many researchers call for the use of rich description, which provides the foundation for making a conclusion to the relevance of this research to other studies (Gay & Airasian, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Patton 1990). This study, however, is specific to the case and has little to no transferability beyond the district studied. Furthermore, the results of this study are not generalizable to other districts across the state.

An audit trail, or a detailed description of the process of the study, was utilized to ensure dependability and confirmability. Dependability and confirmability of results are the assurance that the conclusions will be consistent over time and across researchers and methods provides the reader with the ability to judge if the study is convincingly free from unacknowledged bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Items used to establish an audit trial, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), include detailed descriptions of the participants, use of interview transcripts, notes, and the use of artifacts such as documents and descriptions of all parts of the process. The audit trail consisted of thorough notes recording the process used for the study. These were maintained throughout the process so that future researchers could replicate the procedures used in the study to see how the conclusions were derived (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Additionally, an audit trail helped to ensure the participants that the procedures utilized are appropriate and conducted properly (Lincoln & Guba). In this particular study the audit trail will verify consistency by providing the researcher a comparison between notes and transcripts.

G.E.D.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The primary focus of Chapter Four is the analysis of the data and presentation of the findings. The qualitative research method used conceptually ordered matrices, which allowed the researcher to appropriately analyze the data collected through participant interviews. The intent of this study was to investigate the factors that led students to the decisions to resign from school in an attempt to answer the research question, "What factors influence students to drop out of school?"

This chapter begins with a discussion of the participants followed by an analysis of the data. A conceptually ordered matrix was created using the constant comparative analysis method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The voices of the participants are revealed through the use of carefully selected direct quotes, which are embedded in the data analysis. Finally, the findings from each matrix are presented in the summary.

Participants

The School District sent out surveys to the homes of 354 students who were coded in their database as dropouts during the 2003-2004 school year. Twenty-nine participants returned these surveys for a response rate of 8%. Due to the low response rate

on the initial questionnaire, I chose to sample all participants who returned the survey and gave consent to be contacted.

Twenty-three of the 29 participants or 80% of those dropouts who returned the survey gave me consent to contact them by telephone.

Problems existed that forced the researcher to mark nine of the 23 or 39% of the surveys as unusable. These problems included disconnected telephone numbers, legal guardians not completing and signing the survey, and students indicating that they left school because they became a parent. As the reader may recall, it was noted in chapter one that pregnancy would not be considered.

Finally, 3 of 23 or 13% of the students called did not respond to my phone calls. Therefore, a telephone interview could not be conducted with these participants.

My final sample included 11 participants of which four were male and seven were female. These participants ranged in age from 17 to 19 years. My sample included two 17-year-olds, eight students of age 18, and one 19-year-old.

Information about the participants was included in the following table for reference. Table 1 includes a pseudonym for respondent along with his/her gender and age.

Table 1
Respondents by Gender and Age

Participant	Name	Gender		Age
		Male	Female	
1	Doug	X		19
2	Bobby	X		17
3	Erin		X	18
4	Marty		X	18
5	Shawna		X	17
6	Don	X		18
7	Connie		X	18
8	Paul	X		18
9	Dana		X	18
10	Isabel		X	18
11	Toya		X	18

Interview Protocol

A convenience sample from one local school district was used in order to make it easier to find willing participants. Participants were chosen because of their willingness to participate in an interview. This was determined because they returned a survey to the school district with a signature indicating they give consent to be contacted by telephone. Initially the researcher called by telephone and asked the participant if he/she was still willing to participate in one

individual telephone interview. At this time, a date and time were arranged for the interview. Additionally, the participant's address was obtained and a letter of consent and a resource list for dropouts was mailed to the participant's home prior to the interview.

The researcher then called the participant at the designated time and verified that he/she received the consent form. All participants indicated that they had received the form and resource list. The researcher then explained the consent form and asked permission to turn on the audiotape before asking if the participants felt they were informed and gave consent to the study. Two of the 11 participants were under the age of 18 years old so consent was obtained from their parents in the same manner.

The interviews were approximately 15-20 minutes in length. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by a professional typist. An interview guide (See Appendix A) was used during each interview and follow-up questions were utilized as needed. Pilot testing of the interview protocol was completed with one subject prior to the remaining data collection. The purpose of the pilot interview was to test the effectiveness of the interview protocol. Adjustments that were made subsequent to the pilot interview were the addition of a follow-up question

pertaining to the student's academic performance while in school.

In order to contact those participants who were not home at the designated interview time, the researcher continued to call their homes several times daily. When possible the researcher left a message for the participant with a return number so that another more convenient time could be scheduled. However, all interviews conducted were the result of the researcher contacting the participant. This may or may not speak to the hesitancy of dropouts to discuss this sensitive issue. In all, an average of 25 attempts were made to contact participants who agreed to be interviewed but failed to answer or return phone calls.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was accomplished through within-case and cross-case analysis. The constant comparative method was used, which allowed the analysis of extensive amounts of data in a way that highlighted the aspects of the question under examination (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This method was chosen because it allowed for simultaneous inductive coding and comparison of the data. During the procedure it was possible to refine, change, merge, or omit categorizes that were formed and create new categories as well. For the purpose of this study, participants' responses to questions specifically aimed at

finding out why they dropped out of school were analyzed. At the beginning of the procedure, the smallest units of meaning were identified and a category matrix was created (See Appendix B). The categories identified initially became the basis for the creation of larger thematic categories.

Within-Case Analysis

The within-case analysis explored each participant's responses, addressing the research questions pertaining to the student's experiences that led to his/her decision to drop out of school, and if the requirements of the Louisiana accountability program had an impact on his/her decision to leave prior to obtaining a diploma. Information gathered during the interview that related to these questions was analyzed and synthesized. The interview data were analyzed and put into a narrative form. Narratives included the respondent's own words so that the student's voice was apparent throughout the selection.

Respondent #1-Doug

Doug left school because he had moved out on his own and had trouble balancing household responsibilities with schoolwork. Additionally, Doug was really discouraged with what he saw happening in his school. Doug felt strongly that the school no longer cared about the education that he was receiving, but instead was more worried about the school image

and how the students were dressed. Doug indicated that he left school with feelings of "resentment and an overwhelming feeling of feeling sorry of what's happening" because public schools were not allowing students to keep their individuality. He felt that "they don't care" about low test scores, but instead are more worried about if a student wore a belt or not.

Although Doug spoke to his friends and his mother prior to making his decision, he revealed that he had "my mind made up before I asked everyone." Doug indicated that he felt "...there was no purpose" and that was what led to his dropping out. He also acknowledged that the school personnel did nothing to keep him in school.

Doug had taken the LEAP21 and the GEE21 assessments and had passed them. Doug indicated that he had passed these tests on the first attempt. The participant did not signify that these assessments had an influence on his decision to drop out of school.

Respondent #2- Bobby

Bobby was a special education student who passed the LEAP21 test in the eighth grade. He spoke to his middle school counselor who, as he describes, "promised to put me in the G.E.D. Option Three program" when he reached high school. When he arrived at the high school, a member of the school staff indicated to him that his record had not been received from his

previous school. Bobby stayed out of school while the school waited to receive his records. After two weeks had passed, school personnel suggested that Bobby enroll in the ninth grade instead of the Option Three program. Bobby felt "by the time I would have gotten in school I would have been too far behind to catch up." Bobby was heartbroken that the long delay in getting his files prevented him from continuing his schooling.

When asked why he didn't enroll in ninth grade at the beginning of the school year when he was first told that there may be a delay, Bobby revealed that he had trouble in school due to a medical condition. While his medical condition did not affect him academically, it did affect his physical health and forced him to miss school at times.

Bobby felt that he would have obtained his G.E.D. quicker if he had been enrolled in the Option Three Program. He wished to pursue his dream of working for the automotive industry and was in a hurry to start his career. Bobby felt upset that he was not accepted in the Option Three program even though his counselor "promised" him that he would be able to enroll in it.

Bobby had passed the LEAP21 test in the eighth grade on his first attempt. He never enrolled in high school and therefore did not take the GEE21 test. Bobby indicated that these tests did not influence his decision in dropping out of school.

Respondent #3- Erin

Erin felt that school was not for her. She felt that the teachers showed favoritism to the athletic kids while at the same time they were "mean" to other students and described the teachers as "basically A-holes." She particular disliked when the teachers shut off the bathrooms and then they would not call anyone to open the restrooms even when it was a designated bathroom time.

Erin decided to leave school after her counselor refused to change her class schedule from ROTC to Physical Education. Erin did not wish to be in ROTC anymore because she was removed from the color guard due to failing grades. When the counselor denied her request, Erin asked her parents if she could quit school. Although her parents and the ROTC chief tried to talk her out of leaving, Erin indicated, "I had it stuck in my mind that I was going to drop out."

Erin seemed to resent the way she was treated in school. She felt that she was treated like a child and, when she decided to drop out, she had simply had enough of it. She was angry that the counselor would not change her schedule and she felt that "Public school, they really don't, in my opinion, they didn't give a care." When asked how she would have changed things she responded that going to a Catholic or private school would have made things better because the teachers were more caring.

Although Erin had to retake the LEAP21 test in the eighth grade, she did pass it. She did not, however, pass the portion of the GEE21 tests as a sophomore in high school. Despite her failing scores, Erin told the researcher that these tests did not have an influence on her decision to leave school.

Respondent #4- Marty

Marty indicated that she dropped out of school because, "I was crazy doing what everybody else was doing." She dropped out after a friend left school and told her to come with her to get a G.E.D.. So Marty "...followed her footsteps." However, Marty indicated she was not in school pursuing a G.E.D. at the time of the interview.

Marty indicated that she did not like school because the teachers and the students "...get on my nerves." Although Marty did not say that she dropped out because of her poor relationships with authority and her peers, it was apparent that these relationships did nothing to help encourage Marty to continue her education. She didn't like when the boys picked on her and she didn't like when teachers helped other students instead of her. Although her mom tried to talk her out of it, she said, "I had my mind made up" and her mom signed the papers.

Marty felt that going to another public school in the district would have changed her fate. She had friends who attended the other school and had told her of the nice teachers;

this appealed to her. Marty implied that the people in her school were what really drove her to drop out prior to obtaining her diploma.

Marty passed the LEAP21 tests in the eighth grade on her first attempt. She left school prior to taking the GEE21 test. Marty did not feel that these tests had any impact on her decision to drop out of school.

Respondent #5- Shawna

Shawna did not return to school after being suspended too many times. Shawna described her discipline problems to be the result of "aggravating" teachers and students. Shawna admits to talking back to teachers and leaving class if the teacher refused her request to go to the bathroom. Shawna also had problems with her peers. She described a verbal altercation between herself and another student on campus.

Shawna's relationships with the people in her school led to the disciplinary actions that ultimately got her suspended three times. Shawna indicated that the school did not do anything to try to solve her conflicts with others in the school besides warning her of the consequences.

She felt the end of her story would be different if she had attended a different school. The school she would have preferred to attend was another public school in the same district. She

chose that school because of the friends she had who attended it.

Shawna had passed the LEAP21 and GEE21 tests prior to leaving school. In her opinion, these tests did not have any influence on the actions that led to her being dismissed from school.

Respondent #6- Don

Don left school to start the workforce after he realized that he would never obtain a diploma or a G.E.D.. Don was a special education student who read at a second grade level. Although Don said his teacher begged him to stay in school, Don felt he was better off pursuing work. Don explains why he made the decision to leave school:

"Well, I seen that they wanted me to stay in school until I was 22. And they wouldn't give me a G.E.D. or nothing. Just a certificate saying that I completed 13 years of schooling. So I decided to start working before."

Don did not particularly dislike school, but felt that he would be better working than being in school. Don's parents supported his decision and Don described them as "understanding about it." Don's teacher on the other-hand was not as understanding. Instead, Don remembered that his teacher begged him to stay in school.

Despite Don's reading level, Don had taken and passed the LEAP21 test in the eighth grade. Don left high school prior to taking the GEE21 test. Don blamed his exceptionalism for why he left school and did not feel that the LEAP21 or GEE21 had any influence on his decision because these tests did not have any impact on his ability to receive a diploma.

Respondent #7- Connie

Connie moved out of her house when she was a junior in high school because she wanted to live with her boyfriend. After making this decision to leave home, Connie stopped going to school. Connie described how her boyfriend treated her as the reason for quitting school, "he started getting violent with me, and I didn't want to go to school with bruises all over my face and stuff like that. He would also turn the alarm clock off on me in the morning so I couldn't go to school."

When Connie's mother saw the bruises, Connie moved back home. Connie did not return to school because she had missed too many days and would not receive credit. Although Connie liked school, she did not feel comfortable speaking to anyone at the school about what happened to her. Additionally, she did not recall anyone from the school calling to check on her or offering her assistance during this time. Connie did not leave school because of testing and did not feel that the LEAP21 or

GEE21 tests had any influence on her decision to drop out of school.

Respondent #8- Paul

Paul had trouble reading and didn't like to read in front of the class. Paul admits to disrupting the classroom. After being suspended three times, Paul did not return to school because he was told that he could not. Paul explains why he was suspended the last time:

Ah, disrupting the class, that's when I be shutting down. Stuff like that when I shut down. I just would be saying nothing and the teachers would tell me something and I'd just be um saying stuff like I couldn't control it or not and my daddy told me to control it my um temper so but that might be the reason.

School had been a place where Paul had seen failure previously in his life. He had repeated two grades prior to entering high school. Although Paul admitted that his teachers tried to help him conquer his reading problem, he still did not like school. Instead Paul felt frustrated and shut down in class. When teachers corrected him, he was disrespectful to them. Although his Dad warned him to control his mouth and despite his attempt to do so, he was not successful and was eventually suspended three times from school.

When asked if the school tried to help him control his temper, Paul did not recall them addressing the problem except in a disciplinary manner. He had not been referred to a school counselor or an outside counselor. He did not recall anyone on the school staff attempting to find out what caused his anger or teaching him techniques to deal with his temper.

Paul felt that his inability to read led to his shutting down, suspensions, and finally dismissal from school. Paul had passed the LEAP21 test but not before repeating the eighth grade because he failed the test on his first attempt. Paul left high school prior to taking the GEE21 test. Despite his prior academic performance on the LEAP21, Paul felt that these high-stakes tests had no influence on the behavior that resulted in his suspensions.

Respondent #9- Dana

A medical condition required Dana to be hospitalized for an extended period of time. She was suffering from depression and required accommodations while she was out of school for homebound schooling through the school's special education department. Dana finds the school responsible for her dropping out. She explained, "...the school did not cooperate when I was hospitalized." Not cooperating to Dana meant that the school did not follow through on writing an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Dana's parents requested that an IEP be written for her

in order to provide her with educational services that needed for her to keep up with her work while she was out of school. According to Dana, an IEP was never written or followed so she fell behind in her schoolwork.

While Dana says she liked school prior to this incident, she did admit having trouble with some teachers who wouldn't help her or who failed to provide her with her accommodations. She explained that she had trouble with her schoolwork because her medication made her sleepy and it was hard for her to stay awake in class. She remembers asking teachers for help and being told by a teacher "with an attitude" that she was responsible for her own actions in high school. Dana sounded discouraged when she explained how things would go on in the class, for example, other students aggravated her and the teacher would tell her, "That's not my problem. You have to deal with it." This instance left Dana with the feeling that no one cared about her or her experiences in school.

Even though Dana took the LEAP21 in eighth grade three times before passing it, Dana does not feel that the requirements of the LEAP21 test or GEE21 test had any influence on her decision to drop out of school.

Respondent #10- Isabel

Isabel had eye surgery a few years ago. Although the doctor had fixed her eye problem initially, Isabel's eyes got

progressively worse as time went on. Problems with Isabel's right eye hindered her from being able to see the chalkboard and gave her headaches during the school day. This resulted in Isabel falling behind in her schoolwork. Isabel praised her teacher, and explained that the teacher provided her notes from the board and sometimes an aide wrote the notes for her. Despite their efforts, Isabel simply could not keep up. Additionally, she began to have problems with her other eye. So Isabel came to the conclusion that she would leave school.

When Isabel made her decision not to return to school, Isabel's mother and teacher understood and as Isabel explains, "[They] knew that I would not quit if I didn't have to." Due to previous eye surgery, Isabel was several years behind her classmates and would probably not catch up. Isabel felt that she was "...forced to quit school because she couldn't see the board." Isabel really seemed to miss being in school and conveyed a genuine like for her teachers. Although Isabel wished to someday continue school, she felt that she was too old to return.

Isabel had failed the LEAP21 and GEE21 tests on her first attempt. Despite not passing these tests, she did not blame them for her decision to leave school. She felt that her medical condition was the only thing preventing her success.

Respondent #11- Toya

Toya was an average student who was excited to start high school. During her sophomore year she began to show signs of depression. Toya sought help from a school counselor who, when told by Toya that she thought she was depressed, said, "What high school student isn't." After speaking to the counselor, Toya stopped caring because she felt that no one else cared for her.

During her junior year, Toya decided to end her life. She tried to take her life by overdosing on pain relievers. After that, Toya was hospitalized and treated for depression. Toya believed that "things would have been different if the school was there to help me." She felt that "no one cared" and that is why she quit.

Toya is still very upset with how she was treated by the school counselor. She blames the counselor for not listening to her cry for help. Prior to her mental illness surfacing, Toya remembers liking school. She says that she was an average student and did things like any other teenage girl.

Toya passed the LEAP21 tests and the GEE21 tests on her first attempt. She did not feel that these tests had any influence on the circumstances that led to her decision to leave school. Toya blames mental illness and the lack of support from

the school counselor for the events that led up to her attempted suicide and the eventual end of her high school career.

Cross-Case Analysis

Using constant comparative analysis, four categories of reasons for dropping out emerged (see Appendix B). Initially these were coded as Obstacles, Apathy, Lack of Alternatives, and School Rules. Through the cross-case analysis, these themes were further refined to include: (a) obstacles, (b) broken spirit/disappointment with the system, and (c) lack of alternatives. These all posed barriers to the students' ability and, in some cases, desire to complete their education. Although the literature specifically categorizes factors that cause students to drop out into four distinct groups: (a) student-related, (b) family-related, (c) school-related, and (d) community-related, the researcher chose to use emerging themes which she believes allow for a more specific view of the factors which influenced students' decision to drop out of school. The following section discusses each theme and the factors that describe it.

The process of coding and sorting the data was extremely complex since the participants of teenage students revealed several problems that could have forced them into several different categories. It was the decision of the researcher to place each participant into the noted theme, because it became apparent that the theme described the ultimate cause of why the

students dropped out of school regardless of the other factors that also may have been revealed by the participant. Table 2 lists participants by the category most indicative of his or her reason for dropping out of school.

Table 2
Participant by Dropout Theme

Theme	Participants
Obstacles	Marty Isabel
Broken Spirit/Disappointment with the System	Doug Erin Toya Dana Bobby
Lack of Alternatives	Shawna Paul Connie Don

Obstacles

Factors that impede students' ability to function effectively in a school environment have been labeled obstacles. Although the literature does not use this term, the word obstacles was chosen to emphasize how each situation obstructed the student's ability to successfully complete high school. Factors described as obstacles include medical reasons, financial responsibilities, low academic performance, and peer relations. These factors hindered the student's ability to perform at the expected levels in a school setting. The

literature on school dropouts would have classified these factors as student-related.

Several of the participants initially found themselves faced with obstacles that were hard to overcome, however, it was determined that it was not the obstacle but the response to the obstacle that led to the student's decision to leave school. Two participants in this category were Marty and Isabel. Marty left school because she followed the footsteps of her friend. She indicated that she did not like school because she had problems with the other students. It became clear that these peer relationships influenced Marty's desire to continue school in these comments of hers:

- [I dropped out] because at the time I was just crazy doing what everybody else was doing.
- [My friend] dropped out first and told me that she was going to G.E.D. school and so, you know, I followed her footsteps.
- [The student] would just get on my nerves.
- Like I used to be sitting there or whatever and like the boys used to be picking on me or something. That's how they used to get on my nerves.

On the other-hand, Isabel's leaving school was directly related to a medical condition that prevented her from keeping up with her schoolwork. Isabel would not have left school if it

she had not felt that it was impossible for her to catch up. She spoke of the reasons that made it difficult for her to stay in school when she said, "The medicine my doctor gave me wasn't helping at all so I was forced to leave school because I couldn't see the board." She praised her teachers and even had aspirations to finish school, but felt that she was too old to go back to high school and pursue a traditional diploma.

Broken Spirit/ Disappointment with the System

The literature would label the factors in this category as school-related factors, because all of the problems students encountered had to do with dissatisfaction with something at school. However, the researcher made the decision to sort these factors into a smaller group named broken spirit/ disappointment with the system in an attempt to find a more specific reason that causes students to leave school than simply that they didn't like it.

This category described apathy on the part of students, teachers, and school personnel for the student to succeed in school. Respondents described their feelings of disengagement with school, claiming that school had no purpose. They indicated that they disliked school and that they felt that no one cared about them or their education. Teachers were described as mean and students described a lack of connectedness with the school,

the students, and the staff. Finally, dropouts had a hard time seeing the value of rules to which they were expected to abide.

Doug felt that schools were hindering the ability for students to express their individuality by requiring students to wear uniforms. Doug implied that he was frustrated with the school rules and how he was treated when he made these comments:

- ...what is happening with lot of these public schools is that the, um, the product of your education is no longer a factor.
- But it really seems like they are more focused on the uniforms that I wore and the image the school presented instead of the quality of the students.
- ...if you are part of that minority group, then your opinion really doesn't matter because nothing is going to get changed because of it.
- ...we even went...to the school board to complain about it and they just gave us the same run-around.
- It was just all about how they were so focused on what you wore and how you looked and meanwhile our test scores were like the lowest in the nation. And no one is doing anything to stop that but yet they want to go head and suspend because you are not wearing your belt properly or you don't have your

shirt tucked in. You are still a student but, you know, they don't care.

Erin left school after she was forced into an elective class where she did not want to be enrolled. She felt that the counselor "wouldn't listen" to her request to be placed in gym class. She was left with the feeling that, "...[in] public school [the teachers] really don't -- in my opinion -- they didn't give a care."

In three specific instances, participants described experiences with schools that, if true, would be perceived by many educators as bordering on the line of educational malpractice. Toya indicated that she gave up after a guidance counselor failed to help when she began to show signs of depression. She believed that, "things would have been different if the counselor would have listened to me and offered me help." Bobby didn't reenter school after the school denied his admission to their Option Three program. This denial occurred after he had been out of school for two weeks waiting for his records to arrive from his previous school, which was in the same district. He recalled that "[The school personnel] didn't tell me to do nothing; they just left me out." He described himself as "heartbroken" when they would not let him in the Option Three program.

Dana was hospitalized during the school because she was suffering from depression. Her parents requested help from the school and they were told that an IEP would be convened and that Dana would receive some home-bound services while she was out of school so she would not fall behind. Dana believes that this failure on the school's part is what led her to dropping out. Dana explained, "I dropped out of school because I was hospitalized and the school did not cooperate when I was hospitalized. ...they were supposed to do an IEP and fix it so I could get work while I was in the hospital, but they never did that." This was not the only time when Dana felt that the school was not helpful. Prior to being hospitalized, Dana had the following experience: "I was in, um, under the 504 plan and a lot of things I didn't understand so I would ask the teachers and they wouldn't help. They would catch attitudes and say you were on your own in the high school and you're responsible for your own actions and things like that." The described encounters between the participants and the schools left these students so unhappy that they felt they had to drop out.

Lack of Alternatives

The factors in this category relate to the lack of alternatives that are provided to high school students who find themselves out of school for any reason. The factors found under this label would be considered to be school-related if compared

with the literature. The stories of four participants can be described by this theme. Shawna and Paul indicated that they did not drop out, but instead could not return to school because they had been suspended too many times. Shawna's words to described what happened were, "I kept getting suspended so they x-ed me out." She explained that the school would not let her go back to school, but would not give her credit because she had been out too many days. When asked why she didn't go back she said, "...they wouldn't give me credit so I said what's the point?"

Paul had also been suspended too many times for disrupting class as a response to his frustration brought upon by his poor reading skills. Paul recalled what he was told by the administration after his last suspension when he told me, "I got suspended and um they say I was suspended for the rest of the year." Paul was not offered any other alternative to complete his education when he was suspended from school. Both Shawna and Paul were not allowed to receive work toward their high school diploma while they were out of school serving their punishment.

Connie had missed too many days after finding herself in a relationship with an abusive boyfriend. By the time her mother found out about the situation and helped Connie to get herself away from her boyfriend, Connie had missed more than the number of days allowed by the district. It became clear after re-

reading that Connie believed that there was no other alternative for her to receive a high school diploma:

- I tried going back to school myself but it was too late.
- I couldn't go back.
- It was so long since I've been gone, since I left that they said it was too late for me to go back, to just go try and get my G.E.D..

Finally, Don made the decision to leave school after he realized that his reading level would not enable him to receive a diploma. Although the teacher begged him to stay in school, he felt that he would be better off starting work. Don explained, "Well, I seen that they wanted me to stay in school until I was 22. And they wouldn't give me a G.E.D. or nothing. They just give you a certificate saying I completed 13 years of schooling. So I decided to start working before." These comments illustrate that Don believed that there was no purpose to continue and that the system had not provided him with any alternatives to receive a high school diploma.

Who influenced students to drop out?

In an attempt to understand the process that students went through when deciding to drop out of school, it became apparent that their parents, peers, and teachers all played had a role -- whether it be positive or negative - that influenced students to act on their decision to drop out of school. When the

participants were asked about the process used in deciding to drop out of school, most responded that their decision was made after speaking to others. Even though the students indicated that others either supported them or tried to change their minds, they understood that ultimately the decision was theirs to make and many indicated that they, "had their mind made up."

Four of the 11 students interviewed divulged that their parents tried to change their minds about dropping out. Only 2 of the 11 said that a teacher asked them to change their mind. Three students indicated that their peers supported them in their decision to leave, while only two of them said that their mother supported their decision. Table 3 illustrates who influenced the students in making their decisions to leave school.

Table 3
Individuals influencing students' decision to drop out

Part	Supportive	Against	No Influence
1	Some people agreed	My mother tried to change my mind. And uh, a couple of my friends did as well.	As much as [school personnell] did they just said that they were glad to have me back but they made no effort to keep me there.
3	My friends. I told them that I want to drop out and they was like if that's what you went to do then do it.	My parents did. They tried to..	
4	[My friend] dropped out first and told me that she was going to G.E.D. school and so, you know, I followed her footsteps.	my mama did.	
5	Well my momma ...said not to go if they ain't gonna give you credit.		
6		My teacher, one of them. She begged me to go back to school.	
8		...my daddy told me to control it my um temper..	
10	my momma understood how much pain I was in and she knew that I wouldn't quit if I didn't have too. My teacher called and asked how I was doing and asked if I was coming back and I told her no. No, she understood.		

Findings

The intent of this study was to investigate two research questions:

- What factors influenced one public school district's students to drop out of school?
- In what ways did the Louisiana School Accountability Program influence the decision of students to drop out of school?

A within case and cross-case analysis revealed that there are several factors that influence students' decision to leave school. These factors were categorized into three major themes: (a) obstacles, (b) breaking the student's spirit/disappointment with the school system, and (c) lack of alternatives. It was determined that students faced many conditions, including mental illness and peer relations, which hindered their ability and desire to complete school successfully. Other participants were discouraged by bureaucratic errors, senseless rules, and unwillingness of the school personnel to help them to succeed in their pursuit of a diploma. Many of these participants described actions of the school system that discouraged them from continuing school. Finally, four participants found themselves in a situation where they felt they did not have any other alternative but to end their high-school career without a diploma.

Additionally, an investigation of who influenced the student's decision to leave school revealed that the student's peers most often supported student decisions while parents usually tried to change the student's mind. School personnel seldom were cited as offering any encouragement or discouragement to the student. Many of the students admitted that their minds were made up despite what others had told them.

The second of the two research questions investigated in this study was to determine if the Louisiana Accountability Program had an impact of students' decision to drop out of school. A cross-case analysis of the answers given by respondents when questioned about the LEAP21 and GEE21 tests suggests that these high-stakes tests and the Accountability Program that requires their existence did not influence students in their decision to leave school prior to receiving their high school credentials.

As a result of the interviews with the participants, it was discovered that all 11 of the participants passed the LEAP21 test at the eighth grade level. Only 4 of the 11 participants indicated that they took the test more than once. Of these, only one of them had to take it a third time. Of the 11 students, only five of them took the GEE tests in high school prior to dropping out. Two of the five did not pass the test. When the participants were asked if they felt the LEAP or GEE test had

any influence on their decision to drop out, none of the participants indicated that they felt that these high stakes tests had any influence on their decision.

Summary

Within-case and cross-case analyses were completed to determine what factors influence students' decision to drop out of school. The data collected in the 11 interviews were collapsed into three themes: obstacles, breaking of the student's spirit/ disappointment with the system, and lack of alternatives. These themes described what factors hinder students' ability to be successful in high school. Students revealed that they faced many obstacles. The study found that the cause of students dropping out was not only the obstacles they faced, but in many cases how the system responded to their need for the help that could have assisted them in continuing their education. Finally, five out of the 11 participants indicated that a change of schools would have helped them to be successful.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study attempted to investigate the phenomenon of dropping out of secondary school prior to obtaining a diploma. The qualitative approach was utilized. The researcher interviewed 11 students who left the same school district in the 2003-2004 school year to gain a perspective on the primary research question: "What factors influence students from one suburban district in Louisiana to drop out of school?" The Louisiana School Accountability Program was also examined to determine the impact on students' decision to drop out. Additionally, the researcher analyzed students' experiences and perceptions by themes using within-case and cross-case techniques. This chapter provides a summary of the study, an explanation of the conclusions drawn by the researcher, and implications this study may present.

Overview of the Study

A qualitative study was completed in an attempt to discover which factor led students to their decision to drop out of school prior to obtaining a diploma. The researcher conducted 11 telephone interviews with students who left one Louisiana school district during the 2003-2004 school year. The data collected from the interviews were coded and analyzed using within-case

and cross-case techniques. A concept matrix was created through the use of constant comparative analysis in order for the researcher to find themes embedded in the data. Finally, a thorough examination of the data revealed the findings that are discussed in the following section.

Summary of Findings

Most of the students in this study, as in previous research (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986; McDill, Natriello, Pallas, 1985; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987), indicated that various school-related factors influenced their decision to drop out prior to earning a high school diploma. According to the participants several of them felt that school personnel did not "care" about them or their education. The following section will provide a brief summary of the findings, broken down by each of the research questions posed.

Research Question #1: What factors influenced one public school district's students to drop out of school?

Based on evidence collected from the participants in this study, participants indicated that they chose to leave school for various complex reasons. The researcher attempted to isolate the crucial factor that contributed to each student's decision to drop out of school. Three themes were devised from the various responses given by the participants. These themes

include: (a) personal obstacles, (b) lack of alternatives, and (c) disappointment in system.

Obstacles

Participants' responses indicated that they faced personal obstacles that impeded them from completing their high school education. Two obstacles that students found difficult to overcome were medical conditions and peer relationships. The finding that medical conditions, or in some cases disabilities hindered their ability to perform successfully in school was not surprising, because studies have found that students with disabilities dropout nearly twice as much as those without disabilities (NCES, 2001). Laws such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that schools provide services for students with disabilities (United States, 1997). Despite these laws the findings of this study agreed with those of previous research that found that graduation rates of students with disabilities are lower than those of regular education students (Quinn, 1991). This researcher believes that this was specifically true in the case of participant 10, Isabel, who was faced with medical condition that caused her vision to deteriorate. As a consequence of her eye problems, Isabel had horrible headaches throughout the day and as a result she missed numerous days of school. Although, Isabel indicated that she loved her teachers and she was given modifications, the

pain was too much for her to take during the school day so she decided not to return.

Other obstacles apparent from students' comments were the relationships students had with their peers. Research shows that the decision to drop out of school is as much a social decision as it is an educational or economic one (Pittman, 1991). Pittman and Haughtwout (1987) found that problems within the social environment of the school as well as the level of which a student participates in the school had a high relationship to the decision to drop out. Students who dropped out have also been cited as admitting that they developed few positive relationships with peers while they were in school (Fine, 1991). Moreover, research has shown that the number of friends a student has that previously left school is a strong indicator of the likelihood that a student will end their schooling prior to receiving their diploma (Alpert & Dunham, 1986). An example in this study is participant 4, Marty, who indicated that she left school because she was "crazy doing what everybody else was doing." Conversely, a positive peer relationship among students has been cited as decreasing dropout rates (Pittman, 1991). Therefore it was expected that the students in this study indicated they felt that the relationships with their peers influenced their decision to leave school, whether it was

because their peers encouraged them or because they wished to get away from other students on campus.

Lack of Alternatives

Participants indicated that another factor that influenced their decision to forego the high school diploma was the lack of alternatives for students who missed too many days of school. Furthermore, students who were suspended too many times or expelled from school believed that the school system had not provided them with any alternatives for completing their education. This finding was important because the state of Louisiana enacted a law in 1995 requiring that every school district provide alternative programs for those students expelled from any of their district's schools (La. R.S. 17:416.2). The district examined in this research project, as most districts in Louisiana, has been granted an exemption request due to an economic hardship, therefore, the students in this district cannot receive any educational services after being expelled from high school. (The district does have alternative middle school placement for expelled students.) The researcher strongly believes that two of the participants in this study may have benefited from an alternative education program. Instead, these participants reported that they were not pursuing their education and spent most of their time at home doing nothing.

Pittman (1991) found that forcing all students to stay in regular school is not in the best interest of the students and cautioned that retaining students may create a school social climate where education is less valued and the likelihood of dropping out increases. Lange and Sletten (2002) reported on several specific student populations that are expected to benefit from alternative education, including students who drop out of school. Research shows that students attending alternative schools receive more individualized instruction and report positive interactions with teachers and counselors that appears to support their efforts to complete high school (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986).

Broken Spirit/Disappointment with School System

According to participants of this study, the reason these students left school stemmed from perceived lack of responses to the students' needs. The lack of response by school personnel made students believe that the teachers and counselors did not care about them or their education. This study corroborated with previous research by Weelage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) who noted that schools contribute to the dropout problem because they are not responsive to the conditions and problems accompanying these personal and socioeconomic characteristics of at-risk youth.

Dropout literature has focused on how schools alienate students by failing to meet the pupils' expectations or to facilitate the attainment of their educational goals (Fine, 1991; Rumberger, 1987; West, 1991). Additionally, Bryk and Thum (1989) found that at-risk students were less likely to drop out of school if they perceived the exercise of adult authority to be fair and effective. Other studies had findings similar to the present study, citing that students indicated a disaffiliation with school and felt that interactions with teachers had a negative impact on their school experience (Harrington, 2002; Wexler, 1992). The researcher agrees with Harrington (2002) and Wexler (1992) because she has seen the impact that teachers can have on a student. Participant 3, Erin, felt that the teachers mainly talked to like the athletic kids and did not hold them to the same rules as with the other students. Erin seemed resentful of the teachers and blamed them for her bad experiences in school. When she dropped out she told her parents that she could not take the teachers treating her like a child anymore.

School structure and organization may be a primary force for shaping dropouts because it does not offer any options for students who experience episodic or chronic emotional or physical pain but who do not qualify for special education services (Dorn, 1996; Fine, 1991). Schools have been criticized for creating nonflexible policies that intend to keep students in

school, but instead become a barrier to student success (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). An example in this study is participant 7, Connie, who had missed too many days as a result of domestic violence. Connie did not return to school, because she would not receive credit for her classes because she went over the limit of allowable absences. The researcher believes that students such as Connie and those like her should be given the opportunity to continue their education. Some students can pass their classes regardless of how many days they attend then they should be given the opportunity.

Who influenced students to drop out?

This study also examined the people who influenced the student's decision to leave school. Friends were more likely than others to agree with the students' decision. Although several students indicated that their parents tried to change their minds about dropping out, many participants admitted that ultimately it was their decision and their mind were made up.

It was disheartening to find that participants in this study reported that the school personnel did not attempt to change their minds and keep them in school. One possible explanation of these results comes from the literature on counseling. Fuhrmann (1986) believed that school counselors are in an ideal position to assess the school for systemic barriers to academic success and aid teachers and administrators in

supporting students who show at-risk behavior such as absenteeism and declining academic performance. Edmonston and White (1998) concluded that when educators and counselor collaborate to provide services to at-risk students they make strides toward increasing their self-esteem as well as improving classroom behavior. Healthy self-esteem, productive classroom behavior and successful learning experiences are critical factors for staying in school (Brodinsky, 1989; Waitley, 1987). Research also suggests that school counselors can have a positive effect on potential school dropouts through the use of group counseling (Praport, 1993). However, counselors are rarely used in this capacity. Burnham and Jackson (2000) concluded that school guidance counselors are often involved in non-counseling-related activities including: (a) scheduling; (b) transcripts; (c) office sitting; (d) clubs and organizations; (e) parking lot, restroom, and lunch duties; (f) averaging grades; and (g) homeroom duty. (Burham & Jackson, 2000)

Research Question #2: In what ways did the Louisiana School Accountability Program influence the decision of students to drop out of school?

Bishop, Mane, Bishop, and Moriarty (2001) and Lillard and DeCicca (1997) found that students would be more likely to drop out given higher graduation requirements. However, this study yielded different results. Higher graduation requirements was

not one of the reasons cited by the participants for dropping out. None of the participants interviewed indicated that the high-stakes tests imposed upon them by the state accountability program had an influence on their decision to leave school. This finding corroborates a recent Greene and Winters (2004) study and a research by Porter (1994) that concluded that graduation rates were not affected by the adoption of high stakes testing.

There exist several possibilities why this study resulted in this unexpected finding. First, the students interviewed had several other characteristics that placed them at-risk for dropping out, including: failure of previous grades and parents or siblings who previously dropped out of school. Because the decision to drop out is influenced by a myriad of factors, it is possible that students may be affected by those factors more than by school accountability. It may also be possible that students who drop out of school because they cannot pass a high-stakes tests actually have a more specific problem that results in failure of the tests. A problem of this sort would be the ultimate cause of the students' decision to drop out and not the actual existence or requirement of the high-stakes tests.

Many of the participants indicated that they were offered some form of remediation to prepare them for the LEAP21 or GEE21 test. Out of the 11 students interviewed, five of them reported taking advantage of this extra help. Therefore, another

possibility that would explain why this study's findings were different from previous literature is that students may have had positive experiences in school because of the extra attention and tutoring that they received to help them to pass the LEAP21 or GEE21 test. Therefore, these students would not have considered testing or accountability to be a factor to influence them in their decision.

Finally, this researcher believes that this finding may have been an unintended consequence of the sample that was accessible to the researcher. Participants in this study were self-selected for contact from the researcher by telephone. Interviews were conducted only with those dropouts who gave the researcher consent to contact them. It is possible that students who returned the surveys and gave consent to be contacted did so because they were disgruntled with the school system and felt they had a story to tell. The silent majority who did not return the survey may have had other reasons for dropping out, including failure of the LEAP21 or GEE21 test. Students with an internal locus of control may have been less inclined to return the survey because they blame themselves for failure, whereas students who did consent to be interviewed usually attributed their failure to finish school to external factors.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Delimitations

This study was delimited to students who were coded as dropouts in the database of one Louisiana Parish Public School System. This specific school district was not only convenient to the researcher, but also had an interest in a study such as the one proposed here. A focus on one state's program enabled the researcher to determine the consequences that exist from the implementation of that particular state's program on dropouts without regard to other accountability programs across the nation.

Despite the convenience factor, the unique population characteristics of this large district create an opportunity for data collection in urban, suburban, and rural communities. The diversity of the population has created a unique situation in the schools of the district. Many of the schools in the district are not only servicing a higher number of minority students than ever before, but are also confronted with problems that mimic the problems of the neighboring metropolis, including high crime and low parental involvement. However, there still exist areas in the district that are traditional 1950s style suburban communities populated by white middle to upper-class families. Additionally, the extreme large geographical boundaries of the district create a situation in which the district includes small

rural fishing communities fairly far removed from the metropolitan area. The necessity of the school district to service urban, suburban, and rural populations is unique and provided the opportunity to collect a wealth of information from students coming from various backgrounds.

This study also was delimited by the chosen definition of a dropout. For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to define a dropout as students who indicate to school personnel that they are leaving school without the intention of continuing their education at another school or through an alternative diploma program. The decision to define dropouts this way was determined by the accessible population. While students who simply choose not to return to school are also considered dropouts in the state of Louisiana, there was no way to track these students or obtain data from them.

Students who choose to obtain a General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) are also considered dropouts by the state of Louisiana until the G.E.D. is obtained. Due to the change in status once the diploma is obtained, it was decided by the researcher not to include these students in the study.

Limitations

The limitations of this qualitative research study include (a) the researcher, (b) the sample, (c) the location of the site, and (d) using a single site. However, the interview data

provide insight into the factors that led participants to drop out of school in an era of increased school accountability in Louisiana. It is acknowledged that when obtaining qualitative data, the researcher is the instrument. When asking questions or analyzing data the researcher may impose biases to the questions asked as well as misinterpret the responses given by the participants. Every effort was to ensure the credibility of the findings.

The study is further limited by the sample of students who responded to the survey that was mailed to their homes. The district database of home addresses may not have been completely accurate. Therefore, it was not be possible to reach the entire population.

Additionally, the use of the self-selection process to choose interview participants may further limit the study. The researcher's inability to control the number of participants may have introduced bias to the sample because students willing to participate may not be a representative sample of the population. Nevertheless, data from students who elected to participate may contribute important insights towards the understanding of the dropout phenomenon.

Finally, this study was limited in the ability to determine the effect of ethnicity on the students' decision to leave school. Participants in this study were not asked their

ethnicity at the time of the survey nor as a part of the interview. Although minorities are more likely than whites to leave school, this study did not take ethnicity into consideration.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence students to drop out of school prior to earning a high school diploma. While tracking students who leave school is a difficult task, it is even more difficult to determine the commonalities among their unique situations that lead to their dropping out of school. Nonetheless, the researcher analyzed the data thoroughly and determine what was perceived by her to be the best grouping to describe the specific factors that influenced the students' decisions to leave school. The complexity of this task was amplified by the fact that students gave a multitude of reasons to explain why they left school. The various explanations given by each student could have placed any student in more than one category. The researcher used her best judgment when determining the category that ultimately described the student's reason for leaving. Through the analysis of the data collected, the following conclusions are drawn from this study.

Students are faced with many obstacles when attempting to complete high school. Although the majority of students overcome

these obstacles, some students are less resilient and cannot overcome these barriers. Participants indicated that relationships with peers who previously dropped out and medical conditions that caused them to fall behind in schoolwork were factors that hindered their ability and desire to earn high school credentials.

Additionally, it was concluded that students indicated that how school personnel treated them was highly influential in their decision not to continue their education. Participants in the study explained their disappointment with the system and described what the researcher labeled a "broken spirit" related to school. The literature notes that students must have a feeling of connectedness with the school environment in order to persist to graduation (Fine, 1991). Participants in this study seemed to lack that connection with their school.

It is the feeling of the researcher that the school personnel in this district could have done a multitude of other things in an attempt to keep students in school. In a state where schools are held accountable for the number of students who drop out of their school, it puzzles me that nothing was done to keep these students in school. Based upon the data, it appears that even those participants in the study who seemed to have cried out for help felt that they had been ignored by the system. While it must be acknowledged that these conclusions are

based on a small sample, the majority of students interviewed voiced their disappointment with school personnel. This leads the researcher to believe that there is truth to the claims that students made towards how they were treated while in school. It may be that some of these students would still be enrolled if they had been treated differently by the school staff.

Finally, the findings of this study led the researcher to conclude that the Louisiana School Accountability Program, specifically, the high-stakes test that it requires, was not influential in the participants' decisions to leave school. This finding was important because it refutes the claims of high-stakes opponents that testing influences students to drop out of school. This finding surprised the researcher who expected to find that students were leaving school because they could not pass the test.

Implications

This study was different from previous research as its main purpose was to determine factors that influenced students to make the decision to drop out of school and to analyze it from the students' perspective. Previous dropout research was mainly quantitative and focused on the characteristics of a school drop out with the purpose of being able to conclude which students were at risk of dropping out. These studies cited many personal issues as well as physical characteristics such as gender, race,

socioeconomic status, and education of parents as indicators that a student is at risk of dropping out, however these issues could not be controlled by the school environment. The findings of the present study sought to look beyond the physical characteristics of the student and listen to their voices to determine what could have made a difference in their decision. The participants of this study expressed their feelings of disappointment that they would not graduate from high school and articulated their feelings of sheer anger with the system that they perceived to have let them down. Nevertheless, many students acknowledged that they would need to change their work habits if given the chance to do it all again.

Additionally, the characteristics of the schools attended by the participants in this study were not addressed by the present research project. However, research has found that school size has a direct correlation to drop out rate. The district that was investigated in this study has very large high schools, which would be expected consequently to have high dropout rates. Alspaugh (1998) found that small schools are preferred and boast the lowest dropout rates especially in rural locations. Only a few schools in the district studied can be considered rural, most of these schools are found in suburban or rural locations.

Implications for Practice

In light of the current study's findings, implications for practice should include the following: (a) implementation of positive behavior support programs, (b) professional development with teachers and staff on how to prevent the alienation or "breaking of the spirit" of disengaged students, and (c) an alternative education program for suspended and expelled students. As mentioned previously, the state of Louisiana enacted a law requiring that every school district provide alternative programs for those students expelled from any of their district's schools (La. R.S. 17:416.2). The district examined in this research project was granted an exemption request due to an economic hardship, therefore, high school students in this district cannot receive any educational services after being expelled from school. The findings of this research study suggest that alternative education programs are desperately needed. Personal experience has allowed the researcher to witness the impact that an alternative school can have on students with behavioral problems. The researcher believes that there exists an extreme need to provide these students with an opportunity to continue their schooling.

Additionally, this study points to the need for students to have a relationship with guidance counselors beyond scheduling classes. Although counselors too often find themselves over-

burdened with paperwork, schools should find a way to utilize them as mental health counselors to help at-risk youth. This would have the potential to have a profound effect on students considering dropping out.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this study suggest that policymakers should listen to the students' voice in order to understand their perceptions of the school system prior to changing policies that directly affect the student's future. A recent movement by Governor Warner of Virginia to have students more involved in the restructuring of the modern high school is garnering much attention by educators and policymakers (Byrnes, 2005). This study's findings suggest that policymakers should hear students' voices when considering changes in the education process. Policymakers could accomplish this by allowing student representation to speak to their committees prior to making changes.

Policy makers should consider the need for a mandatory exit survey designed to help school officials to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence students to leave school. School personnel might find that there are simple solutions to the obstacles that are impeding students' ability to graduate and would be able to implement a plan of action with the intent of helping to keep students in school.

Currently, Louisiana is in the initial stages of considering high school reform. The committee charged with investigating how to reform high schools is lacking in student representation. The committee consists of 39 members of which one is listed as a recent graduate; however, there are no current students. If government officials want to find real solutions to high school reform with the intent to increase student graduation rates, then they should consider the voices of not only current students, but those who have recently dropped out.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should continue to use qualitative methodology to study students' experiences in high school so that the factors that lead students to drop out of school can be assessed. Often research has focused on purely quantitative methods and, as a result, characteristic for at-risk students are well documented in the literature (Bearden, Spencer & Moracco, 1989; Cairns, Cairns & Neckerman, 1989; Dryfoos, 1990; Dupper, 1993; Quinn, 1991; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). However, knowing what a dropout looks like does not fully help practitioners to understand what they can do to prevent students from leaving school. The present study uncovered students' perceptions of how they had been treated in high school. This knowledge is much more powerful than simply knowing

gender and race because the understanding of student's experiences could be a catalyst towards school reform on the part of how teachers relate to students and the effect that this has on dropouts.

Finally, researchers could expand upon the current study state-wide to determine if the findings would be replicated. If the findings of this study were found on a larger scale, then it would be a tremendous boost to the state department of education to know that testing is not increasing the dropout rate. It would also help schools to hear the students' perspective on how they feel the school is failing them thereby creating the opportunity for a discussion on student/teacher relationships and how to improve them for the good of the at-risk child.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Why did you drop out of school?
 - a. What specifically didn't you like about school?
 - b. Was it someone in particular who caused you to dislike school?
 - c. If you could do it all over again explain to me how you would change things?
2. Please explain to me the process that you went through in making your decision to leave school.
 - a. Who did you talk to before making this decision?
 - b. Did anyone try to change your mind?
 - c. Describe to me the last experience that you had in school.
3. *Tell me about your academic performance in school.*
4. Describe your experiences with the LEAP test and the GEE test.
 - a. How did this influence your decision to leave school?

* *Question in italic was added after the pilot interview.*

Appendix B

Survey

August 11, 2004

Dear Former Public School Student,

According to records provided by the school you attended during the 2003-04 school year, you made the decision to drop out of school. We are trying to find out why you made that decision. (If you are not a drop out, please contact us as soon as possible at***.****.)

A research study is being conducted to determine the factors that are causing some of our students to drop out of school. A graduate student at the University of New Orleans will examine your answers along with those of other former students and will make recommendations for possible changes in our schools to keep more students in school.

You are being asked to complete the attached survey (front and back) and return it in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Please be as honest with us as possible so that we can use your answers to make improvements. You do not need to give your name unless you are willing to participate in a phone interview.

Thank you in advance for participating in this important study.

Assistant Superintendent
Research, Accountability, and Assessment

Dear Former Public School Student,

A research study is being conducted by a graduate student at the University of New Orleans to determine the factors that are causing Public School students to drop out of school. The study is being conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation at the University of New Orleans. The student conducting the research is NOT an employee of our District Public Schools.

Your experience is very important to that research. The answers provided by you could help to create recommendations for changes to the system. Please take a moment to fill out a short survey explaining the reasons that lead you to your decision to drop out of school.

Thank you.

1. Please read each of the following reasons students have given for dropping out of school. After reading each statement, put a check mark in the column that indicates your reaction to each statement. If you "strongly disagree" with a statement, place a check mark in that column. If you "strongly agree," put a check mark in that column.

Some reasons students drop out of school	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. I had to get a job				
b. I found a job				
c. I didn't like school				
d. I couldn't get along with teachers				
e. I wanted to have a family				
f. I became the father/mother of a baby				
g. I had to support my family				
h. I was suspended too often				
i. I did not feel safe at school				
j. I wanted to travel				
k. My friends had dropped out of school				
l. I had to care for a member of my family				
m. I was expelled from school				
n. I felt I didn't belong at school				
o. I failed the GEE or LEAP test				
p. I couldn't keep up with my				

schoolwork				
q. I was failing in school				
r. I got married or planned to get married				
s. I changed schools and didn't like my new school				
t. I couldn't work and go to school at the same time				
u. I was moving				
v. I wasn't going to pass the LEAP or GEE test				
w. I felt that getting a GED would be easier				
x. An adult at school told me to drop out				
y. I didn't think what I was learning at school would be useful in real life				
z. I was not interested in anything being taught				

2. When you decided to leave school, were you passing? (CIRCLE ONE) YES NO

3. What are you doing now?

4. What are your plans for the future?

5. Do you plan to continue your education? (CIRCLE ONE) YES NO

If so, how?

6. What is the highest school grade completed by your mother? _____ your father?

Your older sisters or brothers? _____

The UNO graduate student would like to talk to you by phone to ask for additional information about your choices. If you would like to participate in the telephone portion of this survey, please complete the information below. If you do NOT want to be called, do not complete the information below.

CONSENT TO BE CONTACTED BY PHONE

I am interested in participating in a follow-up phone survey and I have given my permission to participate in this study.

Age _____
Signature of Participant Name of Participant (print) Date

If you are under 18, please have a parent or guardian sign below.

Signature of Parent or Guardian Name of Parent or Guardian (print) Date

Please let me know how I can contact you for a follow-up phone survey. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

What is the best time for me to call you? _____ (a.m. or p.m.)

What is the telephone number(s) where I may call you?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix C

Category Matrix: Why Students Reported Dropping Out

Themes	Category	Part	Comment	Part	Comment
Obstacles	Be Own My Own	1	I just had moved in to my first place-19	6	To start the work force. 3
		7	I got with my ex-boyfriend and I moved in with him when I was a junior in high school		
	Medical	10	I dropped out of school because I had surgery in my right eye in 2000 ...so I was forced to leave school because I couldn't see the board. 3-6	11	I wound up in River Oaks . I O.D.ed on vicodins about 50 of them.
	Couldn't keep up	1	It just became really hard to balance a household and go to school at the same time 23-24	8	Because I had a problem reading and I would always be scared to read in front of everybody. 3-4
		10	It was because I couldn't keep up with my work.	6	Because I couldn't read and I wanted to do other stuff 23
	Peer Pressure	4	Because at the time I was just crazy doing what everybody else was doing. 3 Following my friends. 7	7	I got with my ex-boyfriend ...and he started getting violent with me, and I didn't want to go to school with bruises all over my face and stuff like that. He would turn the alarm clock off on me in the morning so I wouldn't go to school. 3-6

	Problems with peers	4	The teachers and the students. 29 Probably you could say the school because I never really got along with the students. They always thought I was a goody two shoes or whatever.110-111		
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Appendix C continues

Apathy	Bureaucratic Error	2	Well, in the eighth grade I was promised to be put in a GED option three program when I went to Purple High. And so I went to register and they said Beige Middle never sent my files and stuff and I did pass my LEAP test. 7-9		
	No Help from school	11	I went to my counselor and told her I was depressed. She basically told me "What High School student isn't" If they were there to help me I wonder if this is where I would be now.	9	...they were suppose to do an IEP and fix it so I could get work while I was in the hospital, but they never did that. 13-15
	No purpose	1	It just really seemed there is no purpose. 44-45		
	Mean Teachers	3	The teachers at my school was just mean. I mean they kept yelling at you for any stupid little thing. They was basically A-holes. 7-8 They had one teacher that me and him just did not get along. 23-25	5	Man, those teachers were aggravating. There was this one white man, he was aggravating. 51-52

		4	<p>The teacher bothered me -- I forgot -- Ms. Zebra. We all didn't liked her. 46</p> <p>I mean she always used to tell me to do something I would do it. She would tell me like, I'm going to help you do this and help you do that and she gone, she used to be working with the other schools.54-56</p>		
	Didn't like school	3	I just didn't like school. It was just I don't know I felt that it was not for me.3		

Apathy	No one Cared	11	I felt no one cared so I quit.	1	<p>It means that they really don't seem like they care if you come out with the skills you need to function in the world. 31-32</p> <p>You are still a student but, you know, they don't care 149</p>
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Lack of Alternatives	Missed to many days	2	So about two weeks later I mean you know you can only miss so many days out the year and they had me out of school for like two weeks and I was like, All right, by the time I went it would be a little late to catch up, you know. 14-19 And by the time I would have gotten in school I would have been too far behind to catch up.20-21		
	No options for older students	6	Well, I seen that they wanted me to stay in school until I was 22. And they wouldn't give me a GED or nothing. They just a certificate saying I completed 13 years of schooling. So I decided to start working before.		
	Suspended too many times	5	I kept getting suspended so they x-ed me out. 3	8	I got suspended and um they say I was suspended for the rest of the year..85-86 I was suspended too many times. I was suspended 3 times. 95

Appendix C continues

School Rules	Rules	3	Basically, they would shut off the bathrooms. You would only have like a certain amount of time to use the bathroom. If the bathrooms was locked the teachers would not call nobody to unlock the bathrooms for you. 13-15	5	He wouldn't let you out of class. He always made you stay in class even if you had to go to the bathroom. One time I had to go, so I just left. 56-57
	Forced into elective	3	Well, they was trying to put me in ROTC again. I didn't like ROTC. I had told them it wasn't for me. I'd rather take gym class but they wanted to put me back in there for some reason. I don't know why. And they just -- my counselor she just kept telling me no, no, no -- her name was Ms. Jones -- she just kept telling me, no, you have to go to ROTC and. I just was like, Man, screw this. I can't take this anymore.		
	Forced to conform	1	But it really seems like they are more focused on the uniforms that I wore and the image the school presented instead of the quality of the students. 38-40		

Appendix D

Letter to Participants



UNIVERSITY of
NEW ORLEANS

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP,
COUNSELING AND FOUNDATIONS

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Your experiences are very important to my research. As per our phone conversation I will contact you on **Date, 2005 at time. . . .** Please set aside approximately **20 minutes** for our interview. Due to your age I am required to talk to a parent/guardian so that I may get consent from them to speak with you. **Please make sure your parent/guardian is close by so that I may talk to them.** Enclosed please find a consent form and a resource list. You do not have to return the consent form to me, but instead I will ask for your consent at the time of the interview. If you have any questions or need to reschedule, please feel free to call me at 985-898-4890.

Thank you,

Shannon d'Hemecourt

Appendix E
Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

1. Title of the Research Study:

Jefferson Parish Public School Dropouts and the Louisiana School Accountability Program

2. Project Director:

Shannon M. d'Hemecourt, doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans under the direction of Dr. Juanita Haydel and Dr. Brian Riedlinger; (504) 280-6661.

3. Purpose of This Research Study:

The purpose of this study is to understand the factors that lead to students' decisions to resign from secondary school, and to explore the impact, if any, of the Louisiana School Accountability Program on this decision.

4. Procedures for This Research Study:

Participants are asked to participate in one individual telephone interview. The interview will be approximately 15-20 minutes in length. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed.

5. Potential Risks or Discomforts:

Due to the topic being studied participants may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences and these feelings pose a potential risk to the person being interviewed. Additionally, the interview may continue for a longer time than expected and cause the participant to become tired or fatigued. Participation in this interview may be terminated at any time for any reason. A list of contacts has been provided with this letter to assist any participant who has feelings of discomfort as a result of their participation in this study. A participant's identity will not be revealed in the contents of the researcher paper or to anyone affiliated with the Jefferson Parish Public School System. If you wish to discuss these or any other discomforts



you may experience, you may call the Project Director listed in #2 of this form.

6. Potential Benefits:

Participants may benefit from self-awareness if a new perspective on the current situation is achieved as a result of the interview process. Additionally, the results of the study may contribute to the field of knowledge on school dropouts and the school accountability movement.

7. Alternative Procedures:

There are no alternative procedures. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw consent and terminate participation at any time without consequence.

8. Protection of Confidentiality:

The identity of all participants will be kept confidential. The project director and a professional typist hired to transcribe the tapes will be the sole reviewers of the audiotapes. All tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed. The project director will assign pseudonyms to the participants so that their identity is not revealed in the written materials. This signed consent form; audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other material pertaining to this study will be maintained in a secure and confidential manner in a locked file. To further ensure confidentiality all consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet and in a location that is separate from the data. Finally, the data will contain no names.

9. Signatures and Consent to Participate:

I have been fully informed of the above-described procedure with its possible benefits and risks, and I have given my permission to participate in this study. Parental consent is required if you are under the age of 18.

Signature of Participant

Name of Participant (Print)

Date

Signature of Guardian

Name of Guardian (Print)

Date

Appendix F

Resource List of Contacts



Resource List of Contacts

Mental Health Services

Pat Lanning
Jefferson Parish Public School System
Coordinator of Social Workers and Mental Health Services
504-349-7935

General G.E.D. Information

<http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/uploads/5209.pdf>

G.E.D. Contact Information

Jefferson Testing Site
815 Huey P. Long Ave.
Gretna, LA 70053
504-362-4729
Scheduling Contact: Ms. Leona Kaes
Testing Agent: Ms. Odelia Allen

Adult Education Information

Henry V. Viering Sr.
Adult Education Center
504-362-4729

Appendix G

Human Subjects Approval

**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research**

University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Shannon d'Hemecourt
Drs. Haydel & Riedlinger
ED 348-0

RE: School dropouts and the Louisiana school accountability
program

IRB #: 02oct04

The IRB has deemed that the proposed research project is now in compliance with current University of New Orleans and Federal regulations. . . .

Be advised that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB# listed on the first page of this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!
Sincerely,

Laura Scaramella, Ph.D.
Chair, University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects
in Research

*University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans*

Form Number: 02OCT04

(please refer to this number in all future correspondence concerning this protocol)

Principal Investigator Shannon d'Hemecourt Title: Doctoral Student

Faculty Supervisor: J. Haydel and B. Riedlinger *(if PI is a student)*

Department: Ed. Leadership, Counseling College: Education

Project Title: [REDACTED] School Dropouts and the Louisiana School Acco

Date Reviewed:

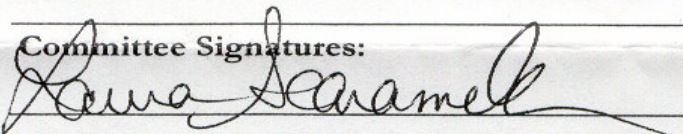
Dates of Proposed Project Period From 10/06/2004 to 12/05/2004

**approval is for one year from approval date only and may be renewed yearly.*

Note: Consent forms and related materials are to be kept by the PI for a period of three years following the completion of the study.


- | Approval Status | Date |
|---|----------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full Committee Approval | 10-27-04 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expedited Approval | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Continuation | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rejected | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The protocol will be approved following receipt of satisfactory response(s) to the following question(s) within 15 days: | |

Committee Signatures:



Laura Scaramiella, Ph.D. (Chair)

Pamela Jenkins, Ph.D.



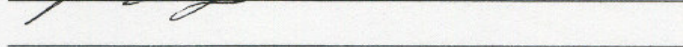
Anthony Kontos, Ph.D.



~~Betty Lo, M.D.~~ Kari Walsh



Richard B. Speaker, Ph.D.



Gary Talarchek, Ph.D.



L. Allen Witt, Ph.D.



Vita

Shannon Mulkey d'Hemecourt was born in Metairie, Louisiana. She received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1995 from the University of New Orleans and a Masters of Education degree from Southeastern Louisiana University in 2000. Ms. d'Hemecourt has worked as an educator for the St. Tammany Parish School District for the past nine years. Currently, Shannon is an assistant principal for a junior high school in Mandeville, Louisiana.