NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

**Dropout Prevention: An Exploration and Creation of
At-Risk Students in a Rural Oregon School District**
Rural High School, Oregon

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<h1 style="text-align:center">Dropout Prevention: An exploration and Creation of
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Funding Sources
    University funded.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative
    Stipend for each participant who participates in the one-on-one interview is $75.00. Twelve participants were found, bringing the total to $900. George Fox University College of Education covered the budget identified.

Scope and Setting
    The project focused on the educational experiences of students enrolled in credit recovery at the traditional high school and the alternative education high school in the school district. Specifically, this was a mixed methods study that explored the experiences of students who encountered barriers to academic achievement as they pursued their high school diploma. The barriers they encountered throughout their P-12 education, both in school and out of school, resulted in enrollment in an alternative education setting, and credit recovery courses. The goal of this project was to explore the following questions: What led to their enrollment in credit recovery classes? What led to their enrollment in an alternative-educational setting? What systemic challenges exist, creating barriers to your academic achievement? What supports are in place? The second goal was to share the findings and recommendations with the Superintendent.
    This rural school district was specifically chosen due to the rural status and poor graduation rates specifically from the alternative-education program. The Superintendent was concerned about these statistics and interested to learn more about the students enrolled.

<u>Procedures</u>
    I met with the Superintendent to talk about the project. Together, we discussed what we hoped would come out of the study and how that information could support the district. After our meeting, I sent a project proposal with timelines, survey, and interview questions attached for approval. Once this was approved, I applied and received Institutional Review Board approval.

<u>Methods</u>
    With all permissions in place, I went to the schools and met with the teachers of the credit recovery classes at the traditional high school and at the alternative school to provide permission slips and a handout on the study for the students. Each student in the credit recovery classes and enrolled in the alternative school was solicited to participate in the study. They were asked to participate in a one-on-one interview utilizing phenomenological methodology, with both open-ended question and demographic questions. I set a date to return to the school to conduct the interview and survey.
    I gained parental permission for each student under the age of 18 prior to beginning the interviews. Interview appointments were set and held in the library throughout the school day, depending on their academic schedule. The interview focused on their experiences both positive and negative that contributed to their academic success or challenges. In addition, each participant completed two surveys. Each interview was transcribed and surveys were collated. Utilizing the demographic information from the interviews and adding the quantitative information from school records, a profile was created.

<ins>Analysis</ins>

Qualitative data was analyzed utilizing Creswell, with themes identified, and textural and structural descriptions created. Then, the quantitative data is added to complete profile of each participant.

Staffing Pattern

The project was created in collaboration with the district Superintendent, high school principal, and district Instructional Coach. No additional district staff were needed to complete the project, nor were faculty or staff asked to deviate from their contracted assignments.

Population Served

<ins>Number of students, subjects, or participants</ins>

The project was conducted in a rural school district in Oregon. The district is located approximately one hour from downtown Portland, Oregon and one hour from the coast. The district includes one K-8 school, a traditional high school, an alternative high school, a language specific focused charter school, and an online school. The most recent state report card showed 1,054 students enrolled in the district. The data show 75% of freshmen students on track to graduate four years, but the actual graduation rate for students earning a standard diploma within four years for 2014-2015 was only 47. 2%. In addition, the district reported a 10.4% dropout rate. Finally, the K-8 school was designed as a "focus school." This is defined as "a high poverty school that is ranked in the bottom 5% - 15% of Title I-A schools in the state with a significant achievement gap based on Oregon's rating formula. These schools need additional support in closing the achievement gap among historically underserved student populations." The economically disadvantaged percentages range from a high of 72% in grades K-3 to 46% in grades 9-12. Nevertheless, the district provides both free breakfast and lunch to all students in the district.

Twelve participants were selected for this project. They were all enrolled in alternative educational programming within the district.

<ins>Description of project participants (ages, grades, demographics, etc.)</ins>

The project focused on students in the alternative education programs in the district. There are three alternative pathways for students to complete their high school diploma. The first is the alternative education high school setting with approximately 10-14 enrolled in this program. The second alternative educational setting is for female teens who are pregnant or recently delivered a child. Students in this school are working to complete their high school diploma or choose to work toward their General Education Diploma (GED). The third pathway is an online program, where students from the two alternative schools can choose to complete their education online. Finally, students at the traditional high school who were identified as "at risk" to either dropout or needing to enroll in the online school were also included in the study. Participant demographic information follows.

Participant Demographics

Student	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Grade	Suspended (S) or Expelled (E) * self-reported	Credit Recovery Class(s)	Adverse Childhood Survey Score (ACEs)
Student 1	18	Male	White	Senior	S – once in 10th grade	Math Social Studies	1
Student 2	18	Male	White	Senior	S – 3 times in middle school, 2 times in high school	English	3
Student 3	15	Female	White	Sophomore	S – 2 times in middle school	English	3
Student 4	16	Female	Hispanic	Sophomore	S – 10th grade	English Geography	0
Student 5	17	Male	White	Junior	S – 11th grade	Math	1
Student 6	15	Female	Hispanic	Sophomore	No	English Math	2
Student 7	18	Female	White	Senior	S – middle school	Social Studies Health Math	6
Student 8	17	Female	White	Senior	S – multiple times in middle school, 2 times in high school	Social Studies Math: Algebra Geometry	5
Student 9	17	Male	White	Junior	S – 3 times in middle school, 1 time in 9th grade	English Math: Algebra & Geometry	1
Student 10	19	Female	Hispanic	Senior	No	Has one year of courses to complete	7
Student 11	19	Female	White	Senior	No	Has one year of courses to complete	1
Student 12	18	Female	White	Senior	S & E – in middle school that turned into an Expulsion	Has one year of courses to complete	9

<u>Participant selection criteria</u>
Participants were chosen through a convenience sample method. I attended two credit recovery classes, presented this project, and asked for participants. For the online course, I wrote to the principal who forwarded information about the project on to enrolled students. Last, I attended a class in the alternative education school and presented the project and asked for participants.

Project Origination
In the spring, I read a dissertation on rural schools and graduation rates. The study was compelling and unique in that it focused specifically on rural schools. This study became the inspiration for this project. Using the study as a model, I created this project and then presented it for feedback to the Superintendent of the school district. Members of the administrative team provided edits and I revised the project accordingly.

Issues Addressed
The alternative education programs in the school district had been unsuccessful. They posted a high dropout rate from the alternative education programs. There was growing discussion of cutting the programs due to budget cuts and moving the students back into the traditional high school setting, even though they had previously been unsuccessful. There was no voice for this group of students, nor did the administration know why their alternative education programs had been unsuccessful. Therefore, this project provided much needed voice on the experiences, perceptions, and needs of students who faced the need for credit recovery through alternative education programs by gathering data to share these experiences.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives
The primary outcome of this project was to gain understanding of the challenges/barriers to academic achievement students encountered as they moved through their high school years. The second outcome was for the voice of the students enrolled in alternative educational programs to be heard, thereby developing recommendations for change. The third outcome was to disseminate the findings to the teachers and community members to gain support for needed changes.

<u>Students</u>
By conducting this study/project, the students will become "known" in ways perhaps that were previously unknown. They will be better served by teachers with a deeper understanding of the barriers they are facing, and with a renewed commitment to compassion and best practices.

<u>Teachers</u>
Through dissemination of the study/project, the needs of students will be made known. It might be interesting to do some sort of survey/questionnaire where questions are asked of teachers and then results of the study revealed. Do they know their students? What skills are needed by the teachers to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms? What barriers to be changed can be identified? What leaders will emerge? Who is passionate about creating change? Will the district provide training and other resources.

<u>Community</u>
The community will see how committed the district is to the successful graduation of every student. In order for this to happen, the community is needed as a partner. What do local employers say about the students they hire? Do they have the skills employers need? Where are the holes? How can employers and the district work together? Perhaps holding a district/business community forum for sharing of information would be a good first step?

Strategies and/or Interventions
  Those previously identified.

Project Timeline
- Project developed in February
- Participants identified in February and March
- Surveys and interviews conducted in March and April
- Data analyzed in April through June
- Findings organized and shared in September

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project
  This project required knowledge of mixed methods methodology. Support was also needed by the Superintendent, Principal, and district Instructional Coach. Parents were needed to support the project for their student(s) who were under the age of 18. Knowledge of how to interview reluctant students was also key.

Outcomes and Achievements
  Students enrolled in alternative educational programs were given voice. Their experiences were shared for the first time. No one has asked what they needed to remain in school, or asked why they may drop out of school.

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates
  Before dropout prevention strategies could be recommended, it was important to learn what barriers currently existed. By naming these and providing clear data to back these up, it became easier to hone in on specifics that the district could do/implement/develop that would support academically fragile students.

Current Status of Project
  The initial project has been completed. However, the findings are now informing recommendations for changes. So, while the initial project has ended, I anticipate additional conversations and opportunities for a follow-up project to support at-risk students in the district.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant
  I approached the Superintendent with the idea for this project. During our meeting, I learned about his concern with the alternative education program. I drafted a project to help fill in the gaps that he needed in order to make informed decisions. The project was then edited and revised with the help of the Superintendent, high school principal, and district instructional coach. I was therefore, the principal investigator and project manager. I conducted all interviews and surveys with the participants. I also was the sole individual conducting data analysis.

Lessons Learned
  First, and most importantly, I learned that students are rarely asked about their educational experiences. Therefore, their critical voice is missing when considering programmatic or systemic changes. Without their voice, we often make the wrong changes.

  The following themes were identified from the mixed methods approach:

Theme 1 – Class to Career training   Theme 4 – Disciplinary Challenges
Theme 2 – Teacher Dispositions   Theme 5 – Friendships
Theme 3 – Classroom Climate   Theme 6 – Adverse Childhood Experiences

Theme 1: Class to Career training Interview	Theme 1: Class to Career training Survey	Theme 2: Teacher Dispositions Interview	Theme 2: Teacher Dispositions Survey	Theme 3: Classroom/ School Climate Interview	Theme 3: Classroom/ School Climate Survey	Theme 4: Disciplinary Challenges Interview	Theme 5: Friendships & Family Survey	Theme 6: Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey
"I've been accepted to Klamath Falls Community College to their welding program. I will get a certificate in Engineering and Structural Welding." Student 1	Classes offered are important to my future schooling or career 2.77/4	I wish my teachers had more knowledge about teaching to different learning styles. Student 3	Small class size allows teachers to give me individual attention 2.38/4	Trying to get help from a teacher, no IEP support here like I had at my last school. Student 1	My teachers expect me to do well in their classes 3.15/4	S – once in 10th grade	I have friends who attend my high school 3.15/4	6 of the 12 participants reported a 3 or higher ACE score
"Be a military Drone Pilot, and if that doesn't work out, I'll work for my dad's roofing company." Student 2	Classes offered are interesting to me 2.23/4	Teachers don't put time and effort into students' understanding of content. Student 6		Math because of teacher frustration. I need more one on one and note taking help. Student 9	My principal expects me to do well in my classes 3.31/4	S – 3 times in middle school, 2 times in high school	Friends care about graduating 3.23/4	11 of the 12 participants reported an ACE score of 1 or more
Ultrasound Tech or be a Paramedic. Student 3		Teachers saying consistently that without a diploma you will not get anywhere. Student 2		The math teacher and I butted heads so I held back, didn't do the work Student 10	My teachers care about my success 3.00/4	S – 2 times in middle school	Friends who have discipline problems at school 2.46/4	
"Get a job." Student 4		I will work harder for teachers who I feel care about me. Student 8		Its small, and I know all my teachers and they know me. Student 3	There is an adult I can trust at my high school 2.54/4	S – 10th grade	Friends will all graduate high school in four years 2.54/4	

Dropout Prevention: An Exploration and Profile Creation of At-Risk Students in a Rural Oregon School District
NDPS Certification Field Project Report

6

Theme 1: Class to Career training Interview	Theme 1: Class to Career training Survey	Theme 2: Teacher Dispositions Interview	Theme 2: Teacher Dispositions Survey	Theme 3: Classroom/ School Climate Interview	Theme 3: Classroom/ School Climate Survey	Theme 4: Disciplinary Challenges Interview	Theme 5: Friendships & Family Survey	Theme 6: Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey
"Join the Marines and do mechanics" Student 6 & 7				I like that its small, and I know all the students. Student 8	Teachers talk about how to improve my schoolwork 2.69/4	S – 11th grade	What keeps you in school? "I want to make my family proud." Student 7	
"Welding" Student 8					Teachers design lessons that keep me involved during class 2.15/4	S & E – in middle school that turned into an Expulsion	What keeps you in school? "Parents" Student 8 Student 8	
"I've already applied for a scholarship to a trade school where I want to learn how to be a welder. I would also like to go into the Army or Navy to learn auto mechanics." Student 12					Teachers treat me with dignity and respect 2.77/4	S – middle school	Teachers saying consistently that without a diploma you will not get anywhere. Student 2	
8/12 students identified vocational/technical job aspirations						S – multiple times in middle school, 2 times in high school		
4/12 were unsure						S – 3 times in middle school, 1 time in 9th		

Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4

Students had opinions on why they had academic challenges, what they perceived as barriers to graduation, and what they wanted from their education. The majority of students voiced the desire to leave their high school educational experience with job ready skills. These included welding, shop, and automotive classes that would provide them with certifications so that they can be employable in those fields upon graduation. Second, they talked about their teachers. While several talked favorably about one or two teachers, the majority talked about teachers of core content with inflexible teaching practices which led to disconnects, confusion, frustration, and failure. Next, they discussed the classroom climate. Each was able to describe their favorite class and teacher over their kindergarten through high school education. They described why that teacher and class was their favorite and why they believed they were academically successful. Then they contrasted that experience to a classroom that led to a failed course. They mentioned the lack of hands on learning experiences, activities with groups, dry content, and teacher(s) without "joy". They described teachers who they believed did not care about them or their success in that class. They then shared openly about their behavioral challenges. Many described making poor choices that ended up with suspensions and/or expulsions. They also identified friends in the school as one of the reasons they enjoyed coming to school every day. Finally, half of the participants reported an Adverse Childhood Experience score of 3 or more. While it is important to note that your ACE score does not define you, it informs the potential rates for less than desired life outcomes. For example, as your ACE score increases, so does the risk of disease and social and emotional problems. With an ACE score of 4 or more, your chance of contracting chronic pulmonary lung disease increases 390 percent; hepatitis, 240 percent; depression, 460 percent; suicide 1220 percent. Higher ACEs have been attributed to risky behaviors, including smoking, drug use, and sexual activity.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

I was surprised to find few research studies where the researcher asked the students at-risk for dropping out or those who had dropped out, what challenges led to difficulty in achieving academic success. Therefore, I would encourage others to meet with students, learn their story, recognize the challenges they encountered, before making any changes or additions meant to support this same group.

ACEs Survey Results

Participants	Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often… swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?	Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often… Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? Or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?	Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever… touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? Or attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?	Did you often or very often feel that…No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?	Do you often or very often feel that …You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? Or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?	Were your parents ever separated or divorced?	Was your mother or stepmother; often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? Or sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Or ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?	Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?	Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?	Did a household member go to prison?	Total of "Yes" Responses
Student 1	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Student 2	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	2
Student 3	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	3
Student 4	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
Student 5	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	1
Student 6	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	3
Student 7	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
Student 8	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	5
Student 9	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	1
Student 10	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
Student 11	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	2
Student 12	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9

Dropout Prevention: An Exploration and Profile Creation of At-Risk Students in a Rural Oregon School District
NDPS Certification Field Project Report

9