

11-2011

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Marchand, G. C. (2011). Understanding Student Disaffection through the Lens of Alternative Education. 1-28.

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# Understanding Student Disaffection through the Lens of Alternative Education

Final Report - 2011 Lincy Institute Fellowship Research Award

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# Understanding Student Disaffection through the Lens of Alternative Education

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lincy Fellowship Award for the *Student Disaffection through the Lens of Alternative Education* project has neared its first year of completion. The focus of this project was to better understand special education student experiences leading up to placement in alternative education settings and during transitions between alternative and comprehensive school sites. The project emerged from a partnership between Student Support Services Division (SSSD) staff in Clark County School District (CCSD) and the UNLV Lincy Fellow designed to help better target intervention services and gain a more complete understanding of the population being served by alternative schools. To achieve this effort, a mixed-methods design was used employing both secondary source quantitative data to illustrate patterns of enrollment, academic achievement, attendance, and behavior for students who attended alternative schools and those who did not; and qualitative interviews to capture student experiences with school over the course of their personal history and during recent events.

This report provides some initial findings based on preliminary analysis of data, as data collection is ongoing through awaiting secondary source data from the Clark County School District and interviews with participants continue. Generally, descriptive use of the available quantitative data would suggest that students who eventually are placed in alternative schools exhibit maladaptive patterns of attendance, behavior, and achievement at a higher rate than their peers. These students are also subject to more within-year transitions during elementary schools than students who have not experienced placement in alternative settings. Further, interviews with students who have had multiple experiences with alternative schools imply that students face a variety of personal and systemic challenges that may inhibit their academic adjustment. Students may have lower expectations for themselves and their behavior, as well as school services, related to frequent school changes and problems participating in class. Students tend to perceive classroom supports as lacking, but may have more positive experiences with school staff in other roles, such as counselors or coaches. Taken together, the initial findings may suggest that students who end up in alternative schools may be identified by a typology of behaviors prior to alternative school entry and that students may need help identifying and using positive problem solving strategies in school but that they may also benefit from increased or targeted efforts of classroom support. Finally, student interviews suggest that as students progress through school, they gain an increased understanding of the importance of school and demonstrate motivation for wanting to do well, but may not have a clear map as to how to get to a positive end point. The preliminary findings indicate areas for additional analyses as data collection nears completion. This project represented a successful partnership between CCSD and UNLV and as such, was in the spirit of the mission of the Lincy Institute to enhance ties between the University and Community to better the lives of students and their families.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

### PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The loss of student engagement in academic tasks and the corresponding increase in students whom are disaffected or disenfranchised from learning is difficult to quantify. It is even more challenging to reliably estimate the cost of student disaffection to learning quality and student retention. One extreme metric of student disaffection from education is the high school drop-out rate, which nationally sits at approximately 8.7% based on the most recent statistics available (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). Drop-out statistics usually reflect students who have withdrawn entirely from the educational system and are typically beyond the reach of interventions from educators or research into the cause and consequences of school-withdrawal. Students at risk for leaving school early may, however, spend time in alternative schools. For the purpose of this project, alternative schools are characterized as short-term placement for students demonstrating behavioral problems resulting in suspension or expulsion from comprehensive education settings. By focusing research efforts on students who have clearly evidenced disaffection, such as students in alternative education programs, it may be possible to better describe patterns of disaffection over time and to identify risk and protective factors related to student disaffection.

This project is the first step toward a larger program of research that focuses on the personal and contextual factors that contribute to or protect students from academic disaffection. The first goal of this first phase is to utilize retrospective data from secondary students placed in alternative education settings for behavioral problems to describe patterns of disaffection and to identify factors that could indicate varying levels of risk. The second goal of this phase is to collect qualitative data from students who have repeatedly attended alternative schools, as well as use archival data, to better understand salient personal motivational characteristics, emotional regulation strategies, and contextual factors that contribute to disaffection. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data will be used to narrow and refine the variables under study during the second phase of the project.

### THEORETICAL FRAME AND BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The overall project draws on a variety of theoretical work and takes a systems perspective to understanding the multiple processes that can result in extreme student disaffection from school. Due to the use of existing secondary data sources for the quantitative portion of this phase of the study, I will be unable to address the motivational and emotional aspects of disaffection in quantitative analyses. However, these are vital components for the qualitative portion and future phases of this project.

Research on student disaffection is closely tied to the construct of student engagement, a variable that has received considerable research attention in recent years (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). When students display passivity in the classroom, a lack of interest, or apathy, they exhibit disengagement (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008), which is considered the absence of engagement (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). Disaffection, in contrast to disengagement, is a qualitatively distinct construct from engagement, characterized by active withdrawal from classroom activities, reflecting maladaptive motivational states (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Passively disengaged students may suffer learning deficits, but their risk for removal from the classroom and eventual premature school leaving

may be less so than students with more active patterns of disaffection. Students who are placed in alternative education programs for behavior problems likely exhibit more active and externalizing patterns of disaffection.

The principal of equifinality, or the idea that different initial states or routes can lead to similar end results, suggest that there may be multiple pathways that lead to eventual disaffection and withdrawal from school. The mechanisms of interest for this overall project that create these routes are person-environment transactions. When students enter the educational system, they learn how to appropriately manage and express their emotions and behaviors in the classroom through interactions with social partners (Schutz, Hong, Cross, Osbon, 2006). Similarly, students develop perceptions of themselves as competent, autonomous, and related with respect to academic tasks through their interactions with their context (Connell, 1990). Over time, through a history of maladaptive interactions, students may develop inappropriate emotional regulation strategies or negative motivational self-perceptions that lead to enduring patterns of disaffection. These maladaptive interactions may be more likely to occur if students also have a learning disability or other need, which could create greater challenges for teachers and other social partners in education.

The limited research available on alternative education settings suggests that alternative education is often viewed within a deficit-thinking paradigm by the larger educational system. This type of paradigm tends to attribute educational failure of students to individual factors such as family characteristics, minority status, or lack of effort. Systemic factors related to educational failure, such as teacher quality, provision of special education services, curriculum continuity, and so on, are often minimized when considering factors that lead to student participation in an alternative program (Valencia, 1997 in Kim & Taylor, 2008). The recidivism rate of students to alternative programs is fairly high (over 30% in the past year in CCSD), leading to questions about student social and academic adjustment during transitions between educational settings. One study suggests that alternative settings may provide a caring environment for students, but may not offer a meaningful or equitable academic setting that would benefit students (Kim & Taylor, 2008). This may limit chances for student success upon return to a comprehensive setting, further deepening student disaffection from school. To the best of my knowledge, there is little to no research related to the transition between alternative and comprehensive settings. Research investigating the relative contribution of both individual and systemic factors is needed to understand how to better educate students before they get to the point of alternative education participation as well as to help them break maladaptive patterns once students have embarked on that path.

#### PROJECT CONTEXT

Alternative schools in the Clark County School District (CCSD), commonly referred to as “consequence” schools, exist to fulfill education service requirements when students have been removed from comprehensive schools due to suspension or expulsion. Secondary students are placed in one of two alternative education programs following behavioral infractions: (1) behavior school that lasts up to nine weeks and (2) continuation school that lasts up to 18 weeks. During the 2009-10 academic year 5,690 students were referred one or more times to a consequence school, representing nearly 7,000 referrals. Of these, approximately 30% received multiple referrals and 18% had an individualized education plan (IEP)

and thus were eligible for special education services. Students are primarily male and approximately 75% are African American. These students are more likely than their peers to have been out of school for suspensions or truancy so tend to be academically disadvantaged. Students may be referred to consequence schools for a wide variety of behavioral infractions that range from relatively minor to severe.

The process of educating students referred to an alternative school is complex and may result in significant gaps in exposure to curriculum. The basic process tends to unfold in the following manner. A student commits some kind of behavioral infraction that results in a recommendation for suspension or expulsion from the comprehensive campus. The student is typically out of school for 3 to 4 weeks while the referral is processed and the transition to the alternative school takes place. During this gap, the student receives the option of 1 hour of instruction per day. For lesser infractions, the student may then have approximately 4-5 weeks remaining during which he/she (the male “he” is used for the remaining description because the majority of students are male) spends time on an alternative campus, for more severe infractions, the student may have 14-15 weeks remaining. It should be noted that students with lesser infractions may be referred to the longer continuation program if he commits an infraction during the behavior school period. Once the 9 or 18 week program is completed, students transition back to their prior campus or a new comprehensive campus; a process that tends to take 1-2 weeks.

When students withdraw from their comprehensive campus and move to a consequence school, there is no guarantee that the consequence school will have the same course offerings as the comprehensive school. Therefore, students may receive instruction that is substantially different than the courses the student had been enrolled in at their comprehensive school. The transition process and change in curriculum can lead to deficiencies in student learning and academic competence during this process. Further, when students transition back to a comprehensive school, they likely enter back into courses mid-semester and may struggle to catch up with their peers in the course. Taken together, although students technically remain in school, their ability to earn credits may be severely eroded. If a student is also suffering from a learning disability, it may be all the more difficult for them to recover from the lack of educational continuity.

The Student Support Services Division (SSSD) of CCSD provides a range of different supports for special education teachers at the consequence school campuses and for students eligible for special education services. The recent reorganization of the school district resulted in an increase in the level of central office support for these teachers and students. One new aspect is the dedication of two facilitators who meet with students at the consequence schools, assess student level of need, and attempt to provide targeted interventions for the students to help them address issues that inhibited success in the comprehensive education setting. The facilitators may contact parents or teachers to help address student needs and may try to meet with students once they have transitioned back to a comprehensive setting. Due to time and caseload constraints, facilitators may only be able to meet with students one or two times while students are at the consequence schools.

Facilitators must play triage for a host of student issues, ranging from severe behavioral problems to difficulties at home. They are faced with the daunting task of assessing student needs and delivering effective services within a limited time frame. If facilitators had more information about their student population or a more efficient system for assessing student needs, more time might be freed to work with students on issues affecting their adjustment in comprehensive school environments. Facilitators have expressed a desire to know more about the factors that contribute to student removal from comprehensive settings and how to identify students for early intervention to prevent initial enrollment and recidivism in alternative education settings.

#### DATA COLLECTION CONTEXT

Planning for this project began with the notification of receipt of the Fellowship in December of 2010. I had been working with Joanne Vattiato, a director in the Student Support Services Division at CCSD, and her team on an informal basis during 2010 to develop ideas for a partnership to better serve students transitioning between alternative and general education settings. Joanne's supervisor, Beth Howe, was also involved and the three of us met in December to finalize the research and practice plans related to this project. Beth Howe was interested in potentially expanding the qualitative scope of the project to include partnerships with other CCSD units, such as school psychology and counseling, so I was asked to refrain from submitting the IRB until those units could be contacted. Beth would be the sponsor for the project through the CCSD Research Review process. Unfortunately, less than 3 weeks later Beth had passed away due to a medical emergency. Her passing was a great loss for CCSD and the greater Las Vegas community. We continue to mourn her and this project will be in part dedicated to her.

Due to these unforeseen circumstances, the project was delayed until early February as the SSSD absorbed Beth's loss and worked to re-assign her responsibilities. It was then determined that Joanne Vattiato would be the primary contact and sponsor for the project and we were ready to continue with the work. I decided to submit the IRB in two separate phases, first the quantitative phase and then the qualitative phase. The quantitative request fit the requirements for exempt research and was submitted in early February. I was notified of approval in early March and then granted approval from CCSD later that month. I submitted a formal data request to CCSD in early April and data began to arrive in September of 2011. Working with Joanne, we were able to find four school partners, two behavioral schools and two continuation schools, for the qualitative phase of the study. The qualitative phase of the project was submitted to the IRB at UNLV in early March and approval was granted on May 9. Interviews began during July of 2011, but still continue to date.

I have assembled an interdisciplinary research team consisting of a master's student in Educational Psychology, a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction, and a master's student in Public Health. Our research team worked closely with our CCSD partners to prepare for data collection. Due to the addition of other funding sources (see below for more information), data collection will continue through the Spring 2012. Beginning a project that involves students, and thus the IRB and permissions associated with vulnerable populations, during the middle of the CCSD school year has been difficult. However, the data beginning to emerge from this project, due to the support of the Lincy Foundation, has been invaluable and offers promising avenues for the completion of the project.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### DESIGN

This study utilized a mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The quantitative portion of the study represented the primary phase of data gathering, while the qualitative data was subsequently collected to help elucidate the quantitative findings. The quantitative portion of the study is correlational in nature and uses a cohort sequential longitudinal design to describe student patterns of disaffection and identify predictors of risk for earlier or more frequent enrollment in alternative programs. In this type of design, secondary data from multiple cohorts of students is collected and knit together to provide more robust findings of patterns over time. The secondary qualitative portion of the study investigates student experiences of their educational contexts through a motivational and emotional lens.

### QUANTITATIVE ASPECT

#### METHODS

**Participants.** Secondary data were requested from the Clark County School District for all students on record as of count day for the 2009-10 academic year. Count day is considered the date on which the official count of student enrollment for that academic year is taken and was September 21 for the 2009 year. Enrollment history data were also requested for all 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students (in the 2009-10 year) with a special education designation. If students had enrolled and actually attended school as of count day 09-10 and if enrollment history data were available for them, these students were eligible for the present study. The population was further defined based on special education designations germane to this study and students were included if they were classified as either learning disabled or of having a health impairment (typically Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). As the population was defined, it became apparent that the requested enrollment history file contained data for only 8-13 grade students, thus the population was re-defined. The final selection process yielded a total of 8,033 students.

This process yielded a population with the following characteristics:

- 1517 (18.9%) Grade 8; 1804 (22.5%) Grade 9; 2013 (25.1%) Grade 10; 1468 (18.3%) Grade 11; 1225 (15.2%) Grade 12; 6 (.1%) Grade 13
- 65.8% male; 34.2% female
- 91.7% classified as learning disabled
- 2957 (36.8%) Hispanic; 2627 (32.7%) White; 2100 (26.1%) Black; 270 (3.4% Asian); 79 (1.0%) American Indian or Alaskan Native
- 6319 (78.7%) non-ELL

Of these students, those who had enrolled in an alternative school at least once as of September 21, 2009 were included as the “alternative school” group and those who had not were the “non-alternative school” group. It should be noted that students in either group could have attended a charter school, magnet school,



or other alternative program (including prison school). Table 1 depicts the demographic information for the two groups.

**Table 1.** Demographic information for Alternative and Non-Alternative Groups

Demographic Variable	Alternative Group n = 1078		Non-alternative Group n = 6966	
<b>Gender</b>	83.5% Male		63.0% Male	
<b>ELL</b>	21.0% ELL		21.4% ELL	
<b>Ethnicity</b>	41.3% Black 35.5% Hispanic 20.7% White 2.5% Other		37.0% Hispanic 34.5% White 23.8% Black 4.6% Other	
<b>Special Education Placement in Regular Class (% of time)</b>	80-100% of time	44.7%	80-100% of time	59.7%
	40-79% of time	36.7%	40-79% of time	30.2%
	0-39% of time	10.8%	0-39% of time	7.1%
<b>Grade</b>	10.6% Grade 8 21.7% Grade 9 31.1% Grade 10 20.4% Grade 11 16.0% Grade 12		20.1% Grade 8 22.5% Grade 9 24.1% Grade 10 17.9% Grade 11 15.1% Grade 12	

**Data sources.** Data were requested from secondary sources for student attendance, discipline referrals, academic testing data, and school enrollment patterns. Unfortunately, although the data were requested in April, 2011, the majority of data was not received until October/November 2011 and in some cases the data is still incomplete (particularly discipline data). The students in this study belong to different grade cohorts and data from all cohorts were not available due to limitations on data accessibility. The matrix below (Table 2) indicates data received by academic year.

**Table 2.** Data Sources by Year.

Data Source	Academic Year						
	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10
<b>Annual Attendance</b>				X	X	X	X
<b>Annual Discipline Counts</b>				X	X		X
<b>CRT (3, 5, 8)</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	

The matrix in Table 2 provides some indication of data that may not be available depending on grade cohort. For example, students in grade 12 in 09-10 will only have testing data for their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year; 11<sup>th</sup> grade students will have 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, but not third. The first cohort with complete testing data from 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades should be 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 09-10. Further, it should be noted that 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 2009-10 will have some elementary and middle school attendance and discipline data, but 12<sup>th</sup> graders will only have attendance and discipline records from high school. It is not yet clear how data might have been reported differently depending on elementary, middle, or high school levels, so the descriptive information provided should be interpreted cautiously.

## FINDINGS

The delayed, and in some cases, incomplete, nature of the data received from CCSD, I was unable to conduct inferential analyses for the purposes of this report. It would be premature and irresponsible to attempt to make claims about growth patterns or statistical comparisons between alternative and non-alternative education participants without complete data or data that has been sufficiently inspected for quality. However, the following information is conveyed descriptively to provide a sense of the student population. It is stressed that these are preliminary data and should be interpreted as a possible indication of patterns that may be found under more rigorous examination.

**Standardized Testing Data.** The graphics in the following section depict descriptive information for annual attendance, discipline counts, and testing for the alternative and non-alternative groups. Table 3 indicates Nevada 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade CRT mean scale scores for the two groups.

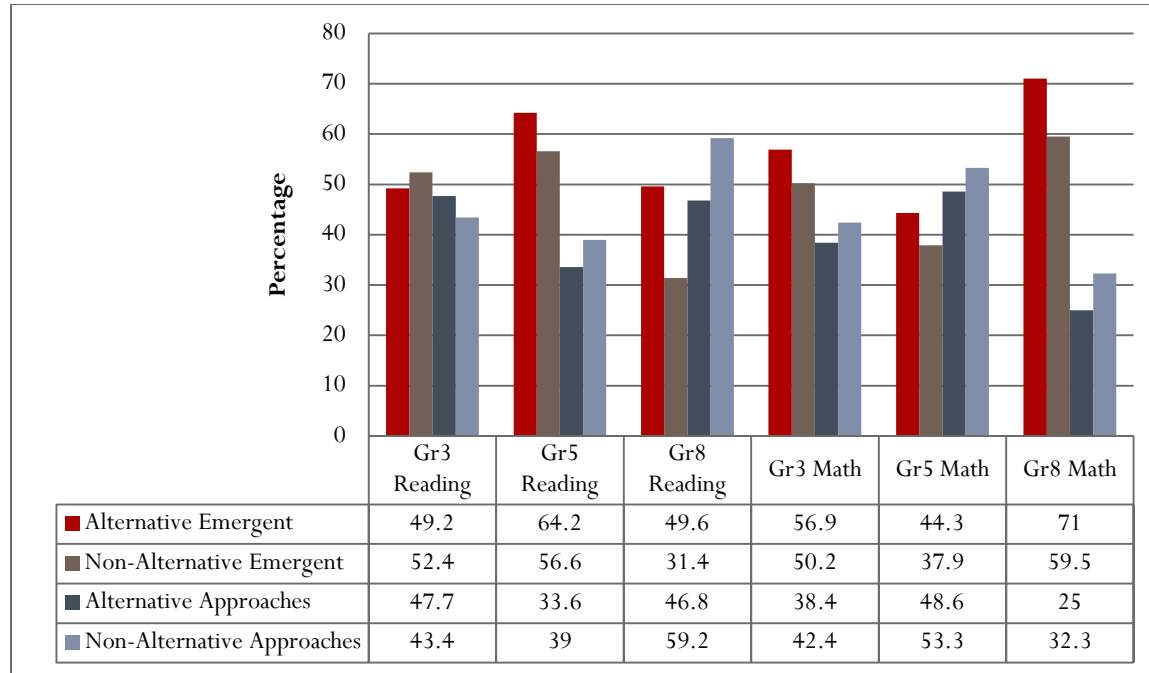
**Table 3.** Nevada CRT Scale Scores for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade.

	Alternative Group			Non-Alternative Group		
	N*	Mean	SD	N*	Mean	SD
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading</b>	257	196.75	54.17	2289	195.90	57.41
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Math</b>	257	189.33	63.79	2285	201.03	64.98
<b>5<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading</b>	684	182.69	55.98	4805	192.47	60.06
<b>5<sup>th</sup> Grade Math</b>	684	210.76	58.17	4795	219.24	61.32
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading</b>	832	193.33	61.80	4997	221.96	64.01
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Math</b>	843	165.74	65.85	4998	190.00	75.84

*Note.* \* The sample size reflects missing data due to cohort differences in available data, differences in year of enrollment in CCSD, as well as data missing for unknown reasons.

Figure 1 depicts the percentage of students who fall into each of the following categories: emergent and approaches the standards for proficiency. Students in the emergent or approaches group are generally considered non-proficient for adequate yearly progress reports. In both groups over 90% of students for whom data were available (see Table 3 for sample size) fell into the category of non-proficient.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of Students in Alternative and Non-Alternative Groups in Non-Proficient CRT Categories



**Attendance and Enrollment.** A preliminary and basic look at student mobility in elementary school, a possible predictor of academic disengagement, indicated that students with at least one enrollment in alternative education experienced an average of 1.17 transitions (range 0-12) between schools *within a school year* during the elementary period. In contrast, students who did not experience placement had an average of .63 (range 0-11) within-year school transitions during the elementary period. Student mobility during the elementary period between academic years has not yet been compiled.

Table 4 provides the mean number of annual excused absences, unexcused absences, and days of school attendance averaged over the 4 years (06-07 thru 09-10) for which data were available. Note again that there is substantial data missing due to cohort and enrollment differences, as well as unknown factors, thus the data are presented by grade level, as indicated in the 2009-10 count day file. Thus, in some cases, the mean may represent fewer years of data.

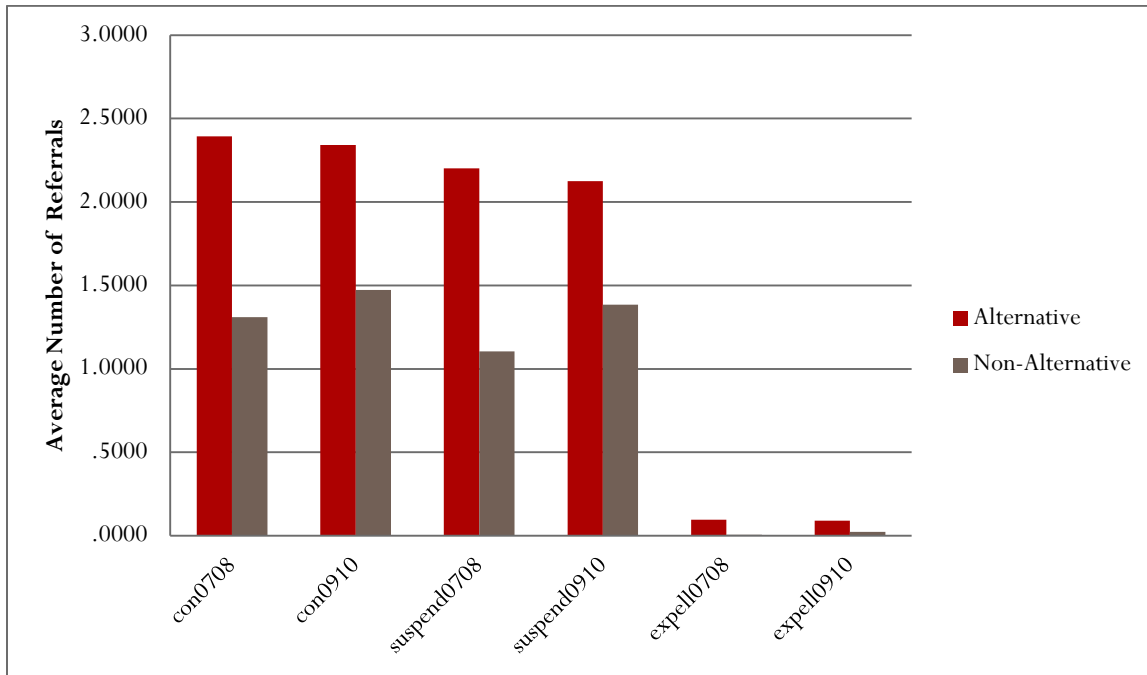
**Table 4.** Average Annual Absence Data from 2006-07 thru 2009-10.

	n	Excused	Unexcused	Days
		Absences	Absences	Enrolled
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
<b>Grade 8 Alt</b>	114	14.44 (8.23)	7.95 (6.89)	170.72 (8.84)
<b>Grade 8 Non-alt</b>	1403	6.08 (5.29)	4.52 (5.10)	173.92 (9.75)
<b>Grade 9 Alt</b>	230	15.74 (9.26)	11.53 (9.53)	169.69 (15.89)
<b>Grade 9 Non-alt</b>	1560	6.82 (6.40)	6.07 (7.89)	174.51 (13.03)
<b>Grade 10 Alt</b>	331	17.69 (12.12)	11.76 (9.87)	170.51 (15.97)
<b>Grade 10 Non-alt</b>	1664	7.06 (6.41)	6.76 (7.74)	174.62 (12.43)
<b>Grade 11 Alt</b>	219	16.69 (11.01)	9.64 (7.34)	170.12 (16.22)
<b>Grade 11 Non-alt</b>	1240	7.12 (6.70)	5.86 (6.82)	174.20 (13.32)
<b>Grade 12 Alt</b>	171	15.21 (10.22)	8.44 (8.01)	170.72 (17.52)
<b>Grade 12 Non-alt</b>	1040	7.26 (7.01)	4.90 (5.62)	175.23 (12.89)

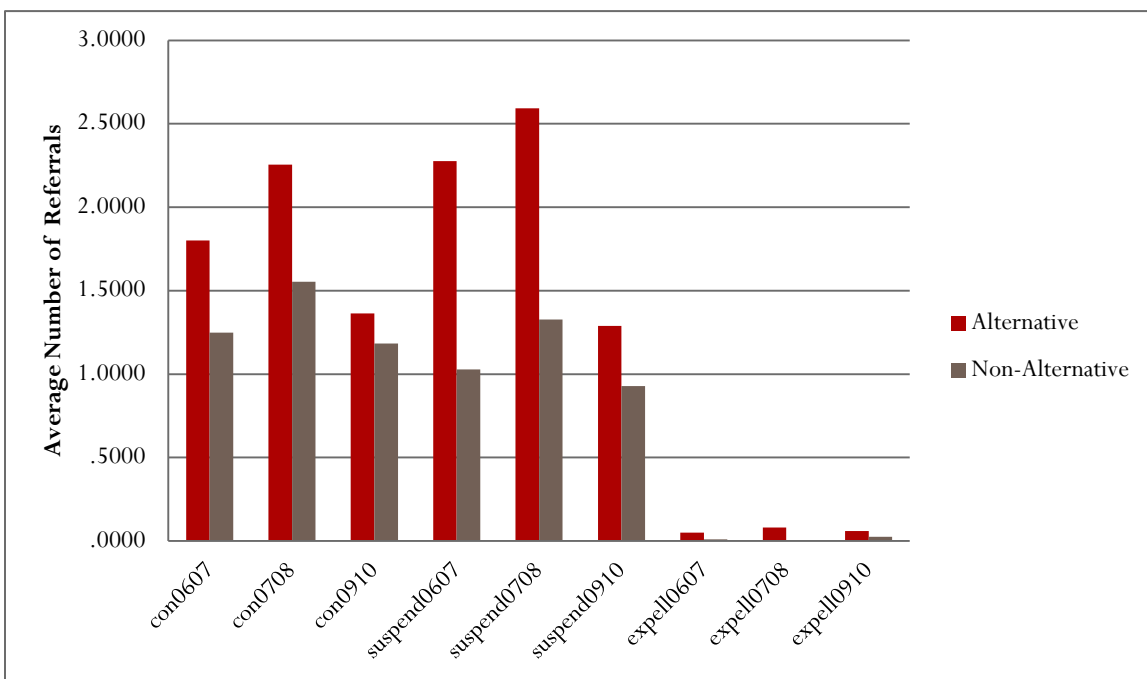
**Behavioral/Discipline Data.** Discipline data were only provided for middle and high school students from 06-07 thru 09-10, thus, data is particularly limited for the 09-10 8<sup>th</sup> grade cohort. Data is also missing for the 08-09 year. Thus, a substantial amount of data were missing for students. 7.6% (n = 613) of students had data for all three years; 21% (n = 1690) had data for two years; 30% (n = 2407) had data for one year; and 41.4% (n = 3323) were missing data for all three years. Further, the data were provided in aggregate as the annual number of conferences, suspensions, and expulsions rather than the dates and types of actual behavioral infractions requested. One key element of this project is to understand behavioral patterns during early school years that may signify potential problems, however, given the nature of the data provided, it is not possible to investigate elementary behavior. I continue to seek additional behavioral data from the school district.

Figures 2-6 show the average number of student conferences, suspensions, and expulsions by grade level for each year. Figure 2 depicts data for 09-10 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. For this group, data begins in 0708 when students would have been in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Figure 2.** 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Discipline Data for Grades 6 and 8.



**Figure 3.** 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Discipline Data for Grades 6, 7, and 9.



**Figure 4.** 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Discipline Data for Grades 7, 8, and 10.

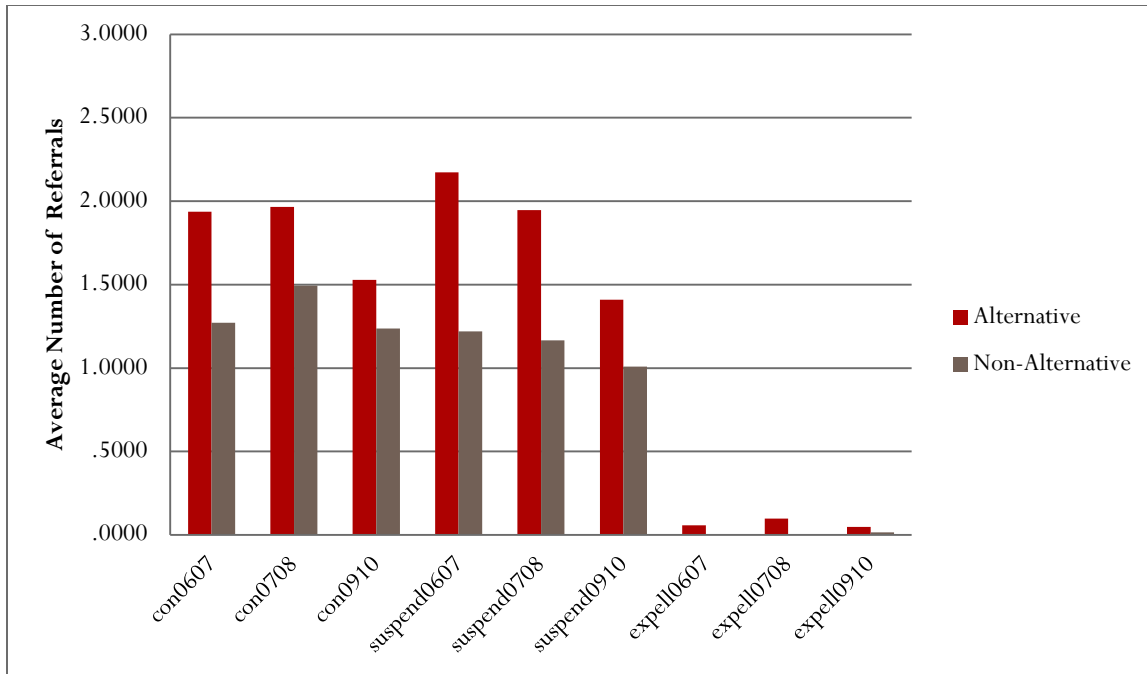
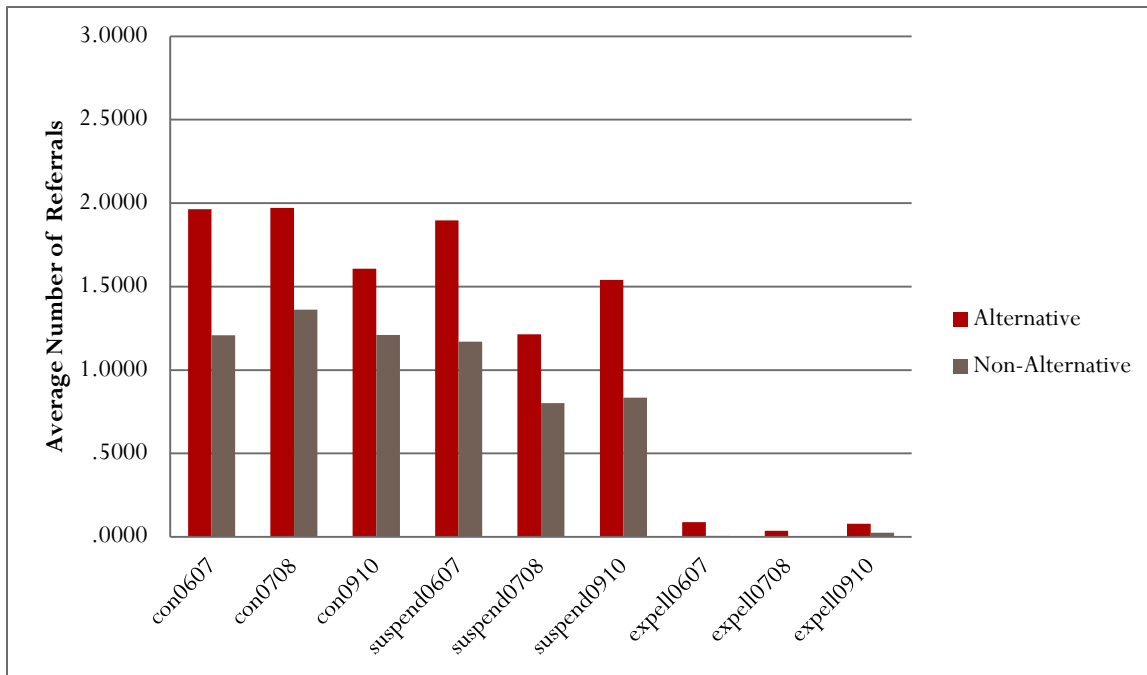
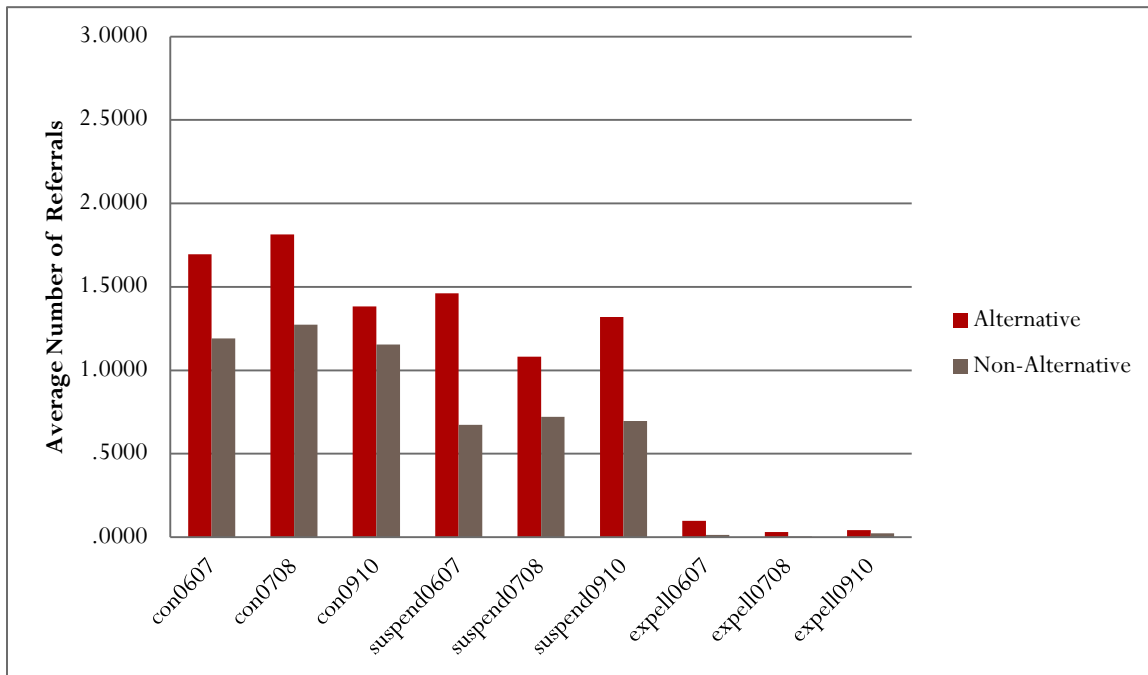


Figure 5. 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Discipline Data for Grades 8, 9, and 11.



**Figure 6.** 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Discipline Data for Grades 9, 10, and 12.

Figures 2 thru 6 demonstrate that students (for whom data were available) who had participated in alternative education programs at some point prior to September 2009 consistently averaged over 1 conference and/or suspension annually. One interesting trend to pursue is that middle school seems to be a particularly troublesome time for students, in that the middle school grades showed the highest averages of all discipline categories, particularly for students in the alternative school group.

**Quantitative Summary.** The data presented offers only a mere glimpse of indicators of academic adjustment for students with learning disabilities. Once complete data is received from CCSD, I hope to be able to investigate trends related to school enrollment in the form of mobility during elementary years and grade of first entrance into alternative programs; investigate issues related to attendance and discipline; and gain a better understanding of how academic competence, as indicated through testing data, may be linked to behavioral problems leading to alternative education placement.

The descriptive information offered may indicate that students who are eventually placed in alternative programs evidence a consistent pattern of academic experiences that may indicate disaffection beginning in elementary school. Alternative students had a higher average of within-year mobility during elementary school than their peers. Further, the standardized testing data suggests that while both the alternative and non-alternative groups of students scored poorly in tests of reading and math in 3<sup>rd</sup> thru 8<sup>th</sup> grade, it appears that in the non-alternative group, a higher percentage of students began to make progress toward proficiency than the alternative group of students. Once students entered middle school, it appears that the alternative group struggled consistently with attendance and discipline issues, much more so than their non-alternative school peers.

## QUALITATIVE ASPECT

### METHODS

**Participants.** To date, there are 11 students in the qualitative sample, enrollees of either Casper Continuation School, Bookman Continuation School, Worth Continuation School, or Presley Behavior School (pseudonyms). As expected, the majority of participants were male ( $n = 10$ ). The youngest participants were in 8th grade ( $n = 2$ ), one from Worth Continuation School and the other from Presley Behavior School. The age range spanned up through 12th grade ( $n = 3$ ), two of these students were attending Bookman Continuation School, with the third in attendance at Presley Behavioral school. Two 9th graders also participated, both of whom attended Casper Continuation School. Three 10th graders participated, two of whom attended Presley Behavior School, the attended Bookman Continuation School. The only 11<sup>th</sup> grade participant was a student in attendance at Bookman Continuation School.

**Recruitment.** The sample came from a student population who exhibited certain criteria: A) students with learning disabilities B) students currently enrolled in a behavior or continuation school, and C) students who had recidivated into alternative education. With collaborative efforts of CCSD, researchers recruited students from participating alternative schools who fit the criteria. The researchers visited the participating schools and spoke with the selected students as a collective group at each campus. Students were informed that their participation would be used for research purposes in aim to better school experiences. A detailed outline of the study's focus was given to students with both student and parent permission forms to be signed and returned (either through U.S. mail or by hand to an administrator or faculty member), At this time, students were made aware that a \$10 Target gift card would be awarded to them for their participation, not excluding any withdrawal from the study mid-interview.

**Research Team.** The research team for the qualitative portion of this project was made up of the primary investigator (Lincy Fellow) and two student workers pursuing master's degrees in Educational Psychology.

**Data Source.** The following sections outline the interview protocol, setting, and processes.

*Interview Protocol--* The interview protocol loosely followed Seidman's (2006) recommendations for in-depth, open ended interviewing. Although Seidman recommends three interviews fairly closely spaced, the protocol for the current study was amended to fit the context surrounding the study participants and the research questions, which focus on student experiences of transitions among educational settings. Two interviews were planned to follow within several weeks of school transitions. The semi-structured approach for the interview was implemented with a conversational nature, allowing the student to express what he/she felt was important and worth sharing. For interview one, the interviewer inquired about general student motivations and engagements regarding school, support systems, school behavior, and school transitions over the students' history since enrolling in CCSD. For interview two, the interviewer was interested in the student's reflection of his/her educational development in light of their experiences at both educational settings. Interview two was directed towards understanding how students make meaning of their latest transition experience with an exploration of his/her motivation and engagement, his/her



academic life both socially and academically, his/her relationships and supports, and his/her future goals.

Interview questions for both interviews were broadly stated for the students to answer how they saw fit as this allowed student voices to lead our topics of our interest rather than investigator-dictated assumptions. Probes were given to students when the researcher needed to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions and underlying motivations.

*Setting--* All Interviews were conducted within the first 3 hours of a student's school day. Students at Bookman Continuation School begin their days at 6:50 A.M. so were interviewed at times between 7 A.M. and 10 A.M. Students at Worth Continuation School begin at 7:40 A.M. (interviewed between the hours of 8 A.M. and 11 A.M). And lastly, those students attending Presley Behavior School start at 8:45 A.M. so were interviewed during the hours of 9 A.M. and 12 A.M. All interviews were held in a private room with only the interviewer and the student present. Pending time of day and room availability at the schools, either small classrooms, small trailers, or private offices were utilized for interview setting. Interviews were conducted across a table of which interviewer and interviewee sat face to face with a known audio recording device centrally placed on top of the table.

*Process--* Preceding the interview process, the interviewer reminded the student of the study's ultimate purpose with intent to facilitate focus during the interview—a concentration on his/her school experiences in the Clark County School District (past and present). Students were informed of the minimal risks associated with the study (boredom, fatigue) and reminded that disclosure of sensitive issues was at their discretion and they could withdraw participation at any point if needed. Researchers explained to all participants that any information divulging the desire to hurt themselves or others in the future must by law be reported; but the disclosure of past offenses would bring no consequences. Two signatures were required before the interview could begin--one in agreement of participation in accordance with the above information and two, in acknowledgment of the audio recording. Once the signed student assent form was retained, a student ID number was recorded for the student with the purpose of maintaining anonymity.

Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour, 16 minutes—determined by how much the student had to say. Once interviews were adjourned, students were awarded a \$10 Target gift cards in appreciation of their time and cooperation. Prior to participation, it was brought to students' attention that receipt of the gift card was not conditional; if a student wished to withdraw during the interview process, he/she would still receive the gift for his/her time.

All interviews were recorded with a device that could be connected to a computer. Once the interview was conducted, the audio file was immediately downloaded from the recorder onto a password-protected, home computer followed by file removal from the actual recording device. As the research team divided up the interviews for the transcription process, the audio files were also appropriately distributed and destroyed, with only the research team's lead investigator having complete access to all files. During transcription, names were left out for both students and those named within the interview. All identifying information about the student was blacked out or replaced with arbitrarily devised pseudonyms. Each student's ID number remains the only means to which he or she can be identified.

## ANALYSES

Interview audio files were randomly assigned among team members for transcription. The audio files were closely evaluated so to prevent any misrepresentations of student perceptions, and team-created Transcription Guidelines were strictly followed for each and every interview. For the purposes of this report, 9 completed transcribed interviews from 8 participants (interview 1 and 2 from participant 2) were used for analyses. Throughout this process, the team worked together to devise a set of codes. To do this, we set forth on a systematic evaluation of our data—a search for shared experiences or frequented concepts. Finding the recurrent issues in our data then gave rise to 5 distinct domains: Behavior Issues, School Importance or Perceptions of Academic Seriousness, Facilitative Factors In School Experiences, Inhibitive Factors In School Experiences, and Transitions (sub-divided into Scheduled and Unscheduled). These domains and their *included terms*, as referenced by Spradley (1980, p. 89), comprise the set of codes used to organize and understand the data.

To further our analysis and understanding, the data was examined using Spradley's (p. 113) description of taxonomical analysis. This allowed us to further break up the domains and their included terms so to shed light on the relationships operating from within our defined domains--both discordant and akin. After the re-configuring of our data, we are left with a more holistic view of the interplay from which we benefit from in our next step: componential analysis (p. 130). This process requires a researcher to unveil the general themes embedded within this data analysis. Clearly emerging at this point were themes, or blanket domains as our team calls them, that represent issues on a much larger scale.

In short, through systematic evaluation, our team established a set of domain categories and included terms of which we utilized as a codebook. The devised set of codes was then applied to the data to uncover themes embedded within the context. These emerging themes were then further analyzed to devise a set of BLANKET domains to encompass a bigger picture of the students' stories. This enabled us to make connections in the data to gain a more complete picture of student stories.

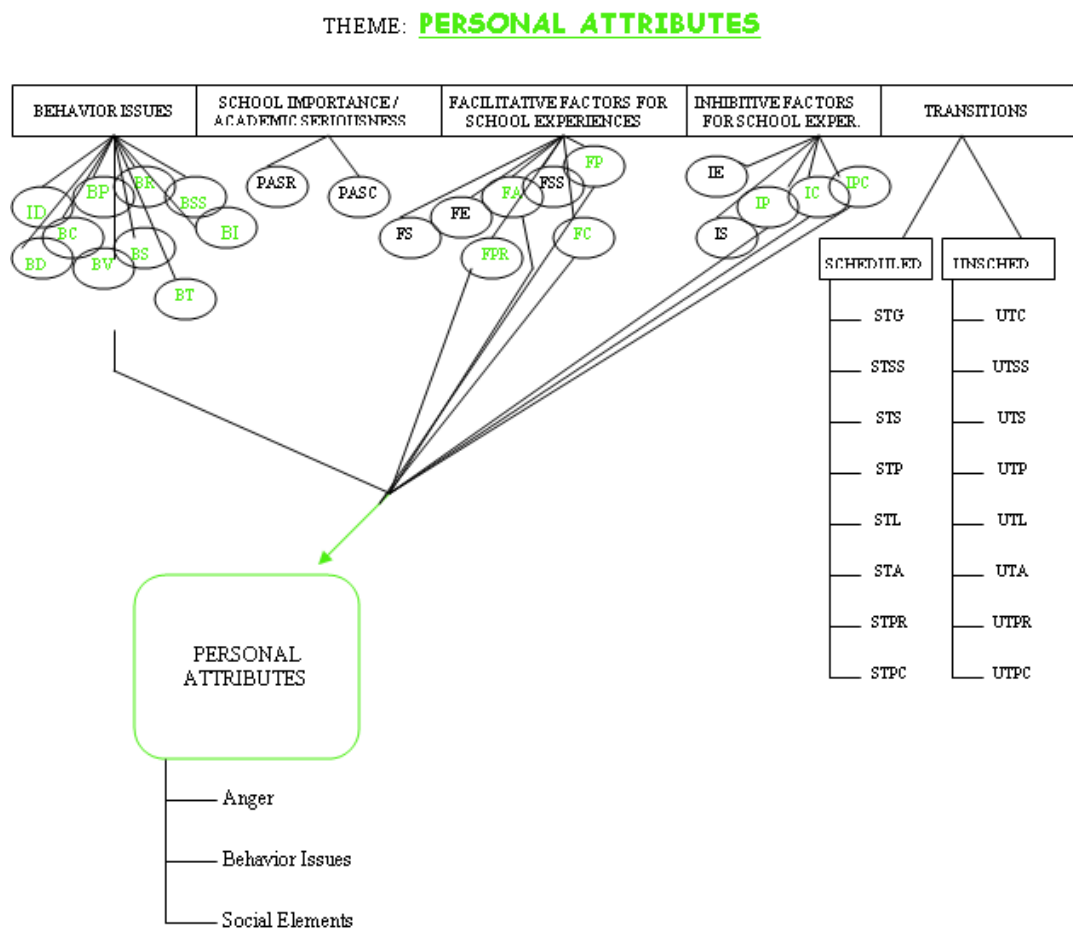
## FINDINGS

The analyses of coded interviews led to the emergence of 5 distinct blanket domains or themes from the first round of analyses. These themes centered around student personal attributes that affected their interpretation of school experiences, student perceptions or internalizations of social relationships, problem solving activities, and processing of school environments and events. Further reflection of these themes provided insight as to how personal attributes, student perceptions of social relationships and problem solving strategies interact to influence environment and event processing. The student narratives indicated that the relationships among the themes were reciprocal and dynamic, mutually influencing student experiences over time.

The theme of **personal attributes** captures the personality factors and behavioral proclivities that the students bring with them to the school environment. As can be seen by the graphic organizer in figure

7, students tended to discuss issues of personal attributes most often when discussing factors that inhibited or facilitated their adjustment in school.

**Figure 7.** Graphic Organizer of Personal Attribute Theme and Codes.



This theme includes student perceptions of their motivation for engaging or disengaging in school, such as interest in activities or student apathy. Several students indicated that activities such as football or a desire to see friends is what led them to stay in school and attempt to stay out of trouble. This theme also includes student descriptions of their relatively stable emotional orientations toward school, such as general anger or boredom. For example, student 10 indicated that his tendency toward acting on his anger led to problems in the classroom:

I: You said that you threw scissors at a teacher, what made you do that?

S: Like my anger and stuff like that. Like when I get angry I use to get angry and there was no stopping me. Like anything you told me not to do, I would do.

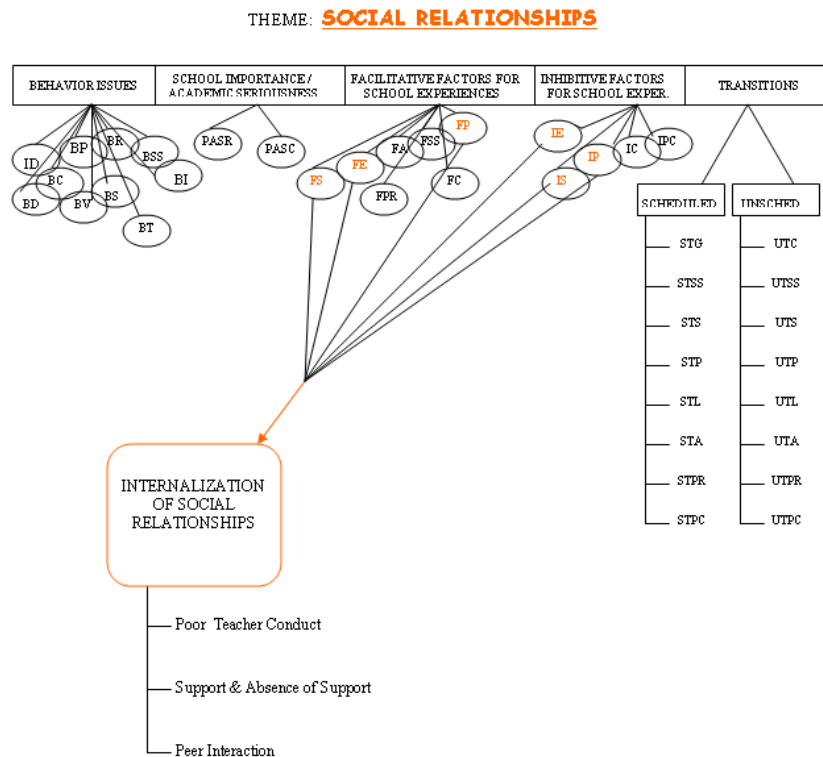
Finally, the includes some elements of student beliefs about themselves with respect to school and behavior. Student 5 provided an example of how their beliefs about themselves but also about their behavior might lead to conflicts in academic settings:

I: How would you describe yourself as a student?

S: ...I'm a good student, but it's just I'm just here because like I feel like whenever somebody disrespect me I gotta disrespect them back...

The theme of **social relationships** also included some aspects of student reasons for engagement or disaffection in school, but these were specifically identified as stemming from interactions with social partners, such as teachers or peers. Figure 8 demonstrates that students commonly talked about relationships again in terms of those things they felt inhibited or facilitated their adjustment in school.

**Figure 8.** Graphic Organizer of Social Relationship Theme and Codes.



This theme represents how a student perceived and reacted to: *teachers* (those with whom he perceives to have bad attitudes or ineffective teaching methods), the presence of *supportive persons* (staff, family, friends), the *need for attention* (from teachers or others), and *peer influence* (good and bad perceptions of peer interaction). For example, one student provided the following explanation as to how teachers are sometimes not helpful for school.

I: Ok. Is there anything else that a teacher could do that's not helpful for you?

S: When I ask for help, they ignore me; but when I raise my hand, like, they're <like> "put your hand down, I'm not answering no questions right now." Like, when teachers they'll get mad like before they get to school and like, they take it out on the students....or they like come over there like "what you want" or something like that. Like, when they get all in my face like "what you want," I won't even ask 'em for nothing anymore. I won't ask them a question for like a week.

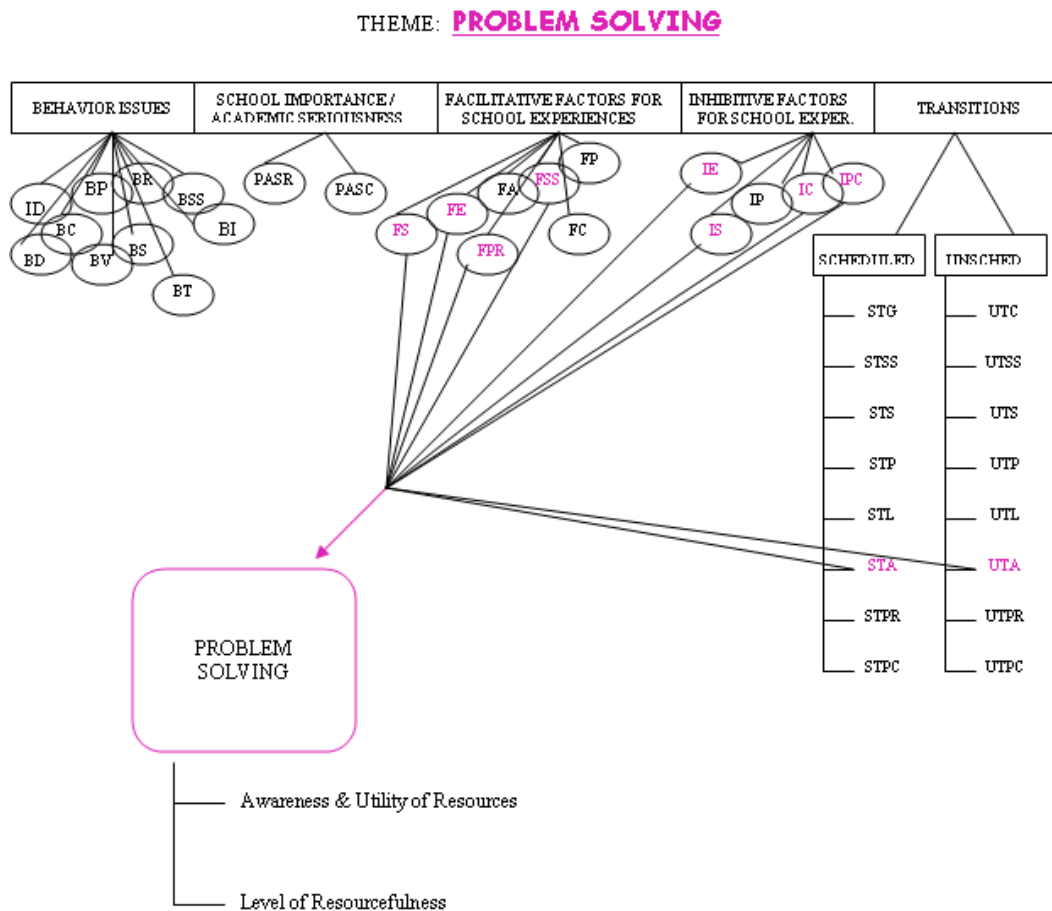
Within this theme students also noted that in some cases teachers don't seem to care about them or pay attention to them. However, students were conflicted about school staff support at either alternative or non-alternative campuses. In some cases, students felt that teachers at alternative schools listened more, but in other cases, students felt that counselors and special education facilitators were more supportive in general education settings. Students also had different perceptions about how peers influenced their behavior at school. In most cases, peers were a primary reason for coming to school and remaining engaged. But, on the other hand, students acknowledged that peer relationships could often lead to trouble. As one student described an experience of moving to a new school during an unscheduled transition, he mentioned that the lack of peer influence was a positive for his academic progress:

I: Do you think that the curriculum was easier? Was there anything that you could attribute to your better performance?

S: It was easier but then I ain't have no friends there so I was just like going to class on time doing my work.

The theme of **problem solving strategies** emerged as students discussed actions they took to deal with a challenging situation, such as transitioning to an alternative school or when they did not understand course material (see figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Graphic Organizer of Problem Solving Theme and Codes.



This theme represents the strategies employed by students to solve a problem and students' status of awareness for the availability of support services. Students evidenced differing levels of willingness to use problem solving strategies or knowledge of strategies, but in general, students did not display a high level of knowledge of how to access help when needed or even awareness of when help is needed. One student, who had indicated that she struggled with reading and math since elementary school told interviewers that the only reason she came to school was for social reasons and was able to get through school by copying assignments from "smart people". This student went on to suggest that she does not participate in class and the researchers inferred that she avoided any academic situation that would require her to put forth effort and possibly fail. However, other students seemed slightly more positive about problem solving, as suggested by this quote from student 11:

I: When you do need help, where do you go?

S: ...I'll ask the teacher or I just won't do it, I guess.

I: let's say you don't like your geology teacher, and you don't get something, who are you going to ask for help?

S: Uhmmm...I dunno, someone in the class that gets it.

I: Do you ever go outside of the classroom?

S: No.

Some students also suggested that they were aware of multiple sources of help outside the classroom, including special education facilitators, counselors, and coaches.

The next theme, **environment processing**, emerged from student discussions about how students understand or experience specific school settings, such as alternative schools. As can be seen from figure 10, this theme really focused on how students made meaning from their new environments following transitions. In several cases, student mentioned apprehension in attending alternative school because based on their past experiences, they knew that they would get farther behind in academics due to curriculum differences or environmental challenges, as suggested by this quote from student 5 in referring to behavior school:

S: These kids...<they interfere with the education the student is trying to get>...'cuz they always disrupting the teacher or something, yelling or something, doin' some stupid thing...and then like the teacher get disrupted and she gonna deal with them and that's takin us out of hour.

On the other hand, one student expressed how a change in environment due to a move was helpful for him academically. His comments below indicate that the culture of the school made a difference in his ability to form relationships with teachers :

S: ...they some fun teachers because they like to do activities and stuff in the class...and they teach a lot too.

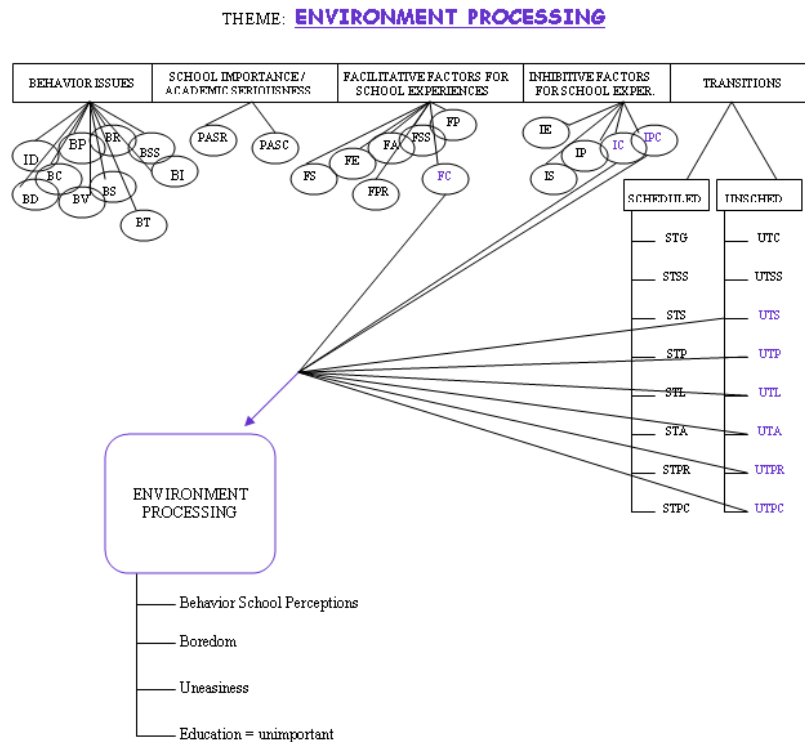
I: ...and was it easy for you to get to know teachers <at the new school>?

S: Yes.

I: Okay good. What made them easier to approach? What was it about their demeanor?

S: Cuz like the other school I was going to, [REDACTED], it's like a ghetto school...and [REDACTED] <the new school> is like a corny school...like lame. (student continued to divulge how the teachers kept the students on track at this "corny" school and *that* helped him)

**Figure 10.** Graphic Organizer of Environment Processing Theme and Codes.



The final theme focused on how students **processed events**, such as important life events, that influenced their academic trajectory or experience. This theme represents times of marked changes in the student’s life and illustrates how the student reacts or adapts (from behavioral and psychological viewpoints). Figure 11 illustrates that this theme emerged from a variety of discussions.

One interesting commonality among students was a change in beliefs about the importance of school stemming from scheduled school transitions, such as from elementary to middle school or middle to high school. Students two and three captured this sentiment well in the following quotes:

S (02): It’s high-school, like it counts...all your credits and stuff like you’re not just doing all your work for nothing. Like middle school and elementary, it’s like you’re doing work for nothing..So that’s why I think like most people don’t really try. (Student reiterates this point of working harder because now it counts on PAGE 15 & 16 when he discusses his increased efforts—asking for help)

S (S03): ...So when I finally did start asking for the help and getting what I needed, it kinda made it easier to transition into high school, ya know, to understand that now you have to have not this *kid* set of mind, but more of a mature, teenage-adult mind; you have to set your standards higher; you have to put the bar up there; “you have to think about the next step before you just do it this time,” (chuckles) ya know, ‘cuz now you’re thinking “there’s a consequence for everything soooo now that I *know* that (chuckles,) I may want to think about this before I do it;”



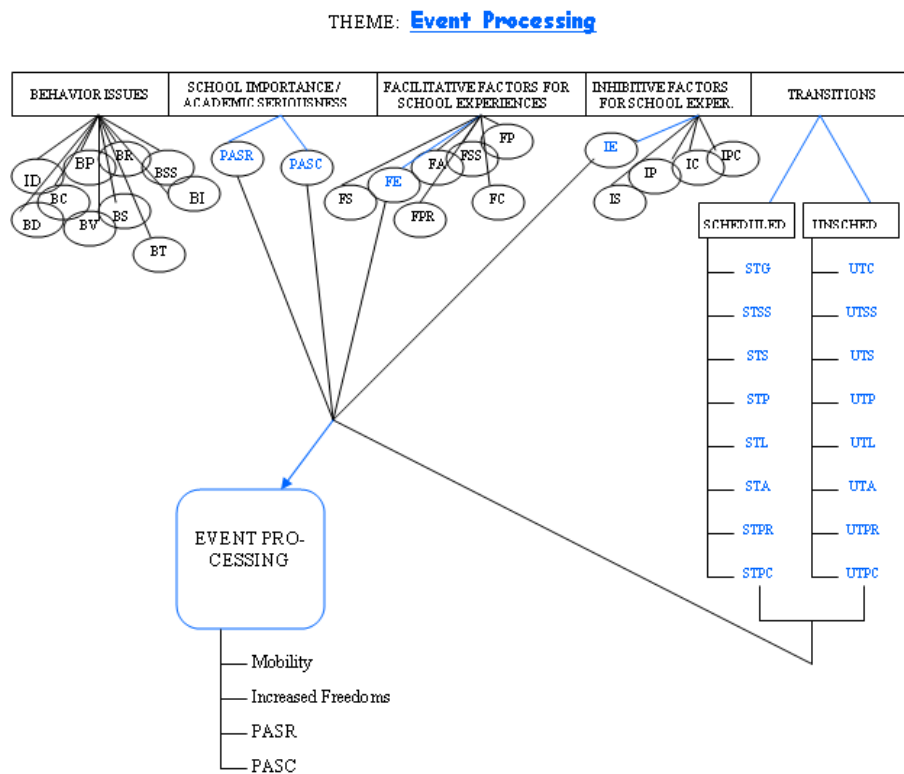
Another interesting pattern that emerged from student responses to life events, such as parental divorce or within-year transitions, was that these challenges were just the “way things are” and seemed to become the status quo for many students. Student expectations for school and behavior in school seemed to be revised downward, leading to an attitude that it is not a big deal if they aren’t doing well or can’t get a positive experience, because that’s not necessarily what they were expecting anyway.

Students also expressed some thoughts on why other people respond to them in certain ways after attending alternative school. As one student expressed his experience with teachers after returning to a comprehensive campus after alternative school:

S: They don’t talk as much to you as other people because I think they like know that I’m a fighter and stuff, yeah.

In this, and other instances, students experienced a difference in interpretation of social responses after the alternative school event.

**Figure 11.** Graphic Organizer of Event Processing Theme and Codes.



**Qualitative Summary.** With more data to come, it is clear from the present analyses thus far that we have gained some insight as to how personal attributes, environment and event processing interact with student internalization of social relationships and problem solving strategies. These findings represent a

first pass at coding data and it is expected that themes may morph as additional data is analyzed. Once completed, the data can offer insight into student perceptions of their history of education in CCSD, the way they make meaning during the transition between alternative schools and general education campuses, and in-depth individual narrative spanning both interview points.

## COLLABORATION REPORT

The staff from the Student Support Services Division have been enthusiastic partners throughout this project and we anticipate a continued partnership beyond the Lincy Fellowship support. As mentioned previously, I have worked with this CCSD team on informal basis through 2010. The SSSD team includes a division director (Joanne), two facilitators who work directly with students on behavior issues and other needs related to their placement at an alternative campus and transitions between settings, and one coordinator who works with schools to provide professional development and other services to staff at alternative education schools. During early meetings, the SSSD team had expressed a strong interest in knowing more about their population of students as to their educational trajectories and periods of vulnerability during their educational tenure. The interest in this area was specific to developing early intervention services to prevent students from reaching alternative education, as well as developing data driven indicators of need for students already involved in the alternative education system. They also wanted to know how students felt about school transitions and services and how we could better help students that are already experiencing trouble in school. These questions formed the basis for the project.

I worked closely with Joanne during the spring of 2011 to refine the project plan and ensure that the data we were planning to gather would be instrumental in meeting the needs of the SSSD group. Joanne also helped to recruit schools for the qualitative portion of the project. The UNLV research team and the SSSD team have met to talk about how the data can be relevant to SSSD and the schools they serve. **The SSSD team offered the following (in red) evaluation of how this partnership has affected their ability to provide services to students in CCSD.**

The information that Clark County School District Student Support Services is obtaining through the project with UNLV has been beneficial in many ways. Part of the data provides information about the educational history of the students as they have progressed through the educational system. Another component provides information about the students' experiences while attending a consequence school. There is also a review of the special education services that are provided from the time the student is made eligible for services through the time they are attending the current consequence school. This compilation of information will be useful to better address the needs of students both proactively to prevent students from being referred to a consequence school and reactively to better meet the needs of students who have been referred to a consequence school and prevent further actions that will increase student disenfranchisement.

Through a review of the student history we have been able to identify patterns that are occurring when students are in earlier grades and potentially address these issues at a younger age. As part of a proactive process the Student Support Services Division will be able to work with students to

identify patterns that will potentially lead to future behavior difficulties and eventually to student disaffection if they are not addressed. Once these patterns of behavior are identified for students specifically targeted supports can be identified and implemented based on how successful or unsuccessful previous supports have proven to be effective with other students. Information about the students experiences while at the consequence schools can be used to provide future support for other students at consequence schools that will provide an improved educational setting and will provide information about how to provide a school for students earlier in their education to prevent future severe behavior that would lead to a referral to a consequence school.

The benefits of having this information are unlimited for how to prevent students from eventually being referred to a consequence school. School decision making teams will have less of a disconnection when determining supports for students. Currently when students are sent to a consequence school, the referring school has very little understanding of how this impacts the student educationally and emotionally. The information gained from this project will be beneficial for future training to make teachers at all levels aware of how the decisions that are made for students at all levels can impact their future educational success.

Activities slated to continue this partnership include reporting and sharing of new findings with the SSSD team once all data has been compiled and analyzed (Spring 2012), and working with the SSSD team to more effectively use data collected from behavior plans and IEPs. The Director of the team has also expressed interest in developing a training partnership to assist behavior mentors at schools in collecting data about behavior plan quality. Further, in collaboration with students, I have been involved in providing some no-cost evaluation services for new programs provided by SSSD to alternative schools.

#### SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY AND CONTINUED FUNDING

I attended the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in New Orleans, LA in April and the American Psychological Association in August to gain a better understanding of the issues related to student engagement surrounding alternative school populations, as well as methods to adequately research these issues. At AERA I participated in several sessions related to student engagement and disaffection and the predictors and consequences of school participation. These sessions were helpful for continuing to develop my conceptualization of how this project fits within dominant frameworks and research related to student disaffection and dropout. Unfortunately, there was little activity sponsored by the conference related to alternative education. I also had the occasion to meet with Dr. Stuart Karabenick, a top scholar in my field. Through our conversation about my past research on school transitions and the present project, I received an offer to contribute a chapter to an internationally recognized book series in my field, *Advances in Achievement and Motivation*, of which the upcoming volume will focus on transitions. The chapter will center on within-year transitions for students and the motivational consequences of these transitions. The preliminary findings associated with the present project will serve as a foundation to identify factors that facilitate or inhibit student adjustment during these within-year transitions and a frame within which to discuss methodological and analytic issues associated with studying school transitions. The following is the citation for the forthcoming chapter:

Marchand, G. C. & Sanders, K. (publication in 2012). Being the new kid: Implications of frequent school transitions for learning and motivation. In S. Karabenick & T. Urdan (Eds.), *Advances in Motivation and Achievement, Vol 17*. Emerald.

As a direct result of the Lincy Award, a private foundation, the Shulman Family Foundation, donated \$5000 to continue to support the work of this project. The goals of this project associated with the Lincy Award came up during personal conversation with a member of the Foundation's board. He was interested in the work and recommended a gift be made to support this project. The funds were received in April with the potential for another round of support next year.

I was also award the American Psychological Association (APA) Division 15 Early Career Research Award to continue this project through May of 2012. This Award is a competitive grant open to all Educational Psychology scholars within the first 5 years of completing a doctorate. It is a national competition and it is expected that results from this project will be presented at the APA conference. This additional support will contribute to expanded interviews, student workers to assist with the project, and potential expansion or follow-up of the quantitative data. The Lincy Award has been instrumental in developing support for a continued program of research.

Through the procurement of additional funds to support continued research in this area, as well as the invitation for the upcoming chapter, I feel that my goals related to scholarship with respect to this project have already been met. I look forward to continued scholarly activity, including submission of manuscripts to refereed journals and national and international conferences.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the partnership of Joanne Vattiato, Stephanie Simmons, Katja Hermes, and Kamille Bryner at CCSD. Further, the support of the participating schools at CCSD requires endless thanks for welcoming us to their campuses as well as the students participants and their families for sharing their stories. A special thank you to my tireless research team members: Kayana Sanders and Christie Higgins. These students have been an invaluable asset to this project and I cannot thank you enough. Finally, additional thanks is needed for the helpful staff at the Lincy Institute at UNLV for supporting this project through actions and funding.

This project is dedicated to the "alternative school" students at Clark County School District and Beth Howe.

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