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An Evaluation of the Back-On-Track Program to Determine Effectiveness in Increasing the Attitude and Motivation Toward School and Academic Self-Perception of Overaged Eighth Graders to Accelerate Grade Placement for On Time Graduation

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An Evaluation of the Back-On-Track Program to Determine Effectiveness in Increasing
the Attitude and Motivation Toward School and Academic Self-Perception of Overaged
Eighth Graders to Accelerate Grade Placement for On Time Graduation

by
Jean R. Dickson

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Jean R. Dickson under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Abstract

An Evaluation of the Back-on-Track Program to Determine Effectiveness in Increasing the Attitude and Motivation Towards School and Increasing Academic Self-Perception of Overaged Eighth Graders to Accelerate Grade Placement for On Time Graduation.
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The purpose of the study was to perform a program evaluation of the Back-On-Track program to determine the program's impact on overaged eighth-grade students' attitudes towards school, motivation to continue and complete a formal education, and academic self-perception. The mixed-method evaluation consisted of an experimental-comparison design that included conducting focus group interviews with and administering surveys to all consenting program participants, performing field observations, and comparing the attitudes and motivations towards school, and the academic self-perception of program participants before and after completing the Back-On-Track program.

The researcher and a trained interviewer administered surveys to and conducted focus group interviews with the Back-On-Track certified staff members as well as the director, the core content teachers of the home middle schools' eighth-grade teachers, current students in the program, and former students of the program. The benefits and limitations of the program were examined based on teacher and student perceptions, analysis of survey data, and field observations.

The four research questions that guided the study were as follows: (1) what are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school-aged students; (2) what resources does this school system possess that enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school-aged students; (3) is the Back-On-Track program following its design as planned; and (4) what is the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student attitude, motivation, and student academic self-perception?

Analysis of the data indicated that students and teachers overall felt that the program for overaged eighth graders was an asset to the school system and provided a much needed avenue for grade acceleration for students who were off track for expected graduation. The director, teachers, and students felt the district provided the necessary resources for the program. While the students and program personnel revealed that the program followed its plan as designed and communicated to them, teachers at the home school admitted unfamiliarity with the details of the program's plan. Both teachers and students alike presented qualitative agreement that the program had a positive impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception. Regarding self-motivation, a significant statistical difference was shown between the pre and postsurvey administrations indicating an increase in self-motivation after attending the Back-On-Track program.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As our nation's adolescents progress through the educational paths of middle and high school, they are thrust into and are required to adjust to transitions, changes in school settings, culture, and expectations while schools strive to provide engaging instruction following content area curriculum, fostering positive relationships, and sustaining various support systems to meet the many differentiated needs of students. While the majority of students are successful in this sometimes tumultuous journey, a substantial number encounter obstacles causing stress and disappointment that disrupts their academic success (Alspaugh, 1998; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Herlihy, 2007). The identification of this at-risk population of students in the school setting, and intervention implementation to assist with their apathy towards school and to provide avenues for transition and acceleration are imperative in order to place them back on track for school completion.

A significant number of students are not successful in promoting to the next grade level due to one or more course failures impacted by one or a combination of the following variables: low academic achievement, low motivation and attitude towards school, effects of the school environment, and/or behavioral issues that have removed them from the school setting before completing the grade (Dreyfoos, 1990; Finn, 1989, 2006; Midgley & Edelin, 1998; Roderick, 1993; Roeser & Eccles, 2000; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Specifically for middle school-aged students, additional factors may contribute to the struggle to maintain academic progression, positive attitudes, and behaviors. "For some children, the early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral in school-related behaviors and motivation that often lead to academic failure and dropping out of school" (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver, &

Feldlaufer, 1993, p. 554). The psychological turmoil assumed to be associated with early adolescent development is suggested as a cause of this decline in academic success (Blos, 1965). The coincidence of the timing of the middle school transition with pubertal development is a factor as well (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

The adjustments that school transitions require, regardless of the grade level, challenge young people (Entwisle & Alexander, 1989; 1993; Roderick, 1995). Roderick (1994) studied a public school system's cohort of seventh graders from fourth grade to either drop out, transfer, or graduation, including information on the timing of retention from kindergarten to eighth grade. The study questioned whether grade retention had an impact on student engagement and propensity to drop out. Secondly, the study investigated whether being overaged for grade had an impact on dropping out. Using event history analysis, the study determined that repeating a grade was associated with a significant increase in leaving school. Early grade retentions were associated with significant increases in dropping out. Results predicted that the odds of dropping out at ages 16-19 would be 75% higher for a student who had repeated a grade between kindergarten and third grade, and a 90% increase in the odds if the grade repeated was between the fourth and sixth grades. Additionally, the results showed that a large proportion of the impact of grade retention, 58% of overaged students, may coincide with the effects of being overaged for grade (Roderick, 1994).

In his examination of patterns of state retention rates, Morris (1993) noted that transition shock, during the pivotal transition years, accounts for high rates of retention. This was evidenced in his study by the peak in the number of retentions of first, seventh, ninth, and tenth graders, which are transition years in some states, in most states noted in

the patterns of state data. Change in school environment as a student moves from one level to the next has proven to be unsettling for some students. Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory attempts to explain the motivational changes in adolescents by suggesting that the declines associated with the transition to middle school are due to the changing nature of the educational environments experienced by many early adolescents. Motivational and behavioral declines could be associated with the fact that traditional middle schools have not provided appropriate learning environments for young adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). In Eccles's (2008) report on middle school reform for the California Dropout Research Project in June 2008, she stated that if individuals are placed in environments, social or educational, that do not address their psychological needs, they are likely not to perform well nor be motivated.

Statement of the Problem

Students' lack of academic self-perception, negative attitudes and motivation towards school, lack of a sense of relatedness, troublesome discipline patterns, as well as the effect of the school environment, have been identified as wielding a negative impact on student progression through school. One or more of these factors can cause a student to fail to meet the academic requirements for course completion and be retained in the current grade level. Retentions, absences, behavior, and family issues in addition to academic struggles can be identified as early as the elementary and middle school level (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010). In her study, Ziomek-Daigle examined the role of graduation coaches in middle and high schools and the interventions they use that affect local and state dropout rates. Interviews with graduation coaches were completed and coded for theme identification. The results indicated that systemic interventions such as efforts from schools, families, and communities at the early onset of predictors, can increase

students' chances for school completion.

Retention during the middle school years is of noteworthy concern because it is associated with a multitude of damaging outcomes in areas such as academic achievement, self-perception, attitude and motivation towards school, discipline issues, and ultimately, non-completion of high school (Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007). "Adolescents' beliefs about personal achievement and general attitudes toward school, which inevitably influence motivation to expend effort on academics, are an understudied but important group of predictors" (Suldo, Shaffer, & Shaunessy, 2008, p. 69). The present study investigated specific predictors related to the interruption in school grade progression due to academic underachievement, resulting in retention at the middle school level. Specifically examined was the impact of students' academic self-perceptions, attitudes, and motivations towards school on potential grade retention at the middle school level. The study also examined student perception of the effects of retention and experiences in an acceleration and transition program.

Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple's (2002) review of 17 studies examining high school dropout predictors found that there is a research gap concerning retention issues at the middle level and that more research on retention, from the student's perspective, is largely absent in the research literature. David (2008) concurs by stating that a major weakness in the research on retention is documenting the educational experiences of students who are retained. In a study of 10 school districts' retention policies, Larsen and Akmal (2007) suggested additional research include perspectives and insights from those who most closely feel the effects of retention: students and their parents. Roderick (1994) stated that previous research on school dropout has been limited in its ability to examine the relationship between school experiences and grade retention, and early

school leaving because of the lack of prehigh school data on the experiences and performance of adolescents. Jimerson, Pletcher, and Graydon (2006) provided a synthesis of research on many aspects of retention, specifically the effects of retention on academic and socio-emotional outcomes, long-term outcomes associated with retention, and students' perspectives regarding grade retention. They found fewer studies that have addressed the social, behavioral, and student perspective aspects of retention.

Extant research has confirmed that retention of students has a negative impact on the probability of school completion as well as substantial costs to society. Questions pertaining to both the potentially negative consequences of retention policies for students and their financial costs for districts have been mostly neglected by educational researchers (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005). Foster (1993) estimated that the cost of retaining a student for 1 year increases the educational costs for that child by 8%. Negative consequences of the retention of students include further decrements in school trajectory, low motivation, behavioral problems, and heightened chances of dropping out of school.

The costs of dropping out are not just applicable to the individual, but have a negative influence on the communities in which they live, as well as the rest of society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Educational achievement during adolescence is an important predictor of adulthood educational attainment (Huurre, Aro, Rahkonen, & Komulainen, 2006), which determines income level, career status, and other factors. High school dropouts earn less, are much more likely to be unemployed, suffer from poor health, receive government assistance, are incarcerated, and are the parent of a future dropout (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Melville, 2006). The job market for students without diplomas is becoming nonexistent. The costs of dropping out are

devastating to society in the estimated billions of dollars in lost revenue, unemployment programs, underemployment, welfare, and crime prevention and prosecution (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley, 2000). More than 75% of state prison inmates are dropouts. Dropouts cost the nation more than \$319 billion in lost wages and increased public expenses (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Eighty percent of the high schools that produce the most dropouts are concentrated in just 15 states, with the majority of them located in northern and western cities and throughout the southern states (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). In South Carolina, just over half of high school students are graduating on time. The impact on the state's future is potentially devastating on a myriad of levels (Drew & Duckenfield, 2010).

According to Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (2003), no authoritative source monitors retention trends on a national level. The Common Core of Data, the leading set of federal statistics on elementary and secondary education, does not include data on retention rates (Stillwell, 2010). According to the Center for Policy Research in Education (1990), census data on the proportion of students "below modal grade" are inaccurate because of inconsistencies among states in age requirements for school entrance, number of children who start school late, and changes in the time of year when census data are collected. Current grade failure rates are as high as they were in the 19th century, before social promotion was implemented in our education policy. Due to the fact that there is little consistency across the country in gathering retention data, The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) stated that solid statistics are scarce, but estimates of the number of K-8 students retained at least once in their school career ranged from 9-11% between the years of 1996-2007. In 2007, a greater percentage of African American students were retained than White and Hispanic students, and a

greater percentage of boys than girls (NCES, 2009). Among K-8 students in 2007, 12% of male students had been retained as compared to 8% of female students (NCES, 2009). In 2007, approximately 11% of public school students in kindergarten through Grade 12 had repeated a grade since starting school. Students in higher grades may also be suspended or expelled due to behavior problems. Around 22% of public school students in Grades 6 through 12 had been suspended and 3% had been expelled (NCES, 2009).

Table 1

Percentage of students in kindergarten through Grade 8 who had ever been retained in a grade during their school career, by selected characteristics

Year	1996	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007
Sex						
Male	13.4	11.3	11.4	10.2	11.9	11.7
Female	7.7	7.1	7	7.3	8.3	7.6
Race/ethnicity						
White	9.4	7.6	7.1	7.3	8	7.9
Black	13.9	14.5	15.3	14.3	17.7	16.4
Hispanic	13	11.4	12.2	9.1	11.7	10.9
Asian	6.4	3	2.1	3.7	1.8	‡
Other	11.7	10.1	10.7	10.9	10.7	8.8
Poverty status						
Poor	17.2	15.7	16.6	17.4	18.9	22.9
Near-poor	12.5	11.5	11.2	10.2	13	10.9
Non-poor	6.8	5.5	5.8	5.6	6.1	5.1
Region						
Northeast	10.3	8.7	8.3	8.9	9.8	10.5
South	13.9	11.7	12.4	11.6	13.7	13.2
Midwest	8.9	8.5	7.8	6.3	6.9	7.8
West	7.4	6.4	6.9	7.1	8.3	6
Of the percentage of students who had ever been retained						
Grade level retained						
Kindergarten–1st grade	34.4	32.6	27.8	31	30.7	34.1
2nd–3rd grade	14.7	12.3	17.8	15.6	16.9	15
4th–5th grade	7.4	8.3	10.1	8.4	10.2	9.3
6th–8th grade	6.2	13.3	10.6	10.6	9.1	6.9

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

States setting promotion policies allow the individual districts the latitude to implement promotion criteria, assess and monitor school promotion and retention decisions, and provide student supplemental services (Bali et al., 2005). States either report no retention data at all, provide figures for two or three grades only, or give an overall total for all grades (Alexander et al., 2003). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), regionally in 2007, the South had the highest percentage, 13.2, of grades K-8 students who had been retained at some point in their school careers. The Northeast had a retention rate of 10.5%, the Midwest of 7.8%, and the West had the lowest retention rate of 6%. Nationally, Blacks and Hispanics make up the largest percentages of retained students at 16.4% and 10.9%, respectively. In South Carolina, 2006 statistics show a 4.13% statewide retention rate (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2007).

Academic Achievement and Self-Efficacy

Students' academic self-efficacy as well as a sense of relatedness to family, friends and teachers, have been found to have a strong influence on academic achievement. In a study of high school students, Dimmitt (2003) surveyed those students who had been identified as receiving a D or an F in a marking period, and their parents and teachers, in an effort to determine the factors that had an impact on student failure. Not doing homework was cited by students, teachers, and parents as the most significant reason for failure. Forty-five percent of students and 57% of parents identified lack of motivation for their academic struggles. Lack of connection with the teacher was evidenced by 28% of students and 40% of parents stating that it was a factor for failure. Teachers were more likely to identify attendance, 59%, and family issues, 38%, along with lack of academic preparation, 32%. While there is an obvious link between poor

academic performance and academic failure, Dimmitt cautions that academic failure is not due to isolated factors, but rather is a result of a myriad of interconnected factors, including a student's individual dynamics and the school environment. Students who do not live up to their academic potential, who show signs of good or average intellectual ability but do not show adequate academic achievements are referred to as academic underachievers (Preckel, Holling, & Vock, 2006).

Underachievers tend to display negative attitudes toward school, teachers, and classes. McCoach and Siegle's (2001) study of 244 ninth through twelfth graders comparing high achieving and low achieving students' attitudes toward school, teachers, motivation and academic self-perceptions resulted in significant differences between the high achievers and low achievers on all four factors. However, academic self-perception and motivation were stronger predictors of academic achievement than attitude. The desire to regulate behavior and set goals to work toward goals, motivation in other words, is related to achievement by intervening in the relationship between perceived academic competence and classroom performance (Bouchey & Harter, 2005). Regarding academic self-concept, it has been documented that underachievers have a lower self-concept than do achievers, but not necessarily lower academic self-perceptions (McCoach & Siegle, 2003).

Successful students are organized, goal driven, inquisitive, strategic, proactive, and efficient (Zimmerman, 1998, 2002; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986, 1988). They possess self-regulatory strategies that are based in their beliefs about their capabilities. In addition to being self-regulated, these students must also possess the belief that they can use these strategies to be successful academically (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Students' self-efficacy for self-regulated learning

is relative to the motivation and achievement in diverse academic areas and students at all levels. Academic self-efficacy is defined as a belief that one can successfully carry out given academic tasks at designated levels (Schunk, 1991). When self-efficacy is high, more challenges are pursued and students strive to achieve goals. However, when self-efficacy is in doubt, failure is perceived as the likely outcome, and little effort follows. Poor academic achievement is one of the strongest predictors of high school dropout (Battin, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989).

Motivation and Attitude/Engagement

The concept of motivation, in an educational environment or not, has been studied from many different perspectives. “One of the most prominent academic problems plaguing today’s teenage youth is a lack of motivation toward academic activities” (Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2003, p. 567). Motivation to perform well at school can be influenced by how much students value school, recognize the importance of an education, and identifying long-term career goals. These are protective factors against school failure (Phalet, Andriessen, & Lens, 2004). Current theories of motivation are based on the concept of intention (Lewin, 1951). The self-determination theory adds an additional distinction that classifies motivational behaviors into those of intentional or motivated (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991), in the arena of education, is focused primarily on promoting an interest in learning, the valuing of education, and having confidence in one’s academic capabilities. Motivational behavior can be affected by intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, or amotivation.

Intrinsic motivation can be defined as engaging in a task for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the task. Intrinsically motivated students engage in activities

that interest them, without material rewards and incentives to coax them. Simply, intrinsic behaviors are performed purely for the joy and satisfaction of performing them (Deci et al., 1991). However, some intrinsically motivated behaviors are regulated either by self-volition or control from within a sense of interpersonal compliance (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Extrinsically motivated behaviors, however, are performed not out of interest but in return for some type of reward or compensation (Deci et al., 1991). Within extrinsic motivation are several subcategories of extrinsic motivation, categorized by levels of self-determination and internalization: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Internalization is the process through which people regulate their decisions to perform activities and tasks not because of external forces but because of internal processes (Schafer, 1968). External regulation presents itself as a behavior being prompted by an external condition such as a reward or punishment, but the reason for performing the behavior has not been internalized. Introjected regulation is displayed when one engages in an activity or completes a task in order to comply with internal pressure or guilt (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Identified regulation occurs when one comes to value the behavior and has accepted and can identify with the benefits of the regulatory process. Integrated motivation is much like intrinsic motivation in that the behaviors are autonomously self-regulated. However, they are different in that intrinsically motivated behaviors are driven by interest in the activity itself whereas activities that are characterized by being personally important for a specific outcome fall into the integrated regulation category (Deci et al., 1991).

Amotivation must be considered to completely understand human behavior.

Amotivation is defined as one being disconnected between his/her behavior and

outcomes. There is an experience of incompetence and lack of control. Amotivated behaviors are neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated. There are no rewards, either intrinsic or extrinsic, and participation in the task will eventually cease (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). Amotivation can be seen in many ways as similar to learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) since the individual will experience feelings of incompetence and loss of control. Vallerand and Bissonnette (1992) administered motivation questionnaires to first semester students from a junior college that had enrolled in a particularly difficult language course to determine the role of intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivational styles as predictors of behavior persistence. As expected, students who persevered and finished the course were found to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation toward academics. Students whose actions were extrinsically motivated and self-determined performed positively while those who were not self-determined did not fare as well. Students displaying amotivation behavior rated negatively in persistence of academic goals (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). Eccles and Wigfield (1985) simply defined motivational constructs with two broad questions: "Can I succeed on this task," and "Do I want to succeed on this task?" (p. 187). These two questions incorporate the theoretical motivational constructs such as self-efficacy theory and intrinsic motivational theory (Eccles et al., 1993).

Regarding attitudes and engagement, Holmes and Matthews (1994) evaluated data from studies identified as meeting their selection criteria in an effort to determine the effect of grade-level retention on elementary and/or junior high school students. From those studies, they found that students who were retained had lower self-esteem and increased negative attitudes toward school as compared to their non-retained counterparts. Suldo et al. (2008) stated that focusing on student attitudes is a wise

allocation of effort and time given that “cognitions are more amenable to change than other achievement-related factors such as intelligence (p. 81). Jerald (2006) stated that given that high school dropouts have been a concern for more than 40 years, and that dropping out has consistently been linked to student disengagement, it is surprising that the field of early indicators is underdeveloped. School engagement, or a lack thereof, has emerged as a formidable factor in student dropout. Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1996) stated that important evidence for understanding the cumulative process of dropping out is omitted when younger adolescents are overlooked. Therefore, early dropouts who left between eighth and tenth grades were the focus of their study of the causes of early dropout among race-ethnic and gender groups. Student data for the study was taken from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. Teachers, the school principal, and parents of the student participants were administered detailed questionnaires. Students were administered a separate dropout survey. Results indicated that 51% dropped out because they simply did not like school. Forty-four percent indicated they were failing in school, and 34% indicated that they could not get along with teachers. One-third reported they could not keep up with the school work and one quarter of them reported they did not feel like they belonged in school. Their disengagement led them to an unwillingness to put forth academic effort. This process led to a cycle of failure that ended with dropping out. Students who are most detached from school have little confidence in their academic ability (Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). As seen in Table 2, a student survey administered yearly to all eighth-grade students in a middle school of the targeted district, illustrates the perspectives in student beliefs in engagement, relatedness, and interesting and beneficial instruction. Survey questions 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, and 13 measure student engagement. An average of 51% of students over a 3-year period disagreed that

their classes were interesting and fun. Survey questions 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, and 11 measure the challenge of coursework and indicate a 3-year average of disagreement of 16.9% that their classes were challenging (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2010).

Experiencing course failure in the middle grades is a strong predictor of eventually dropping out because a course failure is something that dramatically dampens a young adolescent's perceived control and engagement and can also be directly caused by low engagement. (Balfanz et al., 2007, p. 224)

Table 2

Eighth-Grade Student School Climate Survey

Student Survey Question	2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
My classes are challenging.	88.3	11.6	79.6	20.4	82.0	18.8
My teachers want me to understand what I'm learning.	90.0	10.0	87.8	12.1	86.1	13.9
My teachers expect students to learn.	97.5	2.2	95.6	4.4	95.7	4.3
My teachers expect students to behave.	97.9	2.1	95.2	4.8	95.7	4.3
My teachers spend time helping me learn.	74.3	25.7	78.7	21.3	76.8	23.2
My teachers help when students don't understand.	82.3	17.8	85.8	14.2	81.6	18.4
My teachers do a good job teaching ELA.	89.2	10.8	91.2	8.7	94.8	5.2
My teachers do a good job teaching math.	64.1	36.0	71.4	28.6	51.4	48.6
My classes are interesting and fun.	48.8	51.3	55.3	44.6	44.3	55.7
My teachers praise students for good work.	70.2	29.9	64.1	36.0	62.4	37.6
Students at my school believe they can do good work.	60.0	40.0	68.7	31.2	68.1	31.9
I am satisfied with the learning environment at my school.	74.7	25.3	73.3	26.7	71.2	28.8
Teachers and students get along well with each other.	62.1	37.8	59.7	40.3	57.6	42.4

(South Carolina State Department of Education, 2008-2010).

Relatedness Influences

Academic achievement can be affected by many different variables, such as

interpersonal relationships with parents, peers, and teachers; socioeconomic status; peer influences; and school climate (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Larose and Boivin's (1998) findings show that during developmental periods in a student's life, such as school transition, the student relies more on parents. Most of the research on parental behaviors suggests that children whose parents are actively involved in their education have children who are more motivated in school and achieve at higher levels (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Grolnick and Slowiaczek's (1994) study examined the effects of how parent involvement impacts children's school performance. The subjects were 11-14 year old sixth through eighth graders whose parents had various educational backgrounds. Parent involvement was collected from students and teachers and measured by student and teacher reports, questionnaires, and student grades. Results of the study showed parent behavior and cognitive levels had a positive impact on student perceived competence and control understanding, two variables that affect school performance.

Children whose parents are willing and able to provide support but are not coercive and controlling in their influence produce academically motivated children. Children whose parents expect them to do well in school and who have high perceptions of their children's academic abilities often have children who have high perceptions of academic ability, expect to excel, and achieve at higher levels (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982). Those students strive to make their parents proud and live up to their expectations. However, low achievers rarely describe desires to please family members and to make parents proud. Similarly, when low achievers talked about role models in their families, they were more likely than high and middle achievers to mention negative role models (Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007).

Urdan et al. (2007) conducted an exploratory study of perceived family influences on high school students' academic motivations. The study was conducted by asking high, middle, and low achieving participants open-ended questions and developing a coding scheme from their responses. Five patterns of family influence emerged: family pleasing, family obligation, family support, aversive influence, and lack of influence. Results showed that while all three achievement levels described different parental expectations, all participants said their parents wanted them to experience some success in school. That success varied from Asian American students whose parents defined success as earning an A in every class to Latino students who say their parents defined success as graduating from high school.

Academic success is also significantly affected by the student's control of his/her academic achievement (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010). One means by which students gain a sense of control is through the feedback they receive from significant others such as their parents and teachers (Fabricious & Hagen, 1984). The significance of this other person is an important mechanism for a sense of control, and this is established, at least in part, through the nature and strength of the relationship. It had been suggested that control, or helplessness, is learned by observing powerful models, such as parents (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). Considerable evidence supports the idea that parents are important in fostering autonomous academic motivation (Grolnick & Apostoleris, 2002), or achievement (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993). The level of influence of parents and friends is dependent upon the level of schooling of the student. Parents have more influence over younger children than over early and late adolescents (Goodenow, 1993).

Wentzel's (1997) study examined adolescents' perceptions of pedagogical caring

in relation to their motivation to display positive social and academic outcomes in middle school. A longitudinal sample of 248 students was followed from sixth to eighth grade. Perceived caring from teachers predicted motivational outcomes, even when students' current levels of distress and beliefs about personal control as well as previous motivation and performance were considered. Teachers who care were described as demonstrating non-biased interaction styles, developing expectations for student behavior regardless of individual differences, modeling a *caring* attitude toward their own work, and providing constructive feedback. Students' reports of teacher caring predict changes in motivational outcomes over 2 years, even after controlling for previous academic performance and perceived control. Coined as *pedagogical caring*, researchers highlight the importance of caring and closeness in student-teacher relationships (Wentzel, 1997).

As students get older, friends can have more influence over academic motivation. Peers play a significant role in student school participation and completion. While parents and teachers play a significant role in student success, Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992) stated that peers are the most powerful influence on students' day-to-day behaviors in school. They administered a two part questionnaire to high schools with predominately African American, Hispanic and Asian populations. The study showed that regardless of the parenting style or influence on the student, peers are the most potent influence on students' day-to-day behaviors. The greater the peer support, the easier the transition to middle school as compared to students who are lonely and dissatisfied with their peer relations (McDougall & Hymel, 1998). Studies show that children who are ostracized by their peers, who experience loneliness and social isolation, and who associate themselves with more disengaged peers are themselves more likely to become disengaged from academic activities and eventually leave school (Hymel, Comfort,

Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996). Deviant friendships in adolescence explain low levels of school achievement over and beyond parental SES, and adolescents' peer group characteristics predict school engagement over and beyond parents and teachers involvement (Kindermann, 2007).

Behavior

Student suspensions during sixth grade foreshadow future suspensions in seventh and eighth grade (Wald & Losen, 2003). In a study of the overrepresentation of minority students with discipline consequences, Skiba and Peterson (1999) found that suspensions have been shown to be a moderate to strong predictor of dropping out of school, especially for ethnic minority students. Theirot and Dupper (2010) followed fifth graders of an elementary school for 2 years, using discipline data to explore the differences and types of discipline infractions between elementary and middle school as well as the different ways that the schools responded to the varying types of student infractions. Results showed that given the mix of student developmental changes, social and peer pressures, and educational demands of middle school, disciplinary problems are associated with the transition from elementary to middle school. Outcomes showed that there was a dramatic increase in discipline problems in middle school compared to elementary school. Based on this study's findings, students in middle school are more prone to engage in the category of fighting. The question that emerged was whether students are worse behaved as they enter middle school or whether the middle school environment bears stronger consequences and is arbitrary. "Since offenses are more open to individual interpretations and are dependent on the tolerance of the adult who is witnessing and reporting the students' behavior, it cannot be concluded that students' actual behavior is worse, excluding fighting" (Theirot & Dupper, 2010, p. 216).

Because discipline referrals and suspensions increase when students reach middle school, more research is needed to completely evaluate the transition from elementary school to middle school in relation to discipline in order to effectively intervene (Hirst, 2005). Other factors such as a student's SES and gender, school characteristics, and teacher attitudes also have been linked to differences in discipline referrals and outcomes (Gay, 2006). Balfanz et al.'s (2007) research investigated how early in the middle grades a substantial number of students can be identified who, without intervention, will be in danger of not completing school, and what role disengagement plays in falling off the graduation path in middle school. His study of sixth graders found that unsatisfactory behavior grades in any subject in the sixth grade significantly reduced the chances that sixth graders would graduate from school within 1 year of expected graduation (Balfanz et al., 2007). Additionally, poor behavior grades combined with course failures magnified the chances of student dropout. In one survey of teachers about grade retention, 74% stated that overage students cause more behavior problems than other students in Grades 4-7 (Tompchin & Impara, 1992).

School Environment

The school environment recurs in multiple studies as a central theme in all factors of student challenges. It has an influence on the academic achievement, motivation, engagement, and behaviors of students (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). In their study of fifth graders transitioning into sixth grade, Theirot and Dupper (2010) found that factors within the middle school environment include multiple sets of behavioral and classroom rules and expectations entering into a much larger and impersonal environment. Classmates and teachers change on an hourly basis, there is pressure to meet the new academic demands of middle school and to accomplish such

basic tasks as studying, taking notes, taking tests, and having to make new friends. Additionally, middle schools tend to emphasize student performance and whole-class instruction rather than task-oriented individualized or small-group activities (Alspaugh, 1998). Eccles et al. (1993) highlighted the differences between elementary and traditional middle school environments. Middle schools are larger and therefore less personal than elementary schools. Middle level teachers are often specialize in content-area and have a higher teacher to student ratio in the classroom with less time per class period as opposed to elementary self-contained classrooms. Eccles et al. (1993) contended that this lack of sustained time with students affects the middle level teacher's ability to develop relationships and trust. Balfanz et al. (2007) concluded that two clear paths emerge when considering student disengagement from school: one stemming from academic struggle and failure and another rooted in behavioral reactions to the school environment. Disengagement from school, lack of positive relationships with peers and school personnel, low motivation, and grade retention are gaining ground as underlying reasons students do not complete their high school education (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Interventions

Middle schools are charged with the goal of preparing students for successful high school careers and ultimate completion of high school culminating in the awarding of a diploma. Finding and implementing a program that can help middle schools successfully accomplish this task for overaged eighth graders is a challenging endeavor. Currently, considerably more is known about who drops out than about effective intervention programs (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). The majority of interventions in place have focused on remediating specific dropout predictors, such as low attendance and academic performance. Although research supports the idea that these variables should be targeted,

there is little evidence to suggest that these programs change dropout rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Additional research is needed to identify effective interventions that lead to more positive academic outcomes (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). McCoach and Siegle (2001) stated that “researchers should investigate whether interventions that increase students’ academic self-perceptions or their self-regulatory skills can also improve their school performance (p. 75). Ziomak-Daigle (2010) suggested that preventative strategies are scarce in the literature, particularly from the guidance perspective. Rigorous data on the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs is particularly lacking, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). In a study of alternative strategies used to reduce school dropouts in 10 urban school districts, Hoyle and Collier (2006) found a lack of mention of instructional initiatives for early intervention and dropout prevention as well as the neglect to mention the minimum strategies linked to the 15 strategies recommended by the National Dropout Prevention Center. However, in a study of federally funded intervention programs performed by Dynarski and Gleason (2002), four middle school programs with intensive approaches to at-risk students were highlighted. Three of the programs served overaged students by attempting to accelerate their academic progress in order to catch up to their peers. The treatment group was found to be half as likely to drop out and completed more than a half grade more of school as compared to the control group (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

The targeted district in the piedmont area of South Carolina wanted to reduce the number of overaged eighth-grade students in its middle schools who are prone to behavior and academic challenges, as well as being at risk of dropping out when reaching high school. In the 2011-2012 district improvement plan one of the goals was to decrease

the number of dropouts by 5%. A district policy change in 2009 increased the required number of courses successfully completed for grade promotion in middle school from three core courses to four core courses (language arts, math, science, and social studies). In the summer of 2010, students in Grades 6-8 failing three or less courses were allowed to attend summer school in order to promote to the next grade. Eighth graders who failed all four core courses were sent to an off-site summer school that was longer in duration of days and hours than the home school summer program. In summer 2011, due to budget constraints, all five middle schools collapsed their summer school programs into one housed at an off-site facility. To accommodate the number of students, summer school faculty, and facility capacity, sixth and seventh grade students were only allowed to take one course in summer school; eighth graders were allowed to take two courses. The researcher predicted overall higher middle level district retention rates from the 2010-2011 school year due to the changes in those two policies, ultimately increasing the number of overaged eighth-grade repeaters in consequent years.

Through a district-wide middle level acceleration program, the district implemented the Back-On-Track program in 2006 to meet the students' needs for academic acceleration and an age-appropriate academic setting. While the initial causes of student decline in the transition year from elementary to middle school may factor into academic, motivational, and behavioral challenges, the influence of not transitioning to the next level with peers creates another devastating dynamic to the academic, motivational, and behavior issues for the student (Roderick, 1994). There is strong evidence showing that students who have been retained tend to drop out because of the age difference between themselves and their peers and the ensuing lack of fit between the peer group and classmates (Fernandez, Paulsen, & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989).

The district has five middle schools that each has an average of 10-15 overaged eighth graders per year. Many of these students have academic, motivational, and behavioral challenges that have caused them to be grade delayed in earlier years of school. Because they are older than their grade level peers, concerns arose that these students are at risk for more behavioral and academic issues in the eighth grade which could cause them to fall further behind and increase their risk for dropping out. Students dislike being “too old” for the class (Hahn, 1987, p. 259). While the estimates may vary, close to 30% of 12-14 year olds in the United States in the 1990s were overage for their grade, most likely caused by earlier retentions (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Along with the national trend, the targeted school system was faced with trying to provide alternatives for students who are at risk of dropping out. In this study, the researcher examined the effectiveness of the Back-On-Track program regarding students’ academic self-perception and persistence, attitudes toward school, teachers and classes, and motivation. Results of the study were shared with the program’s director and district level administration.

The setting of this study is a suburban Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accredited school district in the piedmont area of South Carolina with a student population of 17,400 and teaching faculty of 1,340. It is one of four individual districts located in one county. Sixty-five percent of the certified faculty members have Master’s degrees or higher. The district consists of an early childhood development center, 17 elementary schools, five middle schools, three high schools, a career and technology center, and a focused learning facility that houses adult education, a parent resource center, and three alternative school programs. Demographically, the district is 54% Caucasian, 35% African American, 6% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian, 1.5% American

Indian, and 2% Other. Fifty-two percent of students are on subsidized lunch and 14% of students have disabilities.

Understanding that the trajectory to dropping out does not start in high school, the targeted district put into place the Back-On-Track program in 2006 for middle school students, specifically overaged (15+ yrs) eighth graders, at the Right Choices Learning Center. The Right Choices Learning Center is an educational facility in the district that houses New Beginnings, an alternative setting for high school students that struggle to flourish in the traditional setting, have to work, are parents and need flexible hours to earn high school credit, or for students that have a desire to accelerate their graduation date by taking additional coursework at night. This facility also houses the district's Adult Education program; Parent Power, a parent resource center; as well as New Dawn, a dropout prevention program for expelled students. Additionally, its property also houses Bounce Back, a behavioral alternative school for fifth graders and middle school aged students. In 2006, the Back-On-Track program was implemented to target overaged eighth graders in the middle schools. These students are more than likely overaged because of retention either in the elementary school and/or the middle school. The table and figure (Table 3 and Figure 1) below indicate that the total middle level retention rate for all three grade levels in the targeted district was 3.9% in 2008-2009, 4.5% in 2009-2010 and 9.24% in 2010-2011. Until the 2010-2011 school year, those averaged statistics were just slightly above the state rate of 4% (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2007). As predicted by the researcher, the 2010-2011 middle school retention rate was considerably higher, making it troublesome and warranting continued action on the part of the district.

The purpose of this study was to formatively evaluate the Back-On-Track

program that has been in place in the targeted district for five years to determine if the program is effective in improving the attitudes, motivation and academic self-perception of the targeted middle school students by providing overaged eighth-grade students the opportunity to attend the program with smaller class sizes, less transition, and age appropriate peers. The study attempted to determine if empowering students with the extrinsic motivation of getting back on grade level with their peers provided enough intrinsic motivation to modify attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. Completion of Back-On-Track allowed these students to transition into On-Track, an alternative setting for ninth graders, which in turn allowed them to accelerate to join their grade level peers at the appropriate attendance zoned high schools.

Table 3

Retention Rates by Middle School in Targeted District

	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Middle School A	0.7	0.7	2.14
Middle School B	1.0	1.0	3.37
Middle School C	0.8	1.5	2.53
Middle School D	1.0	0.6	0.3
Middle School E	0.4	0.7	0.9

(South Carolina State Department of Education, 2008-2010).

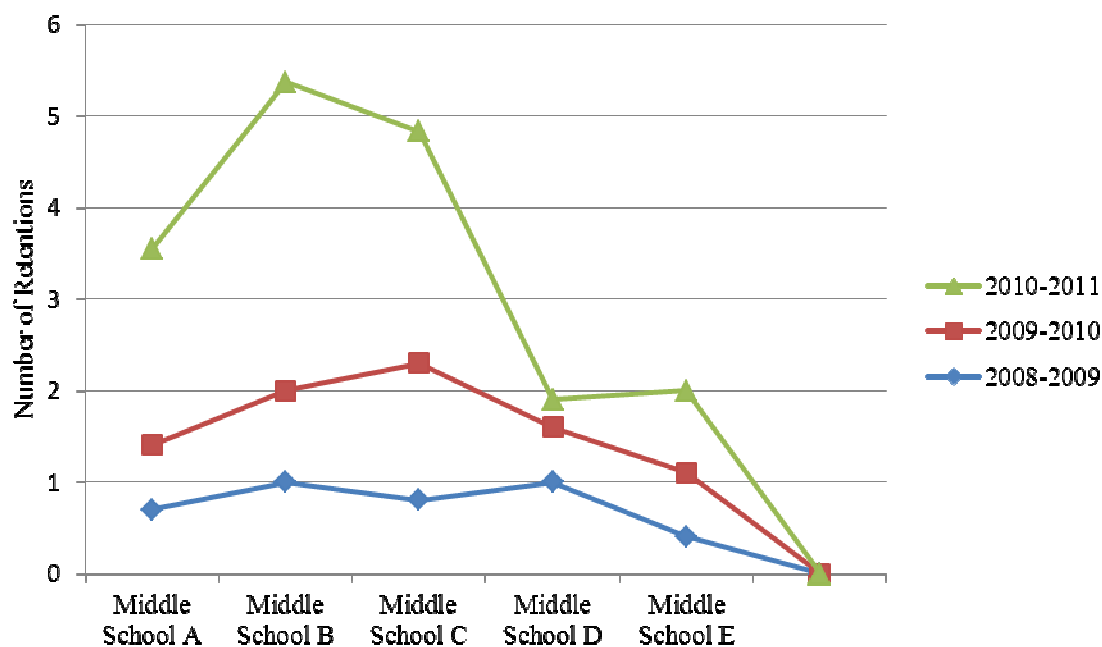


Figure 1. Retention Rates by Middle School in Targeted District

Research Questions

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Back-On-Track program for the 2008- 2011 school years through a mixed methods approach that included administering a pre and post school attitude assessment survey to present program participants; administering an academic motivation survey to former program participants; administering a teacher perception survey; and conducting interviews with focus groups of present and past program participants, home school teachers, and the program teacher and director. Additional data was gathered by performing on-site field observations of the program. The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
2. What resources does this school system possess that enable it to provide an

academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?

3. What are the expectations of the program? Is the Back-On-Track program following its design as planned?

4. What is the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program on student attitudes, motivation, and student academic self-perception?

This study was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources. The qualitative method of focus group discussions is used to interpret the objective data. The strength of performing focus group interviews while gathering qualitative data is that the interaction in the group produces the data (Morgan, 1997). The comparisons that participants make among each other's experiences and the opinions they express are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviors, beliefs, and motivations (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Quantitative data was gathered via surveys to capture perceptions, attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. A concurrent triangulation approach uses separate collection methods, qualitative and quantitative, to offset the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of the other (Creswell, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual frameworks for this study relate to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991) that when applied in an educational setting, primarily is concerned with promoting an interest in learning, confidence in capabilities, and the value of an education in students. Motivational behavior can be affected by the following: intrinsic motivation, defined as engaging in a task for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the task; extrinsic motivation, performed not out of interest but in return for some type of reward or compensation (Deci et al., 1991); or amotivation, defined as one being disconnected between his/her behavior and outcomes (Vallerand & Bissonnette,

1992). Additionally, Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage environment fit theory attempts to explain the motivational changes in adolescents by suggesting that motivational and behavioral declines could be associated with the fact that traditional middle schools have not provided appropriate learning environments for young adolescents.

Definition of Terms

Back-On-Track. The middle school component of New Beginnings.

Bounce Back. An alternative school for students with behavioral or criminal issues.

Common Core of Data. A program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics that annually collects fiscal and non-fiscal data about all public schools, public school districts, and state education agencies in the United States.

Dropout rate. The CCD defines a dropout as a student who was enrolled at any time during the previous school year who is not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year and who has not successfully completed school (Stillwell, 2010).

Grade retention. Repeating of a grade due to course failures, attendance, or expulsion.

Graduation rate. The percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years.

NCES. National Center for Education Statistics.

New Beginnings. A focused learning educational alternative program for high school students in the targeted district.

New Dawn. An alternative program for expelled students.

On-Track. The ninth grade component of the New Beginnings.

Parent Power. A parent resource center.

Power School. A Pearson school database program.

Right Choices Learning Center. A facility in the targeted district that houses alternative and focused learning programs.

SACS. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

SIS. Student Information System.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

United States schools did not group students by grade until the 1860s. Up until that point, teachers worked with groups of students of various ages and recorded their progress in narrative reports (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). The current model of graded education evolved from the U.S. Industrial Revolution beliefs that the standardization of methods and measured steps would equally apply to the education process. American leaders were convinced that by importing the Prussian model of graded education, students would be trained in the behaviors and methods consistent with the demands of industry (Tyack, 1974).

The American education system adopted standards for grade levels to distinguish between students who were prepared for the challenges of the next grade and those who were not, much like the quality control methods used in the manufacturing business. Some students mastered subject material easily, while others had difficulty and failed to meet expectations defined by the curriculum (Balow & Schwager, 1992). Grade retention became the commonplace solution for students who did not demonstrate mastery of the grade level objectives for promotion. However, in the 1970s, the philosophy of social promotion became prominent as being the most beneficial policy for students (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). The publication of a Nation At Risk in 1983 highlighted the demise of the American education system, pointing to the declines in academic achievement. Social promotion was blamed as one of the causes of the *dumbing down* of the standards and the decline in the American education system (Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). National initiatives such as Goal 2000 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that call for student proficiency in math and reading by the year 2014 ensure that students who do not meet the promotion standard will be retained in the

same grade (Jimerson, Pletcher, & Graydon, 2006). Retention can be perceived as a gift of time that allows students to catch up by repeating a grade (Moore, 2000; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

High school success is ultimately based on middle school success (Pytel, 2008). However, “what happens in high school often is rooted in the formative experiences that predate high school” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001, p. 764). While the focus generally has been on low high school graduation rates due to dropouts, middle school interventions are imperative in order to turn middle school students around and reduce potential high school dropout numbers. A student’s decision to drop out of high school is a process, not an event (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Dropping out is generally the end result of a long process of negative elementary and middle school experiences that begin well before the ninth grade. Potential dropouts can be spotted as early as sixth grade (Balfanz et al., 2007). A student at risk of dropping out of school is any student who, because of his or her individual needs, requires temporary or ongoing intervention in order to achieve in school and to graduate with meaningful options for his or her future (Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council, 2007). Educators believe that those students may grow out of their academic challenges when in reality they are just beginning. Schools must react quickly and aggressively when students start to show early warning signs. School personnel and counselors should be trained to identify when students begin the disengagement phase, usually in the earlier grades (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).

The focus on the middle years is vital because the adolescent years are ripe for negative changes in academic attitudes and motivation (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). Middle school aged students continue to be the underperformers of the U.S. educational

system (Balfanz et al., 2007). Dropout prevention strategies must be geared toward the middle school/junior high grades when the transition from elementary to middle school, a more challenging curriculum, a less personal environment, rapid physical and emotional changes, and growing peer pressure factor into an already challenging time for adolescents (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988). The primary purpose of identifying students at risk of dropping out prematurely or not meeting graduation requirements is to target interventions early. Armed with this information, elementary and middle level school personnel and counselors can have an impact on the dropout rate (Ziomiek-Daigle, 2010). Focusing on and actively working to address student difficulties is a more effective use of prevention resources than implementing programs to catch students after they fail and are retained (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

The stage-environment fit theory argues the importance of fit between the developmental needs of an adolescent and the educational environment into which adolescents are thrust (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). In their study of the impact of the types of educational contexts to which adolescents are exposed during the middle years, Eccles et al. (1991) cited multiple research studies in adolescent development and behavior that suggest that many middle school-aged students experience a decline in academic motivation and engagement. The declines are based on an increasing sense of self-doubt, a lack of confidence in abilities, and rising academic pressures. Additionally, their study found that the context of middle school, such as an increase in teacher control, a decrease in teacher efficacy, and the quality of the student-teacher relationship all have a negative impact on student motivation. Middle school struggles that lead to a lack of foundational skills for ninth-grade success and the difficulties that typically surface in ninth grade have been highlighted as critical points along students' educational careers (Pinkus, 2008).

Behaviors such as disengagement, apathy, or stress can be difficult to identify and target in middle school students. “Overt indicators of disengagement are generally accompanied by feelings of alienation, a poor sense of belonging, and a general dislike for school” (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004, p. 37). However, indicators of weak academic performance can provide powerful information to teachers, administrators, and parents of struggling students (Kurlaender, Reardon, & Jackson, 2008).

Factors that can be identified and addressed at the school level should be the focus of the interventions aimed at reducing school disengagement and increasing academic success. Implications for intervention programs must include an early warning system and effective strategies and plans to address the early predictors displayed by adolescents. “Local school districts have long operated intervention and dropout prevention programs, but have not conducted evaluations to study the effectiveness of their programs” (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002, p. 44).

The Alliance for Excellent Education published a report on using early warning data to improve graduation rates. It proposed using a three-tiered response to intervention approach beginning with preventative, proactive strategies to ease transitions, and focus on progressing through school. The second tier is more focused interventions addressing a smaller group of individuals who do not respond to the first-tier interventions. The small percentage of students who are not responsive to the first-and second-tier strategies are supported by individual, intensive strategies including counseling, tutoring, and mental health assistance in the third tier. For those students who do not respond to the three-tiered approach and sometimes fall into the *overaged* and *undercredited* category, they may continue their education in alternative schools or programs (Pinkus, 2008).

Retention and Retention Policies

Research from the California Department of Education in 1998 suggests that students gain no more than 1 month of academic skills during the course repetition and those gains tend to be erased within 2 years (Parker, 2001). For more than 75 years, research has shown that grade-level retention has no academic advantages for students (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). Thorndike's (1908) *Elimination of Pupils from Schools* study linked grade-level retention and dropping out of school. Goodlad's (1954) effects of promotion and non-promotion upon the social and personal adjustment of children study summarized retention research from 1924 to 1948 and showed that retention had no positive effect on achievement. According to Jimerson et al. (2002), several studies dating back to 1972 to the present have found that the strongest predictor of later dropout status was grade retention. The occurrence of retention even once between first and eighth grades makes a student four times more likely to drop out than a classmate who was never retained (Viadero, 2006).

According to the findings from the Youth in Transition Study, one grade retention increases the risk of dropping out by 40% to 50% and being two grades behind increases the risk by 90% (Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971). In a High School and Beyond Survey, sophomores who had repeated at least one previous grade dropped out at more than twice the rate of youths who reported that they had never repeated a grade (Barro & Kolstad, 1987). The National Center for Education Statistics (1992) evaluated at-risk students and found that students who had repeated a later grade (fifth through eighth grade) were nearly 11 times more likely to drop out between eighth and tenth grades as compared to those students who had never repeated a grade, indicating that early grade retention continues to emerge as a substantial indicator of later dropout. More

specifically, grade retentions between Grades 7 and 12 increase significantly the risk of later dropout (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

Roderick's (1994) event history analysis of a cohort of seventh graders found that students who have given up on school and are showing signs of dropping out while they are still in middle school will likely repeat seventh or eighth grade. Eighty-four percent of middle school dropouts and 44% of ninth-grade dropouts in the study were not promoted in either seventh or eighth grade. Additionally, Roderick's (1994) analysis found that close to 70% of students who repeated one grade between kindergarten and eighth grade dropped out compared to 27% of those who never repeated a grade. While students cannot legally drop out of school until age 16 or 17, depending on the state, Rumberger (1995) identified grade retention as the most significant predictor of middle school dropouts. Longitudinal studies following samples of students from first grade to high school in high poverty urban schools showed that retention in any grade had a negative impact on student success through ninth grade, but retention in the middle grades was particularly problematic (Balfanz et al., 2007). Barro and Kolstad's (1987) study of a cohort of high school sophomores indicated that early grade retention increased the risk of dropping out by 30% to 50%. While some dropout predictors, such as race, do not always have a high reliability in predicting student dropout, other factors such as grades, grade retention, attendance, transition, and misbehavior factors in the middle school grades have high predictability. Recent literature in the field presents conclusive evidence against retaining children. Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle, sociologists at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, tracked 790 first grade inner-city Baltimore public school students in 1982 (Alexander et al., 2001). Over the course of the years, 64% of students that were retained in grade during elementary school, and 63% of those retained

in middle school, subsequently left school before receiving a diploma. According to their study, the dropout predictor that trumps everything else is whether a student repeated a grade in elementary or middle school. Among multiple repeaters, dropout approaches a certainty: 80% overall; 94% for those retained in elementary and middle school. “Grade retention merits to be singled out as a particularly powerful predictor. “Grade retention in middle school increases the risk of dropping out nineteen fold” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 775). A meta-analysis by Holmes (1989) demonstrated the inefficacy of the practice. Analyzing 54 negative and nine positive studies, Holmes concluded that retention had consistent negative effects on students. A recommendation for retention is often rooted in symptoms rather than causes. Often grade retention is seen as a “wake-up call” for students by their teachers (Larsen & Akmal, 2007, p. 44).

Roderick’s (1994) aforementioned study on the association of grade retention and school dropouts concluded that a large proportion of the impact of grade retention on dropping out may be through the effect of being overaged for the grade. The results of the study predicted that a seventh grader 1 year overage would face more than a 50% increase in the odds of dropping out (Roderick, 1994). Being overaged for sixth grade appears to be highly predicative that those sixth graders will not graduate within 1 year of their on-time classmates (Balfanz et al., 2007). Merely the fact that retained students are overaged for their grade and peers is a major factor in the dropout rate of retained students (Roderick, 1994). Students dislike being “too old” for the class (Hahn, 1987, p. 259). Fernandez et al. (1989) compared male and female high school dropouts among Latino, non-Hispanic White and African American groups. Strong evidence found that students who have been retained tend to drop out because of the age discrepancy between themselves and their peers and the lack of fit between the dropout’s peer group and

classmates. Just being too old for the grade seems to matter (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

When middle grades repeaters are retained, they are not as far behind their promoted classmates academically as a first grader when they are retained. Grade retention takes children off the normal timetable of grade progression, complicating their social integration with their classmates. Because fitting in is, at the middle level, important physically, emotionally and socially, repeating causes these children to stand out more, further exacerbating their disengagement from school. (Alexander et al., 2001, p. 794)

Roderick (1994) contended that more research is needed if we are determining how being overage for grade and grade retention affects students' experiences in school during adolescence, middle school, and early high school. Roderick (1994) posed the question, "Does early grade retention produce negative effects on performance and attitudes toward school that students will carry with them through their school career, or does the impact of being overage for grade occur, or accelerate, during adolescence" (p. 748).

According to Jimerson et al. (2002), additional research is needed to identify effective interventions that lead to more positive academic outcomes. He also contended that more research on retention, from the student's perspective, is largely absent in the research literature. Ziomak-Daigle (2010) stated that preventative strategies are scarce in the literature. Rigorous data on the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs is particularly lacking, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center (2009). School retention policies may intensify rather than remedy the dropout problem (Grissom & Shepard, 1989). Policies that support suspension and grade retention for students who are considered not ready to advance to the next grade have been linked to higher dropout

rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

The retention policy of the district being evaluated is as follows:

Grades 6-8:

During the three years of middle school, students are required to satisfactorily complete the following core classes with a 70% (“D”) or higher final grade:

- Three classes of language arts
- Three classes of mathematics
- Three classes of social studies
- Three classes of science

Students who do not earn a passing grade during the school year in each core subject may be promoted to the next grade by satisfactorily completing a required summer school program and/or comprehensive remediation program in the following school year (*See Academic Plans for Students below*). Failure to complete the required summer school, comprehensive remediation, or other school-based intervention will result in the student’s retention in that grade level.

Students, who score “Not Met” on the end-of-year accountability test, may be promoted to the next grade as long as a *Student Academic Plan* is developed and implemented in the following year to address noted weaknesses in the subjects for which the student scored “Not Met.”

A conference with the parent and a letter documenting the retention recommendation will be sent home if retention becomes necessary.

(Targeted District Administrative Rule-IKE-R, 2008, p. 3)

Early Warning Systems

Research suggests that some students exhibit early warning signs in middle school, and in some cases, even before. A district database can track students from earlier than high school. The transition year to middle school, usually sixth grade, is a good starting point for identifying the local risk factors most predicative of whether students graduate or drop out. Middle school-level indicators can be effectively used to identify students who are at risk before they even enter high school. They then can begin to target their transition-assistance services and interventions before students begin their high school careers (Heppen & Therriault, 2009).

The Success in the Middle Act of 2011, originally introduced in 2007, and again in 2009, provides needed support to underachieving school systems. The bill provides grants to states to ensure that all students in the middle grades are taught an academically rigorous curriculum with effective supports so that students complete the middle grades prepared for success in secondary school and postsecondary endeavors. The grants also serve to improve state and district policies and programs relating to the academic achievement of students in the middle grades and to develop and implement effective middle grades models for struggling students. (National Middle School Association, 2011, ¶ 1)

The targeted district considered implementation of the Prevent program in 2011-2012, a component of Pearson's Power School student information system used in the state of South Carolina.

Most schools have a student information system (SIS) where all student data exists, the problem is that it exists in disaggregated databases. In the best cases, a time-consuming process of separately gathering and

compiling information must occur before downward student tendencies can be discovered and conclusions can be drawn.

Prevent takes care of this tedious process, collecting student attendance data, course failure rate, grade point average, behavior and disciplinary data, tests scores, and demographic data that includes gender, ethnicity, race, grade level, and poverty level. Data is shipped to us securely, and run against our proven algorithms.

The resulting information gives us something we call the Pearson Index, which is based on and validated by work done by our industry-leading psychometric team. Proven effective, this index compares the elements that research has shown to be the most likely indicators of students dropping out, weighted according to the most predictive values for each of the factors. (Pearson School Systems, 2010, ¶ 1)

In its 2010 application for federal Race to the Top funds, South Carolina developed and implemented its Student Potential Performance Snapshot (SPPS) application, which assesses several at-risk characteristics such as attendance, academics, changes in behavior, changes in family environment, illness, and others, that might predict a student's dropping out of school. Interventions are implemented immediately as the system sends up flags (South Carolina INSPIRED, 2010). With the passage of the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) of 2005, South Carolina's EEDA Coordinating Council established At-Risk Student Services to help schools and districts in accessing and implementing research-based interventions to address the needs of these students. In conjunction with the National Dropout Prevention Center at

Clemson University, South Carolina districts are piloting research-based systems that automatically flag at-risk students and provide interventions. Participating schools agree to implement an early warning data system, provide professional development on how to use the data for intervention, and monitor procedures to ensure that the appropriate systems and interventions are occurring. The Dropout Prevention and Intervention Pilot will be available to those districts with above state average rates for dropouts. One model, Graduate South Carolina, was developed in an upstate South Carolina county and consists of several research-based components: 1) early identification of at-risk students in the eighth grade, 2) a 4-week summer transition program, 3) access to a graduation coach, 4) mentors and after-school tutoring, and 5) a door-to-door dropout recovery campaign (South Carolina INSPIRED, 2010).

School Completion Programs/Interventions

Currently, we know substantially more about who drops out than we do about effective intervention programs. Most interventions have been designed to remediate specific predictors of dropout, such as poor attendance and academic performance (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). In Tuck's (1989) study of Washington, D. C. public school dropouts, it was determined that dropping out is the result of a prolonged experience of school failure and alienation, and that it is imperative that interventions must begin prior to high school. Although research supports the idea that these variables should be targeted, there is little evidence to suggest that these programs change dropout rates (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). A student at risk of dropping out is any student who, because of his or her individual needs, requires temporary or ongoing intervention in order to achieve in school and to graduate with meaningful options for his or her future

(Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council, 2007).

Effective school completion programs should have a primary focus on student engagement, specifically on finding ways to enhance students' interests in and enthusiasm for school, sense of relatedness, motivation to learn, and progress in school, as well as the value and expectations they place on school and learning (Christensen, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). In considering what makes an intervention program successful, Finn's (1989) study describes two models for understanding dropping out as a developmental process that may begin prior to high school. The frustration-self-esteem model identifies school failure as the initial point in a cycle that may perpetuate the student's rejecting, or being rejected by, the school. The participation-identification model focuses on students' participation in school, making both behavioral and emotional investments. According to this formulation, the likelihood that an adolescent will successfully complete 12 years of school is maximized if he or she maintains multiple forms of participation in school-relevant activities. The failure of a student to participate in school and class and/or extra-curricular activities, or to develop a sense of identification with school, may have significant negative consequences. Finn's (1989) study also made an important distinction by contrasting status predictor variables such as socioeconomic status, over which educators have little control, and behavioral predictor variables such as out-of-school suspensions and course failures, which are influenced by educators. Momentum has moved towards investigating alterable variables—those behaviors and attitudes that mirror students' connections to schools—because they have greater impact for interventions (Finn, 1989).

“Conceptually, promoting school completion involves more than preventing dropouts. It is characterized by school personnel emphasizing development of students’

competencies rather than dwelling on their deficiencies” (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004 p. 37). Comprehensive programs involve the family, school and community implemented over time rather than offering a single academic intervention offered at a single period of time. Effective programs also tailor interventions to fit individual students rather than adopting a *one size fits all* approach. School completion programs focus on good outcomes instead of aiming to prevent a bad outcome (Christenson et al., 2001). Similarities among effective intervention programs include strategies that focus on changing the student with counseling and social skills and then shifting to an academic focus with specialized courses and tutoring as well as the alterable variables such as attendance, grades, and attitude toward school (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).

Successful interventions do more than increase student attendance—they help students and their families who feel uneasy in their relations with teachers and peers to be connected at school and with learning (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). McPartland (1994) pointed out the need for school-completion programs to be adapted to fit particular local needs. Programs developed elsewhere cannot be duplicated exactly at another site because of the local talents, priorities for school reform, particular interests, the needs of the students being served, and the conditions of the school system will differ. Allensworth and Easton (2007) felt it was important to emphasize that dropout prevention programs that are disconnected from the core instructional program of a school are unlikely to be a good use of resources. Their study of Chicago city schools’ freshmen coursework, how it was related to graduation, and how their personal and school factors contribute to success or failure in their freshman year, stated that flexibility and tailored programs for a few students should not substitute a school’s instructional program, and all programs should be developed to align coherently with the general instructional

program at the school.

Heppen and Therriault (2009), in a report for the National High School Center, stated that gathering information about the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs and strategies is of critical importance for making a real dent in the dropout problem. Information about the dropout prevention programs provided to students should also be included in each school's and district's early warning system. This allows school and district personnel to gauge the observed success of different interventions in their own local settings. Maintaining accurate and up-to-date data about the programs in which students participate can generate usable information about the most effective strategies for keeping students in school. This information will directly benefit the entire district as well as other similar districts around the country (Heppen & Therriault, 2009). Schools clearly cannot change the background characteristics of the students they serve, but the academic experiences of students in middle school and high school can significantly improve (or undermine) their chances. School practices, resources, and critical learning conditions matter tremendously (Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008).

Accelerated middle schools are academic programs, structured as either separate schools or schools within middle schools that are designed to help middle school students who are behind to catch up with their grade-level peers, stay in school, and graduate. The programs serve students who are 1 to 2 years behind grade level and give them the opportunity to cover an additional year during their tenure in the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review of three accelerated middle school programs in Georgia, Michigan, and New Jersey addressed student outcomes in three domains: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. Two of the three programs reduced the number of students dropping

out, therefore increasing the number of students staying in school. All three programs studied found that accelerated middle schools had significantly positive effects on progressing in school. In the Georgia study, the average number of school years completed at the 2-year follow up was 8.6 for accelerated middle school students and 7.9 for control group students. The Michigan study showed, at the 2-year follow up, 7.3 for the treatment group and 6.8 for the control group, and the New Jersey study found that the treatment group of students completed 7.8 years of school compared to 7.5 years with the control group (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

A Southeastern Suburban School District's Alternative Programs

There are several alternative and focused-learning programs in this southeastern suburban district developed and implemented to provide services for students with focused and specific needs. The alternative programs offered are Bounce Back, Back-On-Track, On-Track, New Beginnings, New Dawn Academy, and Adult and Community Education. The focused learning programs are a technical/vocational center, Parent Power, and an early childhood development center. However, only the alternative programs are described here.

Bounce Back

Bounce Back is an alternative setting for fifth through eighth graders who display behavioral challenges in the classroom and/or community. Students who display discipline problems at school and are accumulating excessive discipline referrals are placed on administrative behavior contracts. Interventions at the school level such as behavior plans, counseling at the school and mental health services level, and mentoring, are put into place to address the discipline issues. If those interventions are not successful, students are referred to Bounce Back. There is no prescriptive district policy

on the number of discipline referrals a student must accumulate before being referred to Bounce Back; it is left up to administrative discretion. Each of the five middle schools in the district is given 12 slots at Bounce Back. The Director of Student Services has 10 slots at Bounce Back for students who have severe or violent criminal records in the community.

Program Qualifications of Bounce Back. After the administrator confirms a student's admittance with the program's director and informs the parent, the administrator and guidance counselor must complete an intake form, and send all student records to Bounce Back. Parents must attend an intake meeting before enrolling their student in the program at which time they receive a handbook. Bounce Back is a 6 to 18 week program, or a student may be assigned to Bounce Back for the entire or remainder of the year from the Director of Student Services. This district's administration and school board discourage expelling middle school-aged students; therefore, a number of students remain at Bounce Back for the entire school year to avoid exclusion. The facility is housed in mobile units behind the Right Choices Center. The faculty consists of a director, a guidance counselor, a certified special education teacher, four certified academic teachers, a PE teacher, a drill sergeant, and two academic assistants. Students are instructed in English, math, science, social studies, computers, and physical education using the same standards, curriculum, and materials that are used in the home school. The structure of Bounce Back resembles a boot camp. Students wear uniforms, are assigned jobs, and participate in rigorous physical activity. They are instructed by certified subject area teachers, and also use online computer-assisted instruction in the classroom. Transportation is provided to students assigned to Bounce Back. Students are put on a point system, and when they reach the top level of points, they may return to their home

school.

Back-On-Track

The Back-On-Track program for middle school students seeks to put these students back with their grade level peers by allowing them to take a high school credit Earth Science course on-site 2 days a week, 2 hours per day. If a student successfully completes the earth science course and his/her home schools' core academic courses at semester end, he/she then becomes a full-time On-Track student.

Program Qualifications of Back-On-Track. In order for a middle school student to be chosen for the Back-On-Track program, he or she must be in the eighth grade, be at least 1 year older than his or her classmates, and have been retained at least once in an earlier grade. Students are chosen by the middle school grade level administrator and guidance counselor based on those three criteria. The Back-On-Track program will only accept 12 students per middle school (5), capping the enrollment at 60 students.

Once the students are chosen, they attend a meeting with the Back-On-Track director and teacher at each school's site to orient the students on the program and inform them of the Back-On-Track program and guidelines. Those students interested in admittance to the program return for an additional meeting where parental attendance is mandatory for acceptance into the program.

Program Description of Back-On-Track. The Back-On-Track program evolved from one district middle school principal's experiment with sending overaged eighth graders twice a week to the New Beginnings facility to take one high school credit Earth Science course to encourage those students to continue with and complete their high school education. The concept appealed to the other three middle school principals, and

with cooperation and collaboration with the director of the New Beginnings and district level administrators, the four middle schools (the fifth middle school was not open yet) the following year began sending overaged eighth-grade students as well. With the program expanding, and the limited staff at New Beginnings to accommodate 50 students, a staggered attendance schedule was developed. For example, students in Middle Schools A and B attend from 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday and from 12:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday, respectively. Students in Middle Schools C and D attend from 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday and from 12:00 p.m.-2:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday, respectively. In 2008-2009, the fifth middle school opened, therefore half of the fifth school's students attend the Monday and Wednesday sessions and the other half attend the Tuesday and Thursday sessions.

Bus transportation from the home school to the New Beginnings facility is provided by the district's Transportation Department. Other than costs for transportation, the costs for the program are minimal. The students attending the Back-On-Track program are currently taught in five district middle schools by highly qualified teachers in all core academic and elective areas. The director for the New Beginnings has a doctoral degree. The teacher at Back-On-Track is a certified science teacher with a Master's degree. Of the 12 students allowed per school, a maximum of two exceptional education students are accepted due to the fact that New Beginnings only has one special education teacher with a maximum student load of 30. That special education teacher serves not only the Back-On-Track students but all students attending On-Track, New Beginnings, New Dawn Academy, and Bounce Back. Students at Back-On-Track are instructed in Earth Science using an online textbook computer-based instructional

program.

Students who attend Back-On-Track attend for one semester. In addition to the science class at Back-On-Track, students are also attending the core academic and elective courses at their home middle school. If at the end of the semester they have successfully completed the Earth Science course and have successfully passed their home middle school courses for the semester, they become full-time On-Track ninth-grade students. They attend school at the On-Track campus at the New Beginnings' facility. While they are not physically on the middle school campuses, fall enrollees are still considered eighth-grade students and take the eighth-grade end-of-year state test, PASS (Palmetto Assessment of State Standards). At the successful completion of On-Track, students should be able to start high school as tenth graders. Table 4 illustrates the high school progression of Back-On-Track/On-Track students by cohorts. Relationally for the study, this provides data on students who have successfully completed the program and re-entered high school back on an on-time graduation schedule.

Table 4

Cohort High School Progression Report for Back-On-Track/On-Track Programs

Back-On-Track/ On-Track	Fall 2007/ Spring 2008	Fall 2008/ Spring 2009	Fall 2009/ Spring 2010
	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
Graduate(d) on time	15%	25% (Expected)	37% (Expected)
Still Enrolled	19%	28%	43%
Not Enrolled	67%	47%	20%

New Beginnings

New Beginnings offers a flexible learning environment that is both self-paced and mastery-based. The curriculum is presented through a virtual medium with teacher assistance. All teachers are highly qualified and certified in the content area in which they teach. New Beginnings also offers flexible scheduling that can accommodate numerous student schedules. Evening classes make it possible for students to continue taking classes within their home high school during the day while attending Right Choices in the evening. The evening sessions also allow for meeting the needs of students that may work full-time during the day or who may be the primary child care-giver for their child.

New Dawn Academy

The New Dawn Academy is an academic intervention initiative that serves a variety of students in Grades 9-12 who have been either expelled from the district high schools or who are entering the district from other alternative programs. Students must complete an application and go through an intense approval process. Students work in a structured yet engaging learning environment. The self-paced curriculum is computer-driven and facilitated by highly qualified teachers. The curriculum offers both challenging and comprehensive units of study delivered in a variety of formats. The New Dawn Academy is located at The Right Choices Center.

Adult Education

The Adult and Community Education program (ACE) is the primary provider of adult education classes in the targeted district's county. Over 1,000 students enroll in the district's ACE programs every year at several different locations during the day and evening. As the largest adult education program in the area, it offers a variety of programs that provide educational opportunities in basic education, computer skills

training, literacy, citizenship, and personal enrichment at sites throughout the district. Its mission is to provide responsive, accessible, and flexible educational programs that prepare adult learners to contribute, advance, and succeed in the 21st Century workforce, to be responsible family and community members, and to embrace learning as a lifelong process.

The Adult and Community Education staff is committed to assisting adult students in the transition to postsecondary and career/technical education, employment, productive daily lives, pursuit of lifelong learning, and educational enrichment. It offers day and night classes to help students prepare for the General Education Development (GED) test. The ACE's High School Credit program offers credit courses needed to meet graduation requirements for a high school diploma. The program offers training and administration of the WorkKeys ® assessment required for a Career Readiness Certificate. The ACE's ESOL program helps adults with limited English skills to understand and develop skills needed to live in an American community.

Review of Successful Intervention Programs

Studies show most students who drop out begin thinking of leaving school early in their scholastic careers (Jimerson et al., 2002). Dropping out of school is not the result of an abrupt decision but an overt response to the impact of circumstances over a student's lifetime (Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council, 2007). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), in the 2007-08 school year, 64% of districts reported having at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students that was administered by either the district or another entity. Alternative schools and alternative programs differ in that schools are housed in a separate facility where students are removed from their regular schools, and programs are usually housed

within regular schools in a school-within-a-school setting (NCES, 2010). As illustrated in Table 5, in 2007-2008, there were 645,500 students enrolled in public school district alternative schools and programs, with 558,300 attending district-administered schools and programs and 87,200 attending schools and programs administered by another entity (NCES, 2010).

Table 5

Total Number of Students Enrolled in Public School Districts Attending Alternative Schools

District characteristic	Students enrolled in alternative schools and programs administered solely by the district			
	Total number of students enrolled in public school districts who attend alternative schools and programs administered by the district or another entity	Number of students	Number of students enrolled in alternative schools and programs who receive special education services	Number of students enrolled in a public school district who attend alternative schools and programs administered solely by another entity
All public school districts	645,500	558,300	90,300	87,200
District enrollment size				
Less than 2,500	98,200	75,600	12,100	22,700
2,500 to 9,999	181,500	150,500	23,900	31,000
10,000 or more	365,700	332,200	54,300	33,600
Community type				
City	222,600	197,800	32,100	24,800
Suburban	232,500	200,500	32,900	32,000
Town	89,000	77,800	12,400	11,100
Rural	101,400	82,100	12,900	19,300
Region				
Northeast	76,000	56,000	13,000	20,000
Southeast	141,400	125,100	25,200	16,300
Central	150,200	122,300	20,800	27,900
West	277,900	254,900	31,300	23,000
Percent combined enrollment of				
Black, Hispanic, Islander, or American Alaska Native students				
Less than 6 percent	60,000	44,600	7,800	15,400
6 to 20 percent	127,600	106,600	18,500	21,000
21 to 49 percent	175,400	148,500	25,600	26,900
50 percent or more	282,600	258,600	38,400	23,900

(NCES, 2010).

Yet, most efforts to identify potential dropouts and implement initiatives to address their needs occur at the high school levels. Instead of waiting until the end of the educational process to help students at risk, educators at each grade level should look for, and address, all dropout indicators (Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council, 2007). Dynarski and Gleason (2002) reviewed findings from an evaluation of federally funded dropout prevention programs. Two features surfaced in all the programs evaluated: programs tried to help students overcome personal and social barriers, and programs tried to create smaller and more personal settings in order to provide a sense of security for students. They identified smaller class sizes, more personalized settings, and learning plans individualized for each student as characteristics that lowered the dropout rate for alternative middle school programs. Most alternative programs are either a smaller version of the host school on the host school campus, or are housed in separate facilities. The study determined that dropout prevention programs were implemented more smoothly when they were not trying to affect how regular schools worked (Hershey, Adelman, & Murray, 1995). Evaluation results of state alternative middle schools show that intensive intervention can keep students in school longer and possibly accelerate their progress in school. The middle level years, Grades 6-8, have been identified as a pivotal juncture where the level of attention and positive feedback directly influences students in one direction or another (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Regardless of the approach of the program, the evaluation found that the selection of the teachers had more of an impact than did the choice of the curriculum (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

In 2006, the South Carolina State Department of Education identified 16 middle and high schools, known as the Palmetto Priority Schools, that had failed to make expected progress as defined by the State Board of Education regulations. One of the four

components of the collaboration strategies for intervention of The Palmetto Priority Schools is a dropout prevention initiative. The component requires each school to have access to a Star Academy Dropout Prevention Initiative. The South Carolina Student Loan Corporation made a \$3 million donation in 2007 to help fund a Star Academy program at each Palmetto Priority School to work with overage students who are at risk of dropping out. The Star Academy program was also identified as an early dropout intervention program in South Carolina from the At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide (Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council, 2007). As an identified and effective program using these criteria, the Star Academy program was chosen by the researcher for a site visit to be made to one program and reviews of others around the state. The programs included in the guide have been categorized into two tiers, exemplary or promising, based on the National Dropout Prevention Center's strategies and research assessments of the data available for each program. Programs with more extensive and detailed evidence and research-based documentation were placed in the exemplary tier. Models with less documentation were placed in the promising tier. The purpose of these reviews and site visit was to allow the researcher the opportunity to both gather information about the individual programs and to see the key strategies of the National Dropout Prevention Center in practice. A site visit to The Star Academy in one upper state county in South Carolina provided the researcher with a visual reference or standard in which to compare the Back-On-Track program.

The Star Academy

The Star Academy Acceleration Program (Students and Teachers Acting Responsibly), created by the PITSCO Corporation in Pittsburg, Kansas, is a school-

within-a-school program that is based on the practice of differentiated learning and productive communication methods and is sensitive to the operational constraints of the parent school. The Star Academy Program is a school-within-a-school for disengaged students (typically overage eighth and ninth-grade students) who have previously failed one or more grades. Students engage in non-traditional instructional methods to complete two grades in 1 year. The program engages students in standards-based curriculum in science, mathematics, English, and social studies. Students experience a rigorous progression of varied instructional methods incorporating hands-on learning, real-world learning experiences, individualized instruction, team instruction, and personal development. Additionally, parents, teachers, and students are taught how to communicate effectively and work together as a team in a safe, happy, and productive environment.

The Star Academy Program successfully reengages students who may have lost hope or experienced personal, academic, or social challenges in their lives. The Star Academy Program provides these students with an opportunity to recapture a sense of purpose, regain their self-esteem, and succeed academically. (Star Academy Program, 2010, ¶ 3)

Benefits of a Star Academy Program. The program accelerates learning of overage eighth- and ninth-grade students who have previously failed so that they can successfully enter the tenth grade. It reduces the number of overage students dropping out of the eighth and ninth grades as well as engages overage students in relevant, career linked learning. The program employs differentiated instructional methods. Its goals are also to increase student attendance from the prior school year as well as reduce negative behavioral incidents from the prior school year (Star Academy Program, 2010).

Environment. The Star Academy program's unique, student-centered environment changes the way students think about academics. The environment, provided as an integral component of the academy, is warm and non-threatening. Each classroom supports one-on-one computing, experiential learning, and small group and whole-class activities.

The program resides in a learning environment that sparks fundamental changes in student attitudes about academic requirements for students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Star Academy Program environments are installed for the school and may accommodate 40, 80, or 120 students. Each environment promotes student success and changes student perception and attitude toward academic achievement (Star Academy Program, 2010).

Curriculum. The curriculum delivered to students in the Star Academy Program ensures academic success in critical core content areas aligned to state academic standards. The curriculum includes courses in science, mathematics, English/language arts, and social studies. The Star Academy Program curriculum is delivered through a blend of instructional methods through diagnostic/prescriptive lessons, cooperative learning pairs, small group sessions, and end-of-course preparation (Star Academy Program, 2010).

The Star Academy in Upper State South Carolina

The Star Academy in an upper state South Carolina county is in its fifth year of operation and serves at-risk students in Grade 8. It is housed in a Career Center and shares facilities with the technical school housed there. All students have failed one or two grades and must be recommended by their middle school guidance counselor and meet strict criteria. The program draws from five area middle schools and feeds into

seven area high schools. It can accommodate up to 80 students, but generally serves 60 students (T. Manigault, personal communication, March 10, 2010). In 2008-2009, the district had a student enrollment of 67,903 students, with an ethnic make-up of 59.9% White, 26% African American, 10.4% Hispanic, 2.6% Asian, and 0.2% Native American. The annual student dropout rate was 3.9%.

Philosophy and Mission. The Star Academy seeks to engage students by employing learning activities in all three learning domains: psychomotor, affective, and cognitive. The academy seeks to reengage the parents/guardians in the education of their children by providing them with tools to become a part of the process. Further, it seeks to enable the teacher to become a facilitator and mentor, thus structurally shifting the focus of responsibility for learning and behavior to the student. Because the program is housed in the Career Center, it provides students with the close proximity of technical career courses. “It gives them the opportunity to see careers so that they can connect their education and what they’re doing in the classroom with job opportunities later on” (T. Manigault, personal communication, March 10, 2010).

The mission of the Star Academy is to prepare students for the world of work by emphasizing the importance of doing their best, understanding that they will be lifelong learners, and encouraging them to attend college or trade school. Their goals are to (a) provide students the opportunity to catch up with their peers by earning up to eight Carnegie Units toward graduation, (b) provide assistance in reducing the number of dropouts by motivating students to higher levels of achievement through relevant academic courses, (c) provide career guidance for prospective students, (d) assist students in determining an occupational or career choice, (e) invite business and industry to discuss strategies for success, (f) evaluate current programs and create new programs to

better meet the needs of students and community, and (g) develop proper work attitudes, safety habits, and work relationships in the workforce.

Organization and Structure. In 1 year, the Star Academy takes students through a rigorous course of study that allows them to complete enough core subjects to complete ninth grade and enter tenth grade. The school employs one site specialist director, four academic teachers, one special education teacher, and support staff. All teachers are licensed in the content areas they are teaching.

The school's curriculum is set up on a 4x4 block schedule. Four 80-minute classes are offered each semester, enabling the student to earn up to eight credits in 1 year. During the first semester students take preparatory English and math classes that count as electives courses along with high school credit science and social studies classes. Second semester, they complete the English I and Algebra I high school credit courses. All classes contain space for up to 20 students. Each classroom has 10-20 laptop and/or desktop computers containing the Synergistic or Pace Ware software used by the teachers and students for instruction. Lunch is provided at the location. The school day starts at 8:50 a.m. and ends at 3:10 p.m. (Upstate South Carolina School District, 2010).

The county Star Academy program data shows that 84% of the students enrolled in its two Star Academy locations successfully completed the program. Eighty four percent of enrolled students advanced to tenth grade; 6% advanced to ninth grade and two students had perfect attendance. In its third year in this county, 75% of the students who participated in Star Academy were back in their home schools and on track to graduate (Upstate South Carolina School District, 2010).

Additional Upper State South Carolina County Star Academy

The Star Academy in another upstate South Carolina county is designed to meet

learning needs by providing students with Carnegie units, study skills, character strengths, and career-related direction for a successful pathway to high school graduation. The Star Academy is a technology-delivered and managed program of studies designed to enable older middle school students to recover academically and be empowered to pursue career and technical education beginning in the tenth grade. The Alternative Center aims to demonstrate best practices by increasing the academic and personal performance of students whose needs are best met in an alternative learning environment. Its motto is “Failure is Not An Option.”

Strategies and Components. Strategies include active learning, alternative schooling, career and technical education, educational technology, and individualized instruction. Courses in science, mathematics, and language arts integrate the use of computer software designed to guide students through highly interactive, hands-on problem-solving activities aligned with the South Carolina Curriculum Standards. A Freshman Success course is offered to help strengthen students’ study skills and build interpersonal communication and character skills. The Star Academy includes four teachers and a youth intervention specialist to mentor groups of 20 students, provide direction instruction, and facilitate the administration of curricula. Targeted groups include seventh- and eighth-grade students who have been retained in one or more grades, who are between 14 and 17 years old, who are experiencing academic difficulties, who are disengaged from the learning process or who have stopped learning, and who may possess other factors that put them at risk of dropping out of high school.

Midlands County South Carolina Star Academy/Learning Center

The Star Academy Program in this midlands county of South Carolina is a school for disengaged students (typically overage eighth- and ninth-grade students) who

have previously failed one or more grades. Students engage in non-traditional instructional methods to complete two grades in 1 year. Their motto is “Where Opportunities Lead to Change.” The Learning Center Star Program was the winner of the 2010 Crystal Star Award given by the National Dropout Prevention Center for its performance in accelerating their students and preventing dropouts in their program.

The program employs standards-based curriculum in science, mathematics, English, and social studies. Students work through a rigorous progression of multiple instructional methods incorporating hands-on learning, real-world learning experiences, individualized instruction, team instruction, and personal development. Additionally, parents, teachers, and students are taught how to communicate productively and work together as a team in a safe, happy, and productive environment.

The Learning Center Star Academy Program successfully reengages students who may have lost hope or experienced personal, academic, or social challenges in their lives. The Star Academy Program provides these students with an opportunity to recapture a sense of purpose, regain their self-esteem, and succeed academically.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Of the many predictors of the student dropout crisis, one of the factors that consistently rises to the top is grade retention (Balfanz et al., 2007). Students who are older than their classmates, either because they have been retained, entered school late, or were placed below grade level when entering school, may feel different than their classmates and become discouraged (Alexander et al., 2001). Being overage for grade has more of an impact during adolescence because of how they are viewed by their peers and forming a sense of identity and school attachment are of paramount importance to students (Roderick, 1994). Research on student dropout consistently finds that high school students who dropout are more likely than graduates to be overaged for their grade or to have repeated grades before entering high school (Roderick, 1994).

According to the findings from the Youth in Transition Study, one grade retention increases the risk of dropping out by 40% to 50% and being two grades behind increases the risk by 90% (Bachman et al., 1971). In a High School and Beyond Survey, sophomores who had repeated at least one previous grade dropped out at more than twice the rate of youths who reported that they had never repeated a grade (Barro & Kolstad, 1987). The National Center for Education Statistics (1992) evaluated at-risk students and found that students who had repeated a later grade (fifth through eighth grade) were nearly 11 times more likely to drop out between eighth and tenth grades as compared to those students who had never repeated a grade, indicating that early grade retention continues to emerge as a substantial indicator of later dropout. In a study of the effects of individual, familial, and school characteristics on school dropout by Rumberger and Larson (1998), results indicated that students retained before eighth grade were more than four times more likely than non-retained students to not complete high school or receive a

graduate equivalent diploma (GED). Students who only fail classes closer to the transition to high school are at a greater risk of not completing high school than those who only fail classes earlier (Silver et al., 2008).

In the *Silent Epidemic* study by Civic Enterprises for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it was discovered that federal evaluations of more than 100 dropout prevention programs showed that most programs did not reduce dropout rates significantly. It also acknowledged that while dropping out is a long process of disengagement, there are relatively few studies that follow students over time to determine which past experiences of students cause them to drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The General Accounting Office has said, “While states and school districts have implemented numerous interventions designed to increase high school graduation rates, few of these programs have been rigorously evaluated, and [the Department of] Education has done little to evaluate and disseminate existing research” (Shaul, 2005). Therefore, while it is imperative that school districts have programs in place to address the needs of overaged middle school students, it is incumbent upon the districts to ensure the programs are effective (Heppen & Therriault, 2009).

Dynarski and Gleason (2002) questioned whether middle school programs should leave the basic structure in place but give supplemental help, or if should they change the school experience by having students attend separate or isolated schools. Their examination of middle school dropout prevention programs found that middle schools with facilities that were physically separate from the regular middle school and whose services were more intensive were more effective. The programs taught students in smaller classrooms and primarily served students who were overaged for their grade level and were attempting to accelerate their academic progress to catch up with their peers. A

suburban school district has implemented the Back-On-Track Program as an alternative program for overaged middle school students to accelerate through eighth grade in an attempt to catch up to their grade level peers.

Statement of the Problem

Retention during the middle school years is of noteworthy concern because it is associated with a multitude of damaging outcomes in areas such as academic achievement and self-efficacy, attitude, and motivation towards school, discipline issues, and ultimately, non-completion of high school (Balfanz et al., 2007). “Adolescents’ beliefs about personal achievement and general attitudes toward school, which inevitably influences motivation to expend effort on academics, are an understudied but important group of predictors,” (Suldo et al., 2008, p. 69). The present study investigated specific predictors related to the interruption in school grade progression due to academic underachievement, resulting in retention at the middle school level. Specifically examined was the impact of students’ academic self-perceptions, attitudes, and motivations towards school on potential grade retention at the middle school level. The study also examined student perception of the effects of retention and experiences in an acceleration and transition program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to formatively evaluate the Back-On-Track program that has been in place in the targeted district for 5 years to determine if the program is effective in improving the attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception of the targeted middle school students by providing overaged eighth-grade students the opportunity to attend the program with smaller class sizes, less transition, and age appropriate peers. The study attempted to determine if empowering students with the

extrinsic motivation of getting back on grade level with their peers provided enough intrinsic motivation to modify attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. Completion of Back-On-Track allowed these students to transition into On-Track, an alternative setting for ninth graders, which in turn will allow them to accelerate to join their grade-level peers at the appropriate attendance-zoned high schools. The evaluation consisted of an experimental-comparison design that included conducting focus group interviews with and administering surveys to all consenting program participants, and comparing the attitudes and motivation towards school of program participants before and after completing the Back-On-Track program. Additionally, it surveyed former Back-On-Track participants to determine the academic persistence of those students and if participation in the program had an impact on their academic persistence.

Rationale of the Study

The management-oriented evaluation approach is designed for those in decision-making capacities such as administrators, managers, and boards. This approach to evaluation supports the evaluation of a program's components as it operates, changes, or grows. It is the preferred model for most managers and administrators in that it places emphasis on cogent information for decision makers (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). The management-oriented evaluation model was used for this evaluation since the researcher is in a middle level administrative position in the targeted district.

The program evaluation model used was Stufflebeam's CIPP Model (Stufflebeam, McKee, & McKee, 2003). The CIPP evaluation model is a comprehensive framework for guiding evaluations of programs, projects, personnel, products, institutions, and systems (Stufflebeam, 2002). This model's core concepts are context, input, process, and product evaluation. The context portion of the study was to define the

contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students. The input evaluation evaluated resources, budget, existing model programs, strategies being implemented, and potential barriers. The process evaluation evaluated program implementation, program design limitations, and stakeholders' assessments of the program's progress. The product evaluation evaluated the outcome of the effectiveness of the program by assessing the program's impact, effectiveness, sustainability, and transportability (Stufflebeam, 2002). The purpose of performing a program evaluation is to reach a valid, definitive conclusion regarding questions related to a program's overall effectiveness (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004).

The study took place in a natural setting, interviewing and surveying students and teachers at their home middle schools. Observations and interviews with Back-On-Track faculty took place at the Back-On-Track facility. A mixed methods strategy was used to address the research questions in this study. According to Creswell (2009), when planning a mixed methods study four aspects that impact the design of procedures should be taken into consideration: timing, weighting, mixing, and theorizing. In this study, the concurrent triangulation strategy was used. In this approach, the qualitative and quantitative data collection occurred at the same time. However, a concurrent triangulation approach uses separate collection methods, qualitative and quantitative, to offset the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of the other (Creswell, 2009). In a study to validate the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised's ability to measure motivation and attitude, Suldo et al. (2008) examined a sample of 321 average performing high school students' academic and behavioral school records as well as survey results. In this study, the mixing of the data from the two methods occurred when the researcher compared the qualitative results and the quantitative data in a side-by-side

discussion, providing qualitative findings that were either supported or unconfirmed with quantitative results. In a concurrent study, the quantitative and qualitative data collection can be presented in separate sections, but the interpretations and analysis combines the two forms of data to look for similarities in the results (Creswell, 2009). The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
2. What resources does this school system possess that enable it to provide academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
3. What are the expectations of the program? Is the Back-On-Track/On-Track program following its design as planned?
4. What is the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program on student attitudes, motivation, and student academic self-perception?

Participants

In order to answer the research questions of the study, four groups of stakeholders were invited to participate in the study. The invited participants included nine certified Back-On-Track/On-Track staff members including the director, 58 eighth-grade content area teachers at the five home schools of the students in the program, and present and former students in the program. Of the nine Back-On-Track/On-Track certified teaching staff members, two have bachelor's degrees, six have master's degrees. The director and one teacher have doctorate degrees. Of the 58 home school certified teachers, 20 have bachelor's degrees, 38 have master's degrees, and 16 are National Board Certified. The number of students participating in the Back-On-Track program varies by year, but the average number of students in the program in the fall semester averages 50, or 10 per

middle school. The researcher used a blend of purposive and convenience sampling strategies for this study. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) noted that purposive sampling involves subject selection based specifically on the purpose of the research and the availability of subject information to the researcher. Convenience sampling involves the selection of subjects who are readily available to the researcher (Patton, 2002). Because the program that was the focus of the study serves a specific population of students and their teachers, and both the students' and teachers' information was readily accessible and available due to the fact that the researcher works in the targeted district, this blend of sampling strategies was used.

Prior to the study's implementation, the researcher obtained permission to perform the study from the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, and the Assistant Superintendent for Planning and Programs in the targeted district in which the researcher is employed (Appendix A). Additionally, the researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board of Gardner-Webb University by completing the training protocol, submitting an application to conduct research with human subjects along with the consent form, copies of interview and survey questions, and permission to use published instruments. The researcher informed the principals of the four other middle schools in the district, the director of the Back-On-Track program, and the principals of the three high schools of the study via email and in person. The researcher is the principal of the fifth middle school. The researcher invited by email the eighth-grade teachers and the Back-On-Track/On-Track teachers to participate in the study and included the purpose of the study, the participants involved, the potential benefits and risks inherent in their participation, and an assurance of confidentiality in the introductory information.

Identified overaged eighth-grade students selected for the program from each middle school attended an orientation session at the home middle school presented by the program's director and lead teacher. Sampling of participants was not necessary due to the small size (50) of the pool of participants. At the initial meeting, the researcher introduced herself to the students, parents, and guardians. At that point they were informed of the rationale and purpose of the study, given a handout with the information in written form, and asked to participate in the survey and focus group sessions. The researcher obtained parental consent (Appendix B) for student participation in the study at the meetings.

Primary data collection strategies used in this study were responses from focus group interviews with teachers and students, surveys with teachers, current program participants and former participants, and field observations. The names of the staff members, directors, and students involved in the study were not used in order to protect the participants' anonymity.

Gathering and Treatment of Qualitative Data

A total of 67 staff members of the Back-On-Track/On-Track Program and eighth-grade home school teachers from the district's five middle schools were invited via email to participate in focus groups to determine the perceptions of the program. The questions for the teacher and staff focus group sessions were constructed to collect feedback from program participants to gather their perceptions on the Back-On-Track program's impact on student motivation, attitude, and academic self-perception, closely resembling the research questions of the study in order to maintain the common themes of the study.

Focus Groups. The researcher and proxy conducted focus group interviews with the Back-On-Track/On-Track staff members and director, home school teachers, and

current and former students in the program. The researcher trained one evaluator to act as a proxy for the researcher when conducting focus group interviews at the researcher's school of employment. The researcher met with the evaluator to clarify the terminology and purpose of the focus group instruments to assure inter-rater reliability. The researcher provided and discussed literature in the proper way to conduct focus group interviews in order to obtain the most valuable feedback. Additionally, the teacher focus group questions were piloted to determine the content validity of the focus group questions. A panel of experts—including four middle school principals, one alternative school director, and one director of student services—made judgments to establish the content validity of the focus group questions. The questions were then field tested with five staff members not involved in the study. The same process occurred with the student focus group questions, having six students not participating in the study validate the content of the questions. These students' parents gave consent to pilot the questions with their students. Constructive conversations regarding the components of the interview and survey questions occurred.

The strength of performing focus group interviews while gathering qualitative data is that the interaction in the group produces the data (Morgan, 1997). The comparisons that participants make among each other's experiences and the opinions they express are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviors, beliefs, and motivations (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Additionally, content analysis provides a systematic technique for compressing many words of text into a few categories based on coding (Krippendorff, 1980). It also allows inferences to be made which can then be corroborated using other methods of data collection (Stemler, 2001). The Back-On-Track/On-Track staff and the eighth-grade home school teachers were asked to respond

during focus group interview sessions to the following questions:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for overaged middle school aged students?
2. What resources does this school system possess that enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
3. Elaborate on the Back-On-Track/On-Track program. Is it following its design as planned?
4. What is the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program on student attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception?
5. What aspects of the program do you think are effective? Do you think there are aspects that are ineffective?
6. What has been your experience with the program?
7. In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school? What supportive or unsupportive actions or statements have you experienced?

The researcher, via email, invited Back-On-Track and home school teachers to participate in the focus groups near the end of the 2011 fall semester. A week prior to the interview date, an email was sent to remind the teachers of the date, time, and place of the interviews. Voluntary attendance indicated consent to participate. Introductory comments included the purpose of the study, risks and benefits of participating in the study, contact information, and permission to be audiotaped (Appendix C). Focus group interview sessions were arranged and conducted by the researcher and the researcher's proxy. Focus groups can be composed of four to 12 people. Krueger and Casey (2009) noted that the groups must be small enough for everyone to have the opportunity to share insights

yet large enough to provide diversity of perspectives. The director and teachers at Back-On-Track were purposefully interviewed separately in order to provide an interview environment that is conducive to candid answers. As Kruger and Casey (2000) noted, the purpose of focus groups is to promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which people can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about a topic.

The focus group interviews took place during the teachers' planning period in a conference room on a prearranged date near the end of the first semester in 2011, and were audio taped, transcribed by the researcher, and verified for accuracy by the focus group members. Accuracy verification was accomplished by using member checking to determine the accuracy of focus group findings. The researcher emailed the transcription to the focus group members for their perusal to determine accuracy. After accuracy of the transcripts was verified, the researcher read the transcripts multiple times, identifying and coding themes that emerged from the reading. Initially, the researcher approached the focus group responses using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With open coding, the researcher examines the responses, looking for patterns and themes not with set categories but rather by seeing what patterns and themes emerge from the responses (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004). According to Creswell (2009), traditionally in the social sciences, the researcher allows the codes to emerge during the data analysis.

The researcher then determined, by clustering similar topics, common themes to the responses. In an effort to extract patterns, Strauss and Corbin (1998) stressed that the researcher ask basic questions such as the who, what, when, where, how, and why of the data. In order to obtain reliability, the researcher used cross-checking by having another researcher read the transcripts and assign codes, reaching agreement on the codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended, for good qualitative reliability, that coding be in

agreement at least 80% of the time. Frequency tables based on focus group question responses were created to determine and display the themes. Themes that emerged from the focus group interviews determined teacher perceptions of the program and its effectiveness in increasing student motivation towards school and teachers, and student academic self-perception.

Strength codes were also used in the analysis process of focus group question responses. Krippendorff (1980) stated that strength coding provides qualifications toward subject matter and is used as a measure of intensity or conviction. Weak responses to emergent themes, such as short or vague answers, were coded as weak. Responses that provided specific examples or instances were assigned a code of moderate, and strong responses were measured by the amount of elaboration and examples related to the themes. Strength code tables were used to display the strength of the themes identified which assisted the researcher in determining the strongest themes emerging from the data.

Shortly after beginning and before ending the program, students who agreed to participate were placed in focus groups of five to six students and asked focus group questions (Appendix D) similar to those from the teacher focus group questions. The researcher and proxy used conference rooms at the students' respective schools and questioned students during their morning enrichment period. Each focus group session lasted 45 minutes to an hour and was audio taped, transcribed by the researcher, and verified by the students for accuracy.

In addition to questions about the program, students were also asked questions in the focus groups about their thoughts on retention, transition, and the opportunity to accelerate in the Back-On-Track program. Former students were asked about their

experiences in high school and the impact the Back-On-Track program had on their attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. Theme identification and strength were determined through the same processes mentioned above, and are displayed on frequency tables. The researcher identified commonality of themes or lack thereof from both parties, therefore providing qualitative data from student and teacher perspectives. Agreement or lack thereof indicated if the Back-On-Track program is having an impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception.

The researcher also made two qualitative observations, at program start and end, at the research site in order to record notes for documentation on the school environment, academic instruction, and on the behaviors and activities of the study participants. This information was added to the description of the program portion of the study.

Gathering and Treatment of Quantitative Data

A total of 67 staff members of the Back-On-Track/On-Track Program and eighth-grade home school teachers from the district's five middle schools were invited via email to participate in and complete a researcher developed survey in order to determine the perceptions of the program. The questions on the teacher and staff survey were constructed to collect feedback from program participants to gather their perceptions on the Back-On-Track program's impact on student motivation, attitude, and academic self-perception, closely resembling the research questions of the study in order to maintain the common themes of the study.

Surveys. The teacher survey included a question that asked the subjects if they were willing to participate in the survey and focus group with other teachers from their school. Their completion of the survey indicated their consent to participate in the survey. Additionally, there was an introduction e-mail that introduced the researcher and study

procedures. The researcher created the survey based on the research questions using an online survey tool and contained questions that included rating scales and multiple choice questions. The survey questions solicited responses that fell into one of five categories on a 5-point Likert (1932) scale: 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. A link to the survey was disseminated via email to all survey participants, and responses were collected via the collection response feature available on the online survey tool. The researcher indicated that the survey would take 10-15 minutes to complete and asked that the survey be completed within 2 weeks. A reminder email was sent after the first week to encourage completion of the survey.

The researcher piloted the survey 2 months in advance of the survey to determine the content validity of the survey instrument. A panel of experts—including four middle school principals, one alternative school director, and one director of student services—made judgments to establish the content validity of the survey instrument. Comment boxes were provided after each question for feedback, questions, and concerns. A pilot sample of sixth- and seventh-grade teachers selected from a middle school was asked to participate in the pilot study of the survey. Teachers were encouraged to provide feedback on the process of completing the survey, the content and format of the survey, and any other concerns about the survey. Comment boxes were provided after each question for feedback, questions, and concerns. Teachers were given 1 week to complete the online pilot survey.

The researcher-developed survey was distributed via email to each staff member near the end of the 2011 fall semester with questions that are correlated to the research questions (Appendix E). All staff members of the Back-On-Track/On-Track Program and the home school teachers had the opportunity to respond to the survey questions. The

survey contained 13 questions that required responses on a 5-point Likert scale of 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. The survey was distributed electronically via email by the researcher to the staff of the Back-On-Track/On-Track Program and home school teachers using an online survey tool. Basic descriptive statistics determining the mean and mode were used to analyze the data collected from the survey. The survey program analyzed the percentage data from the survey which allowed the researcher to identify dominant responses that were triangulated with focus group response themes.

In order to gain additional information on student attitude, motivation, and academic perceptions about school from the students' perspective, a pre and postsurvey was administered to students currently in the program early in the 2011 fall semester. The students completed demographic information and the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised (McCoach & Seigle, 2003) (Appendix F) at pre and post Back-On-Track intervals. Permission from Dr. Betsy McCoach was obtained to use this survey in the study (Appendix G). In a study to determine the validity of the SAAS-R, Suldo et al. (2008) used the school records of 321 students of a rural high school in a southeastern state to obtain information about academic functioning as indicated by attendance, in-school behavior, and grades (Suldo et al., 2008). The SAAS-R is a 35-item questionnaire that measures characteristics commonly associated with underachievement: low academic self-perception (7 questions), negative attitude toward school (5 questions), negative attitudes toward teachers and classes (7 questions), low motivation and self-regulation (10 questions), and low goal valuation (6 questions) (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Whitmore, 1980). On the survey to be administered to the students, questions 1, 7, 11, 12, 13, 25, and 28 measured students' attitudes toward their

teachers and classes; questions 4, 5, 9, 15, and 35 measured students' attitudes toward school; questions 2, 3, 10, 16, 31, 33, and 34 measured students' academic self-perception; questions 14, 17, 19, 22, 23, and 32 measured students' goal valuation; and questions 6, 8, 18, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 29, and 30 measured students' motivation and self-regulation.

The SAAS-R uses a 7-point Likert (1932) scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). Adequate reliability and validity have been established for the SAAS-R. The Flesch-Kincaid formula used to calculate readability determined that the SAAS-R directions and survey items were at a 5.1 reading level (Suldo et al., 2008). Regarding content validity, factor analysis supported the five factor structure of the SAAS-R (Suldo et al., 2008). Internal consistency reliability coefficients were at least .85 for each of the five factors (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Suldo et al. (2008) suggested that practitioners consider administering the SAAS-R to students identified as at risk for school failure to pinpoint specific attitudes in need of intervention as well as school and district-wide programs to increase positive attitudes among all students. Student surveys (SAAS-R) were administered by the researcher or proxy electronically using an online survey tool in a computer lab following consent to participate within the week of the initial meeting in September 2011, and within a week of completing the program in December 2011. Students were reminded their participation was voluntary and they may opt out of participation.

As with the teacher survey, basic descriptive statistics involving the mean and mode were used to analyze the data collected from the survey. The survey program analyzed the percentage data from the survey which allowed the researcher to identify strengths in the responses which were triangulated with themes from focus group

interviews at both administrations to add validity to the study. The researcher coded the questions by the five measurement factors on the survey and displayed the results on percentage tables. Comparison percentage charts from the preadministration survey results and postadministration survey results displayed any changes by percentages in student attitude toward teachers, student attitude toward school, academic self-perception, goal valuation, and motivation and self-regulation. Determinations of the effects of the Back-On-Track program on students' attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception can be concluded from the comparison of the pre and posttest results by calculating percentages of increases or decreases in each of the five factors measured on the SAAS-R. In order to compare student answers to the questions from pre and postadministration of the survey to determine if academic self-perception, attitudes toward school, teachers and classes, motivation and self-regulation, and goal valuation have decreased, increased or remained the same since attending the Back-On-Track program, a two sample t-test was performed. For comparison, an accepted alpha of .05 was used to determine whether there was a significant difference in student perception of the variables between the two survey administrations. Tables displaying mean, standard deviation, t value and P value for both survey administration findings are provided.

Former students of the Back-On-Track program were located through On-Track student information to determine high school attendance, and using purposeful and random sampling, were contacted at a school visit by the researcher in the 2011 fall semester for consent to participate (Appendix H) in a survey based on the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) (Appendix I) developed by Vallerand, Blais, Briere, and Pelletier (1989) to determine academic persistence of former participants. Dr. Robert Vallerand gave permission to use the AMS in this study (Appendix J). If any student was

under 18 years of age, parental consent was sought by sending a consent letter along with an explanatory letter home with the student. A follow-up letter was mailed home 1 week after the school visit (Appendix K). The survey was administered when the researcher accompanied the Back-on-Track teacher and guidance counselor on an On-Track student monitoring visit to the high schools after the first grading period of the semester.

Purposeful sampling was used because individuals were chosen due to the fact that they had experienced a central phenomenon. Purposefully selecting participants involves those that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions (Creswell, 2009). Random sampling of this group involved choosing every fifth student from a list provided by Back-On-Track staff of former Back-On-Track/On-Track students from each high school. The AMS is a multidimensional scale that measures five types of academic motivation, and was used in research studying high school and college students' motivational profiles of the self-determination theory using a person-oriented approach (Vallerand, Ratelle, Guay, Larose & Senecal, 2007). The AMS has been found reliable and valid (Vallerand et al., 1989), and in the study cited, Cronbach's alphas were .93, .78, .85, .64, and .85 for intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, external regulation, and amotivation (Vallerand et al., 1989).

The survey was prefaced by asking students to answer the questions based on their experiences while at Back-On-Track and On-Track programs. From the survey, questions 2, 8, 14, and 19 measured former students' intrinsic motivation to know; questions 4 and 10 measured intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation; questions 3, 9, 15, and 20 measured former students' extrinsic motivation-identified regulation; questions 6, 12, 17, and 22 measured former students' extrinsic motivation-introjected regulation; questions 1, 7, 13, and 18 measured former students' extrinsic motivation-

external regulation; and questions 5, 11, 16, and 21 measured former students' amotivation. Questions 23 and 24 asked former students about their motivational experiences at Back-On-Track and On-Track.

Descriptive statistics involving the mean and mode were used to analyze the data collected from the survey. The survey program analyzed the percentage data from the survey which allowed the researcher to identify strengths in the responses. Data gathered from the survey determined former students' attitudes and motivation toward school and determined if the program had an impact on their decision to stay in school. The number of former students who indicated whether the program had an impact on their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to work or not work toward graduation was an additional indicator of the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student motivation and attitude towards school. Data gathered from the survey is displayed on a percentage table by the five factors measured on the survey.

The researcher triangulated the data to achieve validity of data and results. For this study, triangulation was accomplished by gathering data from different sources about the Back-On-Track program, including transcripts of student and teacher focus group interviews, analysis of the teacher survey, student attitude assessment and academic motivation surveys, and field observations.

Delimitations

The study was conducted in the researcher's natural setting with a small population of program participants within five middle schools and the program setting. The research was restricted to focus group sessions with volunteer participants, survey data, and two field observations. The research focused on motivation, attitude, and academic self-perception, but did not attempt to factor in whether the program had an

impact on academic performance or behavior. Additionally, while gender and race data were gathered, attitude, motivation and academic self-perception data were not disaggregated by gender or race. The research study focused only on the 2011 fall semester of the Back-On-Track program, limiting the longitudinal scope of the research.

Limitations

The researcher is an administrator in a middle school in the district, which could bias some information gathered in the focus interviews. The researcher trained and used a proxy to conduct interviews and surveys on the researcher's campus to avoid bias as much as possible. The researcher interviewed and surveyed students and teachers at other middle school sites. The study was limited to responses received from those present and past students in the Back-on-Track and On-Track programs whose parent/guardian provided consent for student participation. Between the pre and postsurvey administrations and focus group sessions, students could have dropped out of the Back-On-Track program. In addition, the ability to generalize the results to other alternative schools is limited due to the hybrid nature of the program. It is neither a separate facility, full-time program in the initial phase, nor is it a school-within-a-school program. Most programs are either one or the other, so an equal comparison was difficult to achieve. The study was limited to responses received from those present and past students in the Back-On-Track program whose parent/guardian provided consent for their student to participate, therefore limiting the size of the sample. Former students who were 18 years of age and were interested in participating in the focus group sessions and interviews gave their own consent.

Table 6

Data Source Chart

Research Questions	Data Sources	Analysis
1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an acceleration program for middle school aged students	Teacher/Student Focus Group Question 1	Frequency & Strength charts
2. What are the capabilities of this school system to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?	Teacher Focus Group Question 2	Frequency & Strength charts
3. Is the Back-On-Track/On-Track program following its design as planned?	Teacher/Student Focus Group Questions 3,5,6,7	Frequency & Strength charts
4. What is the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program on student attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception?	Teacher/Student Focus Group Questions 4,5,6,7 Teacher Survey SAAS-R AMS	Frequency & Strength charts Percentage/Mean Charts & Statistical Data

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to formatively evaluate the Back-On-Track program that has been in place in the targeted district for 5 years to determine if the program is effective in improving the attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception of the targeted middle school students by providing overaged eighth-grade students the opportunity to attend the program with smaller class sizes, less transition, and age appropriate peers. The study determined if empowering students with the extrinsic motivation of getting back on grade level with their peers provided enough intrinsic motivation to modify attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. Completion of Back-On-Track allowed these students to transition into On-Track, an alternative setting for ninth graders, which in turn allowed them to accelerate to join their grade-level peers at the appropriate attendance-zoned high schools. The evaluation consisted of an experimental-comparison design that included conducting focus group interviews with and administering surveys to all consenting program participants, and comparing the attitudes and motivation towards school of program participants before and after completing the Back-On-Track program. Additionally, former Back-On-Track participants were surveyed to determine the academic persistence of those students and if participation in the program had an impact on their academic persistence.

This chapter reports the findings from the school attitude and motivation survey instruments, teacher perception survey, and focus group sessions. A qualitative analysis of student and teacher focus group findings is presented as they are related to the research questions. A quantitative analysis of the School Attitude Assessment and Academic Motivation surveys of current and former students as well as the teacher perception survey are presented as they relate to the research questions.

Student Focus Group Analysis

Eighth-grade students in the program participated in focus group interviews. The focus group discussions not only provided the human reaction to the study's research questions but it also enhanced the statistical analysis of the study by providing meaning and depth. Focus group questions were related to the research questions as well as the questions on the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised in the categories of academic self-perception, attitude towards school, classes and teachers, goal valuation, and motivation. Additionally, some focus group questions asked specifically about the Back-On-Track program's effectiveness in the same categories. Students currently in the program participated in an initial focus group discussion in the early weeks of the program, and were reconvened in the last 2 weeks of the program for a follow-up focus group session to determine if their perspectives of the program and levels of attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception had changed during the course of the program.

The analysis of the focus group discussion responses determined dominant themes by listening for and documenting word choice recurrence, the number of students responding, and statements that corroborated or disputed the statistical analysis of the school attitude assessment survey. The focus group sessions with the students were not only to determine if student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception changed while in the program, but also to determine if student and teacher perception of the program's impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception were comparable or contradictory. Additional questions were asked of the students to solicit answers to the essential questions about attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception, and are incorporated into the categories in which they correlate. They will not be reported as separate questions. *Italicized statements represent terminology used as*

suggested by an eighth-grade student pilot group.

The focus group interview questions used with the student group in the initial phases of the program are as follows:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? (*Why do we need a program for overaged eighth-graders?*)
2. Do you think the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will follow its design as planned? (*What are your expectations of the program?*).
3. What do you think the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will be on student attitudes? On student motivation? And on student academic self-perception?
4. What aspects of the program do you think will be effective? What aspects do you think will be ineffective?
5. What has been your experience with the program? (*Do you know of anyone who has been a student already? Friend? Family? How did you hear about it?*)
6. In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school? What supportive or unsupportive actions or statements have you experienced?
7. How do you feel about being behind in school? What caused you to be behind in school?
8. What were the hardest aspects of moving from elementary to middle school and what do you think will be the hardest part of moving from middle school into high school?
9. What are your feelings about being able to attend the Back-On-Track/OnTrack program and join your classmates? Do you have any concerns/worries about the moving

up so quickly?

10. How do you describe your experiences in school so far?

11. What motivates you to keep going to school? What un-motivates you?

12. How is school related to your future after high school?

Of the 50 students currently in the Back-On-Track program, 33 students (66%) participated in the initial focus group interviews and 31 students (62%) participated in the concluding focus group interviews. Of the 33 students participating in the initial focus group sessions and survey administration, 36% were female and 64% were male. Forty-two percent were African American, 27% were Caucasian, 15% were multi-racial, 9% were Hispanic, and 6% were American Indian. Of the two students who did not participate in the postprogram focus group interviews, one voluntarily withdrew from the program, and one was removed by the Back-On-Track director. Survey results indicate that study participants were overaged for eighth grade because 48.5% of them repeated a grade in elementary school, 48.5% repeated a grade in middle school, and 3% started elementary school late. Four students indicated that they transferred in from other states and were required to repeat a grade in elementary school, a parent held the student back from starting school because of physical size, or the student had a late birthday requiring a delay to the start of school relative to same aged peers. Students' responses to the research questions on the need for a program for overaged eighth graders, the expectations of the program, the impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception, as well as student perspectives on retention, transition, and acceleration were analyzed for themes and strength of themes. This information is displayed in frequency tables, and also was analyzed as to whether the responses validated the responses from the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised.

Postprogram student focus group interviews were conducted within the last week of the program in the 2011 fall semester. The researcher contacted the grade level administrator and guidance counselor to arrange a meeting time during student enrichment periods at each middle school. Follow-up questions were based from results of the preprogram focus group interviews done within the first week of the program to determine changes of perceptions of the program and its impact on students' attitude, motivation, and academic achievement and self-perception and are displayed in frequency and strength code tables. The researcher used the open coding process, which allowed the response themes to evolve from the analysis of the focus group transcripts, using in vivo terminology (Creswell, 2009). With a total of 31-33 students participating in five focus group sessions, a theme was determined strong if it was mentioned 10 or more times; a moderate theme was determined if it was mentioned six to nine times, and a weak theme was determined if it was mentioned five or less times.

Research Question 1

What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? Focus group results during the preprogram sessions from the research question pertaining to the need for an acceleration program for overaged eighth graders revealed three recurring themes: getting back in the right grade, being too old/too mature for middle school, and being physically too big for eighth grade. Analysis of the discussion showed the strongest result regarding the need for the program was to get students "back in the right grade." Student comments consistently indicated that being too old for eighth grade was a source of embarrassment and a constant concern for them, resulting in a moderate response. During the discussions, one student commented, "You get discouraged when you see others younger than you in the same

grade.” A female student interjected by saying, “When you tell them how old you are, they say you’re stupid; it’s embarrassing.” Students being too old and too mature had a moderate response, while being physically too big was also mentioned, but had a weak response. Table 7 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 8 presents the strength codes.

Postprogram interview results show that students continued to present a strong response to the need for the program by offering an avenue for students to accelerate to their correct grade and a moderate response to being too old and mature for eighth grade. Likewise, teachers expressed concern about the level of physical and social maturity of overaged eighth graders in teacher focus group sessions. In the postprogram interview, being physically too big for middle school was only mentioned one time, indicating it continued to be a weak concern for students.

Table 7

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “Why do we need a program for overaged eighth graders?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Get back in right grade	14	16
Too old/too mature	8	9
Physically too big	4	1

Table 8

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “Why do we need a program for overaged eighth graders?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Get back in right grade	Strong	Strong
Too Old/too mature	Moderate	Moderate
Physically too big	Weak	Weak

Research Question 3

What are the expectations of the program? Is the Back-On-Track/On-Track program following its design as planned?” From the students’ preprogram responses to the focus group question asking them their expectations of the program and if they thought the program would follow its design as planned and explained to them, four themes emerged: going to high school if successful, graduating on time, having less distractions, and agreeing that the program would follow its design as planned. Students were enthusiastic about the opportunity to accelerate, get into high school, and being able to graduate on time, or earlier than the current graduation trajectory, indicating a strong response. They anticipated that by being in a smaller environment with more mature students there would be less distractions and “drama.” Students felt as if the program would follow its design as planned and explained to them at the orientation meeting. Several students were still confused about their ninth-grade homeroom assignments while taking tenth-grade classes the following year and HSAP (High School Assessment Program) administration. Table 9 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 10

presents the strength codes.

Postprogram focus group interview sessions showed that students felt strongly that the program maintained its integrity, followed its design as planned and explained, and lived up to expectations. Most students expected to move on to high school and graduate on time after completing the program, however their idea that the program would be less distracting diminished towards the end of the program. During the conversations, a female student commented, “I kinda got side-tracked a little bit.” One male student said, “I got almost too focused on Back-On-Track and almost let my grades go here (at home school), but I’m ok.” Another male student said, “I’m bored here (at home school); I don’t feel like going to class here,” indicating that the Back-On-Track program created a distraction for students as they anticipated their departure from their home middle schools.

Teacher focus group results confirm that for some students, their participation in the Back-On-Track program had caused a distraction for the students at their home schools. One teacher said, “It’s almost like they’re working hard for Back-On-Track but it’s like, you know, they’ve forgotten about their classes here or they don’t care about them.”

Table 9

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What are your expectations of the program? Do you think the Back-On-Track program will follow its design as planned?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Going to high school if successful	11	15
Graduating on time	12	18
Less distracting	11	4
Will follow its design	8	12

Table 10

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What are your expectations of the program? Do you think the Back-On-Track program will follow its design as planned?”

Themes	Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Going to high school if successful	Strong	Strong
Graduating on time	Strong	Strong
Less distracting	Strong	Weak
Will follow its design	Moderate	Strong

Research Question 4

What do you think the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will be on student attitudes? On student motivation? And on student academic self-

perception? The focus group question during the preprogram session that asked for student perspective on the program's potential to have an impact on student attitudes, motivation, and student academic self-perception is displayed in three separate tables. Students' comments revealed four themes regarding the program's impact on student attitude: positive attitude about school, better behavior in school, excited anticipation of Back-On-Track, and perceived increase in maturity. Strong student responses indicated that the opportunity to be in the Back-On-Track program had improved their attitudes because as one student said, "It makes me feel better about myself." Another student commented, "My attitude has changed because I wanted to be in Back-On-Track; I want to be in high school with my friends." Statistically, preprogram data measuring student attitude toward school confirms the focus group finding of feeling out of place in a middle school setting with a survey mean result of 4.3, indicating uncertainty when asked if their school is a good match for them.

A strong response evolved from the theme of looking forward to being in the Back-On-Track program. One female student said that she normally would hate Mondays but now she looks forward to them because her group attends Back-On-Track on Mondays. Another female student commented, "I've been wanting to be in Back-On-Track since sixth grade when I saw the eighth graders getting on the bus to go. This is a chance of a lifetime." Several students said they were aware of the Back-On-Track program from friends and family members who had attended. As sixth graders, they heard about the program and had been looking forward to admittance into the program when they reached eighth grade. Students also felt that just being in the program made them feel more mature than their current eighth-grade peers. Table 11 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 12 presents the strength codes.

During the discussions, several students indicated that their behavior would improve because they did not want to be removed from the program, and that when their behavior would start to deteriorate, their teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors would remind them of their attendance in the Back-On-Track program. A male student said, "I used to get in trouble all the time, but when I heard I was going to Back-On-Track I stopped getting in trouble so I can get in my right grade."

Postprogram focus group interviews determined that students continued to feel strongly that their attitudes toward school had improved since being in the program, due to the fact that they knew that successful completion of the program would place them in On-Track. When asked what impact the Back-On-Track program had on their attitude towards school, student comments ranged from "I like school more better," to "It makes me want to learn more; I'm not as distracted. It makes me feel more successful." A female student said, "I would probably still go to school, know I'm behind, but I would not put in as much effort, and just have less hope." A male student interjected, "I don't feel quite as stressed. If I didn't have Back-On-Track, I would be stressed out." Three male students said the program had not changed their attitudes one way or the other. However, pre and postsurvey data shows little to no change in mean scores when students were asked if their classes were interesting and whether or not they like their classes, statistically indicating little impact from the program on student attitudes towards their classes.

Regarding anticipation of attendance at On-Track, a strong response revealed that students were eagerly awaiting their full time attendance at the New Beginnings facility in the On-Track program, keeping their motivation level high to successfully complete the Back-On-Track program. A strong response also indicated that students were

motivated to complete the program because they felt that their maturity level had increased, especially while at the Back-On-Track facility. A few students said they felt no change in their maturity while others made comments such as, “Yes, I feel more mature; some of these kids are silly.” “The ones here (at home school) are childish; they like drama.” While not statistically significant, postprogram statistical data confirms students’ perspectives on a middle school setting not being a good match for them with a decrease in mean from the preprogram survey from 4.3 to 3.8.

The few students who indicated they had behavior issues prior to admittance into the program indicated that their disciplinary infractions had decreased while in the program, regardless of the fact that the program does not have a behavior modification component. A male student stated, “I used to get in trouble all the time, but when I heard that I was going to Back-On-Track, I stopped getting in trouble so I can get it my right grade.” However, few students or teachers indicated behavior was an issue, therefore the response strength is moderate.

Table 11

Frequency for Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What do you think the Back-On-Track program’s impact is on student attitude?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Positive impact on attitude	14	12
Anticipation of Back-On-Track	13	18
Increased maturity	12	16
Improved behavior	8	8

Table 12

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What do you think the Back-On-Track program’s impact is on student attitude?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Positive impact on attitude	Strong	Strong
Anticipation of Back-On-Track	Strong	Strong
Increased maturity	Strong	Strong
Improved behavior	Moderate	Moderate

Regarding motivation, four themes emerged from the transcript analysis of the preprogram interview as to the impact of the Back-On-Track program: positive impact on motivation, improved self-esteem, increased attendance, and increased assignment completion. Table 13 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 14 presents the strength codes. Students in the focus group interview sessions indicated by their answers that their motivation to succeed in school had been positively impacted by their participation in the Back-On-Track program. Many said their self-esteem had improved, they were completing their assignments at Back-On-Track and at their home schools, and that their attendance, particularly on the Back-On-Track days, had improved. Students stated they did not want to miss school on the days they were assigned to go to Back-On-Track. Another student stated that “Going to Back-On-Track makes me want to do my work so I can pass on to On-Track and then to high school.” A female student commented on self-esteem by saying, “I think if we didn’t have it (Back-On-Track), I would feel shamed because I’m older than everybody else, and it makes us look stupid

and we should have done it when we could have.”

Postprogram interviews show that positive student motivation to complete school and increased self-esteem remained a strong theme in the focus group conversations.

Regarding motivation to complete school, a female student said,

I like school, but when I went to Back-On-Track it made me think about my career, because if you think about it we're going to be in high school and then only have two more years until high school ends and then some will go off to college if they want to; it makes you think about the future and what you're supposed to be doing.

When asked about the program's impact on their motivation, several male students made comments such as, “I would still be failing and doing the same old thing,” “Without this program, I would still be failing all four classes, probably,” and “I like having something to look forward to; getting full time over there instead of here (home middle school).

Actually having the feeling that we're in ninth grade.” Statistically, the school attitude assessment survey results indicated that there is a significant change in the pre and post mean scores regarding self-motivation to do school work, indicating a positive program impact on student motivation. Slight mean increases were noted for the variables related to regularity of school work completion, using a variety of strategies to learn new material, effort, and student responsibility.

However, several students said that while their motivation at Back-On-Track increased, their motivation at their home schools declined due to their participation in the Back-On-Track program. Students indicated that problems in their home school classes due to the fact that they missed class while at Back-On-Track had caused some difficulties. This issue was confirmed by home school teacher focus group session results

that indicated that some students had “checked out” mentally because of their participation in the Back-On-Track program. Additionally, the postprogram survey results indicated a slight decrease in mean score for the variable indicating a desire to do one’s best in school from 6.3 to 6.1.

Table 13

Frequency for Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What do you think the Back-On-Track program’s impact is on student motivation?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Positive impact in motivation	18	15
Increased assignment completion	12	15
Improved self-esteem	11	13
Attendance increase on Back-On-Track days	8	4

Table 14

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What do you think the Back-On-Track Program’s impact is on student motivation?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Positive impact on motivation	Strong	Strong
Increased assignment completion	Strong	Strong
Improved self-esteem	Strong	Strong
Attendance increase on Back-On-Track days	Moderate	Weak

Preprogram focus group discussion on the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student academic self-perception revealed that four dominant themes emerged: improved grades at the home school, improved grades overall, increased focus, and increased work completion. Table 15 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 16 presents the strength codes. During the conversations, a male student commented, “I probably wouldn’t be doing all my work if I wasn’t in Back-On-Track.” A female student added,

I actually starting to make better grades here (at her home school); I made a 106 on my math test. I study because I know we can’t make bad grades here and if you want to do it your grades have to be good here.

Focus group findings are validated by preprogram survey data that found that 93.9% of students understood the importance of making good grades, and 88% wanted to make good grades in school. However, only 61% felt capable of making straight As. Most students felt that keeping focused on the goal of transitioning into the On-Track program in the second semester helped keep them focused on maintaining good grades and getting their work done at both their home schools and at Back-On-Track.

Postprogram interviews found that students and teachers alike felt that students struggled academically trying to maintain good grades working in two separate programs. As indicated earlier, several students said they focused more on their Back-On-Track grades than their home school grades. Additionally, students indicated that they were challenged by maintaining grades in the home school classes they missed while off campus 2 days a week attending the Back-On-Track program. A female student said, “The classes that we’re missing are the ones I’m struggling in. My language arts grade went way down because I’m missing that class.” However, for some students, they

maintained their grades in both the Back-On-Track program and the home school. One student commented, “I knew being in the Back-On-Track program, I would have to step up my grades, so I’m doing better, making As and Bs. Before, I made Cs and Ds.”

Comments from students showed a slight increase in focus and assignment completion. Information gleaned from the focus group comments indicated that the increase in those two areas was derived from efforts at the Back-On-Track program.

Statistically, students indicated a slight increase in academic self-perception with an increase in pre to post mean scores for the variable related to capability of making straight As and learning new things in school, the ability to grasp complex concepts, and an overall feeling of being smart in school. However, there was a slight decrease in the mean when asked if school was easy. During the teacher focus group conversations, one teacher said, “They’re capable of doing the work. Some of them don’t know how to play the game of school.”

Table 15

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What do you think the impact of the Back-On-Track program is on student academic self-perception?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Improved grades at home school	12	9
Increased work completion	14	12
Improved grades overall	13	10
Increased focus	9	11

Table 16

Overall Strength Codes for Focus Group Question, “What do you think the impact of the Back-On-Track program is on student academic self-perception?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Improved grades at home school	Strong	Moderate
Increased work completion	Strong	Strong
Improved grades overall	Strong	Strong
Increased focus	Moderate	Strong

Program Effectiveness

When students were questioned about what aspects of the Back-On-Track program they thought would be effective as the program was explained to them, five themes emerged as the dominant themes in the dialogue: self-paced work, use of technology, use of study guides, small classroom environment, and mastery-based assessments. Table 17 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 18 presents the strength codes. A strong response from the students was documented from their being able to work at their own pace and being responsible for completing their work. One male student commented, “Working at your own pace causes you to learn to be more responsible and think for yourself; you don’t get all the answers from the teacher by mooching off the teacher.” He defined “mooching off the teacher” as teachers providing answers to questions.

Another male student said that when doing self-paced work, he had no one else to blame but himself if he did not do well. A male student who admitted he struggled in

school said when doing self-paced work it relieved the stress of feeling that he was holding the rest of the class back and he could concentrate more on the subject matter. Additionally, the students had a strong response to the mixed use of computers and direct instruction. All quizzes and chapter tests are computer-based, and completion of the study guides are accomplished by using a combination of the textbook, websites, and the online version of the text. One female student said, "It's simple; kids are more used to technology and it helps me learn more."

During the discussion, the use of study guides to chunk (break into smaller sections) the material and the smaller classroom environment emerged as moderate themes as to the effectiveness of the program. The students favored the smaller groups saying they received more intensive help when needed, and the smaller classroom setting provided less distractions. The fifth theme that emerged was mastery-based grading, allowing for reassessments if not displaying mastery. The students were appreciative of the fact that they had the opportunity to correct study guides and reassess until a level of mastery was obtained.

Postprogram focus group results showed that students continued to respond well to being able to work at their own pace and teach themselves. Students reiterated the fact that they respond well to working by themselves and using a combination of text, study guides, websites, and online instruction and assessment to complete the course work. One male student said,

It doesn't matter if the teacher is standing up and teaching. I feel that still helps, but with this type of work it was easier because we had a study guide and we got to figure it out on our own, but she did help us.

Students indicated that the smaller classroom environment and being able to retake

assessments continued to be an effective part of the program.

Table 17

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What parts of the Back-On-Track program do you think will be effective?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Self-paced work/student responsibility	18	19
Computer/Technology	15	17
Study guides	10	20
Small classroom environment	14	18
Retaking assessments	12	9

Table 18

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What parts of the Back-On-Track program do you think will be effective?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Self-paced work/student responsibility	Strong	Strong
Computer/Technology	Strong	Strong
Study guides	Strong	Strong
Small classroom environment	Strong	Strong
Retaking assessments	Moderate	Strong

The preprogram focus group session results regarding program ineffectiveness

revealed three themes: attending with another school, dress code, and concerns about getting behind at the home school. Table 19 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 20 presents the strength codes. The strong theme of the dress code emerged as students expressed reluctance to adhere to the stricter dress code at Back-On-Track than at their home schools. A moderate theme regarding the ineffective elements of the Back-On-Track program was a concern from students about getting behind in their home school classes that they miss while they are attending Back-On-Track. One female student commented, "I'm afraid that I'll get behind here (her home school) because I'm missing language arts two days a week, but my teacher is nice and she'll help me during enrichment time and lunch, but I do worry about that sometimes." A weak theme that emerged from all of the students of one school was that it has to split its group and attend with another school. The students would rather attend with all of the participants from their school.

Postprogram focus group sessions show that the concerns about attending with other schools and adhering to a dress code had maintained their theme strengths. However, concerns about getting behind in their home school classes were confirmed by the strength increase in that concern during the postprogram interviews. Students commented that the classes they missed at their home school while at the Back-On-Track program are the classes they struggled in academically. These concerns were further validated by teacher focus group comments regarding student performance in home school classes missed during Back-On-Track attendance.

Table 19

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What parts of the Back-On-Track program do you think will be ineffective?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Dress code	12	10
Concern about getting behind at home school	8	17
Going with other schools	2	2

Table 20

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What parts of the Back-On-Track program do you think will be ineffective?”

Themes	Student Responses	
	Preprogram	Postprogram
Dress Code	Strong	Strong
Concern about getting behind at home school	Moderate	Strong
Going with other schools	Weak	Weak

Student Statistical Findings for Research Question 4

What is the impact of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program on student attitudes towards classes and teachers, attitudes toward school, motivation, and student academic achievement/self-perception? Descriptive statistics using Minitab 15 were computed for all variables from the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised which is divided into five subscales. The SAAS-R is a 35-item questionnaire that

measures characteristics commonly associated with underachievement: low academic self-perception (7 questions), negative attitude toward school (5 questions), negative attitude toward teachers and classes (7 questions), low motivation and self-regulation (10 questions), and low goal valuation (6 questions) (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Whitmore, 1980). On the survey administered to the students, questions 1, 7, 11, 12, 13, 25, and 28 measured students' attitudes toward their teachers and classes; questions 4, 5, 9, 15, and 35 measured students' attitudes toward school; questions 2, 3, 10, 16, 31, 33, and 34 measured students' academic self-perception; questions 14, 17, 19, 22, 23, and 32 measured students' goal valuation; and questions 6, 8, 18, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 29, and 30 measured students' motivation and self-regulation.

The SAAS-R uses a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). Adequate reliability and validity have been established for the SAAS-R. The Flesch-Kincaid formula used to calculate readability determined that the SAAS-R directions and survey items were at a 5.1 reading level (Suldo et al., 2008). Regarding content validity, factor analysis supported the five-factor structure of the SAAS-R (Suldo et al., 2008). Internal consistency reliability coefficients were at least .85 for each of the five factors (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Suldo et al. (2008) suggested that practitioners consider administering the SAAS-R to students identified as at-risk for school failure to pinpoint specific attitudes in need of intervention as well as school and district-wide programs to increase positive attitudes among all students.

Frequency tables were developed for each of the variables surveyed. The average response was indicated by mean scores from each variable from a Likert scale measuring from one to seven: (1) "Strongly Disagree," (2) "Disagree," (3) "Slightly Disagree," (4) "Not Sure," (5) "Slightly Agree," (6) "Agree," and (7) "Strongly Agree." Data analysis

discussion is based on the following data tables and calculations of the student responses to the pre and postadministration of the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised. The analysis of the survey is grouped into five subscales: student academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers and classes, attitudes toward school, goal valuation, and motivation/self-regulation.

Survey data from the early administration (preprogram) analyzed for the subscale of student academic self-perception indicate that participants tend to feel they are intelligent with a mean score of 5.9. The Likert scale association of 5 is slightly agree, which is slightly below the median score of this variable of 6 which is agree. The cumulative percentage of agreement of 91% indicates that students slightly agree, agree, and strongly agree that they perceive they are intelligent. However, when questioned as to whether they are smart in school, a lower mean score of 5.3 and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 78.7% indicates that while they feel they are intelligent, they may not feel as intelligent or smart in a school setting. That assumption is further validated by the responses of a mean score of 4.93 and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 69.7% for the variable that school is easy, well below the percentage of 91% who felt they were intelligent in general.

Scores for students feeling as if they can grasp complex concepts at school and if they are good at learning new things are noted with means of 4.8 and 5.4, respectively. The mean of uncertainty and the cumulative percentage of agreement of 60.6% for the variable of grasping complex concepts indicates a lack of confidence in the ability to grasp a complex concept in a school setting. However, a cumulative percentage of agreement of 75.8% felt they were good at learning new things at school, with a mean score of 5.4. Data indicate that while students felt they could learn new things at school,

their confidence level of grasping complex concepts was lower. Participants also indicated that a cumulative percentage of 69.7% agreed at all three levels of agreement that they can learn new ideas quickly at school, with a mean score of 5.2.

Only 60.6% felt they were capable of making straight As in school, with a mean score of 4.8. Overall, the participants felt they were intelligent and capable of learning new things, but in a school setting with grades, the introduction of complex concepts, and being able to learn new things quickly in school posed challenges for them and their academic self-perception declined in those areas.

Postsurvey data indicate that after completion of the program, student perception of their intelligence remained steady with a mean of 6.0. However, the cumulative percentage of agreement increased by 2.5% to 93.5%, indicating that the program had a positive impact on academic self-perception. When asked if students were smart in school, a mean of 5.7 indicates that students agree that they are smart in school. The cumulative percentage of agreement for that variable increased by 2.3% to 81%. In the academic self-perception subscale postprogram survey results, the percentage of agreement increased for each question and the means either remained the same or increased for all questions except for the statement, "School is easy for me." The mean decreased from 4.9 to 4.5 and the percentage of agreement decreased from 69.7% to 61.3%. An increase in the means and percentages of agreement indicates a slight increase in perceived academic ability after attending the Back-On-Track program; however, students continued to find school a challenge for them. According to focus group findings, with support from survey data, inclusion in the Back-On-Track program had a positive impact on academic self-perception. Table 21 lists the both the pre and postsurvey question totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 21

Frequency of All Respondents Academic Self-Perception

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I am intelligent				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	1	3.2
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	1	3.0	1	3.2
Not Sure	1	3.0	0	0.0
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	2	6.5
Agree	15	45.5	18	58.0
Strongly Agree	10	30.3	9	29.0
I can learn new ideas quickly in school				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Disagree	3	9.1	3	9.7
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	0	0.0
Not Sure	3	9.1	0	0.0
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	8	25.8
Agree	11	33.3	17	54.8
Strongly Agree	7	21.2	2	6.5
School is easy for me				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Disagree	3	9.1	5	16.1
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	3	9.7
Not Sure	2	6.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	6	18.2	8	25.8
Agree	11	33.3	9	29.0
Strongly Agree	6	18.2	2	6.5

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I can grasp complex concepts at school				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	1	3.2
Disagree	2	6.1	2	6.5
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	2	6.5
Not Sure	7	21.2	6	19.3
Slightly Agree	7	21.2	5	16.1
Agree	9	27.3	12	38.7
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	3	9.7
I am capable of getting straight As				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	1	3.2
Disagree	4	12.1	3	9.7
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	2	6.5
Not Sure	6	18.2	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	6	18.2	3	9.7
Agree	6	18.2	9	29.0
Strongly Agree	8	24.2	9	29.0
I am good at learning new things in school				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	3	9.7
Not Sure	4	12.1	2	6.5
Slightly Agree	6	18.2	4	13.0
Agree	10	30.3	13	42.0
Strongly Agree	9	27.3	9	29.0

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I am smart in school				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	3	9.1	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Not Sure	2	6.1	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	4	12.1	4	13.0
Agree	18	54.5	12	38.7
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	9	29.0

In the presurvey, analyzed data scores for the subscale of attitudes toward teachers and classes indicated that participants tend to feel ambivalence regarding interest level of classes with a mean score of 4.5. The Likert scale association of 4 is not sure, while the Likert scale score association of 5 is slightly agree. The mean score of 4.5 and the cumulative average of agreement of 57.5% indicated that students are somewhat undecided about whether their classes were interesting to them. Regarding teachers and their role in the interest level of classes, the mean score of 5.0 indicated students slightly agreed that their teachers made learning interesting, with a cumulative percentage of agreement of 66.7%. Data indicate that students somewhat liked their classes with a mean score of 4.78, which falls between not sure, and slightly agree, correlating with the focus group finding that students are somewhat ambivalent about their classes at their home schools.

Data analysis of student attitudes towards teachers shows that they slightly agree that their teachers are good teachers with a mean of 5.30 and a cumulative percentage of

agreement of 69.7%. Analysis shows that they relate well to their teachers and like their teachers with identical mean scores of 5.15. A cumulative 78.7% of students agreed that they relate well to their teachers. While 69.7% of students surveyed indicated agreement that they liked their teachers, a significant percentage of students, 39.5%, were not sure or disagreed that their teachers cared about them, as evidenced from the data with a lower mean of 5.06. Data from the focus group findings support the findings that students feel their teachers are supportive of their attendance at Back-On-Track and were willing to work with them to ensure their success in school and at Back-On-Track. Focus group discussions revealed that while students, for the most part, felt their teachers were supportive of their attendance at Back-On-Track, some teachers would use their attendance as a threat for compliant behaviors and some teachers were not aware that some of their students were attending Back-On-Track, indicating a lack of caring, validating survey results on that variable.

Postsurvey results reveal that student attitudes towards teachers and classes showed little to no change in student perception of liking their teachers and classes, teachers making learning interesting, and teachers caring about students. However, there was an increase in the mean and percentage of agreement in the interest level of classes. The mean score increased from 4.5 to 4.8 and the percentage of agreement increased from 57.5% to 67.7%. Additionally, students' perceptions of the teacher quality increased with a mean score increase from 5.3 to 5.6 and a percentage of agreement increase of 14.2%. However, students' perceptions of how well they relate to their teachers decreased as indicated by a decrease in the mean score of 5.2 to 4.7 and a percentage of agreement decrease of 14.1%. Table 22 lists the both the pre and postsurvey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 22

Frequency of All Respondents Academic Attitudes Toward Teachers and Classes

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
My classes are interesting				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Disagree	3	9.1	2	6.5
Slightly Disagree	5	15.2	3	9.7
Not Sure	4	12.1	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	7	21.2	9	29.0
Agree	8	24.2	9	29.0
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	3	9.7
I relate well to my teachers				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	2	6.5
Disagree	2	6.1	3	9.7
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Not Sure	4	12.1	5	16.1
Slightly Agree	11	33.3	8	25.8
Agree	11	33.3	8	25.8
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	4	13.0
I like my teachers				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	4	13.0
Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	2	6.5
Not Sure	4	12.1	2	6.5
Slightly Agree	3	9.1	9	29.0
Agree	13	39.4	11	35.4
Strongly Agree	7	21.2	2	6.5

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
My teachers make learning interesting				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	3	9.7
Disagree	1	3.0	3	9.7
Slightly Disagree	5	15.2	2	6.5
Not Sure	4	12.1	1	3.2
Slightly Agree	6	18.2	12	38.7
Agree	11	33.3	7	22.5
Strongly Agree	5	15.2	3	9.7
My teachers care about me				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	2	6.5
Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	3	9.7
Not Sure	6	18.2	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	1	3.2
Agree	7	21.2	13	42.0
Strongly Agree	8	24.2	5	16.1
Most of the teachers at this school are good teachers				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	5	15.2	2	6.5
Not Sure	3	9.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	3	9.1	4	13.0
Agree	10	30.3	17	54.8
Strongly Agree	10	30.3	5	16.1

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I like my classes				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Disagree	3	9.1	4	13.0
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	3	9.7
Not Sure	3	9.1	2	6.5
Slightly Agree	9	27.3	8	25.8
Agree	9	27.3	9	29.0
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	4	13.0

Analysis of data from the presurvey showed that student attitudes towards the middle school they attended was that their middle school was a good school with a mean of 5.15, in the range of slightly agree. Additionally, 75.8% of students agreed that their middle school was a good school. Students tended to like their school and were proud of their school with means of 4.45 and 5.0, respectively, in the ranges of not sure and slightly agree, and agreement percentages of 60.7% and 69.7%, respectively. However, regarding whether their school was a good match for them and that they were glad they attend their middle school, mean scores of 4.33 and 4.2, respectively, indicate they were not sure. Only 51.5% of students agreed that they were glad they went to their middle school and felt their school was a good match for them. These findings validate the focus group findings that students felt that while they attended a good middle school and were proud of it, they were too old to be in middle school at this point and should be attending high school, therefore disagreeing that at their ages, middle school was the best setting for them. These findings support a study by Allensworth and Easton (2007) that found

that students who have been retained tend to drop out because of the age discrepancy between themselves and their peers and the lack of fit between the dropout's peer group and classmates. Just being too old for the grade seems to matter.

Postsurvey results indicate a decrease in the means and percentages of agreement regarding students' attitude toward the middle school they are attending, indicating that participation in the Back-On-Track program had a negative impact on students' perceptions of their home school, yet confirming the assumption that overaged eighth graders can develop negative attitudes toward school when they feel they are too old and not in the correct educational setting for them. Table 23 lists the both the pre and postsurvey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 23

Frequency of All Respondents Academic Attitudes Toward School

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I am glad that I go to my middle school				
Strongly Disagree	5	15.2	6	19.3
Disagree	4	12.1	4	13.0
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	2	6.5
Not Sure	4	12.1	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	4	12.1	7	22.5
Agree	9	27.3	3	9.7
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	5	16.1
My middle school is a good school				
Strongly Disagree	3	9.1	3	9.7
Disagree	3	9.1	2	6.5
Slightly Disagree	1	3.0	3	9.7
Not Sure	1	3.0	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	4	13.0
Agree	11	33.3	11	35.4
Strongly Agree	9	27.3	4	13.0
My school is a good match for me				
Strongly Disagree	4	12.1	5	16.1
Disagree	5	15.2	6	19.3
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	2	6.5
Not Sure	5	15.2	6	19.3
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	4	13.0
Agree	10	30.3	4	13.0
Strongly Agree	2	6.1	4	13.0

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I like this school				
Strongly Disagree	5	15.2	4	13.0
Disagree	4	12.1	6	19.3
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Not Sure	4	12.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	6	19.3
Agree	10	30.3	7	22.5
Strongly Agree	5	15.2	4	13.0
I am proud of this school				
Strongly Disagree	3	9.1	3	9.7
Disagree	5	15.2	2	6.5
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Not Sure	2	6.1	4	13.0
Slightly Agree	2	6.1	8	25.8
Agree	11	33.3	11	35.4
Strongly Agree	10	30.3	3	9.7

Analysis of the data showed that students agreed with all the variables in the goal valuation portion of the survey. On the Likert scale, a mean score of 6 indicates agreement with the question. Regarding attainment of doing well in school as a goal and as being important for future career goals, students agreed with a mean score of 5.9 and 6.3, respectively. A cumulative percentage of 87.9% and 94%, respectively, agreed that doing well in school is an immediate goal and is important to attaining future career goals. This data validates findings from the focus group interviews when students stated that they must have a good education in order to attend college and/or get a good job. Students indicated that they agree they want to make good grades and they are aware of

the importance of good grades in school, with mean scores of 6.2 and 6.3, respectively. Ninety-four percent of the students agreed it is important to get good grades in school, while 87.9% of students agreed that they want to make good grades. Students expressed a desire to do well in school and to do their best in school with a mean of 6.3 for both variables. A cumulative percentage of 93.9% of students agreed that they want to do their best in school, as well as a cumulative percentage of 90.9% agreed it was important for them to do well in school. Again, students indicated in the focus group interviews that they knew doing well in school and getting an education was needed in order to attain their goals after school.

Postprogram survey results indicated that while the means and percentages of agreement decreased slightly for the two statements related to doing well in school as a goal and being important for future career goals, the remaining goal valuation indicators showed an increase in the means and percentage of agreement. Students agreed that getting good grades in school was important with the mean score increasing from 6.39 to 6.54 and a percentage of agreement increase from 94% to 100%. Doing well in school and wanting to get good grades in school indicate an increase in percentages of agreement of 2.6% and 2.3%, respectively. Table 24 lists the both the pre and postsurvey question totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 24

Frequency of All Respondents Goal Valuation

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
Doing well in school is important for my future career goals				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Not Sure	2	6.1	2	6.5
Slightly Agree	3	9.1	2	6.5
Agree	9	27.3	8	25.8
Strongly Agree	19	57.6	18	58.0
Doing well in school is one of my goals				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	2	6.1	2	6.5
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Not Sure	2	6.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	6	18.2	5	16.1
Agree	8	24.2	8	25.8
Strongly Agree	15	45.5	13	42.0
It is important to get good grades in school				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Not Sure	2	6.1	0	0.0
Slightly Agree	4	12.1	3	9.7
Agree	6	18.2	8	25.8
Strongly Agree	21	63.6	20	64.5

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I want to do my best in school				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Not Sure	1	3.0	1	3.2
Slightly Agree	3	9.1	5	16.1
Agree	8	24.2	9	29.0
Strongly Agree	20	60.6	15	48.3
It is important for me to do well in school				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Not Sure	3	9.1	1	3.2
Slightly Agree	4	12.1	5	16.1
Agree	5	15.2	8	25.8
Strongly Agree	21	63.6	16	51.6
I want to get good grades in school				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	2	6.1	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Not Sure	2	6.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Agree	6	18.2	7	22.5
Strongly Agree	21	63.6	20	64.5

Analyzed data of the presurvey of the subscale motivation and self-regulation showed varying levels of agreement regarding motivation and self-regulation of academic

obligations. The variable with the highest mean and cumulative percentage of agreement was student indication that they work hard at school with a mean of 5.6 and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 87.9%. Students also indicated that they put a lot of effort into their school work with a mean of 5.3 and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 78.8%. This validates the focus group answers to the question of the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student motivation. Most students said they were motivated to get their work done to make better grades at Back-On-Track and at their home schools in order to remain in the program. Contradictory to those findings were students' indications that they were not sure, with a mean of 4.0, when asked if they spend a lot of time on their school work, with 54.5% of students either disagreeing to varying degrees or are not sure that they spend a lot of time on their school work.

For the variables of completing school work regularly and checking assignments before turning them in, students slightly agreed with means of 5.4 and 4.8, respectively. Cumulative percentages of agreement were 78.7% and 66.7%, respectively. A mean of 4.8 indicated students were not sure and slightly agreed that they use a variety of strategies to learn new material with a cumulative percentage of 69.7% agreeing in some degree that they use various strategies to learn new material. Organizational skills regarding school work revealed a mean of 5.2 indicating agreement that students are organized about their school work, with a cumulative percentage of 78.8% being in agreement. Students also felt they were responsible students with a mean of 5.3 indicating they slightly agree and a cumulative agreement percentage of 75.8%. Regarding concentration on their school work, students indicated agreement with a mean of 5.4 and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 78.8%.

The variable of self-motivation to do school work revealed a mean of 4.8,

indicating that students were in slight agreement that they are self-motivated, with a cumulative percentage of agreement of 69.6%. Presurvey results indicate that students have an overall motivation and self-regulation mean of 5.1, indicating that they slightly agreed with the variables in the motivation/self-regulation subscale. These findings are comparable to focus group findings that indicate that their motivation to succeed in school had been positively impacted by inclusion in the program as evidenced by their statements about their positive self-esteem, assignment completion, and improved attendance.

Postprogram survey results showed a slight decrease in the means and percentages of agreement for the variable of working hard at school upon completing the Back-On-Track program. Students also indicated a decrease in organization about school work, the use of a variety of strategies to learn new material, and the amount of time spent on school work. However, students indicated an increase in assignment completion, student responsibility, effort put forth to do school work, concentration on school work, assignment checking, and being self-motivated to do school work by showing an increase in the means and percentages of agreement in those variables. Focus group interview session results confirm that students felt like participation in the Back-On-Track program encouraged them to complete their assignments and remain self-motivated.

Students were asked on the postsurvey to indicate the impact participation in the Back-On-Track program had on their motivation to succeed in school and to further their education. The mean score for that variable was 6.6, which indicates a strong sense of agreement with a cumulative percentage of agreement of 100%. Table 25 lists both the pre and postsurvey question totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 25

Frequency of All Respondents Motivation/Self-Regulation

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I work hard at school				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	1	3.2
Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	0	0.0	2	6.4
Not Sure	1	3.0	1	3.2
Slightly Agree	9	27.3	6	19.3
Agree	9	27.3	14	45.1
Strongly Agree	11	33.3	6	19.3
I am self-motivated to do my school work				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Disagree	3	9.1	2	6.4
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	4	12.9
Not Sure	3	9.1	5	16.1
Slightly Agree	8	24.2	6	19.3
Agree	11	33.3	7	22.5
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	6	19.3
I complete my school work regularly				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	1	3.2
Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Not Sure	4	12.1	1	3.2
Slightly Agree	7	21.2	8	25.8
Agree	11	33.3	15	48.3
Strongly Agree	8	24.2	5	16.1

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I am organized about my school work				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	0	0.0
Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	2	6.1	5	16.1
Not Sure	1	3.0	2	6.4
Slightly Agree	7	21.2	7	22.5
Agree	12	36.4	8	25.8
Strongly Agree	7	21.2	8	25.8
I use a variety of strategies to learn new material				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	1	3.2
Disagree	2	6.1	1	3.2
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	4	12.9
Not Sure	4	12.1	4	12.9
Slightly Agree	13	39.4	4	12.9
Agree	6	18.2	13	41.9
Strongly Agree	4	12.1	4	12.9
I spend a lot of time on my school work				
Strongly Disagree	4	12.1	2	6.4
Disagree	6	18.2	4	12.9
Slightly Disagree	4	12.1	5	16.1
Not Sure	4	12.1	4	12.9
Slightly Agree	5	15.2	7	22.5
Agree	7	21.2	9	29.0
Strongly Agree	3	9.1	0	0.0

(continued)

Survey Items	PreSurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I am a responsible student				
Strongly Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Disagree	1	3.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	3	9.1	1	3.2
Not Sure	3	9.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	6	18.2	7	22.5
Agree	12	36.4	14	45.1
Strongly Agree	7	21.2	6	19.3
I put a lot of effort in to my school work				
Strongly Disagree	2	6.1	0	0.0
Disagree	2	6.1	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	1	3.0	4	12.9
Not Sure	2	6.1	1	3.2
Slightly Agree	9	27.3	4	12.9
Agree	9	27.3	18	58.0
Strongly Agree	8	24.2	4	12.9
I concentrate on my school work				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	4	12.1	4	12.9
Not Sure	3	9.1	2	6.4
Slightly Agree	10	30.3	7	22.5
Agree	10	30.3	14	45.1
Strongly Agree	6	18.2	4	12.9

(continued)

Survey Items	Presurvey		Postsurvey	
	N=33	%	N=31	%
I check my assignments before I turn them in				
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0	2	6.5
Disagree	5	15.2	0	0.0
Slightly Disagree	4	12.1	4	12.9
Not Sure	2	6.1	3	9.7
Slightly Agree	8	24.2	5	16.1
Agree	9	27.3	13	42.0
Strongly Agree	5	15.2	4	12.9

Findings from t tests

Minitab 15 was used to perform a two sample t test for each group of variables to determine the level of significance related to student attitude towards school, teachers and classes, motivation and self-regulation, goal valuation, and academic self-perception of program participants in the initial phase of the program and at the students' completion of the program. An accepted alpha of .05 was used for comparison for each group of variables to determine whether there was a significant difference between the means from the two administrations of the SAAS-R. The following conclusions about student attitudes towards school, teachers and classes, motivation, goal valuation, and academic self-perception after attending the Back-On-Track program can be made based upon the inferential statistics.

The analysis of the variable group academic self-perception determined there was no significant statistical difference in the means between the preprogram and postprogram survey administration on students' perceptions of their intelligence, their ability to learn new ideas and grasp complex concepts, their ability to earn straight As,

and if they felt school was easy. Table 26 presents the pre and postsurvey means, standard deviations, t values, and P values for each question in the variable group.

For the variable group attitudes toward teachers and classes there was no significant difference between the means of student perception of class interest, student teacher relationships, and perceived teacher quality. Although there were slight differences between the mean scores between student teacher relationship variables and teachers making learning interesting, the difference was minimal and not significant. Table 27 presents the means, standard deviations, t values and P values for each question in the variable group.

The group analysis for academic attitudes toward school represented five variables to determine the difference between student attitude before and after attendance in the Back-On-Track program. No significant difference between the means during the survey administration intervals for the variables related to school pride and school fit, such as “my school is a good match for me,” and “I am glad that I go to my middle school,” was reported. A slight difference between the mean scores in the variable, “my school is a good match for me,” was minimal and not significant. Table 28 presents the means, standard deviations, t values, and P values for each question in the variable group.

In analysis of the variable group goal valuation, there was no significant mean difference between student perceptions after attendance in the Back-On-Track program of doing well in school as a present and future goal, desire to do well in school, and the importance and desire to get good grades in school. Table 29 presents the means, standard deviations, t values, and P values for each question in the variable group.

The group analysis for motivation and self-regulation included 10 variables to determine a difference in student perceptions between survey administrations. No

significant differences in mean was found between student perceptions for the variables “I work hard at school,” “I complete my school work regularly,” “I am organized about my school work,” “I use a variety of strategies to learn new material,” “I spend a lot of time on my school work,” “I am a responsible student,” “I put a lot of effort in to my school work,” “I concentrate on my school work,” and “I check my assignments before I turn them in.” However, for the variable “I am self-motivated to do my schoolwork,” a significant difference was shown between the pre and postsurvey administrations, indicating an increase in self-motivation after attending the Back-On-Track program. Table 30 presents the means, standard deviations, t values, and P values for each question in the variable group.

Table 26

Summary of Findings t-test Academic Self-Perception

Survey Items	Presurvey			Postsurvey				
	N=33	M	SD	N=31	M	SD	t	P
I am intelligent		5.85	1.46		5.97	1.22	0.35	.725
I can learn new ideas quickly in school		5.21	1.73		5.26	1.48	-0.11	.910
School is easy for me		4.94	1.84		4.52	1.69	0.96	.342
I can grasp complex concepts at school		4.82	1.55		4.94	1.55	-0.30	.763
I am capable of getting straight As		4.88	1.80		5.19	1.82	-0.70	.489
I am good at learning new things in school		5.42	1.50		5.74	1.24	-0.92	.361
I am smart in school		5.33	1.45		5.68	1.30	-1.00	.323

Note: *p<.05.

Table 27

Summary of Findings t-test Attitudes Towards Teachers and Classes

Survey Items	Presurvey			Postsurvey				
	N=33	M	SD	N=31	M	SD	t	P
My classes are interesting		4.55	1.77		4.84	1.53	-0.71	.482
I relate well to my teachers		5.15	1.42		4.74	1.74	1.03	.303
I like my teachers		5.15	1.79		4.68	1.81	1.05	.297
My teachers make learning interesting		5.00	1.58		4.58	1.80	0.99	.326
My teachers care about me		5.06	1.66		5.00	1.75	0.14	.887
Most of the teachers at this school are good teachers		5.30	1.72		5.65	1.08	-0.94	.349
I like my classes		4.79	1.71		4.74	1.71	0.11	.915

*Note: *p<.05.*

Table 28

Summary of Findings t-test Attitudes Towards School

Survey Items	Presurvey			Postsurvey				
	N=33	M	SD	N=31	M	SD	t	P
I am glad that I go to my middle school		4.24	2.08		4.00	2.13	-0.46	.646
My middle school is a good school		5.15	1.99		4.71	1.88	0.91	.365
My school is a good match for me		4.33	1.91		3.84	2.05	1.25	.322
I like this school		4.45	2.06		4.23	2.08	0.44	.660
I am proud of this school		5.06	2.14		4.84	1.75	0.46	.652

*Note: *p<.05.*

Table 29

Summary of Findings t-test Goal Valuation

Survey Items	PreSurvey			Postsurvey				
	N=33	M	SD	N=31	M	SD	t	P
Doing well in school is important for my future career goals		6.36	.895		6.29	1.07	0.30	.767
Doing well in school is one of my goals		5.91	1.38		5.81	1.42	0.29	.770
It is important to get good grades in school		6.39	.933		6.55	.675	-0.75	.454
I want to do my best in school		6.33	1.11		6.16	1.04	0.64	.524
It is important for me to do well in school		6.33	1.02		6.16	1.16	0.63	.530
I want to get good grades in school		6.21	1.39		6.42	.958	-0.69	.492

Note: *p<.05.

Table 30

Summary of Findings t-test Motivation/Self-Regulation

Survey Items	Presurvey			Postsurvey				P
	N=33	M	SD	N=31	M	SD	t	
I work hard at school		5.61	1.54		5.45	1.48	0.48	.684
I am self-motivated to do my school work		4.85	1.73		4.87	1.69	0.05	.958*
I complete my school work regularly		5.48	1.33		5.61	1.23	-0.40	.691
I am organized about my school work		5.21	1.75		5.29	1.51	-0.19	.849
I use a variety of strategies to learn new material		4.88	1.45		5.06	1.57	-0.49	.625
I spend a lot of time on my school work		4.00	1.97		4.19	1.64	-0.43	.672
I am a responsible student		5.33	1.49		5.68	1.01	-1.07	.288
I put a lot of effort in to my school work		5.33	1.55		5.55	1.18	-0.62	.537
I concentrate on my school work		5.45	1.09		5.39	1.20	0.24	.815
I check my assignments before I turn them in		4.88	1.65		5.06	1.63	-0.45	.653

Note: *p<.05.

Teacher Focus Group Analysis

Teachers of Back-On-Track students participated in focus group interviews that not only provided the human reaction to the study's research questions but also enhanced the statistical analysis of the study by adding depth and meaning. Focus group questions

were related to the research questions. Forty-six teachers out of 75 (61%) participated in the focus group sessions held at all five middle schools and the Back-On-Track facility to determine teacher perspective of the program's impact on students' attitudes toward school, motivation, and academic self-perception.

The analysis of the focus group discussion responses determined dominant themes by listening for and documenting word choice recurrence, the number of teachers responding, and statements that corroborated or disputed the statistical analysis of the teacher survey. The focus group sessions with the teachers were not only to determine if student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception changed while in the program, but also to determine if student and teacher perception of the program's impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception were comparable or contradictory. Additional questions were asked of the teachers to solicit answers to the essential questions about attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception, and are incorporated into the categories in which they correlate. They were not reported as separate questions.

The focus group interview questions used with the teacher group are as follows:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
2. What resources does this school system possess that enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
3. Do you think the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will follow its design as planned?
4. What do you think the impact/effect of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will be on student attitudes? On student motivation? And on student academic self-perception?

5. What aspects/parts of the program do you think will be effective? What parts do you think will be ineffective?

6. What has been your experience with the program?

7. In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school? What supportive or unsupportive actions or statements have you experienced?

Teachers' responses to the research questions on the need for a program for overaged eighth graders, the resources needed for such a program, the expectations of the program, the impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception, and teacher perspectives on program support were analyzed for themes and strength of themes, displayed in frequency tables, and analyzed as to whether the responses validated the responses from the teacher online survey.

The researcher used the open coding process, which allowed the response themes to evolve from the analysis of the focus group transcripts, using in vivo terminology (Creswell, 2009). With a total of 46 teachers participating in six focus group sessions, a strong theme was determined if a theme was mentioned by teachers 10 or more times; a moderate theme was determined if a theme was mentioned by teachers six to nine times, and a weak theme was determined if a theme was mentioned by teachers five or less times.

Research Question 1

What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? Focus group results during the sessions from the research question pertaining to the need for an acceleration program for overaged eighth graders revealed five recurring themes: getting back in the right grade,

being too old/too mature for middle school, serving as a motivator, preventing dropping out, and providing an alternative setting. Table 31 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 32 presents the strength codes. Analysis of the discussion showed the strongest result from the teachers is the need for overaged students to get back in the right grade. Teacher comments indicated that they saw a need for an academic acceleration program due to the number of overaged eighth graders they have in class each year. One teacher commented,

We need it for the overaged kids who for whatever reason have not made it to high school...because as they approach 17 they're going to be able to drop out and if we can't give them some hope to catch up, then some will do exactly that.

Teachers expressed a moderate concern regarding the advanced age and maturity of overaged eighth graders for a middle school setting. A female teacher stated,

Because of some of their knowledge and experience, they need to be moved on, but this is a way to do it academically, not just because we've waved a magic wand and said you're gone; they earn it and it makes them feel good because they earn it.

During the discussions, another teacher stated,

I think it's a good opportunity to move ahead the students that, age wise, should be at another grade level; it gives them the opportunity to progress and be where they need to be peer wise with their own age group.

Some teachers addressed the issue of motivation, saying that they felt like the overaged eighth graders needed motivation to continue their education. A male teacher commented, "It motivates students that have fallen behind in the past and gives them

something to work toward that they wouldn't normally have. It can be a big motivator."

A few teachers expressed appreciation for the alternative programs offered such as Back-On-Track. A teacher said, "I love the alternative school choices we offer kids because they need alternatives." Results from teacher comments regarding the issues that warrant such a program indicate that teachers feel that the district has a significant population of overaged students that pose challenges for teachers and students alike, and they appreciate the fact that the district provides an acceleration program for these students. The program director stated, "We hope to be a catalyst to this group of students and to offer them the hope and the chance to graduate with their peer group."

Table 31

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, "What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?"

Themes	Teacher Responses
Get back in the right grade	15
Too old/more mature	8
Motivator	6
Prevents dropping out	4
Provides an alternative setting	3

Table 32

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Get back in the right grade	Strong
Too old/more mature	Moderate
Motivator	Moderate
Prevents dropping out	Weak
Provides an alternative setting	Weak

Research Question 2

What resources does this school system possess that will enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? Three perspectives from the teacher groups evolved from the discussion of district resources used to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school students. Home school teachers have little experience with the program and therefore could not speak to the resources, but were supportive of district funds being used to implement and maintain the program. The Back-On-Track and On-Track teachers and director focus group response indicated that the district is appropriately providing all of the instructional staff, tools, and transportation needed. However, a strong concern emerged regarding the percentage of students with learning disabilities and the number of learning disabled teachers on staff. One learning disabled teacher had been serving four alternative programs housed at the Right Choices facility, but recently another teacher had been added. Additionally, teachers did indicate a desire for classroom assistants, such as a

local university's education students, in order to provide additional instructional assistance to their diverse classroom populations.

Research Question 3

Do you think the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will follow its design as planned? What has been your experience with the program? When asked to elaborate on the Back-On-Track program and if it was following its plan as designed, the theme that emerged was that the home school teachers have little knowledge of the details of the Back-On-Track program; therefore, they could not speak with confidence that it was following its plan as designed. A large number of teachers admitted to not knowing how the Back-On-Track program was structured, and many were not aware of the course the students were taking at Back-On-Track, unless they were a science teacher. Even then, some science teachers were not aware of the science course students were taking at Back-On-Track. During the focus group sessions, it became obvious to the researcher that most teachers were uninformed about the specifics of the program and what students were doing while in attendance at Back-On-Track. They were only aware of the overarching plan of the program. Table 33 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 34 presents the strength codes. One teacher stated, "I don't know what they do at Back-On-Track." Another teacher interjected, "I think we don't know specifically enough of what they do there to make any suggestions." Teachers working in the Back-On-Track program feel as if the program is working as planned; however, they confirmed the lack of collaboration between the home school and Back-On-Track program.

Table 33

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, “Elaborate on the Back-On-Track program. Is it following its design as planned?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Little knowledge of program	16
Working as planned	2

Table 34

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “Elaborate on the Back-On-Track program. Is it following its design as planned?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Little knowledge of program	Strong
Working as planned	Weak

Research Question 4

What do you think the impact/effect of the Back-On-Track/On-Track program will be on student attitudes? On student motivation? And on student academic self-perception? When teachers were asked about the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student attitudes and motivation toward school, a strong theme emerged in both categories regarding dependency on individual students’ dispositions. Each student’s circumstances, according to the teachers, had an impact on whether the program affected a student’s attitude toward school and motivation to complete his/her education. One teacher commented, “(There are) individual differences there, because I

see some that are more conscientious; they try to stay on top of getting their assignments done whereas I don't think they would have done that were they not in the Back-On-Track program..." Many teachers simply commented, "It just depends on the kid."

Weak themes emerged regarding either a positive or negative change, or no change, or fluctuation either way concerning attitude. Table 35 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 36 presents the strength codes. However, there was a moderate positive response regarding the program's impact on student motivation. One teacher commented, "I've seen some students...you can just see how much of a benefit and helps them. It helps their attitude and motivation." Overall, teachers felt the level of impact on student attitude and motivation was dependent upon individual student intrinsic motivation.

Table 37 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 38 presents the strength codes.

Table 35

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, "What is the impact on the Back-On-Track program on student attitudes toward school?"

Themes	Teacher Responses
Depends on student	12
Positive	4
Negative	3
No change	2

Table 36

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What is the impact on the Back-On-Track program on student attitudes toward school?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Depends on student	Strong
Positive	Weak
Negative	Weak
No change	Weak

Table 37

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, “What is the impact on the Back-On-Track program on student motivation toward school?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Depends on student	10
Positive	6
Negative	2
No change	4

Table 38

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What is the impact on the Back-On-Track program on student motivation toward school?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Depends on student	Strong
Positive	Moderate
Negative	Weak
No change	Weak

The strong recurring theme from the teachers about the program’s impact on students continued to be student-based, contingent upon student academic ability and academic self-efficacy. A moderate sense of frustration was derived from the teacher focus group discussion about the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student academic self-perception and performance due to students missing classes at the home school to attend the Back-On-Track program, therefore having a negative impact on student academic achievement and possibly academic self-perception. A teacher commented, “I would really love to see them have the opportunity to be in all of our classes and still be able to do Back-On-Track because it’s a huge source of anxiety for the kids and for us.” Teachers also expressed academic concerns regarding students with learning disabilities and their ability to manage additional coursework at both the home school and Back-On-Track. Just the inclusion in the program revealed weak themes of a negative impact or no change at all. Table 39 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 40 presents the strength codes.

Table 39

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, “What is the impact on the Back-On-Track program on student academic self-perception?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Based on student ability	13
Decline in class missed at home school	8
Positive	6
Negative overall	4
No change	2

Table 40

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What is the impact on the Back-On-Track program on student academic self-perception?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Based on student ability	Strong
Decline in class missed at home school	Moderate
Positive	Moderate
Negative overall	Weak
No change	Weak

Program Effectiveness

In response to the question regarding the effective aspects of the program that are beneficial, the focus group discussion revealed moderate responses from teachers who

felt like a smaller setting and affording the students the opportunity to move ahead would be beneficial to students in the Back-On-Track program. The Back-On-Track environment and the good rapport with the program's teacher emerged as weak themes. This finding supports Dynarski and Gleason's (2002) findings from an evaluation of federally funded dropout prevention programs. Two features surfaced in all the programs evaluated: programs tried to help students overcome personal and social barriers, and programs tried to create smaller and more personal settings in order to provide a sense of security for students. They identified smaller class sizes, more personalized settings, and learning plans individualized for each student as characteristics that lowered the dropout rate for alternative middle school programs. Most alternative programs are either a smaller version of the host school on the host school campus, or are housed in separate facilities. Table 41 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 42 presents the strength codes. During the discussion about the program's effectiveness, one teacher commented,

I really think it's better for us to spend that money on the front end with these dropouts because that's really and truly what you're talking about, these potential dropouts. If there's any way to prevent them from doing that you're saving a whole lot of money on the front end than if they drop out and need all sorts of other services.

Table 41

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, “What aspects of the program do you think are effective/beneficial?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Small setting	7
Good student rapport with teacher	4
Opportunity to move ahead	6
Environment	5

Table 42

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What aspects of the program do you think are effective/beneficial?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Small setting	Moderate
Good student rapport with teacher	Weak
Opportunity to move ahead	Moderate
Environment	Weak

In accordance to teacher concerns about students struggling academically in classes missed while at the Back-On-Track program, the issue surfaced again when asked about the aspects of the program that teachers considered ineffective and not beneficial to students. A strong theme emerged from concerns about the scheduling of student attendance at Back-On-Track during core class time at the home middle school. One teacher commented, “Right now they’re missing my class twice a week, the entire class.”

Another teacher stated,

If we could find a time for them to go where they're not missing core education classes, and I hate to take EE (elective) time away from them, but I really see that helping because they're not missing work, they're in class and able to stay caught up.

A moderate concern for home school teachers was student performance on PASS testing. After students leave their home schools for full time On-Track attendance, they continue to be coded as eighth-grade students for the remainder of the year. Due to their eighth-grade classification, students are required to participate in the administration of the state standardized testing program, PASS, in March (writing assessment) and May of each year. Their home school teachers are still considered the teacher of record during PASS testing, even though they have discontinued instructing those students after the semester break in January. They expressed a level of concern in students taking a test coded with the eighth-grade teacher's name when they have not delivered instruction to those students since January. Table 43 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 44 presents the strength codes. Teacher comments were similar to the following:

The area of frustration as teachers is that my eighth graders that leave me first semester come back and take PASS testing. They're bound to fail and affect my scores in a negative way because they've missed half a year of my instruction. I don't know how fair that is to us as teachers and them as students. How do they feel when they get that score back that says you weren't successful in doing what you needed to do for eighth-grade?

Several teachers expressed concern that students are instructed in science with little variety of instructional strategies. A science teacher expressed her concern by saying,

They (the students) tell me all they do is sit at the computer. So to just sit at a computer, that's not their learning style. So I would like to see possibly throwing in some auditory teaching or some hands-on or a lab once a week to supplement what they're learning during the week.

In addition, the science teachers in the focus group expressed concern of the lack of correlation between the content of the Earth Science courses students are taking at both the Back-On-Track program and at the home school. A comment made regarding curriculum was,

I'd like to see more correlation between the content. We're on a pacing guide and if their content in Earth Science is laid out like our content is laid out, then there wouldn't be so much mismatch between what they're missing in class and what they're doing at Back-On-Track. It would be more correlated and it doesn't seem they would miss as much.

Another concern raised was a perceived lack of transition for students when they left the home school and attended the On-Track program full time. This concern is validated by current students who expressed a similar concern. Former student focus group findings revealed students voicing a dislike for high school due to the abrupt transition from the On-Track program back to the high school setting.

Table 43

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, “What aspects of the program do you think are ineffective/not beneficial?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Scheduling issues/missing class	12
PASS testing concerns	6
Lack of transition	4
One method of instruction	4

Table 44

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What aspects of the program do you think are ineffective/not beneficial?”

Themes	Teacher Responses
Scheduling issues/missing class	Strong
PASS testing concerns	Moderate
Lack of transition	Weak
One method of instruction	Weak

Program Support

Regarding the research question about support for the program by home school teachers, administration, and other students, a strong theme of support emerged from the focus group discussions. No one expressed any incidences of nonsupport from any of the stakeholders involved. Table 45 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 46 presents the strength codes. As a matter of fact, one teacher admitted,

We work really hard with those kids to try to keep them up. I think there's an amount of extra patience involved with it. It's a lot of work. You don't want them to get disqualified from the program so we give them a little extra slack, benefit of the doubt, sometimes.

Teachers did express a desire to have more input on student participants in the program and the need for success rate data of their former students. A teacher stated, "When selecting students, too, we probably need to talk a lot more with their teachers in the previous grade." Regarding the desire for data, a teacher commented, "We would love to know some data for our purposes to see how our kids have fared."

Table 45

Frequency of themes for the Focus Group Question, "In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and other students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school?"

Themes	Teacher Responses
Supportive	11
More input from teachers	7
Need for data	7

Table 46

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, "In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and other students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school?"

Themes	Teacher Responses
Supportive	Strong
More input from teachers	Moderate
Need for data	Moderate

Teacher Survey Data

Teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program at the home schools and at the Back-On-Track/On-Track facility were surveyed using a researcher developed survey regarding their perceptions of student attitude of students in the program towards school and teachers, student academic performance, student motivation, and their overall perception of the program. A total of 46 out of 75 teachers participated in the online survey, indicating a 61% response rate. Of the 46 teachers participating in the survey, 74% were female and 26% were male. Twenty-eight percent of the teachers participating have 20+ years of teaching experience, 24% have 13-20 years of experience, 43.5% have 6-12 years of experience, and 4.3% have 0-5 years of teaching experience (see Figure 2).

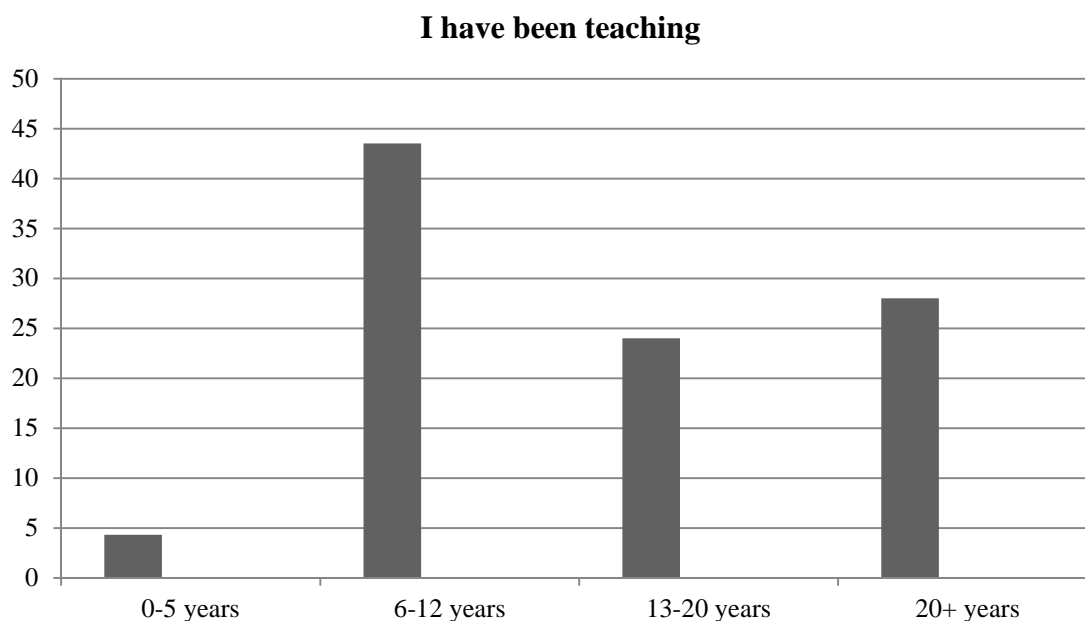


Figure 2. Teachers' Years of Experience

Fifteen percent of participating teachers possess a Bachelor's degree, 21.7% have a Bachelor's +18, 41% have a Master's degree, 24% have a Master's +30, 2% have a

Doctorate, and 24% are National Board Certified.

On the survey, the average response was indicated by mean scores from a Likert scale measuring from one to five: (1) “Strongly Disagree,” (2) “Disagree,” (3) “Not Sure,” (4) “Agree,” and (5) “Strongly Agree.” Analysis of teacher survey data showed that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are not sure about whether students show improvement on graded assignments, disputing the fact that students feel they are showing improvement. A mean score of 3.1 indicated teachers are undecided, and a cumulative percentage of 57.8% of indecisiveness or disagreement indicated teachers are not convinced that the Back-On-Track program was affecting student improvement on graded assignments. Table 47 lists the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for that variable.

Table 47

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-Improvement on Graded Assignments

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
Students that attended and/or are attending the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement on graded assignments		
Strongly Disagree	1	2.2
Disagree	12	26.1
Not Sure	14	30.4
Agree	17	37.0
Strongly Agree	2	4.3

In response to the survey questions regarding student attitude towards school,

analysis of teacher survey data show that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program lean toward agreement that students in the program have improved their attitude towards school with a mean score of 3.5 and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 69.5%. This data confirmed preprogram student data that found that students varied from not sure to slightly agree that their attitude towards school had improved since being a participant in the Back-On-Track program with a mean score of 4.6 from a Likert scale of 1-7. Teacher comments from the focus group sessions indicated that teachers felt like more often than not, attitude improvement was dependent upon individual students. However, students and home school teachers indicated that toward the end of the Back-On-Track program, attitudes towards students' home school declined in their anticipation of full time attendance in the On-Track program. Table 48 lists the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for that variable.

Table 48

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-Improvement in Attitudes

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
Students that attended and/or are attending the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their attitudes toward school		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	8	17.4
Not Sure	6	13.0
Agree	29	63.0
Strongly Agree	3	6.5

Regarding respect, teacher response indicated that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are not sure that students have shown improvement in their respect towards teachers and staff with a mean score of 3.3. The cumulative percentage of agreement and disagreement/undecided are 52.1% and 47.9%, respectively, indicating that approximately half of the faculty believed there had been improvement while the other half was either undecided or disagreed. Table 49 lists the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for that variable. Noted here are the results of the student pre and postprogram survey that indicated that close to 40% of students were not sure or disagreed that their teachers cared about them. It could be inferred that student respect is incumbent upon student perception of teacher caring.

Table 49

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-Improvement in Respect

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
Students that attended and/or are attending the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their respect towards teachers and staff		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	9	19.6
Not Sure	13	28.3
Agree	22	47.8
Strongly Agree	2	4.3

Teacher survey data indicated that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are not sure that Back-On-Track student have displayed an improvement in their

academic self-confidence with a mean score of 3.3, and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 52.2% and undecided/disagreement of 47.8%. Data show that teachers are divided in their belief that student academic self-confidence has improved by participation in the program. However, student academic self-perception data showed that in both the pre and postsurvey, students indicated positive academic self-perception with an overall mean of 5.0, slightly agree, on the variables in the self-perception subscale. Table 50 lists the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for that variable.

Table 50

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-Improvement in Academic Self-Confidence

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
Students that attended and/or are attending the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their academic self-confidence		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	11	23.9
Not Sure	11	23.9
Agree	19	41.3
Strongly Agree	5	10.9

Analysis of teacher survey data indicated that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program mostly agree that students in the program express a desire and motivation to continue and complete their education with a mean score of 3.8. The cumulative percentage of agreement supports that finding with 78.2% of teachers either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. This confirmed student data that

indicated that students agree with the importance of an education with an overall mean of 6.2 for the subscale of goal valuation. Students also indicated an increase in self-motivation to do their work in order to succeed and continue in school on the SAAS-R. Table 51 lists the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for that variable. Additionally, former students indicated strong agreement to a comparable question on the Academic Motivation Scale discussed later in this chapter.

Table 51

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-Desire to Complete Education

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
Students that attended and/or are attending the Back-On-Track program demonstrate a desire to continue and complete their education		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	1	2.2
Not Sure	9	19.6
Agree	33	71.7
Strongly Agree	3	6.5

Regarding aspects of student motivation in relation to effort in the classroom, analysis of teacher survey data indicated that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are somewhat undecided as to the improvement of effort in the classroom with a mean of 3.4 on a 5-point Likert scale. Focus group results confirmed the teacher indecisiveness on this variable with the strong theme of dependence on the individual student disposition emerging. However, findings from the student survey indicated that

students mostly agree there is a lot of effort put into their school work with a mean of 5.33 on a 7-point Likert scale. Table 52 lists the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for that variable.

Table 52

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-Improvement in Effort

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
Students that attended and/or are attending the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their effort in the classroom		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	14	30.4
Not Sure	3	6.5
Agree	24	52.2
Strongly Agree	5	10.9

Analysis of teacher survey data showed that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program indicate teacher agreement that the program provided a valuable acceleration avenue for overaged eighth graders and it should be continued, with means of 4.0 and 4.1, respectively. Percentages of agreement for both variables were 82.6%, indicating a high percentage of teachers in favor of the program's continuation in the district. Tables 53 and 54 list the teacher survey question totals and overall percentages for those questions. This finding was confirmed by the focus group responses by students and teachers who indicate that the Back-On-Track program is a valuable program that provides an avenue of acceleration, without which the students would probably not

complete their education. Former student survey data findings confirmed this data with a mean score of 4.2 and percentage of agreement of 85% when asked if attendance at Back-On-Track encouraged continuation of a high school education.

Table 53

Frequency of All Teacher Respondents-A Valuable Acceleration Avenue

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
The Back-On-Track program provides a valuable acceleration avenue for the districts' overaged eighth-grade students		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	3	6.5
Not Sure	5	10.9
Agree	24	52.2
Strongly Agree	14	30.4

Table 54

Frequency of All Teacher Respondent-Back-On-Track Should Be Continued

Survey Item	Survey Results	
	N=46	%
The Back-On-Track program should be continued		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	1	2.2
Not Sure	7	15.2
Agree	23	50.0
Strongly Agree	15	32.6

Field Observations

After the preprogram student focus group interview data was analyzed, the researcher spent a day at Back-On-Track, recording field notes from observing a morning and afternoon group of students that represented approximately half of the Back-On-Track enrollment. Observed during the visits were students working at their own pace, with the majority of students working at either desktop or laptop computers, completing quizzes, chapter tests, or searching web links for information, with an average of four students per session working from the Earth Science text completing their study guides. This observation validated focus group findings that students completed study guides and worked at their own pace while at Back-On-Track. The teacher moved about the room, assisting students when requested. The teacher had to prompt some distracted students occasionally, but overall students were engaged and apparently comfortable with the structure in the classroom. They were aware of the procedures and proceeded to move through the work with little to no direction from the teacher.

After the postprogram focus group session, an observation was performed at the end of the program that included the remaining half of the student Back-On-Track population. The researcher noted a somewhat less structured environment as several students were completing or had completed the last exam for the Earth Science course. Those students that had completed the course were engaged in alternate activities such as watching movies on laptops or playing computer games. Several students were continuing to work on the Earth Science assignments while two students who had completed the Earth Science course were working on computers on the next course, Environmental Science.

Former Student Focus Group Interview

Staff from the Back-On-Track and On-Track programs visited each of the three high schools in the district after report cards were issued at the end of the first 9 weeks grading period in 2011 to monitor former Back-On-Track and On-Track students.

Twenty-four students from the three high schools were randomly chosen from a field of 90 former Back-On-Track students for participation in the study. The researcher accompanied the staff and held focus group interviews with a total of 13 former Back-On-Track and On-Track students, seven students who were 18 years old and six students under 18 who returned parent permission forms, indicating a response and participation rate of 54%. The researcher audiotaped the focus group interviews, then transcribed student responses. Students were asked the following questions:

1. What has been your experience in high school so far?
2. What impact did the Back-On-Track/On-Track program have on your attitude, motivation and academic self-perception?
3. What would suggestions would you make about the Back-On-Track/On-Track program?

After transcribing the interview responses, the researcher used open coding, allowing student responses to determine the themes that emerged from the discussions. Strength codes of themes with 8-13 responses were considered strong, 4-7 responses were considered moderate, and 3 or less were considered weak.

Focus Group Question 1

What has been your experience in high school so far? Focus group interview results showed that some students have struggled since returning to the traditional high school setting. The general feeling noted is that students are not thriving in the larger

school environment since entering high school. Many former students stated that they liked the combination of teacher-directed and computer-assisted instruction in the Back-On-Track program. Students in the high school settings claimed to not have as much computer-assisted instruction. This finding validates current student focus group findings of their positive reaction to the mixture of teacher-directed and computer-assisted instruction.

Regarding teacher interaction, a strong response was elicited from students when asked about their experiences with teachers at their high schools. Students indicated that teachers at their high schools did not spend as much time working with students one-on-one, and that the high school teachers did not appear to care. One student said, “Teachers don’t care; they don’t spend as much time working with you.” A strong response from students indicated a desire to return to the New Beginnings program. A moderate response was indicated regarding relaxation of the dress code; several students were members of each school’s ROTC programs and were dressed accordingly. Table 55 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 56 presents the strength codes.

Table 55

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What has been your experience since entering high school?”

Themes	Student responses
Less self-paced work	9
Expressed desire to enroll in New Beginnings	8
Less teacher one-on-one	8
Relaxation of dress code	5

Table 56

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What has been your experience since entering high school?”

Themes	Student responses
Less self-paced work	Strong
Expressed desire to enroll in New Beginnings	Strong
Less teacher one-on-one	Strong
Relaxation of dress code	Moderate

Focus Group Question 2

What impact did the Back-On-Track program have on your attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception? Student responses to the question of the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception indicated that the majority of students questioned showed strong positive responses to the motivation and attitude variables and a moderately positive response to the academic self-perception variable. Table 57 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 58 presents the strength codes. One male student who is on track to graduate in June 2012 said, “If it had not been for the Back-On-Track program, and Ms. Jones, I am sure I would have dropped out of school by now.” These focus group findings validate current student focus group responses in that both groups felt the program has a positive impact on their attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception.

Table 57

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What impact did the Back-On-Track/On-Track program have on your attitude, motivation and academic self-perception”?

Themes	Student responses
Positive impact on motivation	9
Positive impact on attitude	8
Positive impact on academic self-perception	6

Table 58

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What impact did the Back-On-Track/On-Track program have on your attitude, motivation and academic self-perception”?

Themes	Student responses
Positive impact on motivation	Strong
Positive impact on attitude	Strong
Positive impact on academic self-perception	Moderate

Focus Group Question 3

What suggestions would you make about the Back-On-Track/On-Track program? When questioned about any suggestions to improve the current Back-On-Track and On-Track programs, students strongly responded that they would like to see the program add elective courses and more content area courses. One male student specifically suggested that the program add math courses such as Geometry. An

additional strong response of students indicated that the Back-On-Track/On-Track program relax or abolish dress code restrictions. A better transition process was reported as weak by both teachers and former students. During the conversations, a male student suggested that there should be some type of transition process from the On-Track program into the high schools since the mode of instruction differs. Table 59 lists the frequencies of the emerging themes and Table 60 presents the strength codes.

Table 59

Frequency of Themes for the Focus Group Question, “What would suggestions would you make about the Back-On-Track/On-Track program?”

Themes	Student responses
Relaxation/abolishment of dress code	11
Add electives	8
Add more courses	7
Improved transition to high school	4

Table 60

Overall Strength Codes for the Focus Group Question, “What would suggestions would you make about the Back-On-Track/On-Track program?”

Themes	Student responses
Relaxation/abolishment of dress code	Strong
Add electives	Strong
Add more courses	Moderate
Improved transition to high school	Weak

Former Student Survey

The same 13 former Back-On-Track students that participated in the focus group sessions were administered the Academic Motivation Survey during the high school visits by the researcher in the fall 2011 semester to determine, based upon their attendance at Back-On-Track, their levels of academic motivation. Of the 13 students, 7.7% were in the ninth grade, 38% were in the tenth grade, 31% were in the eleventh grade, and 23% were in the twelfth grade. The survey was based on the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) (Appendix I) developed by Vallerand et al. (1989) and modified to determine academic persistence of former participants. Dr. Robert Vallerand gave permission to use the AMS in this study (Appendix J). The AMS is a multidimensional scale that measures five types of academic motivation, and was used in research studying high school and college students' motivational profiles of the self-determination theory using a person-oriented approach (Vallerand et al., 2007). The AMS has been found reliable and valid (Vallerand et al., 1989), and in the study cited, Cronbach's alphas were .93, .78, .85, .64, and .85 for intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, external regulation, and amotivation (Vallerand et al., 1989).

Former Back-On-Track students responded to the survey questions using the 5-point Likert scale with 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree. Prior to taking the survey, and in the introduction of the survey, students were asked to consider their attendance at Back-On-Track when answering the survey questions.

In the subscale of extrinsic motivation external regulation, the questions focused on students' external motivators for completing their education for future jobs, salaries, and quality of life. Extrinsic motivation external regulation occurs when the behavior is

regulated externally and is not chosen but usually motivated by a reward or constraint (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). All four indicators in the category had a mean score of 4.0 or more, indicating that students agreed that they go to school to obtain a job that pays well and to live the “good life” later on. All students, 100%, agreed or strongly agreed that they go to school to find a high paying job, get a more prestigious job, and have a better salary later on. Only one student was not sure if going to school would afford him/her the “good life” later on. Table 61 lists the external regulation survey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 61

Frequency of All Respondents-Extrinsic Motivation External Regulation

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
I go to school because I need at least a high school diploma in order to find a high paying job.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	0	0.0
Agree	9	69.2
Strongly Agree	4	30.7
I go to school in order to get a more prestigious job later on.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	9	69.2
Strongly Agree	3	23.1
I go to school because I want to have “the good life” later on.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	8	61.5
Strongly Agree	4	30.7
I go to school in order to have a better salary later on.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	0	0.0
Agree	12	92.3
Strongly Agree	1	7.7

Extrinsic motivation identified regulation occurs when a behavior is valued and is perceived as being chosen by the student. It is extrinsic because it is performed as a means to an end (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). Former Back-On-Track student survey results indicated that while students agree that a high school education will better prepare them for a career and enable them to enter the job market in a desirable field with identical means of 4.15 and 92% of agreement, not all students were sure that going to school would help them make a better career choice or would improve their competence as a better worker with means of 3.7 and 3.9, respectively. Table 62 lists the identified survey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 62

Frequency of All Respondents-Extrinsic Motivation Identified

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
I go to school because I think that a high school education will help me prepare for my chosen career.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	0	0.0
Agree	9	69.2
Strongly Agree	4	30.7
I go to school because it will eventually enable me to enter the job market in a field that I like.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	9	69.2
Strongly Agree	3	23.1
I go to school because this will help me make a better choice regarding my career orientation.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	3	23.1
Agree	10	76.9
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
I go to school because I believe that my education will improve my competence as a worker.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	1	7.7
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	9	69.2
Strongly Agree	2	15.3

Extrinsic motivation introjected regulation indicates a student's desire to prove something to him or herself by completing a task, complying with internal pressure to avoid feelings of guilt or shame (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Survey results showed that former Back-On-Track students go to school to prove to themselves that they are capable of succeeding in school and earning a high school diploma with a mean score of 4.1 and 4.0, respectively. Attending school to show themselves that they are intelligent and feel important when succeeding in school both had mean scores of 3.9, indicating that students agree with these statements. Table 63 lists the introjected survey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 63

Frequency of All Respondents-Extrinsic Motivation Introjected

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
I go to school to prove to myself that I am capable of completing my high school diploma.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	0	0.0
Agree	12	92.3
Strongly Agree	1	7.7
I go to school because of the fact that when I succeed in school I feel important.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	12	92.3
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
I go to school to show myself that I am an intelligent person.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	2	15.3
Agree	10	76.9
Strongly Agree	1	7.7
I go to school because I want to show myself that I can succeed in my studies.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	1	7.7
Not Sure	1	7.7
Strongly Agree	2	15.3

Intrinsic motivation is defined as engaging in a task for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the task. Intrinsically motivated students engage in activities that interest them, without material rewards and incentives to coax them. Simply, intrinsic behaviors are performed purely for the joy and satisfaction of performing them (Deci et al., 1991). Intrinsic motivation with the desire to know information results indicate uncertainty about going to school for the pure pleasure of learning. On average, students' responses ranged in the not sure category for all four questions. Students indicated they are undecided if they go to school for the pleasure and satisfaction of learning new things and discovering new things never seen before with mean scores of 3.76 and 3.30, respectively. Continuing to learn and broaden knowledge about subjects that appeal to and interest students had means of 3.46 and 3.21, respectively, indicating uncertainty in that area as well. Focus group interviews confirmed the apparent disengagement of the students regarding their overall feeling of attendance at their high schools. Table 64 lists the intrinsic motivation to know survey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 64

Frequency of All Respondents-Intrinsic Motivation To Know

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
I go to school because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	4	30.7
Agree	8	61.5
Strongly Agree	1	7.7
I go to school for the pleasure I experience when I discover new things never seen before.		
Strongly Disagree	1	7.7
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	7	53.8
Agree	4	30.7
Strongly Agree	1	7.7
I go to school for the pleasure I experience in broadening my knowledge in appealing subjects.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	1	0.0
Not Sure	9	69.2
Agree	2	15.3
Strongly Agree	1	7.7
I go to school because my studies will allow me to continue to learn about many interesting things.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	1	7.7
Not Sure	7	53.8
Agree	3	23.1
Strongly Agree	2	15.3

Regarding being intrinsically motivated to experience educational stimulation, students indicated they did not attend school because they really liked school, with a mean score of 2.8 and 69% of students either being not sure, or disagreeing that they liked school. Additionally, only 31% of students said that school was fun with a mean score of 3.0. Table 65 lists the experience stimulation survey questions totals and overall percentages per question. This data confirmed the overall focus group findings that former students in the high school setting were generally disenfranchised from school and engagement was low in the high school setting.

Table 65

Frequency of All Respondents Intrinsic Motivation-Experience Stimulation

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
I go to school because I really like going to school.		
Strongly Disagree	2	15.3
Disagree	2	15.3
Not Sure	5	38.4
Agree	4	30.7
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
I go to school because, for me, school is fun.		
Strongly Disagree	2	15.3
Disagree	1	7.7
Not Sure	6	46.1
Agree	3	23.1
Strongly Agree	0	0.0

Amotivation is defined as one being disconnected between his/her behavior and outcomes. There is an experience of incompetence and lack of control. Amotivated

behaviors are neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated. There are no rewards, either intrinsic or extrinsic, and participation in the task will eventually cease (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). In the subscale of amotivation, students disagreed or strongly disagreed with all statements. Student response to the statements of not seeing why they attend school and not caring about school had identical mean scores of 1.5 with 92% of students disagreeing with those two statements. Student response to statements about wasting time going to school and questioning if they should continue school solicited responses with means of 1.84 and 100% disagreement, and 1.76 and 77% of disagreement, respectively. Table 66 lists the amotivation survey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 66

Frequency of All Respondents-Amotivation

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
Honestly, I don't know why I go to school. I really feel I am wasting my time in school.		
Strongly Disagree	2	15.3
Disagree	11	84.6
Not Sure	0	0.0
Agree	0	0.0
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
I once had good reasons for going to school; however, now I wonder if I should continue.		
Strongly Disagree	6	46.1
Disagree	4	30.7
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	0	0.0
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
I can't see why I go to school, and frankly I couldn't care less.		
Strongly Disagree	7	53.8
Disagree	5	38.4
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	0	0.0
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
I don't know why I go to school; I can't understand what I'm doing in school.		
Strongly Disagree	7	53.8
Disagree	4	30.7
Not Sure	1	7.7
Strongly Agree	0	0.0

Results of the former Back-On-Track students survey indicated that while these

students understand the importance of a high school education regarding careers, jobs, and future, they do not enjoy going to school. They expressed a desire to learn about new things, but not necessarily in a traditional high school setting. These students want to prove to themselves and others that they are capable of succeeding in and completing their high school education. Their high levels of disagreement in the amotivation subscale indicated that they understand the importance of being in and completing school. Mean scores of 4.2 on a 5-point Likert scale and a percentage of agreement of 84.7% indicated that students agree that their attendance at Back-On-Track encouraged their motivation to continue their high school education. Table 67 lists the survey questions totals and overall percentages per question.

Table 67

Frequency of All Respondents-Back On-Track/On-Track Attendance

Survey Items	Survey Results	
	N=13	%
I go to school because my experience at Back-On-Track encouraged me to continue my high school education.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	2	15.3
Agree	6	46.2
Strongly Agree	5	38.5
I go to school because my experience at On-Track encouraged me to continue my high school education.		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Not Sure	1	7.7
Agree	5	38.4
Strongly Agree	7	53.9

Summary

This chapter discussed research findings from the School Attitude Assessment and Academic Motivation surveys of current and former Back-On-Track students, a teacher perception survey, and focus group discussions. First, analysis of focus group sessions held with students and teacher groups from each middle school and the Back-On-Track/On-Track faculty was presented. Thirty-three current students, 13 former students, and 46 teachers participated in the focus group interviews. From the combined focus group interviews with both present and former students and teachers, five themes

emerged: the need for an acceleration program for overaged eighth graders in the district to allow students to get back in the right grade; depending upon individual students, an impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception; the difficulty for some students to maintain academic performance in both the home school and Back-On-Track program; the benefits of a small setting and self-paced learning for these students; and the overall support of all stakeholders in the program.

Next, School Attitude Assessment, Academic Motivation, and teacher perception survey data were presented responding to research questions related to academic self-perception, attitude toward school, teachers and classes, goal valuation, and extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Pre and postsurveys were completed by 31-33 current students. Thirteen former students completed surveys, and 46 teachers completed surveys. Surveys from current students were administered pre and postenrollment in the Back-On-Track program to determine if participation in the program had an impact on student attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

Introduction of the Dissertation

Deci and Ryan's (1991) self-determination theory, in an educational realm, is concerned with promoting an interest in learning, a placing of value on education, and a confidence in academic capabilities (1991). The concept of motivation, in an educational environment or not, has been studied from many different perspectives. "One of the most prominent academic problems plaguing today's teenage youth is a lack of motivation toward academic activities" (Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2003, p. 567). Motivation to perform well at school can be influenced by protective factors against school failure such as the value students place on school, recognizing the importance of an education, and identifying long-term career goals (Phalet et al., 2004). The self-determination theory adds an additional distinction that classifies motivational behaviors into those of intentional or motivated (Deci et al., 1991). This study sought to determine if empowering students with the extrinsic motivation of getting back on grade level with peers translates into intrinsic motivation to modify attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. The purpose of this study was to formatively evaluate the Back-On-Track program to determine if the program is effective in improving the attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception of overaged eighth-grade students by providing the opportunity to attend the program with smaller class sizes, less transition, and age-appropriate peers. The stage-environment fit theory argues the importance of fit between the developmental needs of an adolescent and the educational environment into which adolescents are thrust (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). In their study of the impact of the types of educational contexts to which adolescents are exposed during the middle years, Eccles et al. (1991) cited multiple research studies in adolescent development and behavior that

suggest that many middle school-aged students experience a decline in academic motivation and engagement. The declines are based on an increasing sense of self-doubt, a lack of confidence in abilities, and rising academic pressures. Declines in motivation are more often due to the mismatch between students' needs and the middle school setting than the assumed characteristics of the early adolescent phase (Eccles et al., 1991). Middle school struggles that lead to a lack of foundational skills for ninth-grade success and the difficulties that typically surface in ninth grade have been highlighted as critical points along students' educational careers (Pinkus, 2008). Completion of Back-On-Track allows these students to transition into On-Track, an alternative setting for ninth graders, which in turn allows them to accelerate to join grade-level peers at the appropriate attendance-zoned high schools. Prior to this study, it was unknown what student and teacher perspectives were of the program pertaining to its impact on attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
2. What resources does this school system possess that enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students?
3. What are the expectations of the program? Is the Back-On-Track program following its design as planned?
4. What is the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student attitudes, motivation, and student academic self-perception?

Contextual Issues

What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration

program for middle school aged students? The targeted district has an average of 50-60 overaged eighth graders each year in its five middle schools. The focus group discussions supported, from both current students and teachers, the need for an acceleration program for overaged eighth graders in the middle school setting. Both groups cited the need for the program with identical themes of providing an opportunity to get back in the right grade and the students being too old and mature for an eighth-grade middle school setting, confirming existing literature and the stage-environment fit theory that age appropriate settings are conducive to fostering positive student attitudes, motivation, and academic self-perception. Teachers expressed a concern about students dropping out if they continued on the current graduation trajectory without an opportunity to accelerate to the correct grade. Roderick's (1994) event history analysis of a cohort of seventh graders found that students who have given up on school and are showing signs of dropping out while they are still in middle school will likely repeat seventh or eighth grade. Merely the fact that retained students are over aged for their grade and peer groups is a major factor in the dropout rate of retained students (Roderick, 1994).

Statistical data from the teacher perception survey response reflected a need and approval for the program when asked if the program provides a valuable acceleration avenue for the districts' overaged eighth graders with a mean score of 4.1 on a 5-point Likert scale. When asked if the program should be continued, teachers indicated it should be with a mean score of 4.1 on a 5-point Likert scale. Former Back-On-Track students indicated on the Academic Motivation Scale survey that participation in the Back-On-Track program encouraged them to continue their high school education with a mean score of 4.2 on a 5-point Likert scale. One former Back-On-Track student commented, "If it had not been for the Back-On-Track program, and Ms. Jones, I am sure I would

have dropped out of school by now.”

The data determine that current and former students and teachers alike feel that the school system consistently has overaged eighth graders in its middle school that warrant having a middle school acceleration program in place. By providing an avenue of academic acceleration for this population of students, the district reduces the potential for a population of disengaged eighth-grade students and will potentially increase the district's graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate for its three high schools.

Resources

What resources does this school system possess that will enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? Focus group discussions revealed that the staff at the Back-On-Track and On-Track facility felt as if the program has the instructional and fiscal resources needed to continue the program. The school system provides the funding, facility, instructional materials, technology, and transportation to and from the home schools for the program. However, during the focus group discussion, teachers at the Back-On-Track program expressed a need for additional special education personnel to meet the academic needs of students with IEPs and to accommodate more students in the program with learning disabilities. They also expressed a need for classroom assistants to assist with the diverse academic abilities of students who are not classified as learning disabled but display skill deficiencies. The skill deficiencies presented are often indicative of the reason for academic struggles causing students to fall behind in school. By providing more intensive assistance with additional personnel, teachers could ensure that struggling students maintain the curriculum pace. The ultimate goal for most alternative programs, regardless of the focus, is to successfully mainstream students back into the traditional schooling environment.

Alternative programs generally offer small student to teacher ratios, smaller classroom settings, and structures that mainstream schools cannot offer (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Data from the study show that the school system possesses resources such as facilities, technology, and funding in order to provide an academic acceleration program.

Expectations of the Program/Program Design

What are your expectations of the program? Is the Back-On-Track program following its design as planned? During focus group discussions, a disparity between student responses and teacher responses emerged regarding program expectations and design integrity. Students responded strongly, in both the pre and postfocus group sessions that the program was following its plan as designed and was meeting their expectations as the program was explained to them at the orientation meeting. Students presented strong results indicating they were confident of going to high school if successful in the program and graduating on time. In sharp contrast, during the home school teacher focus group sessions, teachers indicated they had little experience with the details of the program and, therefore, could not speak to whether the program was following its design as planned. Regarding the effective aspects of the program, students responded strongly in both the pre and postfocus group sessions that the program's plan of employing self-paced work in a small classroom environment, the use of technology and study guides, and the ability to retake assessments to achieve mastery would have a positive impact on their attitudes, motivation, academic performance, and self-perception. Likewise, teachers felt that the small setting and classroom environment would be effective as well. The element consistent with both the students and teachers regarding the ineffective aspects of the program is the concern of missing classes at the home school while in attendance at the Back-On-Track program, negatively impacting

classroom performance, and potentially threatening to impact attitude, motivation, and academic self-perception.

The qualitative data collected determined that the program is following its plan as designed and communicated to student participants. Students also indicated that the program was meeting their expectations in the preprogram focus group sessions. During the postfocus group sessions, students continued to agree that the program was meeting their expectations. Teacher focus group sessions revealed that teachers at the home school knew little about the program's design or its expectations, therefore teachers could not form a valid opinion on those two research questions. The communication orientation model assumption is that information sharing and integration is critical because it increases the possibilities for comprehension, problem solving, and finding common ground of colleagues (Krauss & Fussell, 1990). Cooperative communication encourages co-workers to actively seek, share, and integrate information that is beneficial to themselves and others in the organization (De Dreu, Nijstad, & Van Knippenburg, 2008). This finding indicates a need for structured communication between these two entities of the district in order to improve the co-existence and collaboration of two programs that share the same students.

Impact on Student Attitudes, Motivation and Academic Self-Perception

What is the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student attitudes, motivation and student academic self-perception?

Attitude. Focus group discussions revealed that current students felt strongly both before and after program attendance that a positive impact had been made on their attitudes toward school, teachers, and classes, therefore providing encouragement to continue in school. During focus group conversations with former Back-On-Track

students, the group also indicated by a strong strength code that the program had a positive effect on their attitude toward school, teachers, and classes while in attendance at the program as evidenced by their present high school attendance. Teacher comments from the focus group sessions indicate that teachers felt like more often than not, attitude improvement was dependent upon individual student disposition to succeed in school. However, focus group interviews with both students and home school teachers indicated that toward the end of the Back-On-Track program, attitudes towards students' home schools declined in their anticipation of full time attendance in the On-Track program. To validate that qualitative finding, on the SAAS-R students indicated by a decline in mean score from the pre to the postsurvey from 4.33 to 3.84 that they felt their middle school was a good match for them. The dissonance caused by this lack of fit can lead to disengagement in school, which could manifest itself into behavior or attendance issues if students feel that the middle school setting is less than ideal for them. Based on that disposition, schools are positioning students to be unsuccessful if a more appropriate setting is not provided. These findings confirm Eccles and Midgely's (1989) stage-environment fit theory that a lack of fit between a student and his/her school setting can have a negative impact on attitude.

Using descriptive statistics, analysis of teacher survey data show that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program lean toward agreement that students in the program have improved their attitude towards school with a mean score of 3.5 on a 5-point Likert scale and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 69.5%. Statistical analysis of the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised indicated that there is not a statistical significant difference in attitude towards school, teachers, and classes between the preprogram and postprogram attendance of current students. The overall data indicated

that students' attitudes toward school, teachers, and classes remained the same or improved while in the program; however, as the students progress they begin to feel that the middle school setting is less ideal for them.

Motivation. Focus group sessions with current students indicated that students feel strongly during both the pre and postprogram discussions that the Back-On-Track program had a positive effect on motivation to continue in school. Two studies have explored the relationship between motivation and educational outcomes. Grolnick and Ryan's (1987) study that measured children's external, introjected, and identified regulation and intrinsic motivation toward school showed that higher forms of motivation and self-determination were related to better conceptual learning. In addition, Vallerand et al.'s (1989) study showed that students with more self-determined forms of motivation for doing academic work were more likely to stay in school than students who had less self-determined motivation. Maintaining positive motivation and encouraging academic performance should increase the number of students remaining in school and completing a high school education. Statistical analysis of the motivation and self-regulation subscale from the SAAS-R showed no statistical differences for nine out of the 10 variables in the subscale. However, for the variable "I am self-motivated to do my school work," a significant difference was shown between the pre and postsurvey administrations with a P value of .958, indicating an increase in self-motivation after attending the Back-On-Track program. When asked about the program's impact on their motivation, several male students made comments such as "I would still be failing and doing the same old thing" and "Without this program, I would still be failing all four classes, probably."

Former Back-On-Track students also indicated during focus group sessions that the program had a positive impact on their motivation to complete their education.

Former program participants were administered the Academic Motivation Scale survey, used to determine students' motivational profiles of the self-determination theory. Former students displayed agreement with an average mean score of 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale when questioned on three types of extrinsic motivation, indicating that external forces such as a career and positive self-perception motivated them to continue with their education. In a study of junior college students, Vallerand and Bissonnette (1992) found that non-self-determined types of extrinsic motivation, external and introjected, were not indicative of academic persistence. However, the self-determined types of extrinsic motivation, namely integration and identification, were found to be positively related to academic persistence. Extrinsic motivation does not necessarily lead to negative effects. Former Back-On-Track students indicated an average mean of 4.0 on all subscales of external motivation on the AMS. Additionally, former students indicated that they are less intrinsically motivated with an average mean score of 3.25. On the survey scale that determined amotivation, or a lack of motivation, students showed strong disagreement when asked if they lacked motivation with an average mean score of 1.7. Therefore, survey data can conclude that former students are externally motivated to complete their education for a reward and to comply with internal pressures, which while motivating them to finish school do not translate to academic persistence. While students are even less intrinsically motivated, they do not present amotivated tendencies. Former students indicated on the survey that the experience at the Back-On-Track program provided encouragement to complete school with a mean score of 4.2, albeit extrinsically.

Teacher focus group commentary revealed a strong theme of dependency on individual students regarding the impact of the program on motivation. Analysis of teacher survey data indicates that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program

mostly agree that students in the program express a desire and motivation to continue and complete their education with a mean score of 3.8 on a 5-point Likert scale. The cumulative percentage of agreement supported that finding with 78.2% of teachers either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. One teacher commented, “The program keeps them (the students) from falling through the cracks and not dropping out.”

Regarding aspects of student motivation regarding effort in the classroom, analysis of teacher survey data indicated that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are somewhat undecided as to the improvement of effort in the classroom with a mean of 3.4 on a 5-point Likert scale.

Academic self-perception. Student focus group commentary indicated that students presented a strong theme that the Back-On-Track program had positively improved grades, work completion, and especially academic focus. Therefore, an increase in academic focus benefited students and helped them evolve into lifelong learners. Statistically, students indicated a slight increase in pre to postmean scores in the academic self-perception subscale. Variables related to capability of making straight As and learning new things in school, the ability to grasp complex concepts, and an overall feeling of being smart in school presented an increase in mean scores between the pre and postsurvey administrations. These findings are confirmed by McCoach and Siegle’s (2003) study that found that underachievers have a lower self-concept than do achievers, but not necessarily lower academic self-perception. However, there was a slight decrease from the pre and postmean scores when asked if school was easy. The data indicate that students in the program maintain a positive academic self-perception; however, they find school sometimes difficult.

Focus group discussions with former students revealed a moderately positive

response when posed the question regarding the impact of the program on their academic self-perception, leading to the assumption that a positive academic self-perception would have a positive impact on academic performance. However, in a study on fourth and fifth graders on the impact of self-perception on academic performance by Heath and Stringer (2008), results showed that self-perception of academic competence had little effect on academic performance. On the Academic Motivation Survey, results showed that former Back-On-Track students go to school to prove to themselves that they are capable of succeeding in school and earning a high school diploma with a mean score of 4.1 and 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale, respectively. Attending school to show themselves that they are intelligent and feel important when succeeding in school both had mean scores of 3.9, indicating a positive level of academic self-perception. However, being intrinsically motivated to learn and experience intellectual stimulation revealed lower average means of 3.4 and 2.9, respectively. Former students feel as if the program had a positive impact on their academic self-perception, but remain in school for extrinsically motivated reasons more strongly than for intrinsically motivated reasons as indicated by statistical results on the AMS. Therefore, the study shows that statistically, while the program extrinsically motivated students, it failed to impact intrinsic motivation.

During the teacher focus group conversations, teachers felt strongly that the impact of the program on academic self-perception was dependent upon the student. Teachers stated that whether students seized the opportunities afforded to them determined the impact of the program on self-perception. Some students embraced the chance to move ahead more fervently than others. One teacher commented, "They're capable of doing the work. Some of them don't know how to play the game of school." While teachers felt the program could have a positive impact on academic self-

perception, some expressed a concern about the decline of academic performance in classes missed, therefore, the negative impact on academic self-perception. Analysis of teacher survey data show that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are not sure about whether students show improvement on graded assignments, disputing the fact that students feel they are showing improvement. A mean score of 3.1 on a 5-point Likert scale and a cumulative percentage of 57.8% of indecisiveness indicated teachers are not convinced that the Back-On-Track program is affecting student improvement on graded assignments. Teacher survey data indicate that teachers of students in the Back-On-Track program are not sure that students have displayed an improvement in their academic self-confidence with a mean score of 3.3, and a cumulative percentage of agreement of 52.2%. However, student academic self-perception data showed that in both the pre and postsurvey, students indicated positive academic self-perception with an overall mean of 5.0, slightly agree, on the variables in the self-perception subscale. Data show that teachers are divided in their belief that student academic self-confidence had improved by participation in the program.

Accelerated middle schools such as Back-On-Track are academic programs structured as either separate schools or schools within middle schools that are designed to help middle school students who are behind to catch up with their grade-level peers, stay in school, and graduate. The programs serve students who are 1 to 2 years behind grade level and give them the opportunity to cover an additional year during their tenure in the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review of three accelerated middle school programs in Georgia, Michigan, and New Jersey addressed student outcomes in three domains: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. Two of the three programs reduced the number of

students dropping out, therefore increasing the number of students staying in school. All three programs studied found that accelerated middle schools had significantly positive effects on progressing in school. In the Georgia study, the average number of school years completed at the 2-year follow up was 8.6 for accelerated middle school students and 7.9 for control group students. The Michigan study showed, at the 2-year follow up, 7.3 for the treatment group and 6.8 for the control group, and the New Jersey study found that the treatment group of students completed 7.8 years of school compared to 7.5 years with the control group (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

This study presented data and supportive commentary indicating that inclusion in the Back-On-Track program had an impact on maintaining or improving student attitude toward school, classes and teachers, motivation to complete school, and academic self-perception. For this population of disengaged overaged eighth graders, maintenance or improvement of a student's attitude, motivation, and self-perception provided an impetus to persevere toward completing a high school education. Because the ultimate goal of most alternative programs is to restore students' abilities to succeed in mainstream educational environments, the absence of such programs is a glaring omission.

Limitations

The researcher is an administrator in a middle school in the district, which could have biased some information gathered in the focus interviews. The researcher trained and used a proxy to conduct student and teacher interviews and surveys on the researcher's campus to avoid bias as much as possible. The researcher interviewed and surveyed students and teachers at other middle school sites. Additionally, the ability to generalize the results to other alternative schools is limited due to the hybrid nature of the program. It is neither a separate facility full time program in the initial phase, nor is it a

school-within-a-school program. Most programs are either one or the other, so an equal comparison is difficult to achieve.

The study was limited to responses received from those present and past students in the Back-On-Track program whose parent/guardian provided consent for their student to participate, therefore limited the size of the sample. Former students who were 18 years of age and were interested in participating in the focus group sessions and interviews gave their own consent. Additionally, the duration of the study was limited to one semester of program participation.

Implications of the Findings

This study suggests the following implications:

1. Students who are overaged in the middle school setting feel a sense of embarrassment and shame, regardless of the reason they are overaged.
2. Smaller classroom settings and self-paced work are beneficial for overaged students.
3. A student's attitude, the level of motivation, and academic self-perception can be positively impacted with opportunities for acceleration but it is often times dependent upon student disposition.
4. An effective acceleration program for overaged middle school students can provide an avenue for acceleration to the high school by offering high school credit, positively affecting graduation rates.

With the discrepancy between the school attitude and motivation surveys and the focus group commentary, additional research should be conducted to determine additional statistical evidence of the impact of such a program on student attitudes toward school, motivation to continue school, and academic self-perception. Alternate school

attitude and motivation surveys may offer additional research data that contrasts or compares the findings of this study. Additionally, further research should be performed to determine if participation in such a program has an impact on a student's academic growth and performance. No academic archival data was used to determine academic growth. Dynarski and Gleason's (2002) evaluation of federal dropout prevention programs found that alternative middle school programs had no impact on grades or test scores. While students were promoted at a faster rate than non-program middle school students, learning did not seem to improve in these programs (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). This study was limited to the use of the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised, the Academic Motivation Scale, a researcher developed teacher perception survey, and focus group discussions. Additional research needs to be performed to determine if similar results occur in comparable settings. Based on findings by Gold and Mann's (1984) study of student and teacher relationships, students need additional interventions over a prolonged period of time before changes take root. Therefore, the subsequent programs in the school system that follow the Back-On-Track program should be evaluated to determine their impact on student completion of school.

Recommendations

Based on student and staff perceptions revealed in the focus group interviews, the program should be continued with the following enhancements and/or modifications: adding additional special education personnel to assist the number of students with Individual Education Plans, investigating schedule modifications that would prevent students missing academic courses at the home school to avoid academic performance decline in the courses missed, having either the Back-On-Track staff travel to the home middle schools for the Earth Science instruction or have a home school teacher offer the

additional Earth Science course, but at the risk of negating the enthusiasm for and anticipation of attending the program off campus, transforming the program into a full-time comprehensive setting, soliciting more teacher input on student participant selection, infusing study skills into Back-On-Track instruction, implementing social and personal intervention curriculum, implementing transitional strategies between alternative and high school programs, providing student data to the home school teachers regarding student progression, improving communication and collaboration between Back-On-Track and home school teachers, and performing an evaluation of the On-Track program.

Availability of alternative programs for students of all academic capabilities and social challenges has become a facet of the educational programs afforded students in today's society. No longer are educational settings of a one size fits all mindset. Students and their parents now have more choices to enable them to reach the final destination of a high school diploma. Hopefully, alternative educational settings will continue to evolve to meet the diverse needs of our students, enabling them to reach their fullest potential and educational goals.

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Appendix A

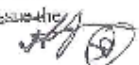
Request for District Collaboration for Doctoral Candidates

Request for District Collaboration for Doctoral Candidates

_____ has set up a means of support for individuals who are seeking doctorate degrees and who agree to develop a dissertation on a topic that is mutually acceptable and beneficial to the individual and District. In addition to access to data collected by various District departments, the District will provide monetary assistance of \$1,000 to eligible individuals who are ready to begin their dissertation.

To be eligible to receive this money, a person must:

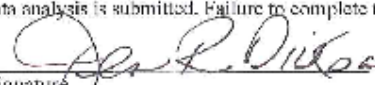
- have been an employee of the _____ for at least six
- select a topic approved by the District;
- orally present topic to district committee (Dr. Jaworski and Dr. Kokolis); and
- commit to completion of the data collection and analysis submitted to the District within an allotted time.

In return, the District will disburse \$500 to the employee at the beginning of the data collection and will issue the remaining \$500 when the final data analysis and background research are submitted to the District. 

Employees who are interested in being considered for this opportunity may complete the form below and submit it and related documents to the Associate Superintendent for Instruction, Dr. Harriet Jaworski.

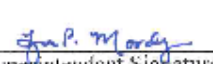
Name	Dickson Jean R.
Address	Last: _____ First: _____ Middle: _____ _____ Street: _____ City: _____ State/Zip: _____
School/Location	_____
Current Position	Principal
College/University	Gardner-Webb University
Doctoral Program of Study/Expected Date of Completion	Educational Leadership/March 2012
Suggested Dissertation Topic (Attach the research proposal)	An Evaluation of the _____
Expected Completion Date of Data Analysis	January 2012

By my signature below, I agree to complete the data collection and analysis for my dissertation within 6 months and submit it to the District by March, 2012. I also agree to maintain the confidentiality of the data provided to me by the district and will remove personal and school identification from all published work. I further understand that I will receive \$500 when my request is approved and an additional \$500 when the data analysis is submitted. Failure to complete the data analysis in the specified time will result in no final payment.

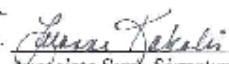

 Signature

9/8/11
 Date

District Response: Approved ☒ Denied ☐
 Comments:


 Superintendent Signature


 Associate Supt. Signature


 Associate Supt. Signature

9/8/11
 Date

Appendix B

Back-On-Track Parent Consent Letter and Form

Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent or Caregiver:

This letter provides information about a research study that will be conducted at Back-On-Track and your child's home middle school to determine the impact of the Back-On-Track program on your child's attitude and motivation towards school and academic self-perception. The study will also determine the effects of retention and being overaged for grade.

The researcher is a middle school administrator at a local middle school and a doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University. Your child is being asked to participate because he or she is a student in a middle school in our district and is qualified to attend the Back-On-Track program. We need to learn more about our Back-On-Track program in order to provide your student with the best experience possible. Our goal is assist your student in accelerating through middle school in order to join his/her peers in high school, ultimately leading to high school completion. Information I learn from the study will allow me to make suggestions to the Back-On-Track staff and middle schools for improvement for our students.

If you give permission for your child to participate in the study, he or she will be asked to do the following:

- 1) Complete two surveys (pre and post Back-On-Track attendance) on the computer.
These questionnaires will ask about your child's attitude towards school, teachers, classmates, family, and life in general.
- 2) Be interviewed in focus groups of 6-8 students about their previous experiences in school, their expectations of the Back-On-Track program, and their thoughts for the future before and after Back-On-Track attendance. These sessions will be

audio-taped to ensure thoroughness of researcher attainment of information.

However, no student will be identified.

- 3) Allow use of student's school records for the purpose of comparing grades and discipline prior to and after attendance at Back-On-Track. All information will be kept confidential; no students will be identified.
- 4) Allow observations at Back-On-Track.

Your decision to allow your child to participate is completely voluntary and anonymous. You are free to allow your student to participate in this research study and to withdraw him or her at any time. Withdrawal from the study will not affect your relationship with your home middle school or the Back-On-Track program.

If you want to know more about this research project, please contact me at 803-981-1503 or email me at [REDACTED]. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University. Information on Gardner-Webb University's policy and procedure for research involving humans can be obtained from Dr. Doug Eury at Gardner-Webb University.

To permit your child to participate in the study, complete the attached consent form and mail back in the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

With Best Regards,

Jean Dickson

Parental Permission Form

I have read the information in this letter about the Back-On-Track study, and,

☐ Yes-I give permission for my child to participate in the study,

-OR-

☐ No-I do not give permission for my child to participate in the study.

Printed name of child

Printed name of parent

Signature of parent

Date

___I have received a copy of this letter and consent form for my records.

Appendix C

Teacher Focus Group Question Protocol

Focus Group Interview Protocol (Teachers)

Opening:

Tell us your name, the grade[s] and subject[s] you teach, and how many years you have worked at/with students in the Back-On-Track/On-Track program.

Introductory:

How were you trained to work with overaged students?

Transition:

Think back to when you first became involved with the Back-On-Track/On-Track program? What was your first impression?

Has that impression changed, and if so, in what ways?

Key:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? (Why do we need this program? What are the issues/problems at the home school for overaged students?)
2. What resources does this school system possess that will enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? (Facilities, budget, faculty/staff, resources, materials. Are we able to implement effectively, efficiently?)
3. Elaborate on the Back-On-Track program. Is it following its design as planned? (What is your knowledge of the program: how students are chosen, the daily schedule?)
4. What is the impact of the Back-On-Track program on student attitudes/motivation and student academic achievement?
5. What aspects of the program do you think are effective/beneficial and what aspects do you think are ineffective/not beneficial?
6. What has been your experience with the program?

7. In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school? What supportive or unsupportive actions or statements have you experienced?

Ending:

- If you could make one statement to summarize your thoughts on the Back-On-Track program, what would you say?
- Do you feel there is anything we should have talked about today regarding the Back-On-Track program but **didn't**?

Appendix D

Student Focus Group Question Protocol

Focus Group Interview Guide (Student)

Opening:

Re-introduce yourself and the study.

Introductory:

Does everyone understand how the Back-On-Track program works?

Transition:

Think back to when you first heard about the Back-On-Track program?
What was your first impression?

Has that impression changed, and if so, in what ways?

Key:

1. What are the contextual issues that warrant an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? (*Why do we need a program for overaged 8th graders?*)
2. What resources does this school system possess that will enable it to provide an academic acceleration program for middle school aged students? (*What resources does our school district have to provide this program?*)
3. Do you think the Back-On-Track program will follow its design as planned? (*What are your expectations of the program?*)
4. What do you think the impact/effect of the Back-On-Track program will be on student attitudes? On student motivation? And on student academic achievement?
5. What aspects/parts of the program do you think will be effective? What aspects/parts do you think will be ineffective?
6. What has been your experience with the program? (*Talk about anyone you know of who has been a B-O-T student already? Friend? Family? How did you hear about it?*)
7. In your opinion, are administrators, teachers, and students supportive of the Back-On-Track program at your school? What supportive or

unsupportive

actions or statements have you experienced?

8. How do you feel about being behind in school? What caused you to be behind in school?
9. What were the hardest aspects/parts of moving from elementary to middle school? What do you think will be the hardest part of moving from middle school into high school?
10. What are your feelings about being able to attend the B-O-T program and join your classmates? Do you have any concerns/worries about the moving up so quickly?
11. How do you describe your experiences in school so far?
12. What motivates you to keep going to school? What un-motivates you?
13. How is school related to your future after high school?

Ending:

- If you could make one statement to summarize your thoughts on the Back-On-Track program, what would you say?
- Do you feel there is anything we should have talked about today regarding the Back-On-Track program but **didn't**?

Appendix E

Teacher Perception Survey Questions

Teacher Survey

Please respond to the following questions using the scale of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Not sure, Agree and Strongly Agree.

1. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their grades on assignments.
2. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their attitude towards school.
3. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their respect towards teachers and staff.
4. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their academic self-confidence.
5. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate a desire to continue and complete their education.
6. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their relationship with their peers.
7. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their effort in the classroom.
8. Students that attended the Back-On-Track program demonstrate improvement in their behavior.
9. The Back-On-Track program provides a valuable acceleration avenue for the districts' overaged 8th grade students.
10. The Back-On-Track program should be continued.

Appendix F

School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised (adaptation)

School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised

(adapted from McCoach & Seigle, 2003)

All questions will have the answer choices of 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Slightly Disagree, 4-Not Sure, 5- Slightly Agree, 6-Agree, 7-Strongly Agree

1. My classes are interesting.
2. I am intelligent.
3. I can learn new ideas quickly in school.
4. I am glad that I go to my middle school.
5. My middle school is a good school.
6. I work hard at school.
7. I relate well to my teachers.
8. I am self-motivated to do my school work.
9. My school is a good match for me.
10. School is easy for me.
11. I like my teachers.
12. My teachers make learning interesting.
13. My teachers care about me.
14. Doing well in school is important for my future career goals.
15. I like this school.
16. I can grasp complex concepts at school.
17. Doing well in school is one of my goals.
18. I complete my school work regularly.
19. It's important to get good grades in school.
20. I am organized about my school work.
21. I use a variety of strategies to learn new material.
22. I want to do my best in school.
23. It is important for me to do well in school.
24. I spend a lot of time on my school work.
25. Most of the teachers at this school are good teachers.
26. I am a responsible student.
27. I put a lot of effort into my school work.
28. I like my classes.
29. I concentrate on my school work.
30. I check my assignments before I turn them in.
31. I am capable of getting straight A's.
32. I want to get good grades in school.
33. I am good at learning new things in school.
34. I am smart in school.
35. I am proud of this school.

Appendix G

Permission to Reproduce SAAS-R



Department of
Educational Psychology

University of Connecticut
Neag School of Education

September 7, 2011

Jean R. Dickson
[REDACTED]

Re: Use of School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised

Dear Ms. Dickson,

You are welcome to use the SAAS-R. I've attached the instrument, some scoring information, and two validation articles.

Best of luck in your research!

D. Betsy McCoach, Ph. D.
Associate Professor, MEA Program
Educational Psychology Department
University of Connecticut

An Equal Opportunity Employer

249 Glenbrook Road Unit 2064
Storrs, Connecticut 06269-2064

Telephone: (860) 486-4031

Facsimile: (860) 486-0180

web: <http://www.ucc.uconn.edu/~wwwepsy>

Appendix H

Former Student Consent to Participate

Consent Form: The Impact of The Back-On-Track Program on Student Attitude,
Motivation, and Academic Self-Perception

I am conducting research on the impact of the Back-On-Track program on overaged 8th grade student motivation, attitude, and academic self-perception. I am investigating this because the research will help educators make informed decisions about the Back-On-Track program based on the impacts revealed in the study. If you decide to do this, your child will be asked to participate in a survey discussing their experiences while in the Back-On-Track program. Students will participate in a session in November of 2011. All sessions will take place at your student's high school computer lab for around 10-15 minutes; all efforts to minimize lost instructional time will be made.

There are no risks to students in this study. All information is confidential, and no person or school will be identified in the study. All online survey sessions are with the research interviewer only, and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel. If your child takes part in this project, he or she will have the opportunity to give input about the future use of the Back-On-Track program in our schools. Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and no one will hold it against your child if you decide not to do it. If your child does take part, he or she may stop at any time without penalty. In addition, you may ask to have your data withdrawn from the study after the research has been conducted.

If you want to know more about this research project, please contact me at 803-981-1503 or email me at [REDACTED]. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University and the [REDACTED]. Information on Gardner-Webb University's policy and procedure for research involving humans can be obtained from Dr. Doug Eury at Gardner-Webb University.

You will get a copy of this consent form.

Sincerely,

Jean R. Dickson

Consent Statement

I agree to let my child take part in this project. I know what he or she will have to do and that he or she can stop at any time.

Parent Signature/Student Name

Date

Appendix I
Academic Motivation Scale

Back-On-Track Completer Survey

Academic Motivation Scale

(adapted from Vallerand, Blair, Briere, & Pelletier, 1989)

Reflect upon your experience when you were enrolled in the Back-On-Track/On-Track program. Based on your experiences at the Back-On-Track/On-Track program, please answer the following questions on the following scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

Why do you go to school?

- 1) Because I need a high school diploma in order to find a high-paying job later on.
- 2) Because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things.
- 3) Because I think that a high school education will help me better prepare for the career I have chosen.
- 4) Honestly, I don't know. I really feel that I am wasting my time in school.
- 5) To prove to myself that I am capable of completing my high school diploma.
- 6) In order to obtain a more prestigious job later on.
- 7) For the pleasure I experience when I discover new things never seen before.
- 8) Because eventually it will enable me to enter the job market in a field that I like.
- 9) I once had good reasons for going to school; however, now I wonder whether I should continue.
- 10) Because of the fact that when I succeed in school I feel important.
- 11) Because I want to have "the good life" later on.
- 12) For the pleasure I experience in broadening my knowledge about subjects which appeal to me.
- 13) Because this will help me make a better choice regarding my career orientation.
- 14) I can't see why I go to school and frankly, I couldn't care less.
- 15) To show myself that I am an intelligent person.
- 16) In order to have a better salary later on.
- 17) Because my studies allow me to continue to learn about many things that interest me.
- 18) Because I believe that my high school education will improvement my competence as a worker.
- 19) I don't know; I can't understand what I'm doing in school.
- 20) Because I want to show myself that I can succeed in my studies.
- 21) My experience at Back-On-Track encouraged me to continue my high school career.
- 22) My experience at On-Track encouraged me to continue my high school career.

Appendix J

Permission to Reproduce AMS

Montreal, September 7, 2011

OBJECT : PERMISSION TO USE THE ACADEMIC MOTIVATION SCALE (AMS)

This letter is to grant permission to Jean Dickson to use the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) for her research. Jean Dickson can use this scale for research purpose only and we ask her to mention the complete reference data.

Thank you,

Robert J. Vallerand, Ph.D.

Directeur et professeur titulaire
Laboratoire de recherche sur le comportement social (LRCS)
Département de psychologie
Université du Québec à Montréal
C.P. 8888, Succ. Centre-Ville
Montreal, Quebec, H3C 3P8
Tel. : 514.987.4826
Courriel : vallerand.bob@gmail.com

Appendix K

Former Student Parent Consent Letter and Form

Dear Parent/Guardian of former Back-On-Track/On-Track students:

My name is Jean Dickson, and I am principal at [REDACTED]. I am currently working on my doctorate degree from Gardner-Webb University. I recently visited your child's high school to ask them to participate in a study I am doing of the Phoenix Bound program. I am asking them to take a 5 minute survey in November of this year.

I gave them the enclosed consent form for your signature, but I also wanted to mail a copy home as well. If your student is interested in participating in the survey, which is completely voluntary and anonymous, please return the consent form in the enclosed, self-address stamped envelope.

If you want to know more about this research project, please contact me at 803-981-1503 or email me at [REDACTED]. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University. Information on Gardner-Webb University's policy and procedure for research involving humans can be obtained from Dr. Doug Eury at Gardner-Webb University.

Thank you in advance for your participation and permission for me to survey your student. My contact information is on the consent form if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Jean Dickson, Principal
[REDACTED]