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An Alternative Program To Help Special Education Students Transition Back Into High School: A Program Evaluation

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AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM TO HELP SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

TRANSITION BACK INTO

HIGH SCHOOL: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

Janine E. Gruhn

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirement of

Doctor of Education

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My work is dedicated in loving memory to my dad, William J. Brill, who was my biggest

fan and taught me to always advocate for what I believe in. In addition, to my family,

who inspire me each day, make me laugh, and understand my joy of learning.

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership Ed.D is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice.
The three projects are:
- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The "program" can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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ABSTRACT

This program evaluation examines the effectiveness of transitioning students from an

alternative program (O'PLUS) back to a general high school setting. Research on

effective alternative high schools for students with disabilities includes five components:

broad academic courses, support structures that can be customized to a student's needs,

student-felt connection to the school and built in motivation, a caring adult community,

and responsive school leadership (Brigharm, et. al. 2006). Students lacking these key

components in an alternative setting often do not transition well, or at all, back into the

high school general education environment. In this program evaluation it was found that

only six students fully transitioned back into general high school over a three-year period

of time. Student achievement data were analyzed and interviews conducted to better

understand if and how alternative high school students were meeting established criteria

to transfer back into high school. It was found that few achieved the required criteria for

the transition and of those that did often decided to stay in the O'PLUS program rather

than transfer back into the regular high school. While the O'PLUS program was

perceived by students and teachers alike as positively impacting the students' education,

the program was failing in its primary mission of transitioning these students back into

the regular high school.

PREFACE: LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout my career as a teacher and as a special education administrator, I have learned to expect the unexpected. It is often with best intentions that as educators we create criteria that students must meet in order to move forward or to meet our expectations; however, if we purposefully plan to meet individual needs, a student might surprise us and even surpass that criteria we set.

As I found of the O'PLUS program, expectations were set for students to go back to the high school. We thought that by raising expectations for attendance, grades, behavior and credit-earning, that students would be incentivized to transition from the alternative program back to the high school. We didn't consider that students might actually want to *stay* in an alternative program. This caused us to realize that we needed to think outside of the box and tailor the program to meet the academic and social emotional needs of individual students. As an educator, I learned it is necessary to evaluate the outcomes, reevaluate, and make necessary adjustments if you have unexpected results.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of the program evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the

Ombudsman Plus (O'PLUS) program to transition special education students back into

the high school. The O'PLUS program was an alternative educational program

specifically designed for high school special education students. Each student in the

O'PLUS program had an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and an Individualized

Learning Plan (ILP). If a student was eligible for special education services, an IEP was

developed to assess a student's strengths, performance, goals, and accommodations. The

IEP included state-required documents and helped the program and district ensure

services are provided, whereas the ILP is student-centered and focused on the goals that

the student sets with the staff member in order to succeed both academically and

behaviorally.

As the Director of Special Education, I helped found the O'PLUS program along

with other colleagues and staff from the Ombudsman Educational Services Alternative

Corporation. The O'PLUS program was created to serve special education students

because District 60 did not have an alternative school that could provide the necessary

services. The concept of O'PLUS was derived from the Ombudsman program that has

been an alternative program in District 60 for over 15 years. The Ombudsman program

serves students that need an alternative setting, who do not require special education

services. Both the O'PLUS and the Ombudsman programs served students who have

attendance, credit, and discipline issues; however, the O'PLUS program also served as a

45-day placement for special education students who have brought weapons, drugs, or caused bodily harm to other students or staff members at school. The Ombudsman program does not typically serve special education students because of the various instructional and related service needs.

The Ombudsman program required that students be in attendance at the center for three hours per day, whereas the O'PLUS program required students be in attendance for at least 6 ½ hours a day. Both programs had computer-based instruction; however, the O'PLUS program also incorporated direct instruction, small groups, and even one-on-one instruction. The Ombudsman program was solely computer-based and did not provide direct instruction. In addition, it provided physical education credit through computer-based instruction, whereas the O'PLUS program provided actual physical education classes by P.E. teachers at a local workout facility.

The O'PLUS program was in operation for over four years and assisted many students in increasing their attendance, completing their goals, and earning credits. The district has measured the success of the program by the number of students graduating and students who have transitioned back to high school.

<center>Rationale</center>

The rationale for selecting the O'PLUS program for evaluation was to determine how effective it was at transitioning students back into high school. Effectiveness is defined by better attendance for students at risk of failing, decreased behavioral referrals, increased credits earned, the number of graduating students, and a perception of student success by teachers, students, and Board members.

Waukegan Public Schools has invested a great deal of time, money, and effort in developing the O'PLUS program, and the program has earned the support of the board of education, staff members, parents, and students. Although there was a great deal of support, it was important to ensure that the O'PLUS program was ultimately measured by the effectiveness of transitioning students back to high school. The transition back to high school ensures students continue to have exposure to the general education curriculum as well as to the support services offered.

Goals

The primary goal of the evaluation was to determine if the O'PLUS program was providing support to students to meet the established criteria to transition back to high school. Transition to high school was important for several reasons:

- Peer interactions with general education students provided the least restrictive environment and allowed positive role models.

- Access to the general education environment increased expectations.

- Access to extracurricular activities provided social interactions and physical and mental stimulation.

- High school provided real world expectations, whereas the alternative program was small, structured, and tailored to meet needs of students

Peer Interactions

Interaction with general education peers was important because it provided the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Special education is not a place, but specialized instruction and supplementary aids and services provided to students with disabilities

(Moore, Gilbreath, Maiuri, p. 2,1998). Interactions with general education peers gave students with disabilities positive role models and helped general education peers learn tolerance.   According to researchers Moore, Gilbreath and Maiuri, , when included with their general education peers, special education students have positive experiences and improved attitudes. (1998).

General Education Curriculum

Access to the general education curriculum provided students with the opportunity to learn at a higher level and gave the students equal opportunity to achieve grade level standards, ultimately preparing for college or post secondary careers. According to the *Application of the CCSS for Students with Disabilities from the Common Core State Standards Initiative* (achievethecore.org), in order for students with disabilities to meet high academic standards and to fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills in mathematics, reading, writing, speaking and listening, their instruction must incorporate supports and accommodations, including:

- Supports and related services designed to meet the unique needs of these students and to enable their access to the general education curriculum (IDEA 34 CFR §300.34, 2004).
- An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which includes annual goals aligned with and chosen to facilitate their attainment of grade-level academic standards.
- Teachers and specialized instructional support personnel who are qualified to deliver high-quality, evidence-based individualized instruction and support services.

Access to Extra Curricular Activities

Access to extra curricular activities was important because it provided students with opportunities to interact. According to Carter and Kennedy, the general education environment "provides a natural context for peer interaction as students work together on shared learning tasks, providing a meaningful context for acquiring social-related skills, accessing social supports, meeting additional classmates, and developing new friendships" (p. 287, 2004).

Real World Experiences

Real world experiences for students with disabilities were important because students could apply their knowledge and learning experiences in the high school as well as in the community. Students with disabilities who were given the opportunity for real world experiences increased their understanding and were able to apply the knowledge of the experience to life after school. For example, if the student was able to work, use the bank and purchase items that they needed from the store, the student would be able to understand how to manage his/her money, prioritize needs and get a sense of what it is like to earn a living.

<div align="center">Research Questions</div>

In order to determine the effectiveness of the O'PLUS program, the evaluation focused on the following primary and secondary research questions:

Primary Question

The primary research question was, "How effective is the O'PLUS Program in transitioning students back into high school?"

Secondary Questions

Secondary research questions include:

- Was there an established criteria students met before they transition back into high school?

- What were the characteristics of students who have successfully transitioned from the O'PLUSprogram to high school?

- What effects does transitioning back to high school have on grades, attendance, credits earned, and their behavior?

- If students did not transition back to high school, did staying in the program have positive or negative effects on grades, attendance, credits earned, and their behavior?

- What is working? What needs improvement?

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To determine if the O'PLUS program was effective in transitioning special education students back to high school, I researched alternative high school best practices, instructional strategies, student characteristics, discipline, program effectiveness, and intervention strategies.

Best Practices of an Alternative Program

An effective alternative program is considered to have the following best practices (Flower, McDaniel, Jolivette, p. 491): a low student-teacher ratio, a highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management, school based adult mentors, functional behavioral assessments, social skills instruction, effective academic instruction, parent involvement, and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

Low Student-Teacher Ratio

A low student-teacher ratio provides personalized attention. According to Flower, McDaniel and Jolivette, a lower student-teacher ratio corresponds to higher levels of school engagement, bonding and commitment than what might be achieved in a traditional setting. In the O'PLUS program, the student-teacher ratio was 13:1. In addition, teachers were often supported in the classroom by a paraprofessional, social worker, director, and a coordinator, making the student to adult ratio approximately 13:5. A typical Ombudsman program can have a 30:1 ratio and a typical high school program can range from a 25:1 to a 35:1 ratio. The low student-teacher ratio provides a highly structured classroom environment that many students need be successful.

Highly Structured Classroom

A highly structured classroom is when behavioral expectations are explicitly taught. (Flower, et. al 2011, p. 492). According to Flower, McDaniel and Jolivette, typically, in a highly structured classroom, expectations and schedules are reinforced; therefore, students are able to self-manage their behaviors. The O'PLUS program used a leveling behavioral point system; students earned points and gained levels based on their behavior. This system must be taught to students in order for them to understand their goal of reaching a level four. A level four student did not have any referrals, were attending class regularly, were respectful, worked on their schoolwork, and were meeting the expectations of the program. Having an adult mentor is another important part of the program.

School-based Adult Mentor

A school-based adult mentor builds a relationship with the student by listening, problem solving, and reinforcing appropriate behavior (Flower, et. al 2011, p. 492). According to their research, students in alternative education settings benefit from adult mentors who listen, help problem solve, and encourage and reinforce appropriate behavior. The O'PLUS program did not have an established formal adult mentor program. It was important to determine through data collection if students were able to form ongoing relationships with adults, and if they had a solid support system throughout their time in the program and when they transitioned to high school.

Adult support in the O'PLUS program included the teacher, paraprofessional, social worker, director and coordinator. They provided academic support to improve grades and credit earning; social emotional support to assist with coping skills, behavioral needs and strategies; and resources to assist the student in transitioning not only back to

the general high school environment, but to prepare the student for real world experiences. A student could only be ready to address his or her behavioral needs if a functional behavioral assessment was conducted.

Functional Behavioral Assessment

Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is a process used to identify antecedents and consequences for challenging behaviors and rewards for positive behavior (Flower, et. al 2011, p. 492). According to Flower, McDaniel and Jolivette, the functional behavioral assessment is used to identify antecedents and consequences for challenging and appropriate behavior in order to develop, implement and monitor interventions. FBA was used at the O'PLUS Program to individualize behavior plans for students. An FBA is used to create a behavior intervention plan (BIP). The plan assisted staff in understanding how to reward good behavior and consequence inappropriate behavior. All of the students in the O'PLUS program had an FBA and a BIP, which is considered a tier three behavioral support. The behavior intervention plans assisted the teachers in providing behavior strategies as well as rewarding appropriate behavior. Once the behavioral needs were identified for a student, it was important to provide instruction through social skills to support those needs.

Social Skills Instruction

Social skills instruction teaches students how to make friends, solve conflicts, find alternatives to aggression, and manage their anger and work-related skills (Flower, et. al 2011, p. 492). According to the research, social skills instruction aim to remediate performance deficits for students with behavior problems. In the O'PLUS program, boys and girls were divided into two groups by a social worker. They worked on problem

solving, real-world activities, and relationships. In addition, students were provided individualized instruction in a small group setting. Social skills instruction was an important aspect of the instructional day as well as high quality instruction.

High Quality Instruction

High quality instruction is defined as small group instruction or individualized instruction with many opportunities to practice new academic skills (Flower, et. al 2011, p. 492). According to Flower, McDaniel and Jolivette, students in alternative settings need effective academic instruction in order to ensure that students catch up or keep up with their same-grade peers in a typical school setting. In the O'PLUS program, students were provided with both an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). Students worked at their own pace on the computer and were provided with instructional supports from the teachers and paraprofessionals. Direct group instruction was provided based on students' needs. Students also received instruction on real-world experiences like taking transportation in the community, applying for jobs, skills needed in the workplace and opening a bank account. In addition to high quality instruction, parent involvement was extremely important to the success of a student.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is necessary to communicate student progress, participation in school activities, and interventions (Flower et. al. 2011, p. 493). According to the research, parents of students with behavior problems often receive negative feedback and are less likely to be involved; therefore, it is important that these parents receive positive feedback to encourage more participation and involvement.

Parent involvement at the O'PLUS program varied greatly from student to student. Some parents were very involved and other parents needed extra encouragement. Since, parent involvement could be a challenge at the O'PLUS program, it was essential to ensure that positive behavioral intervention supports were in place for the students.

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) is a three-tiered intervention framework for preventing and responding to challenging behavior. (Flower et. al., 2011, p. 493). According to Flower, McDaniel and Jolivette, PBIS is a framework for preventing and responding to challenging behavior by building an environment where there is a structure. The O'PLUS program used this system and rewarded students for appropriate behavior with "pride bucks" Pride bucks—a tier one level of behavioral support that students could use to buy gift cards, treats and other items—were awarded when they were found doing something good. For instance, a student who worked diligently on his/her assignment may earn a pride buck. Any staff member could give a pride buck. Even students could recommend that another student be give a pride buck. Staff members needed to be diligent when using this reward system as the students responded to the acknowledgment and it is important to recognize the positive behavior of the students.

Check-in and check-out, a tier two support, was used to have students check-in with an adult when they arrive and before they go home. Check-in and check out promotes self-reflection and positive relationships with adult staff members, which allowed the students to start and end their day in a positive manner. The students who were on the check-in and check out system had a point sheet and goals.

Tier three intervention is a more intensive support and at the O'PLUS program functional behavioral assessment and behavior intervention plans were implemented for each student. Individualized behavior plans were needed to ensure each student understood the consequences for inappropriate behaviors and the rewards for appropriate behaviors.

<p style="text-align:center">Instructional Strategies for an Alternative Program</p>

Alternative programs are effective for many students and are needed because dropouts cost the nation about $77 billion dollars annually: $3 billion in crime prevention, $3 billion in welfare and unemployment, and $71 billion in lost tax revenue. (De La Rosa, 1998, p. 1). One of the major factors that leads to dropping out is that schools often place students in ability groups, which puts pressure on students, focuses on their weaknesses rather than strengths, and places them in an irrelevant curriculum (De La Rosa, 1998, p. 2). The O'PLUS program served many students who were at risk of dropping out due to low grades or failing grades, attendance problems, and behavioral issues.

The O'PLUS program was modeled after the regular Ombudsman Program, similar to a program called New Directions. New Directions is a self-pacing computer-based program for only two hours per day, allowing the student flexibility in his/her schedule to work or take care of family. This program is effective because staff members have created a positive and caring environment, with one-to-one or small group instruction that recognizes the needs of students and encourages them to succeed.. Parental support is strongly encouraged and evident in the program (De La Rosa, 1998 p. 4).

In order for an alternative program to be effective, effective instructional strategies must be part of the programming. Tomlinson notes that in a differentiated classroom, a teacher works with two givens: learning requirements and students who will vary as learners (2014, p. 3). A differentiated classroom requires a teacher who is a flexible diagnostician willing to work in partnership with students to determine a strong curriculum that is engaging and can be modified to help the students master the content (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 4).

Differentiated Instruction

A teacher supports a healthy, differentiated instructional environment by: appreciating the student as an individual, teaching to the whole child, developing expertise, linking learning to ideas or real-world situations, striving for "joyful learning," setting high expectations and a way to achieve those expectations, and teaching with students and teachers to promote independence (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 56). Each practice supports a healthy teaching environment that promotes learning and a positive experience for students.

Differentiating instruction based on student needs is necessary not only to remediate the learner's difficulties, but to accelerate learning as well. Learning can be accelerated by: articulating the goal of the lesson, scaffolding prerequisite skills when learning new skills, developing academic vocabulary, using assessment to provide immediate feedback, having students work cooperatively, providing students an overview of the main ideas prior to group learning, and ensuring teachers collaborate (Rollins, 2014, p. 20). By following these steps, students will be in a position to succeed.

Behavioral Supports

       The most challenged students at the O'PLUS program—those who have attendance issues, behavioral and discipline issues, and failing grades—not only needed instructional supports, but also behavioral supports. Individual supports that may benefit students include: schedules that maximize the student's contact with adults, expectations communicated by a trusted adult, a "toolbox" of coping skills to be used during heightened emotional times, a signal for the student to show that he/she needs a break, and built-in times for positive reinforcement—even if the student is rejecting you at the time (Benson, 2014 P. 12). These strategies are not only important for the students to support their behavioral and instructional outcomes, but assist the staff members in dealing with difficult behaviors, too.

<div align="center">Characteristics of Alternative Students</div>

       Students in alternative programs have varying characteristics, ethnic backgrounds, disability eligibilities, discipline referrals, academic needs and social emotional needs. In the O'PLUS program, students are eligible for special education services and many have emotional disabilities (ED). In the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, students with emotional disabilities were found to most likely be African American, living in poverty and having a head of the household with no formal education past high school (NLST2, 2004). According to the study, more than half of the ED population did not receive special education services until age nine or older. Of all of the participants studied, ¾ of them were either suspended or expelled at least once. However, most participants were given equal access to an educational program that would prepare them for college and career readiness once they changed school programs. At least 55 percent

of the students had a behavior management plan and/or participated in a behavior

management program. 42 percent of the students were reported to be in fights. Students

with emotional disabilities were also more likely to receive D's or F's than their peers in

general education settings (NLST2, 2004).

<p style="text-align:center">Discipline of Alternative Students</p>

Once students are placed in an alternative setting for disciplinary purposes, it is

difficult for students to return to the general education setting. In a study of two

alternative schools used for placement for disciplinary purposes, administrators could

place students in these settings for mandatory purposes or discretionary purposes.

Discretionary placements showed that more Hispanic students were placed than either

African American or Caucasian students (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). Hispanic students

were also 4.1 times more likely to return to the alternative setting during the same school

year. Compared to high school students, middle school students were less likely to return.

The study also indicated that special education and general education students had an

equal chance of being placed in an alternative setting for disciplinary purposes. As

students enter and exit alternative programs, it is important to analyze not only the reason

for entrance, but also the characteristics of the students to determine if other procedures

need to be reviewed.

Student competence, control, parent, teacher and peer support, and academic

strengths are important in developing an individualized educational plan. In a study

conducted in 2001, researchers compared a group of general education students, special

education students, and students in alternative education settings. Students in general

education settings had higher grade point averages, and in general, their academic

competence was higher than the other groups (Weist et. al). All three groups had similar self-esteem ratings, with no significant difference from a cognitive, social, or emotional point. One of the biggest differences was in the alternative group where parents were less involved, less supportive, unavailable, and often characterized as controlling. Special education students perceived their parents as the most helpful and positive.

Alternative education programs often have a positive impact on office discipline referrals. A study conducted by Gut and McCaughlin (2012) indicated that when an alternative program was implemented in two middle schools and six high schools, the number of office discipline referrals, such as intimidations, tobacco, weapons, and fighting, was reduced. By removing students who have high levels of discipline issues, influencing behaviors across all students declined.

<center>Programming for the Needs of Students</center>

Discipline and office referrals are only one of the many challenges secondary special education teachers face. Teachers in high school programs face challenges that include: difficulties teaching content areas, a need for more vocational and pre-vocational training, more support in transition planning, and more options for special education students. In a survey of 191 teachers, they indicated that there was a need for curriculum alignment, more specialized and diverse curriculum in general, and more self-contained classrooms in order to serve special education students in a small environment (Wasburn-Moses, 2006). They also voiced a need for vocational and pre-vocational programs. The survey indicated that there is a lack of options for high school special education programs, and students' educational needs cannot be met within the current options.

Intervention Strategies Beyond the Classroom

According to Razeghi (1998), additional intervention strategies beyond the classroom need to be implemented in order to prevent students from dropping out: earlier and increased involvement in vocational training, special vocational education courses designed for students with disabilities, trained transition or job placement specialists, career counseling, formal and informal vocational assessment, supervised paid work experience, on the job training, and alternative education programs. Most of the strategies evolve around college and career readiness, which is truly the ultimate goal of educators, as well as the Common Core State Standards.

An effective high school for students with disabilities includes five school-wide strategies: broad academic courses, support structures that can be customized to a student's needs, connect students to the school and build motivation, create a connected and caring adult community, and develop responsive leaders (Brigharm, et. al. 2006). The academic courses allowed for a range of classes that students could take to challenge themselves. In the Brigharm 2006, study, the school-wide structures varied among schools, but included hand scheduling or scheduling each student's schedule individually and looking at the needs of the students, vocational skills, support from related service staff such as occupational therapists, support physical therapists, and counselors. The school encouraged students to connect by emphasizing peer interaction, participating in clubs, and auditioning for parts in theater. Building an adult community took place in the form of providing professional development to staff members regarding disabilities and inclusion strategies, co-teaching, and having special education teachers take lead roles in

the school. Developing responsive leadership required the director of special education to work closely with the principals, academic chairs, and school-wide leadership in order to represent the needs of the staff and students.

Summary

The research demonstrates that characteristics of a good alternative program are similar to what is needed in a good high school program for students with disabilities. Both programs need strong academic support, school supports, and adult support. Students with special needs and in need of an alternative program may have varying characteristics, but it is important to determine if the placement is a student need or a need to make an adjustment to the program. Overall, there are many challenges in special education high school programs, as well as alternative programs, that include discipline referrals, programming, and options to meet student needs. It is important, however, to remember the characteristics of a good alternative program, high school program, and ways to accelerate and differentiate instruction to meet the varied needs of learners.

SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design Overview

Data collection for this program evaluation used qualitative research techniques including group and individual interviews with adult stakeholders, individual interviews with students who have successfully transitioned to high school, and a comparative quantitative analysis of student records. Group interviews were completed with teachers, counselors, social workers, and coordinators from both the O'PLUS program and Waukegan High School. Individual interviews were conducted with the O'PLUS director, the coordinator of private/alternative schools for Waukegan Public Schools, and the specialist for private/alternative schools.

It was important to focus on these adult stakeholders because they were typically present at student intake meetings, as well as meetings to transition students back to high school. These adult stakeholders provided perspective on designing implementing the program transition criteria, student characteristics, and program documentation.

Students were interviewed to gather their perspective on the program, the criteria for transition, and the experience of transitioning back to high school. Student data including grades, attendance, behavioral data, and credits earned were analyzed for trends over a period of three years. Data from current O'PLUS students was compared with students who transitioned to high school to determine patterns in student performance.

Participants

Adult Stakeholders

Teachers, social workers, paraprofessionals, students, and administrative staff members participated in the study. Teachers and paraprofessionals were selected because they work directly with the students. Social workers, a director of the O'PLUS Program, the Coordinator of Private/Alternative Programs, and the specialist were selected as part of the study because they work both directly and indirectly with the students and assisted in building and implementation. They also participated in the entrance and exit meetings of the students.

Students

Students who successfully transitioned back to high school or were in the process of transitioning were part of the study to gain perspective on what it takes to be considered as a candidate for transitioning, the supports in place at both the O'PLUS program and high school, and the characteristics of students who transition back to high school. The three students who were interviewed were either dually enrolled (enrolled part-time in the O'PLUS Program and the high school and are working towards a full time transition) or have completely transitioned back to the high school. In addition, four students who transitioned back to the high school and graduated in the 2013-2014 school year. The graduates were contacted; however, they did not agree to participate in the study.

Administrative staff including: the director of the O'PLUS program, the coordinator of private/alternative day, and the private/alternative specialist were included in the study. Individual interviews provided the administrative staff's perspectives on the procedures as well as the original intent of the program. Each of the aforementioned staff

have participated in designing the program and assisting with the implementation from the start and had a perspective on what he/she believes the original intent or goal of the program, as well as what was considered to be effective.

<div align="center">Data Gathering</div>

Data gathered used group and individual interviews, an analysis of student records, and student surveys. All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Participants were informed that the information was recorded prior to the interview and consent was obtained. The information recorded was transcribed and available for any participant if requested. In addition, written notes as well as my own impressions were recorded during the interview.

Group Interviews with Adult Stakeholders

Group interviews were conducted with teachers, social workers, and paraprofessionals from the high school and O'PLUS program. Two groups were used during this process. The first group included teachers and paraprofessionals. Teachers and paraprofessionals were grouped together because they comprised the instructional, academic and behavioral supports that assist the students on a daily basis. This group consisted of two paraprofessionals and two teachers. The second group included the social workers and the administrative staff, which include the coordinator of private/alternative programs, the director of the O'PLUS program and the specialist of the private/alternative programs, as well as the social workers. This group had a slightly different perspective than the teachers and paraprofessionals because they work with the students directly and indirectly by having individual meetings with students as well as participating in entrance and exit meeting. (See Appendix A for Group Interview

<div align="center">21</div>

Questions with Adult Stakeholders.) A second meeting was held with the interview groups to discuss the findings and how they correspond to the primary and related research questions.

Individual Interviews with Adult Stakeholders

Individual interviews were conducted with the director of the O'PLUS program, the coordinator of the private/alternative programs, and the specialist of the alternative/private programs because these adult stakeholders understand the program and either helped design the program from the beginning or have developed similar programs and understand the goal of the O'PLUS program. (See appendix B for individual interview questions.)

Individual Interviews with Students

Students who have transitioned back to high school full time or dually enrolled in both the O'PLUS Program and the high school were also interviewed individually to determine if they understood the criteria, what it took to be a successful student, and if they feel there were supports at both campuses to help them be successful (See Appendix C for student interview question).

Analysis of Student Records

Grades, attendance, behavior, and credits earned of students who transitioned back to the high school (while in program and at the high school) and students who remained in the program were gathered from the Ombudsman's student information system, Infinite Campus, as well as from records kept with the special education department. Numbers of students transitioned over time were also collected. Additional data were obtained from the student information system and assisted in determining if

grades, attendance, behavior, and credits earned were actually part of the criteria in determining a student could transition back (the original intent of the program).

Student Survey Data

Student survey data was used from data collected by the O'PLUS program in 2011-2012 and again using the same questions in 2013-2014 school year. This data provided the student perspective regarding the O'PLUS program. Different students were interviewed from the 2011-2012 school year to the 2013-2014 school year; therefore, the results were based on the general perspectives of the students.

Data Analysis

Patton (2008) describes a specific framework for engaging findings that include organizing data, interpretation, judgment values, and recommendations (p. 478). He recommends using the simplest form of presentation that can handle the facts so that decision makers can access the findings (p. 479).

Group and Individual Interview Data Analysis

Interview data was interpreted based on the criteria for successfully transitioning, student characteristics, student supports and effective programming. If a topic was consistently brought up, that topic was listed in a chart. My impressions as the researcher was also recorded to ensure that clarifying comments or information are included in the analysis. It was necessary to analyze all of the interview data from the adult stakeholders, individual interviews and student interviews around the areas of criteria, student characteristics, student supports and effective programming.

Analysis of Student Records

Grades, attendance, behavior, and credits earned of both in-program and transitioned students were analyzed over a three-year period of time. Comparative analysis was done on the two groups to see if there is a difference based on the placement of the students. Data of students who started in the O'PLUS program and transitioned back to the high school will be compared with data of students who started in the high school program and went to the O'PLUS program. This quantitative data was used to help determine if students transitioned back to the high school had enough supports in place to maintain their grades, attendance, behavior, and credits.

Analysis of Student Survey Data

The student perspective is important when analyzing the overall effectiveness of the O'PLUS program. Student survey data collected from the O'PLUS program will be analyzed from the past two years. The survey was given to gain the student perspective on the O'PLUS program.

SECTION 4: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

Document analysis and interviews with adult stakeholders and students were used to determine the overall effectiveness of transitioning. The document analysis included a three-year period of time. Attendance, credits earned, referral reason and number of graduates for both the O'PLUS program and for students who transitioned back to the high school were included in the analysis. Adult stakeholders were interviewed as well as students who were transitioning to the high school. First, I will discuss the analysis of student records, followed by an analysis of survey data, then the results of the adult stakeholder interviews, and finally the results of the student interviews.

Student Records

Table 1: O'PLUS Attendance Over 3 Years

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
O'PLUS Total Number of Students (at time of report)	36	24	27
Average Yearly Daily Attendance	79.5 percent	75 percent	75 percent

Table 1 shows that the average attendance over a three-year period of time was between 75-79 percent—--significantly lower than the high school average attendance of 93 percent. As an alternative program, one of the criteria set for the students was an average attendance of 90 percent or above in order to transition to the high school. Based on this three-year trend, the attendance data is very low and may need to be a focus, as these

criteria may need to change or attendance may need to be an area of intervention.

Another area that the O'PLUS program uses as criteria for student to transition back to

the high school is credits earned, therefore the data over a three-year period of time was

analyzed.

Table 2: Average Credits Earned

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
O'PLUS Student Total (at time of report)	36	24	27
Average Yearly H.S. Credit Earned (100% possible)	89.5 percent	81 percent	67 percent

Table 2 above shows students earned 89.5 percent of the overall credits were obtained in

2011-2012, in 2012-2013, 81 percent of the credits were earned and in 2013-2014 67

percent of the overall credits were earned. This data shows that more students were

successful in their credit achievement in 2011-2012 then in 2013-2014. Credit earning in

O'PLUS required the completion of various requirements using both computerized

instruction and direct instruction. This is important because if students were not earning

credits, they could not qualify to transition back to the high school. Furthermore, if

students were not in attendance, it could have also impacted their ability to earn credits.

Not only is it important to look at attendance and credit data, but also to analyze the

demographics of the program.

Table 3: Student Demographics

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
O'PLUS Students Total (at time of report)	36	24	27
Female	11	6	2
Male	25	18	25
African American	21	10	8
Hispanic	11	11	16
Multiracial	2	1	-
Caucasian	3	2	3

For the years 2011-2014, the majority of the students that were in the O'PLUS program were male. This raises a question if staff members feel that boys need these services more than female students or if other referral criteria lead to more males getting accepted to the program. In addition, the majority of the students referred in 2011-2013 were African American males, even though the majority of the population in Waukegan is Hispanic. In the 2013-2014 school year, half of the O'PLUS students were Hispanic and half were African American. This data is significant because it means that the referral process may be over representing African Americans or that staff members need additional training in regards to working with diverse populations. Not only should the demographics be considered when looking at data, but the reason for the referral is essential, since this is how the students enter the program. Table four shows referral reasons over a three year period of time.

Table 4: Referral Reasons

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Behavior	21	12	15
Attendance	5	2	5
Direct Placement	0	2	2
New to District	0	4	2
Unknown/Other	10	4	3

As you can see from Table 4, the majority of students who were referred to the O'PLUS program had behavioral issues. Attendance was another concern. The O'PLUS program was designed to focus on social and emotional concerns with two social workers as a support and a behavioral level system in place, therefore many of the students referred may have been appropriately referred to address the behavioral concerns. In order to exit the program, students needed to meet behavioral expectations; however, instead of exiting, many seniors graduated over the years.

Table 5: Graduation Numbers

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Graduates	4	3	7

In three years time, 14 seniors graduated from the O'PLUS program. The number of graduates increased over the years and was approximately 4-7 graduates each year, which was 25 percent of the students. This is significant because this data shows two important factors. First, students were staying at the O'PLUS program and graduating. Secondly, students who graduated from the program did not transition back to the high school even though they were experiencing success and earning credits.

Table 6: Numbers of Students Transitioned to HS, GPA and Stayed Full time

Year	Students Transitioned	OPLUS Student Total (throughout year)	GPA of Transitional Student (Scale of 4.0)
'11-'12	4	36	Student A: 2.39 Student B: 2.57 Student C: 2.86 Student D: 2.19
'12-'13	5	38	Student A: 2.47 Student B: 2.40 Dually Enrollment Student C: 2.81 Dually Enrollment Student D: 2.20 Student E: 2.05 Dual Enrollment
'13-'14	2	40	Student A: 1.81 Returned back to O'PLUS semester Student B: 2.42 Dual Enrollment

In order to determine if O'PLUS was effective in transitioning students to the high school, it was important to look at the number of students who transitioned back to the high school either full time or part time and were dually enrolled over a three year period of time. From 2011-2014, 11 students transitioned to the high school. However, only 6 of the 11 students transitioned back full time. The other five students were dually enrolled in the O'PLUS program and in the high school and had no intention of transitioning full time. The students have a role in determining whether or not they would like to transition back and from the data collected, the five students only wanted to go back to the high school for part of their day and wanted to remain in the O'PLUS program. In addition, one student opted to return back to O'PLUS after only one semester of transition. (See Table 6). This is important because compared to Table 5, more students graduated from the program than transitioned to the high school. It raises

the question as to why they were not able to meet the criteria to transition back to the high school.

The students who fully transitioned back to the high school had a grade point average (GPA) between a 2.19 and a 2.86 out of a scale of 4.0. Students who were dually enrolled at the O'PLUS and the high school had a GPA ranging from a 2.05 to a 2.81. Students who fully transitioned back to the high school had a slightly higher GPA than those who were dually enrolled. This may be due to the fact that the student is not traveling back to different environments with different expectations. This may also be due to the fact that the se student can spend more instructional time in one place rather than have to travel between two school environments. The one student who transitioned to the high school and then decided to return to O'PLUS had the lowest GPA out of all of the students, which was 1.81. This student transferred back due to the lack of success in the high school environment and needed the smaller school setting.

Students who were in the process of transitioning back to the high school could not receive any referrals if they wanted to be considered. Therefore, the referral rate is very low for those students who are dually enrolled. Students who transitioned back full time had two referrals over the entire three years, one student had six referrals , and the other student had five referrals.

Overall, the students who transitioned were able to maintain an average GPA of at least 2.0 and based on the student records, students who fully transitioned had higher GPA's than those who were dually enrolled in the high school and at O'PLUS. The discipline referrals seemed to rise for certain students who fully transitioned to high school. This could be due to the larger environment and the end of the referral incentive

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In addition to analyzing student records, it is important to understand the student perspective regarding the O'PLUS program. From the student records, students often chose to remain dually enrolled rather than transitioning fully into the high school. Being dually enrolled is when the student is enrolled part time in the O'PLUS program and part time in the high school. The survey data gives a perspective of how the O'PLUS students feel about the program and the supports they get at the center.

Student Survey Data Report

The Ombudsman Program Accountability Report (2011) details the O'PLUS student survey results from 2011-2012. Of the 24 students surveyed:

- 96 percent strongly agreed/agreed that they are prepared to move onto the next grade or graduate.

- 79 percent strongly agreed/agreed their attitude about school has improved during their enrollment at O'PLUS.

- 92 percent strongly agreed/agreed they feel safe and secure at O'PLUS.

- 96 percent strongly agreed/agreed they are proud of the work they have done at O'PLUS.

- 92 percent strongly agreed/agreed they make better, "life choices".

- 96 percent strongly agreed/agreed their academic courses are challenging, yet achievable.

The students attending the O'PLUS program were surveyed in 2013-2014 and the following information was obtained:

The students agreed or strongly agreed that the O'PLUS program has positively impacted their education. The lowest percent of students (79 percent) agreed or strongly

agreed that the O'PLUS program changed their attitude regarding school. This question could have a lower agreement possibly because of the way it was worded or because some students do not feel their attitude changed or needed to be changed. (All other responses to the survey indicated that the O'PLUS program has had a positive impact on the ability to prepare students to move to the next grade level and make good life choices.) Students agree that they are proud of the work they have done in the program and find the work at the O'PLUS program challenging.

<div align="center">Interview Analysis</div>

Interviews were conducted on an individual basis and group basis. Adult stakeholders interviewed individually were: the private day/alternative coordinator, the specialist for private day/alternative programs, the Director of O'PLUS and the Operations Mangers and two students. The first group interview included the paraprofessionals and teachers. The second group interview included the counselor, Director of the O'PLUS program and specialist and social worker. They discussed criteria to enter and exit the O'PLUS program, characteristics of students, supports and transitioning to the high school

Similar themes developed during the interview process:

- Entrance criteria to the O'PLUS program are primarily based on attendance and behavioral issues.
- A typical student entering the program is in need of behavioral intervention.
- Students exit the program if they meet attendance, behavior and grades expectations.

- Students exiting the program have more positive characteristics than those entering.

- More Targeted Resources are available at O'PLUS than at high school

Areas of need for both the O'PLUS program and the High School.

Theme One: Entrance Criteria is Based on Attendance and Behavioral Issues.

During both the group and individual interviews, stakeholders determined that the entrance criteria to the O'PLUS program is based on the referrals that the Coordinator of Private/Alternative programs or the Specialist receive from the high school. The referrals are based on individual need of the student. In fact, The entrance criteria to the O'PLUS program presented as a theme during the interview process among various stakeholders and most stated that attendance issues or behavioral issues including social and emotional concerns are a reason students are referred to the O'PLUS program.

> Operations Manager: "Most students are referred to us under attendance
> issues, maybe they weren't attending regularly at their homeschool, or if
> they had behavior issues where they weren't coming to school on time,
> or they were having issues where they had brought something to school
> that they shouldn't or they engaged in a fight or aggressive behaviors
> with the staff, as well as the kids who come to us for medical reasons."

The specialist agreed with the administrator on the referral process and focused on various needs of the student in the statement below.

> Specialist: " Really the typical profile of students are older students that
> need credit recovery, have issues with truancy, issues with substance

abuse, or have some deeper social emotional needs. Those are the types

of students that do really well at Ombudsman Plus."

Other comments among entrance criteria revolved around students who

experience substance abuse and students who need credit recovery. It was important to

determine how student's entered the O'PLUS program and it was evident from the

interviews with the adult stakeholders that it was based on a referral basis and on

individual need. It was also important to determine how students exit the program in

order to transition to high school. Since, transitioning was a criteria to determine how

successful a student was in the program, the next theme is of how students leave the

program was very important to this study.

Theme Two: Students exit the program once they meet attendance, behavior and grade

criteria.

Although the entrance criteria were based on the student's individual needs,

interviewed stakeholders seemed more confident in defining the exit criteria. The

prominent themes regarding the exit criteria among interviews included: 90 percent

attendance rate, passing grades and maintaining a behavior at a level four. In addition,

one adult stakeholder stated,

 "It's easy in terms of the criteria," one stakeholder said. "It's 90 percent

attendance, no in-school or out-of-school suspensions, and passing all your classes.

That's just the expectation." The exit criteria are well-defined, yet only 11 students have

transitioned in some manner over three years. Several staff members knew the exit

criteria and it was evident by the statements below:

Specialist: "There are criteria for students to transition. It is a , a

semester-long period where the student really needs to be on their best

behavior. Attendance needs to be 90 percent or greater. The need to have

all passing, and what we call positive grades. Those are B's or A's again

mostly A's."

The teacher agreed with the specialist in the interview and focused on a specific

exit criteria of meeting attendance, behavior and grades expectations in the

statement below.

Teacher: "Typically looking at are they passing all of their classes; what

their behavior is like here (meaning the O'PLUS program). If they had

any in school suspensions and what their attendance and grades is like. I

think mainly the behavioral aspect and the attendance is the biggest

thing."

Students who enter and exit the O'PLUS program have specific

characteristics. The entrance characteristics that presented as a theme in the

interviews were very different from the student characteristics of students who

could exit the O'PLUS program in order to transition.

Theme Three: Students Entering the Programs are Typically in Need of Behavioral

Intervention

Students who enter the program are typically in need of behavioral intervention

and were referred based on individual needs which manifests itself through

characteristics or traits rather than a specific criteria. Since the O'PLUS program was an

alternative program, often students who were expelled entered the program so they can be

serviced, supported or transformed in some manner. Other behavioral characteristics noted throughout the group interviews as well as the individual interviews included: students with attendance issues, emotional issues, substance abuse issues, involved in fights, behind in credits, and emotional internalizers. Some individuals mentioned that students are excluded from entering the program if they are violent or overly aggressive. One administrator summarized the characteristics of students:

"Typically, they are students who have attendance issues or internalized anxiety, school withdrawn, behind credits, expulsion, some behavioral needs, but not overtly violent, aggressive type of behavior…".

Interviewees agree that the O'PLUS program is not for students who have aggressive behaviors, but for students with emotional concerns, credit issues, attendance issues and behavioral issues. Adult stakeholders commented how students entering the program and are in need of change through behavioral intervention or supports:

Paraprofessional: " I was going to say sometimes we do have kids here for different reasons too. Sometimes they're actually expelled from high school and we're looking to put them here during and other times it's because they're struggling or having issues at the high school for whatever reason {….} so there's the kids we have to place, due to expulsion and then there's kids who come here because whatever the accommodations are that are taking place at the high school aren't meeting the needs."

Administrator: "A lot of times, they might be in trouble with the law, they might have probation, and they might have been incarcerated. In the

school now, they're usually students who cut classes, who fail in classes.

We have quite a few who are internalizers{…}."

Students who were ready to exit the O'PLUS program have very different

behavioral characteristics and were described in a positive manner by the adult

stakeholders that were interviewed. In a sense, they have been transformed from

the time they have entered the program to the time they are ready to exit.

Therefore, it is important to analyze the characteristics of students exiting the

program.

Theme Four: Students Exiting the Program Behave More Positively than Those Entering

The characteristics of students who exited were very different from the students

who entered. Exiting students were described as being very successful, motivated,

wanting to be with a large group, hard workers, driven, and goal oriented. One of the

most interesting comments an administrator made during an interview was that

"typically, what happens is they (referring to students) will do things to sabotage

(referring to student's performance) so don't have to go back. Over time, we learn that,

and we tell students, if you really don't want to go back, you can let us know."

The data shows that in three years there have been only 11 transitions back to the high

school. The staff members recognized that the students who had very positive

characteristics were the students who were recommended to transition back. The positive

characteristics of students who are able to transition are exemplified by the comments

below by the adult stakeholders:

Administrator: "The typical characteristics we see, or their personalities,

are they want to go back and they have friends there that they want to be

united with. They want to go back to the high school to join the big group

and they work hard. They typically work hard on what they need to do and

they're motivated to change. These are things or characteristics we

typically see for students who return to the high school successfully."

The specialist agreed with the administrator in the fact that they both found very

positive characteristics of the students who were ready to exit.

Specialist: "Students that exit are typically students that are driven, goal

oriented. They are driven to success. Some students see being placed at

the Ombudsman Plus as a punitive measure. Although that is not the

case—it's really there to help them— students that are driven to return to

their home school, and they really truly work hard to achieve the goals that

we set for them. They understand the transition process because it's

explained to them upon arrival, that if they are interested in getting back,

that they need to demonstrate perfect behavior, sound academics, and of

course, have to be there every day."

Although the behavioral characteristics of student that were required to exit are evident,

the supports that are available to O'PLUS may be one explanation as to why some of the

students close stay in the program rather than transition back to the high school.

Theme Five: More Targeted Resources are available at O'PLUS than at the High School

According to the individuals and the adult stakeholders, the resources at the

O'PLUS program included social workers that have groups. The social work service was

a resource that came up several times throughout the interviews as a service that was

essential to the students. The students benefitted greatly from this service as many of the

students had emotional issues. In addition, collaboration among staff members was also another area that was determined as a resource and determined valuable among the adult stakeholders interviewed. One of the teachers stated:

"One of the things we do is talk. I think that makes a huge difference in terms of being able to not disconnect from each other."

Being able to communicate with each other was important for several reasons as the staff members worked to plan for each student, problem solve based on each student's needs, and communicate when students had social emotional needs. An area that was also considered a support was the willingness of the staff members of the O'PLUS staff members to find resources outside of the program to address student needs. This was important as many students come into the program with substance abuse issues or other problems and need outside counseling. Another theme that came up several times throughout the interviews was the leveled behavioral supports available throughout the O'PLUS program.

The specialist noted, "If they are working toward something that is the daily carrot that is dangled in front of them {…}to get on level in order to make that sustained progress,{,,,,,.}"

Although the adult stakeholders were very aware of the resources at the O'PLUS program, the supports in the high school were not as well known or understood.

Although the resources in the high school were not as known among the adult stakeholders, supports at the high school were still identified. One resource noted in the interviews was RENEW—a social and emotional support for students. "RENEW is fantastic," one specialist noted. "Students drive their own goals and their own success."

The high school's smaller learning communities or houses also helped the high school

staff get to know the students better and understand individual needs.

> One administrator stated: "I think the house system is a good idea, and I
>
> think the special education department has changed quite a bit to the good
>
> part, to better, actually, on a good note. I think the fact that there are a lot
>
> more partnerships as well as working with the teachers, different
>
> curriculum and things like that."

Although it was important to determine and compare the available resources at

the O'PLUS program to the high school, it was also important to determine the

needs.

Theme Six: Interviews Allowed for Reflection on the Needs of the Students

The themes that developed during the interviews were the need for more hands on

experiences, transition services, counseling services and connections to community

resources for both the O'PLUS program and high school. Resources needed for just the

O'PLUS program included more space and updated technology.   The O'PLUS program

needs more space, while the high school needs better communication and scheduling

flexibility.

Both the O'PLUS program and the high school need more work experiences and

volunteer experiences. Adult stakeholders were asked if they were to design another

alternative program, what would they include in the design? The counselor stated:

> "A post-secondary counselor that focuses all their efforts on post-
>
> secondary opportunity…. a post-secondary counselor is somebody who
>
> would go even out with the community and find volunteering options."

Various adult stakeholders mentioned transition services as another need. The need to follow up with students when he/she transitions to high school was a common statement as well as preparing the student ahead of time for the transition. In addition, the adult stakeholders mentioned that students who transitioned not only needed services during the initial transition, but almost needed to be treated like a newcomer and should be included in counseling and/or social work groups.

> The specialist stated: "Perhaps social workers would take our transitioning students and make a social worker counseling group with them during their transition period…like they should do with students who are new to the district."

Another area identified was the need for more community services and linkages to access programs for substance abuse and truancy.

> One administrator stated, "more assistance with truancy….truancy is an issue…although I can almost guarantee success while the students are there, it is not so much if they don't show…so if we had something to perhaps make them more accountable for their attendance."

The need to support truancy is evident as the overall attendance rate in the O'PLUS program has been between 75 percent and 81 percent over three years, whereas the average attendance rate at the high schools is over 90 percent for all students. Although both the O'PLUS program and the high school need more hands on experiences, transition services, counseling and community services, the stakeholders have identified individual needs for each.

The adult stakeholders identified the need for more space and updated technology. The identified need for more space relates to the theme of providing more hands-on

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experience, however, this was identified separately as it also relates to the size of the program and the individual needs of the students. One administrator stated:

> "I think the facilities, the proximity. I mean, it makes a huge difference for students to be able to move around and stretch their legs and go to another room and walk the hall. Just for them to have that space where they're not confined to one or two classrooms for 6 ½ hours."

The counselor mentioned that O'PLUS should have a "vocational room for trades or like a woods department and maybe an art department. Something like that where they can be a little more hands-on."

Another need identified by the teachers is for the O'PLUS program to have updated technology. The program has many computer-based programs and it was stated that if the technology is down there has to be a backup plan.

The needs identified for the high school were better communication and scheduling flexibility. A teacher discussed the need for better communication especially when a student is transitioning and stated:

> "When communicating with people at the district, whether it's teachers or principals, that they have to be open in terms of….what we see from the student, as well, and what we think the plan should be, what plan should be implemented."

Another concern that also relates to the student's ability to transition is scheduling within the high school. The counselor stated the following:

> "I would say from a counseling perspective a problem with kids transitioning back to high school is just the inflexibility in general of the

high school schedule. It's much easier for kids to transition at the

beginning of a school year than it is mid-semester or at the semester

because there are not a lot of semester options for the students to take at

the high school."

Communication and scheduling are barriers in transitioning students back to the high

school.

In order to get a complete picture, it is also important to get the perspective from

students who are dually enrolled in the high school and in the O'PLUS program to

determine if the O'PLUS program is effective in transitioning students to the high school.

Student Interview Data

Two students were interviewed who are dually enrolled and are in the process of

fully transitioning to high school. Both students interviewed discussed the following:

- entered the program for behavioral issues,

- had an understanding that they had to meet a goal to exit (but could not clearly
  state the criteria), and

- had available resources at O'PLUS that supported their needs.

Theme one: Entrance to the program was for behavioral issues

One student had been at O'PLUS for three years and the other just over a year.

When asked how they came to the program, both students indicated it was because of a

fight. One student mentioned that his teachers told him that it would be best for him to

attend the program. The other student did not have a choice because he was expelled.

One student stated: " I came here because I got expelled from high school." "For

fighting." The second student stated, " they told me this would be the best place for me."

Although, both students were placed at the O'PLUS program due to disciplinary issues, both students were ready to exit the program and were dually enrolled.

Theme Two: Students had an understanding that they had to meet a goal to exit but could not clearly state the criteria.

Although transitioning to high school and dually enrolled, neither one could identify the specific exit criteria as the adult stakeholders did in the interviews. One student stated: "I just had to mature and learn how to just ignore people and what they got to say to me, and just think that I'm the best." The other student indicated that he is able to go because he wanted to and asked if it was okay. The student then proceeded to state that the year prior he was suppose to transition but was not able to "because last year, we planned to go to (referring to the high school), but it didn't go through… maybe because I didn't get enough GPA average." This indicates that there was some understanding that he had to maintain a grade point average, but the students did not clearly identify the exit criteria.

Theme Three: Available resources at O'PLUS supported the needs of the students.

One student indicated that resources were in place at the O'PLUS program such as being able to earn credits quickly and one-on-one time. The student stated, " You can get done way faster. It's more one-on-one time". When asked whom he had one-on-one time with he indicated teachers, social workers and even the director of the program. The other student did not indicate any available resources. When asked, "What makes you a successful student?" one student indicated that his teachers helped him and stated, "I know I got better and they helped me think about what's the best for me in my future." The other student stated, "Just coming to school and doing work." When asked about the

high school, one student truly believed it provided a greater opportunity for him for his future as well as his current educational programing. He stated the following:

"Because I'm pretty sure when people came here they wasn't mature enough to be in the high school….so they sent them to make them realize that you messed up and you need to be back there and doing your thing. It's going better in the high school, because here (referring to O'PLUS) there's not that much people…to be honest with you, graduating here, it's good because you have all your credits and you'll be able to go to some colleges but the high school, if you do your best you can go into good colleges."

Both of the students indicated that the O'PLUS program served the purpose and provided necessary resources and prepared them for the transition to high school.

The student interviews indicate that the students each achieved their goals at the O'PLUS program and feel ready to complete the transition process. The entrance criteria for each of the students were based on the behavioral referral. Though each student accomplished their goal, they could not clearly state the exit criteria. In addition, the students both indicated that they were supported at the O'PLUS program. One student indicated that the program helps the students earn credit faster, but the high school provides better opportunities for his future.

Summary

Overall, the data indicates that in three years time there is consistency in the student record data. However, the attendance data, in addition to the interview data indicates that truancy is an issue for the program. Students who were not attending at 90

percent or more will not transition according to the exit criteria, however the overall average attendance for the program ranges from 75-81 percent. Therefore, students who were meeting the exit criteria were above the overall attendance rate of the program.

The interview data indicates that entrance criteria was based on a referral basis; however, characteristics of students such as low attendance, emotional concerns, behavioral referrals and a lack of credits were potential reasons to enter the program. Many of the referred students had similar characteristics. Students were often referred to the O'PLUS program in order to receive the appropriate social skills training. In the research, social skills instruction refers to teaching students how to: make friends, solve conflicts, find alternatives to aggression, and manage their anger and work-related skills (Flower, et. al 2011).

The exit criteria are well defined at 90 percent attendance, passing all classes, and maintaining a level 4 on the behavioral scale. However, during the interviews it was mentioned that even if a student reaches that criteria, a student might choose to stay or at times sabotages their exit. Over a three-year timeframe, only 6 of the 11 students transitioned back full time. The other five students were dually enrolled in the O'PLUS program and in the high school and had no intention of transitioning full time. The low numbers of students who transition may be due to the exit criteria and the high expectations that have been set by the program, as well as the fact that students also had a choice as to whether or not they transitioned to high school.

The supports at the O'PLUS program were well defined and accessible to students. However, the supports at the high school could not be identified among many of the adult stakeholders and may not be as readily available to the students. Therefore,

since the adult stakeholders may not be aware of the available resources, they may not be able to effectively facilitate more transitions. The needs of both programs were similar and included a need for more social work and counseling services, hands-on experiences and community resources. The need for more hands-on experiences at both the high school and O'PLUS is consistent with the research in which Razeghi (1998) identified the need for more vocational training and career counseling in programs for special education students. Better communication and scheduling flexibility is also necessary. The challenge of scheduling a student at the semester due to the lack of available classes or mid-year may also be reducing the number of students who can successfully transition.

Students interviewed indicated that the O'PLUS program supported their needs and helped them develop the ability to transition to high school. The O'PLUS program provided supports from the teachers. One student indicated that he felt that he would have more opportunity for a challenging curriculum and a better opportunity to go to a good college if he graduates from the high school. However, he felt the O'PLUS program taught him to mature. The social skills training for both of the students interviewed provided them the necessary skills to transition.

SECTION 5: JUDGMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The primary research question of this program evaluation is, "How effective

is the O'PLUS Program in transitioning students back into high school?" In order to

answer this question, student data and interview data was collected and analyzed.

Based on the information gathered I determined that the program was not meeting

the intended purpose of transitioning students back to the high school; however,

O'PLUS was serving other purposes such as providing the necessary social skills,

assisting students in meeting the necessary credits to graduate and providing

individualized educational supports to the students.

Judgment

The intent of the O'PLUS program was developed with the understanding that students would effectively transition to high school once the O'PLUS criteria were met. Factors influencing the program effectiveness of transitioning students to the high school: exit criteria, attendance issues, student choice to stay in the program, supports needed at the high school, and scheduling difficulties.

The exit criteria is very clearly established according to all of the stakeholders interviewed, which includes 90 percent overall attendance, level 4 behavior and passing all of the classes. When a student is considered to exit, the team members review the student information to ensure that the student is meeting the necessary attendance, behavior and grade point average. However, according to the overall attendance data, the average attendance rate is between 75 percent and 81 percent. Therefore, students falling below the 90 percent in the area of attendance, but may be meeting the criteria in other areas could not be considered as a candidate to transition. This is aimed to ensure the success of the student in the O'PLUS program, but does not assist in the transition.

Students who are meeting the criteria to transition to high school also participate in the decision making process. Students can choose to stay in the O'PLUS program even if they have met the criteria to exit. Over a three-year period of time, of the 11 students who transitioned, five chose not to fully transition even though they qualified. The students interviewed felt the teachers provided support and gave them the one-on-one support that was needed.

Because there was an established criterion for exiting, transition numbers were low and the overall student attendance rate was also low, it is my recommendation to determine if the exit criteria are appropriate and meeting the needs of the students and

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assists in effectively transitioning students to the high school. It may be necessary to make adjustments and look at more than one way for students to achieve the exit criteria in order to access the high school and other transition services.

Many supports were noted in the O'PLUS program; however, the adult stakeholders interviewed did not have a great deal of knowledge regarding the available supports in high school. It was acknowledged that the students need social work services, transition services and community resources. However, the various types of resources available in high school were not known, which may make it difficult for the staff members to ensure they are readily available to support the transition process.

Recommendations

It is important to first analyze the exact supports that are in place at both the O'PLUS program and at the high school and determine the additional needs and supports necessary. In the interviews, it was apparent that both programs needed additional resources to support the social emotional and vocational needs of the students. Both the O'PLUS program and high school also needed more support to address issues such as truancy and substance abuse. Therefore, it is my recommendation to do a needs assessment of both programs, prioritize the needs and build the necessary resources to support the individual needs of students as well as the program needs.

The last issue that affects the transition of students is scheduling difficulties. The availability of classes at the high school are limited if the students do not access the

transition in the beginning of the year. Therefore, according to the stakeholders, they have to determine if the student can earn the necessary credits if they transition.

Although, only a small number of students have transitioned, the data indicates that the O'PLUS program is effective in providing necessary supports to students who are struggling with social and emotional issues, credit earning and necessary individualized programming. One of the most unexpected results is that students at times feel so supported at the O'PLUS program that they will purposefully sabotage themselves so they do not meet the criteria to exit. Another interesting factor is that students at times choose not to exit or to maintain a dual enrollment in order to maintain contact with the O'PLUS program. Therefore, one of the most important recommendations is to reevaluate the intent of the O'PLUS program. Based on the data analyzed it seems the intent is to ensure that the needs of each student are met and that each student is prepared for college and a career. By reevaluating the intent of the program, the staff members and students will have a clearer understanding of how to determine whether or not a student is successful and if the program is working.

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APPENDIX A

Adult Stakeholders Group Interview Questions

1. Is there an established criteria to enter the O'Plus program from the HS?

2. Is there an established criteria to exit O'Plus and transition into the HS

3. What are the common characteristics of the students who enter O'PLUS program?

4. What are the common characteristics of the students who exit O'PLUS program to transition into high school?

5. If you were to design another special education O'PLUS program, what elements would you include in the design?

6. What is working at the O'PLUS program? What needs improvement?

7. What is working at the HS? What needs improvement?

8. What supports are working at O'PLUS?

9. What supports are in place that are working at the HS?

10. What additional supports are needed either in the O'PLUS program or at the HS?

11. Is there anything else we haven't discussed that you feel is important and you want to add?

APPENDIX B

Adult Stakeholders Individual Interviews

1. Is there an established criteria to enter the O'Plus program from the HS?

2. Is there an established criteria to exit O'PLUS and transition into the HS

3. What are the common characteristics of the students who enter O'PLUS program?

4. What are the common characteristics of the students who exit O'PLUS program to transition into high school?

5. If you were to design another special education O'PLUS program, what elements would you include in the design?

6. What is working at the O'PLUS program? What needs improvement?

7. What is working at the HS? What needs improvement?

8. What supports are working at O'PLUS?

9. What supports are in place that are working at the HS?

10. What additional supports are needed either in the O'PLUS program or at the HS?

11. Is there anything else we haven't discussed that you feel is important and you want to add?

APPENDIX C

Student Interviews

1. First of all, I would like to learn more about you. How old are you and how many years did you spend at the high school and how many years of your education did you spend at the O'PLUS Program

2. Can you tell me why you went to the O'PLUS Program?

3. How did you transition out of the O'PLUS Program? Was there a certain criteria you had to meet? Did you know the criteria when you first entered the program?

4. What supports are available in the O'PLUS Program?

5. Are more supports available to you at the High School or at the Ombudsman PLUS Program? Please Explain.

6. What makes you a successful student?

7. If you could design an alternative school, what do you think needs to be part of the school to help students be successful?

8. If you could design a high school, what needs to be part of the high school to help students be successful

9. Is there anything else we haven't discussed yet that you think is important about to my research regarding the overall effectiveness of the O'PLUS program and transitioning students to the high school?