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Factors Contributing to Students Seeking an Alternative Secondary School Setting

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENTS SEEKING AN ALTERNATIVE SECONDARY
SCHOOL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of six students who chose to leave a comprehensive high school that has a reputation for academic excellence. Through a triangulation of data from semi-structured private interviews with the students and their school counselors and the students' academic records, the details of the students' experiences at a high school exposed some of the personal factors and school-based factors that influenced their decision to leave. All of these students struggled academically, socially, or emotionally. The major thematic categories for reasons the students left that emerged from the interviews were student mobility, mental illness, socio-economic pressure, academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions. Interviews revealed the likelihood that if more school-based supports were available at the high school, all six of the students in the study could have found a way to be academically successful without leaving the school. The major recommendation for practice and policy is that school districts could learn from the students who choose to leave their school system so that they can identify specific school-based interventions and educational opportunities that will support their at-risk students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the final step in my enjoyable journey toward earning my doctor of education degree. After earning my IAL at George Fox University, I became an administrator and have grown tremendously over those seven challenging years of service. During my time in the program I got married to my lovely wife, Carrie, and we are raising two amazing children. Through it all I benefited greatly from the ongoing professional development that occurred as a result of taking all of the classes at George Fox University. I have learned a tremendous amount from my professors and the books that they have suggested as well as all of the professional educators who were also enrolled in those courses.

I would like to thank Dr. Terry Huffman for helping me to identify the topic and develop a proposal for this dissertation. I thank Dr. Eloise Hockett for teaching me how to search for existing research and improve my writing ability. I appreciate the conversations that I have had with Dr. Gary Tiffin on multiple occasions about my progress in the program. He always encouraged me to continue toward my goals. Dr. Susanna Steeg generously agreed to serve on my committee for this dissertation. Her perspective helped to shape my research questions and my interview questions and to bring clarity to the methods I would use for the research. My conversations with Dr. Steeg helped me make some important changes that undoubtedly had a tremendous impact on the results of my research and the quality of my writing. Over the last 18 months I have worked very closely with Dr. Patrick Allen. I am extremely appreciative for his willingness to offer feedback, guidance, and encouragement throughout the process. He understood when I needed to focus on my day job, and he was available when I needed to talk or needed someone to read my work and point me in the right direction. His pragmatic approach to this work helped me understand that I was making slow and steady progress toward completion.

I am extremely grateful for all of the time and energy he has given to this endeavor. All of the professors at George Fox University have helped me develop as a person, an educator, and a leader.

One of the most important things I learned while conducting this study is how valuable it can be to sit down with students who are leaving the school system and ask them about their experience. All six of the students helped me develop a more thorough understanding of Bay View and what it is like for teenagers to navigate their way through some very challenging situations. I truly enjoyed sitting down with each student, and I appreciated their willingness to share their perceptions and feelings with me. I feel that all administrators should find the time to do this periodically. After each interview I found myself thinking about the conversation for several days and mulling over important questions for policy and practice. For example, could we have done more for them while they were at Bay View, and how we can use what I learned from their experience to benefit other students at Bay View? I also appreciate the participation of my colleagues at Bay View. The counselors helped me identify potential participants, and they shared memories of their experiences working with each of the students.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my wife, Carrie. I love her and appreciate all of the times that she allowed me to focus on coursework and this dissertation while she took care of our children, Georgia and Ronan. We are fortunate to have Carrie in our lives, and I could not have completed this journey without her.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Stories of Raven, Stacy, and Sabrina

Bay View High School invited all of their new students to attend an orientation session on the last day of summer vacation in 2013. At that session, in the back corner of the classroom sat a junior girl with jet-black hair. Her black lipstick highlighted an angry expression on her face. She wore clothing that looked like something she could wear to a punk rock concert. Her appearance was dramatically different than many of the other students at this affluent, suburban high school. I approached the girl and introduced myself. She said her name was Raven and she just moved to the area from another state.

During Raven's first year I saw her persona change slowly. She appeared to make a few friends and she allowed people to call her by her given name, Stacy. She developed a friendship with a boy named Steven, and it appeared that Stacy was assimilating to the Bay View culture. In the fall of 2014, I had a conversation with Stacy's mother, Leslie, and I asked how she felt Stacy was doing at school. Leslie said that the first year was a little rough, but the move to the school was very good for Stacy overall. Leslie reported that Stacy was also sad that a good friend withdrew from Bay View and enrolled in an online school. He needed to have surgery and did not know how he could keep up with the academic workload at Bay View during his recovery.

In November, Stacy collapsed during lunch. The students who were sitting near her in the hallway could not identify her by name, and neither could the other adults who responded. I spoke to Stacy while she was seemingly unconscious. She woke up and whispered in a raspy voice, "low blood pressure." When the paramedics arrived on the scene they ran some tests and quietly reported to me that they thought she faked the whole episode. She went home with Leslie and we scheduled a meeting to put a plan in place to support Stacy.

About a week later, Stacy showed up in the main office speaking incoherently. I was called to the scene and spent about an hour with Stacy and a few other staff members trying to provide emotional support to Stacy as she explained all of the triggers for her self-described mental breakdown. We again met with Leslie and Stacy to put a more elaborate support plan in place. A week later, Stacy came to my office and introduced herself as Sabrina, an alternate personality of Stacy. Sabrina reported that Stacy tried to harm herself the night before and Sabrina thought it would be in Stacy's best interest to stop attending school at Bay View. I contacted Leslie who happened to be en route to the school to take Stacy to a previously scheduled appointment for a psychological evaluation at a hospital. I walked Stacy down to Leslie's car not knowing if I would ever see her again.

My experiences with students like Stacy compelled me to undertake this study. I wanted to find out why some students struggle academically, socially, and emotionally while attending Bay View. I hoped to find ways to improve our ability to support all of our students so that they can enjoy their high school experience at Bay View and graduate feeling prepared for the next phase of their life.

Overview

High school students face a variety of challenges every day. For some students, the challenges are directly observable; for other students, it may not be apparent that they are facing adversity, but quietly, internally, they struggle to come to school each day. Even more so, the daily struggles of students with anxiety and depression often go unnoticed at a large comprehensive high school. I am the assistant principal at an affluent, elite, four-year, comprehensive public high school. I use the pseudonym, Bay View, to maintain anonymity for the school. I began working at Bay View prior to the 2013-14 school year and quickly became

concerned over the number of students suffering from anxiety and depression, a problem that is not confined to Bay View. The U.S. Department of Education (2013) reports that nationwide the primary category for students with disabilities is consistently Learning Disability (LD), followed by Speech/Language (SL). Since 2005, the third most frequently identified category for students receiving special services is Other Health Impairment (OHI). OHI includes Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and a variety of other impairments that impact a student's educational experience, including struggles with anxiety and depression. At Bay View OHI is the most commonly found disability, and we have an increasing population of students who have medical diagnosis for anxiety and depression, but who do not yet qualify for special education.

The internalized struggles of students with anxiety and depression at Bay View only become visible when a staff member responds to a crisis or to a request for alternative placement. It is only after those times of crisis or after a student seeks alternative placement do staff at Bay View look to see where improvements can be made. The recent increase in students seeking alternative placement has led the school district staff to consider creating an alternative school so that we can provide the needed services and retain these students in our school system. We have wondered whether strategies used at smaller alternative schools could be implemented within Bay View and help retain and serve more of the students who are considering alternative placement. There is a shared desire to integrate effective supports for these students, as well as a desire to address some of the various factors that contribute to the struggles these students face academically, physically, socially, and emotionally. My concerns about the students at Bay View inspired me to investigate the challenges these students face, and to seek out strategies to better serve this portion of the student population.

This study is focused on the experiences of a select group of students who chose to transfer away from Bay View, a comprehensive high school with a reputation for academic excellence, to attend high school in an alternative school setting. Perhaps strategies used effectively at smaller alternative schools could help Bay View High School retain and serve more of the students who are considering alternative placement.

The participants in this study were students who struggled academically, socially, or emotionally, and decided to seek alternative placement from a comprehensive high school. This study investigated the factors contributing to the struggles these students faced. Additionally, it examined how these struggles influenced their decision to leave Bay View. Because of my own history with the school, I sensed that some of the factors that led students to request a transfer were related to struggles with anxiety and depression, and for some, these struggles were life-threatening conditions. I hope that the results of this research will help educators at Bay View develop a more complete understanding of what these students were going through. This, in turn, may assist the institution in developing more effective strategies and programs for students. If the needs of these students can be met at Bay View, it may reduce the number of students who face the painful and difficult decision to seek alternative placement.

Role of the Researcher

I chose to study Bay View because of my familiarity with the school and the unique dynamics that exist there. The students involved with the study had varying levels of previous interactions with me through my role as assistant principal at Bay View. To some, I was perceived as a stranger; others may have seen me as someone with whom they could confide and tell their stories. I was also a doctoral student interested in learning about their experiences to use in my dissertation.

I chose to conduct the research within a familiar setting. Consequently, my analysis of the situation may be biased as a result of my role as assistant principal at Bay View. There is a risk that my writing could inaccurately describe the staff or the school more favorably than they deserve. By maintaining the anonymity of the participants and the school, I hoped to minimize the impact that my role in the school had on the comments made by the students and staff who participated in the interviews. My responsibilities at the school include working with and supervising the counselors. When I interviewed my colleagues as a part of this study, their comments may have been influenced by their relationships with me as a colleague and supervisor. I can understand how a counselor may be tempted to focus on all of the support that was offered to the student rather than the areas where support was insufficient or ineffective in order to be perceived as an effective counselor. As I interviewed the students, I asked them to consider the effectiveness of the supports they received and describe any additional interventions that the school could have offered that would have helped the student remain at Bay View.

My perceptions and analysis may have also been influenced by my experiences working with students' parents. As assistant principal, I frequently speak with parents who are concerned about their children, and I work with them to seek out opportunities for support. There were times where an interview of a student reminded me of a similar situation that I have worked through in the past. Some of my memories were of other students that I have known and in some cases I saw similarities in the students' experiences with some of the struggles I had when I was a high school student. Although my circumstances were not as severe as the students in this study, during my sophomore year in school I was apathetic and unmotivated. I benefited from coaches and teachers making personal connections that let me know they cared for me and encouraged me to get involved in school. Their efforts made a dramatic impact in my life. I am

disappointed that the relationships the students in this study had with school staff members were not strong enough to help them find a way to successfully complete high school at Bay View.

I often view high school students as both young adults and the sons and daughters of people who have struggled to navigate their own pathways through parenthood. I understand the challenges of parenthood from my own experience as a father of two young children. My desire to support and protect children, along with my experiences working with parents and caring for my own children, undoubtedly influence my understanding of the stories that these students share with me. I remained aware of these issues and kept track of them as I completed my field notes and analyzed the data throughout this qualitative study.

Potential Implications of the Research

This study originated from questions and concerns that I have about Bay View High School. Many of these questions are difficult to answer, but this study has helped me develop a better understanding of the school and the problems we face. Studying these students has helped me engage the staff at Bay View High School in conversations and make decisions that could ultimately adjust our practices to better meet the needs of our students. Hopefully, the way we distribute resources within our school could be modified and provide additional support for interventions with struggling students. Changes at Bay View High School could lead teachers to offer struggling students more effective accommodations in classrooms and more appropriate grading practices without sacrificing the academic reputation of the school.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this case study was to examine the factors and dynamics associated with students' decisions to transition from a high performance, affluent high school to an alternative school setting. During my first year at the school I was surprised to see struggling students

decide to leave the school to seek a more supportive learning environment. I wanted to understand why students were choosing to leave and so I designed this study so I would be able to interview students who chose to leave Bay View due to reasons other than a change in residence. That restriction on the selection of participants helped focus the study on families who were intentionally choosing to leave Bay View to pursue an educational opportunity in a different environment. I created a detailed profile of each student interviewed in order to identify compelling interpersonal, emotional, and academic reasons for the decision to seek alternative placement. This study is important because it adds to our understanding of the challenges articulated by students who struggle and provides insight about why some students seek alternative educational settings.

Research Questions

This study was designed to document the experiences of students who struggle within a comprehensive high school setting and articulate how the difficulties they experienced influenced their decision to seek alternative placement. The results of the study identified and explained some of the challenges these students face, along with some of the supports that these students believe would have been most helpful. The research questions that guided the data collection process were:

What factors do students self-report as contributing to their decision to seek an alternative school placement?

- a. What personal factors influenced their decision to leave the school?
- b. What were the school-based factors that contributed to their departure from the school?

Definition of Terms

Based upon my interviews of students and counselors at Bay View, some of the students who choose to seek an alternative educational setting also experience some form of mental illness. I have included definitions of some important terms and disorders that arise in the literature, are commonly used terms at Bay View, or could be factors in a student's decision to leave an educational setting.

504 Plan: A 504 plan documents the accommodations a student needs in an educational setting. It also helps to provide a student with an equal opportunity for education and protection from forms of discrimination.

Absenteeism: The regular absence from school by a student, typically without a valid excuse.

Academic Pressure: The pressure felt by students to achieve academically. This pressure may contribute to a variety of challenges facing students at schools.

Alternative School: A non-traditional educational setting designed to meet the academic, behavioral, and physical needs of students.

Antisocial Disorder: A mental condition which leads a person to act in a manner that shows a significant lack of concern for others.

Anxiety Disorders: A grouping of several chronic mental illnesses that have constant feelings of anxiety (fear, nervousness, and worry) as a core symptom.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A behavioral disorder that often results in actions that are impulsive and display a lack of concentration.

Comprehensive High School: A traditional high school setting in the United States designed to meet the needs of all students.

Delinquency: Behavior that is typically antisocial and judged to be criminally or morally wrong.

Depressive Disorder: A mood disorder characterized by chronic feelings of depression (dejection, despair and sadness) that persist for extended periods of time.

Dispositional Rumination: A focus on the symptoms and possible causes and consequences without attempting to improve the situation.

Externalizing Disorders: A grouping of disorders in which behaviors affect the external environment, examples include: Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Conduct Disorder.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): An IEP documents the need for specially designed instruction.

Internalizing Disorders: A grouping of disorders in which behaviors affect the internal experience of the individual, examples include: Anxiety Disorder and Depressive Disorder.

Intervention Team (I-Team): The group of counselors, case managers and administrators who meet every week at Bay View to discuss struggling students and consider possible supports for students. This team can approve informal accommodations or initiate the process to develop a 504 Plan or an IEP for a student.

Materialism: A focus on material possessions rather than intellectual or spiritual interests.

Mental Illness: A mental health condition that impacts a student's behavior, relationships, or overall life experiences.

Mindfulness: An intentional focus on the present moment and an awareness of one's thoughts and emotions.

School-Based Interventions: An intentional attempt to get someone the help they need.

This support for students could occur within a school setting or occur in partnership with school personnel.

Social Anxiety Disorder: An anxiety disorder in which feelings of anxiety are triggered by social settings where the individual has an unreasonable fear of being subjected to the judgment and criticism of others.

Socio-Economic Pressure: The social and economic pressure a student feels. This pressure may make a student feel inadequate due to perceived lower social status. The economic pressure may indicate decreased access to opportunities due to financial constraints.

Somatic Symptom Disorder: A mental disorder in which an individual has an intense and disruptive reaction to painful and non-painful symptoms presented by his or her own body.

Student Mobility: The transferring of students from one school to another for reasons other than promotion.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was designed to broaden our understanding of the factors that contribute to high school students deciding to seek alternative placement. One of the limitations of case study research is the local nature of the research; findings cannot be generalized to other individuals or a larger population. Additional limitations of this study include the accuracy of information gained through an interview process. There are likely to be some inaccurate details recalled by individuals included in this study, but through the use of existing documentation and interviews of counselors, I attempted to notice inconsistencies and then seek clarification. Another limitation is my role as the administrator who oversees the counselors at Bay View. My role as supervisor may have influenced the responses the counselors made during their interviews.

The interviews were conducted using a series of guide questions; the selection of these questions is a delimitation of the study. I asked follow-up questions and then had the opportunity to revise the guide questions prior to the next interview, if needed. Another delimitation is the sample of individuals selected for the study. This study was intentionally focused on a select group of students who have decided to leave Bay View High School. I minimized the impact of my role as assistant principal by only including student participants who had already decided to leave the school. I conducted interviews only after the student left the school and agreed to participate in the study. At the time of the interviews, the participants did not expect to attend Bay View or interact with me ever again. Due to my role as supervisor of the counselors, I was careful during my interviews to avoid making comments that would appear evaluative.

Summary

This study was designed to investigate the factors that contributed to some students' decisions to leave a comprehensive high school and enroll in another educational setting. There are a variety of reasons that students may have for departing. This study was an attempt to identify some of the school-based factors and some of the personal factors that influenced the decisions made by the participants. The following five thematic categories emerged as major factors for students to seek another educational setting: student mobility; mental illness; socio-economic pressure; academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions. These themes are explored in chapter two and then used again in chapter four as the stories from the six students highlight how those factors influenced a student's decision to leave Bay View. Through personal interviews of students, counselors, and analysis of other available data sources, I developed profiles for each case.

Chapter two provides a review of research that relates to school-based factors and personal factors that lead to students choosing to withdraw from a school setting. A thorough review of the existing research provides a better understanding of the challenges these students face and the results of various strategies schools have used to provide support.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature that is associated with students transferring between schools and adolescents struggling with school at the secondary and post-secondary level can be sorted into five themes: student mobility, mental illness, socio-economic pressure, academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions. The body of research associated with each of these five themes provides a more complete description of the various factors that influence a student's decision to seek an alternative secondary school setting.

Student Mobility

There are a variety of factors that may contribute to a student transferring from one school to another. The most frequent cause for a student to transfer is a change in residence. Families may need to change their place of residence for a wide variety of reasons that are out of the control of the student. In these instances, the disruption to the student's educational experience may be an unavoidable result. In other cases, families strategically seek opportunities to move or take advantage of inter-district transfer opportunities with the intention of improving the educational experience for their child (Schafft, 2006). Wealthy families have increased options when it comes to selecting places to live and schools for their children to attend. Students who transfer due to a change in residency may be strong students who do not want to transfer, or they may be struggling students who are excited about the opportunity to enter an educational environment with different teachers and students. In a study of Chicago public schools, researchers dealt with the complexities associated with identifying the causes for student transfer by classifying them as either residential mobility or school-related reasons (Kerbow, 1996).

Recent changes in open-enrollment (inter-district transfer) and the increase in quantity of online schools, charter schools, and alternative schools have made it possible for any student in

the United States to consider the possibility of transferring to a different school system. With increased educational options for students and families to consider, researchers have attempted to determine which school characteristics are most important for families considering a student transfer. A study on the volume of open-enrollment requests received by various school districts in Minnesota revealed that a school's average for student achievement scores were more influential than the school community's level of socioeconomic status or school district spending (Reback, 2008). The implication is that some of the families who can afford to leave a school with reported low levels of student academic achievement will do so.

The results from Minnesota differed slightly from a study of the open enrollment program for the public school system in Wisconsin, where researchers found that the families who were most likely to seek transfer lived in communities with expensive housing and lower levels of local funding for schools (Welsch, Statz, & Skidmore, 2010). These families were likely to seek opportunities for their children to attend school in districts with higher levels of per-pupil spending. The study also found that transfer students were likely to seek enrollment in districts with lower percentages of minorities and more extracurricular opportunities. Bay View is located in an affluent community. Compared to surrounding schools, Bay View has higher levels of per-pupil spending. The school has extensive extracurricular opportunities and the student body is predominantly white. The school has all of the desirable characteristics that were identified in the studies of schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

A study of student mobility in the Chicago public school system found that student mobility not only impacts the student who is transferring, but it also has consequences for the public school system as a whole (Kerbow, 1996). Schools are evaluated on the basis of student

achievement and growth over time. Schools who have a highly mobile population are likely to have lower student outcomes than schools with student populations that are more stable.

The reporting of student outcomes can motivate school districts to adjust their practices and their policy decisions. One example of this is that schools must report the graduation rates for students who enter as freshmen. Students who transfer to other schools are excluded from the calculation, which creates the potential for school districts to capitalize on an opportunity to improve their school's graduation rate by encouraging struggling students to transfer to alternative schools. A recent study in California found that nearly 50% of the students who dropped-out of school in that state did so after attending a non-traditional high school (Rumberger, 2011). The comprehensive high schools' graduation rates were higher because these struggling students decided that rather than dropping out of the comprehensive high school, they would transfer to a non-traditional high school, from which they eventually dropped out.

One study identified several common characteristics of transfer students. Students who do not live with both of their biological parents or have a disadvantage due to their academic background are more likely to transfer at some point during their K-12 educational experience (Rumberger and Larson, 1998). Students who transfer from one school to another typically have more risk factors than their peers who maintain enrollment. Transfer students are more likely to struggle with increased levels of behavior problems and lower academic achievement than those who maintain enrollment. The results of the study indicate that identifying and supporting students who have these characteristics are important because students who transfer once between eighth grade and their senior year have a high school completion rate that is less than half of the rate of students who maintain enrollment throughout high school (Rumberger and Larson, 1998).

The experiences of educational leaders who have witnessed transfer students struggle may influence their perceptions of students with higher rates of mobility. A study found that principals' perceptions of students' levels of aspiration and school achievement are negatively associated with levels of mobility. The same study found that those same principals anticipate students with high levels of mobility are more likely to exhibit insubordination (Seunghee, 2014). Students who switch schools are likely to demonstrate inappropriate behavior and have lower levels of educational outcomes, including disengagement and dropping out of school (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012). Students who are struggling prior to ninth grade and transfer multiple times are at high risk of dropping out of school.

The existing research suggests an association between low socio-economic status and high student mobility. Schools that have more than 50 percent of their students identify as an ethnic minority tend to have more student mobility than schools where the majority of students identify as white (Seunghee, 2014). Existing research also suggests that transferring negatively affects students' academic outcomes. One study tracked the outcomes for students who were identified as non-transfer, summer transfer, or midyear transfer. The non-transfer students were the most likely to attend college and were most likely to attend highly selective colleges. Midyear transfers were the least likely to attend college. Additionally, this research looked at GPA, math level, and participation in extra-curricular activities, and found that these three groups of students were on different educational trajectories prior to the point of school transfer (Sutton, Muller, & Langenkamp, 2013). Clearly, the first step in understanding how schools can improve the educational outcomes of struggling students who transfer is to study the conditions that cause students to struggle in a comprehensive high school in the first place. If

comprehensive high schools can effectively meet the needs of all of their students, fewer students will choose to transfer.

Mental Illness

A recent study reports that 25 percent of people will suffer from a mental health problem between the ages of 15 to 24 (Deziel, 2011). Students who suffer from mental illness often need additional support from the school staff. A study of adolescents found significant unmet needs for mental health or emotional concerns (Parasuraman and Shi, 2015). Mental illness may impact students' behavior at school, their relationships, and their overall academic experience. For some students, the struggles they face as a result of their mental illness may lead them to seek a different educational environment. Approximately half of all Americans will suffer from a mental health disorder during their lifetime (Hurst, 2005). Anxiety and major depression are the most common forms of mental illnesses. As individuals transition into adolescence, there is an increased likelihood that they will experience depressive symptoms and depressive disorders. Evidence-based cognitive behavioral treatments can be effective interventions. However, there can be barriers to implementation in a school setting, including financial and logistical concerns as well as a lack of training and expertise among the staff. School-Based Health Centers that integrate mental health care can effectively reach underserved adolescents with undiagnosed mental health concerns (Parasuraman and Shi, 2015).

Having a means to provide school-based mental health care can become even more effective if it is connected with a screening and referral process to identify high-risk students and connect them with the services that they need (Husky, Sheridan, McGuire, & Olfson, 2011). School-based mental health screening can identify a greater proportion of students in need of mental health services and increased rates of referral improves the students' access to services

(Husky, Kaplan, McGuire, Flynn, Chrostowski, & Olfson, 2011). School-based mental health identification programs that are connected to mental health services aimed at prevention and treatment within a school setting can improve students' academic performance and mental health (Levitt, Saka, Hunter Romanelli, & Hoagwood, 2007). Unfortunately funding for many mental health promotion and intervention programs in schools is reliant upon fees paid by users of the services or other inconsistent sources (Weist, Goldstein, Evans, Lever, Axelrod, Schreter, & Pruitt, 2003).

Half of the individuals who suffer from anxiety and depression begin experiencing symptoms of these disorders by age fourteen (Hurst, 2005). Although the symptoms of anxiety and depression can have a significant impact on a person's life, very few people who experience these symptoms receive adequate treatment. A study of students with anxiety or depression found that approximately one third of the participants reported that they did not feel they needed treatment. The remaining two thirds of the participants felt treatment either would not help or be too costly or embarrassing (Hurst, 2005). Although there can be many contributing factors for the onset of anxiety and depression, this study found that white and Hispanic students who feel they are too heavy or too thin report that they have considered suicide twice as often as students who feel they are an ideal weight. For many students, their self-worth is based upon their assumptions about the way they are perceived by their peers. When an individual's perception of their self is worse than the image they intend to portray to others, it creates additional pressure to live up to unrealistic expectations. Female students in the United States who present themselves as nearly perfect and seek outward validation are at greater risk to experience internalizing symptoms (Schrack, 2012).

In addition to an individual's perceived body image, a review of the literature shows that there is a relationship between low socio-economic status and mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, antisocial disorder, and ADHD. When discussing the overrepresentation of these mental disorders among adult individuals with low socio-economic status, it can be difficult to determine if the mental disorders are a cause or a consequence of poverty. In a study of adolescent youth, it was discovered that families with low socio-economic status were more likely to have children struggling with mental disorders (Miech, Caspi, Moffitt, & Wright, 1999). This supports the assumption that low socio-economic status can lead some individuals toward internalizing mental disorders. States and local community-based organizations offer a variety of mental health services for high-risk adolescents including screening, education, and early intervention (Buckelew, Yu, English, & Brindis, 2008). Students with behavioral inhibition, a shy temperament, or those who have suffered from a childhood chronic illness are at increased risk for Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). A four-year study of high school students from four high schools near San Jose, Ca. found that many individuals who suffered from SAD as youth suffer from another anxiety disorder or major depression as adults (Hayward, 2008). Research shows that there is a relationship between pain and depression, and a recent study contributes additional evidence that childhood pain could be associated with anxiety and depression later in life (Mallen, 2009).

Conflicts that exist within a family can also contribute to symptoms of anxiety and depression. A study of 681 African American adolescents struggling with family conflict found that individuals with atypical levels of family conflict as adolescents were at an increased risk for experiencing anxiety, depressive symptoms, and/or violent behavior as young adults. Additionally, of the young adults who experience these symptoms, those who have a history of

family conflict are more likely to have more severe conditions than those who had healthier family relationships (Ewon Choe, 2014). Individuals with healthy familial relationships are better equipped to transition from childhood to adolescence. During adolescence, it is beneficial for individuals to internalize pro-social attitudes and behaviors while expanding their network of friends before eventually establishing romantic relationships (Collins and Laursen, 2004).

In a study of adolescent first and second-generation immigrants in the U.S. with internalizing mental health symptoms (anxiety, depression and somatic symptoms), low-income urban adolescents were more likely to experience anxiety and depression than a nationally normed sample (Sirin, 2013). The results show that the mental health symptoms decreased over time as students progressed from 10th to 12th grade. As students and families found balance between their culture and their current environment, stress levels decreased and mental health symptoms improved. Increased levels of acculturative stress are associated with increased levels of internalized mental health symptoms. Although some students experience a decrease in internalizing symptoms toward the end of high school, the transition to college can trigger additional challenges. A study of 1,600 college students in Canada found that over half of the students in a 12-month period felt that things were hopeless and also over half felt overwhelming anxiety (Lunau, 2012). Many of these students' mental health problems were associated with academic/social/parental pressure and the prospect of a bad job market awaiting them after graduation.

In a study of adolescents, 27% reported thoughts of self-harm and 15% reported at least one act of self-harm. Of those who reported self-harm, only 18% sought help for anxiety or depression (Stallard, 2013). Girls were found to be at an increased risk compared to boys. This study found the presence of the following factors increase the likelihood of self-harm: insecure

peer relationships, low mood, and experience of being bullied. Secure relationships and a strong sense of school membership reduced the risk of self-harm for boys and improved the likelihood that girls would cease harming themselves (Stallard, 2013). Internalizing disorders can have a significant impact on a student's experience in an academic setting.

Socio-Economic Pressure

Students may seek an alternative school environment due to the social pressure and economic pressure that they experience in their current school setting. These pressures are at times separate from one another, and at times are closely connected. Social pressure can be observed when students struggle to meet the expectations of the people around them. Students' behaviors in the social setting of a school are influenced by their social goals or motivation for initiating interpersonal relationships (Makara and Madjar, 2015). A study grouped the reasons students have for engaging in social relationships at school into three categories: a desire to have strong friendships, a desire to appear popular, and a fear of appearing socially inferior (Jones, Mueller, Royal, Shim, & Hart, 2013). These social achievement goals are most influential on a students' experience at school if the student performs at a moderate level of academic achievement. For these students, the social context of a school helps keep them engaged at school (Shim and Finch, 2014). In that study the school experience was not influenced significantly by social achievement goals for students who were strong academically or students who were not committed to their learning. Socially and academically disconnected students may feel inadequate due to their academic performance and their social status. If they do not feel accepted or connected to a school community, they may be more likely to seek a different educational environment.

A study found that students' decisions to drop out of school were informed by their social context, self-perceptions, level of school engagement, and academic achievement (Fall and Roberts, 2012). Rather than drop out of school, some students may hope to transfer to a school with people who have similar social status and aspirations for the future. Results from a study indicate that perceived familial support and the level of acceptance and love from other members of a group predicted 15% of academic success (Bahar, 2010). If the school staff has an increased awareness of the social challenges some students face and use that information to intentionally make some changes within their school, it may help struggling students connect with others at the school and have improved educational outcomes.

Economic pressure can be a factor that influences the academic performance of economically disadvantaged students. Nationwide student achievement results indicate that there is an achievement gap between students who are economically disadvantaged and their peers. These results were highlighted in a study that found an association between poverty and poor grades and behavior; however, the economically disadvantaged students' grades and behavior showed improvement if the students perceived a positive school climate (Hopson and Lee, 2011). The students' social context mediated the impact of economic pressure.

In the United States, children from affluent families have the highest rates of emotional problems, depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse. Between 30 and 40 percent of teens from affluent families have significant psychological symptoms, and more than 20 percent of females from affluent families have been diagnosed with depression (Levin, 2007). Rather than affluence, this research suggested that the problems these students face are materialism, parental pressure, and feelings of being disconnected from parents.

One study indicates that materialistic people are likely to report less autonomy in their life, feel incompetent, and be disconnected from others. They are also likely to appear to be ungrateful and do not have a sense of meaning in their life (Kashdan, 2007). Students who live in affluent neighborhoods, regardless of their family's status, are more likely to have specific problems that will impact their education. Boys in affluent neighborhoods are more likely to have increased levels of delinquency. Girls in affluent neighborhoods are more likely to have increased levels of anxiety and depression (Lund, 2013). Children of affluence are at high risk for substance use, anxiety, and depression due to achievement expectations from their parents and a lack of connection with their parents (Luthar, 2003). Affluent youth have been considered at low risk and not needing the attention of psychologists; however, these children do need support. There are real threats to their emotional and physical health (Luthar, 2005). Parental pressure, criticism, and materialistic values contribute to the problems facing children of affluence (Luthar, 2013).

Although students in affluent neighborhoods have unique obstacles to overcome, they are fortunate that the United States education system is set up in a way that provides public schools in affluent neighborhoods with more resources than public schools in poor neighborhoods. These public schools in affluent neighborhoods may have the opportunity to support the students who struggle with issues that are related to their own affluence, because their community as a whole does not face the same obstacles that less affluent neighborhoods confront, allowing resources to be focused on the problems that local administrators prioritize (Mangino, 2010).

Academic Pressure

The pressure to achieve academically can contribute to a variety of challenges facing students at secondary and post-secondary schools. The academic achievement level of many

students drops unexpectedly as they enter high school due to the dramatic increase in academic expectations. These early failures cause many students to leave school systems (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). Students who succeed in difficult academic situations often do so due to their personality traits, intelligence, and previous academic achievement; however, a recent study went beyond those characteristics to study students' self-efficacy and found that the beliefs that students have about their own ability to regulate their learning was one of the most important predictors of students' academic achievement (Zuffianò, Alessandri, Gerbino, Luengo Kanacri, Di Giunta, Milioni, & Caprara, 2013).

Another study found that students with low self-efficacy believed that they could not change their level of intelligence, while students with high levels of self-efficacy sought challenging educational opportunities to gain knowledge and skills while still pursuing performance goals associated with high grades (Komarraju and Nadler, 2013). In that study self-efficacy, effort regulation, and help-seeking behaviors predicted 18% of the variance in GPA. If a student has low self-efficacy and moderate-to-low academic ability, they are more likely to struggle academically and could be at risk for leaving the school system. One way to help high school students like this re-engage with school is to help them understand how their current studies will support their pathway to their desired future jobs or academic pursuits. Students who are not currently planning to attend college need support and guidance toward alternative pathways that lead to good jobs (Joselowsky, 2007).

High school students in the United States face parental pressure and academic stress throughout the college selection process. These stressors can damage a student's psyche. Good communication between student and parents can help a student deal with stress. Additionally spiritual values can also relieve some of the pressure and stress that a student feels (Moseman,

1999). A study of high school students in the United States who are enrolled in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses indicate that many of these students feel pressured by parents, teachers, and students to achieve academic success, which is a source of stress and leads some of them to engage in academically dishonest practices (Taylor, 2002).

A high school experience that includes a balance between academic rigor, physical activity, and healthy social interaction may help limit the impact of academic pressures felt by the student. Existing research shows an inverse relationship between physical activity and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Helgadóttir, Forsell, & Ekblom, 2015). In a recent study, sports participation provided the most significant promise as a potential option to decrease or avoid depressive symptoms (Johnson, 2011). The study suggested the need to study older students who are academically disadvantaged, particularly female minorities, because they are at a higher risk for depressive symptoms. The need for balance between coursework, physical activity, and a social life is an important consideration for families considering alternative educational environments. If a student struggling with anxiety or depression is considering transferring from a comprehensive high school to an online school, the lack of required physical activity and social interaction with peers may cause an increase in their symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Secondary schools can implement a variety of interventions to serve students who are at risk for dropping out. If school leaders can determine why some of their students are choosing to drop out, they can look to improve the services the school provides and address the needs of the at-risk students. This could be lead to academic interventions for reading and mathematics, or it could lead to improvements in school culture and climate. Many of the effective interventions that a school can provide will need to be specifically tailored to the needs of their own at-risk

population. Early interventions during the middle school years and ninth grade seem to be the most successful (Neild, 2007). As soon as students who show signs of struggling are found to be more than a year behind in reading and/or math, the school should consider providing opportunities for the students to experience short-term successes to help them re-engage.

Availability of School-Based Interventions

School personnel are well equipped to support students when they struggle with an academic issue or a learning disability. An example of a school-based intervention can be found in a method many schools use to support struggling learners. In 2004 a nationwide effort to improve services to students with disabilities led to a new approach to educational interventions in many public school systems called Response to Intervention (RTI). The RTI process is comprised of assessments and interventions aimed at minimizing behaviors that interfere with school success at the school, class, and individual levels (Sabatino, 2009). This strategic approach has improved the quality of instructional practices and provides a logical method to increase the duration and intensity of instruction based upon the needs of the students (Hoover, 2011).

Although school staff members are often adept at supporting the academic needs of students and identifying students who struggle with symptoms of anxiety or depression, it is difficult to offer effective mental health treatment in a school setting. Many teachers acknowledge they lack the experience and training to effectively support students with mental health needs (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). Some would argue that treatment of mental disorders is not the responsibility of the school at all. After a four-year study of efforts to intervene early and prevent anxiety disorders in Australia, results indicated little difference in conditions at the two and four year intervals (Hunt, 2009). The study suggests the need for

trained specialists to be available for students in need, because evidenced-based interventions provided by clinical psychologists are more effective than school-based efforts by counselors and teachers. Schools are likely to retain at-risk students and help them transition to college if they have small class sizes, partnerships with parents and the local community, flexible scheduling, connections with a college, and excellent staff members who were carefully selected and professionally developed throughout their career (Carter, 2011). In a subsequent study the same researcher found that an intentional inclusion of guidance counseling in the students' schedule creates an academic environment where students know that the adults at the school care for them and this helps improve the retention of at-risk students (Carter, 2012).

Although interventions at the school can be less effective than those conducted by trained professionals, it can be useful to help train students to use strategies to navigate stressful situations. When students experience increased incidences of "life hassles," they are likely to experience an increase in depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress. Marks (2010) found that students experiencing life hassles were exposed to either dispositional rumination or mindfulness. Rumination appeared to exacerbate the relationship between life hassles, anxiety, and depression, but not stress. In this study, rumination allowed depressive symptoms to become stronger and last longer. Mindfulness attenuated the relationship. Mindfulness is a strategy adolescents can use to help maintain a healthy mental state while facing the inevitable challenges of everyday life. Mindfulness-based interventions are also useful for people with existing psychological disorders or who have exhibited suicidal behaviors (Marks, 2010).

A study of 8,400 13-14 year old students in Australia evaluated the effectiveness of the CLIMATE Schools Combined Intervention to help adolescents avoid substance use and mental health problems (Teesson, 2014). CLIMATE consists of twelve 40-minute lessons. The first six

lessons were focused on alcohol. Six months after the initial lessons the students took the other six classes focused on marijuana. Although there is plenty of evidence in existing literature showing the comorbidity of anxiety, depression, and substance use, there are few prevention programs that have a combined approach to prevent and reduce the symptoms of these disorders. Those that do exist have minimal effect size and cannot be implemented to large populations. In Australia they considered a curriculum change to the traditional health and PE curriculum to decrease the occurrence and severity of anxiety, depression, and substance use. After an initial trial, students increased their knowledge of alcohol and marijuana, decreased their usage of those drugs, and reported that they preferred the internet-based lessons to traditional school-based drug education (Tesson, 2014).

In a similar study on an internet-based education program designed to help junior high school students manage stress, results indicated that a proactive educational approach might be beneficial (van Vliet, 2009). The course included six lessons over a three-month period for eighth graders. Students increased their knowledge of stress, began seeking help, and reduced avoidance behaviors. Web-based education courses of this type are feasible and can be effective.

School-based interventions rather than clinic-based treatment can result in improved educational outcomes for students. Schools need to carefully select the appropriate evidenced-based interventions and determine how to deliver it in a school setting. The Adolescent Mood Project (AMP) is an example of an effective form of treatment for depressive disorder in a school setting. For example, four Denver high schools coordinated resources with psychologists, counselors, and a community mental health clinician to provide students with 12 weekly treatment sessions (Crisp, 2006). One of the reasons interventions like AMP lead to positive outcomes is the coordination between school staff and trained experts. Although school staff

members are often able to identify students who need help, for best results, social workers or clinicians need to implement the interventions, and their efforts need to be evaluated and improved over time (Ruffolo, 2009). School-based interventions that exist as an add-on to the educational programming are difficult to sustain and are often put together to address a specific need rather than being created from empirical data regarding social-emotional learning. Schools can bring about improved student behavior and academic performance if they integrate empirically based social-emotional learning throughout the school's curriculum (Pellitteri and Smith, 2007).

Alternative schools typically have smaller enrollment totals and are able to design their school program to more effectively meet the needs of their unique students. Some alternative schools include elements of social work among the services they provide their students in an attempt to develop a positive peer culture and provide opportunities for students to develop effective psychosocial skills. One study of an alternative school revealed that elements of social work practice helped raise students' self-esteem, lower their anxiety, and decrease students' symptoms of depression (Franklin and Streeter, 1991). Some alternative schools are able to help students develop skills that will help them deal with significant challenges in their lives. In a study of students in New York schools, seniors in an alternative school were more likely than their public school counterparts to use appropriate coping strategies to face problems, and they experienced less stress (Shankland, 2009).

A study of Alternative Education students in New Zealand found that 35% of female participants and 21% of male participants suffered from depression. Students who had healthy connections to family and peers were less often found to have depression. Students who are academically disadvantaged, experience domestic abuse, and face bullying at school are more

likely to suffer from depression (Denny, 2004). Students in New Zealand who have left the mainstream education system and entered alternative education have high rates of depression and have received very little mental health treatment (Fleming, 2012). The results of a recent study indicate that schools need to provide services without the student being expected to seek treatment independently. The report suggests that one promising option is to provide engaging computer-based support, which reduces student embarrassment about seeking support.

Summary

The existing literature provides valuable information about the struggles that adolescents face internally, within their family, and at school. There are a variety of factors that influence a student's decision to seek an alternative educational setting. When students move from one school to another it impacts the student and the two school systems involved in the transfer. School leaders can study the trends that are affecting their enrollment fluctuations and seek opportunities to improve their school system to more effectively meet the needs of all of their students. In some cases students are seeking different educational opportunities due to circumstances related to personal factors such as mental illness or a history of switching schools as a result of their family moving to a different location. The effects of some of these personal factors can be mitigated through the implementation of effective school-based interventions designed to support students who are suffering from mental illness.

School-based interventions can also help students learn the academic content they may have missed due to absences from school or close learning gaps that were caused from transferring between school systems. Some students seek an alternative setting due to school-based factors such as socio-economic pressure, or academic pressure that they experience within the school community. School leaders can study where these students are intending to transfer

and the reasons for doing so for insight on potential changes that would encourage the students to maintain enrollment in their district. Chapter three outlines the methods that were used to capture the stories of students who decide to leave Bay View in search of different educational opportunities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Given the school-based factors and personal factors discussed in chapter 2, it is important to understand how these and other factors affect some students within the unique setting offered at Bay View High School. I designed this case study to ascertain the factors that some students self-report as influencing their decision to leave Bay View so that they may attend high school in an alternative setting. Through personal interviews of students, discussions with counselors, and analysis of other site-based records for these students, I investigated the school-based factors and personal factors that contributed to their departure. This qualitative case study approach was designed to provide a thorough, holistic description and analysis of a select group of students who chose to depart Bay View High School (Gideon and Moskos, 2012; Hibberts and Johnson, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Miller, Brewer, John, & Credo Reference; Miller, Reid, & Fortune, 2012; Woodside, 2010). The research questions that guided this study were:

What factors do students self-report as contributing to their decision to seek an alternative school placement?

- a. What personal factors influenced their decision to leave the school?
- b. What were the school-based factors that contributed to their departure from the school?

Personal interviews provided an opportunity to learn about students' life experiences through their own descriptions and allow enough flexibility to ask follow-up questions aimed at clarifying or investigating specific aspects of the students' responses (Cameron, 2012). The personal interviews were semi-structured conversations with the clear purpose of obtaining descriptions of the experiences of the interviewees while at Bay View High School so that I could interpret the meaning of their experiences and develop a better understanding of their

decision to leave the school (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009). I also considered the similarities and differences of each student's story when compared with the stories told by other students.

Setting

All of the students who participated in this case study were expected to attend Bay View High School for the entire 2014-2015 school year, but they chose to complete their school year somewhere else. Bay View High School is located in an affluent suburban community in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Before attempting to understand why students chose to leave the school, it is important to consider some of the important characteristics of Bay View High School. The school serves approximately 1,300 students. According to the Bay View High School 2014-2015 Profile, during the 2013-2014 school year, the combined average SAT score for the students at Bay View was 1,782. This is higher than the state (1,544) and national (1,497) averages. That same year, students scored an average composite ACT score of 27, which is also higher than the state (21.4) and national (21) averages. In 2014, 91% of the graduating seniors reported that they planned to enroll in a four-year or two-year college. As a result of the high level of academic achievement by top students, US News and World Reports consistently ranks Bay View as one of the top comprehensive high schools in the state.

The level of academic achievement of the top scholars at Bay View exceeds the collective accomplishments by many schools in the surrounding area. It is clear that students at Bay View benefit from a very supportive and affluent community that values education. Many of the students spend each school year taking rigorous classes while participating in a variety of other activities. The school offers a wide range of co-curricular activities in athletics, drama, music, speech, clubs, and student government. Approximately 70% of the students are involved in at least one co-curricular activity.

The students at Bay View have well-educated parents who provide safe housing and transportation, and frequently eliminate the financial need for their teens to work at an after-school job. Many of the students live in expensive houses, drive nice cars, and wear fashionable clothing. The property values in the area are among the highest in the state, and the community has a reputation for being elitist and wealthy. The opportunity to attend Bay View High School is so desirable that many families who do not live within the boundary are willing to pay tuition costs of \$7,000 to avoid attending their neighborhood public school. This only adds to the concentration of students from wealthy families within the Bay View's population.

At Bay View most of the student population will attend the high school for all four years. Comments from counselors and teachers indicate that transfer students frequently struggle in mathematics, English, and world languages. They have also noticed that struggling students are the most likely to transfer out of our school. At the same time, some of Bay View's newly enrolled students find our academic expectations to be higher than they expected, which leads them to transfer back out within a year or two. As a result of struggling students exiting our school system, the percentage of our remaining students who have above average test scores and aspirations for attending college is high when compared with surrounding districts.

Although publicly thought of as an excellent school, Bay View faces some hidden challenges. During the 2013-2014 school year, 48 students with IEPs or 504s and had previously attended Bay View enrolled in alternative school settings. Also during that year, the counselors reviewed all of the files for their students and found that there were 88 students with documented medical diagnoses of anxiety and/or depression. The counselors also reported a list of another 44 students struggling with symptoms of anxiety and/or depression who did not yet have a medical diagnosis. Bay View has an increasing number of students who are experiencing difficulties

associated with anxiety and depression, and there is also an increase in the number of students who are seeking placement in an alternative school setting. Bay View's history of struggling students leaving the school may highlight the disparity between the public's conception of an excellent school and what these exiting students actually perceive Bay View to be.

Participants

This study was designed to identify the contributing factors that lead students to choose to leave Bay View High School. There are a variety of scenarios that could result in a student no longer attending Bay View. This study did not include students who are forced to leave due to extenuating circumstances, such as students who move with their family to another school's attendance boundary or temporarily withdrew to receive treatment for illness. The student population for this study included students at Bay View who were alternatively placed by the district or transferred to another school without a change in residence. The six students included in this sample had an opportunity to choose which school they wanted to attend, and they decided to leave Bay View. This study is designed to help explain why these six students chose to leave. Case study design provided opportunities to learn the relevant details from some of the students who chose to leave. Discussions with counselors in February of 2015 helped me identify a list of students who chose to leave during the 2014-2015 school year. I attempted to contact the parents of students from those lists and from that point on, as students chose to leave the school, I reached out to their parents and invited the students to participate in this study. The sixth and final personal interview took place in the middle of May of 2015.

The primary source of data for the study is the personal interviews of the selected participants (Miller, Brewer, John, & Credo Reference, 2003). However, the research also included interviews of school counselors, along with content analysis of site documents and

existing data. These data sources contributed to the construction of a profile for each of the participants that helped explain the complexity of the issues involved in why these students requested alternative placement.

Sampling Strategy

This study used a purposive sampling strategy with a target sample size of five to seven participants, which provided enough examples to draw similarities between the cases (Hibberts and Johnson, 2012). Once I began the interview process and developed more knowledge of the people that I was studying, I found it necessary to adjust the sampling strategy (Flick, 2008). Although the target number of participants remained the same, I found that many eligible participants declined the opportunity to participate. Although I was still selecting appropriate candidates to invite to participate in the study, I found it necessary to contact a larger number of candidates than I originally anticipated, and in many instances I made multiple inquiries to the parent of a participant before the student was willing to meet with me. There were 16 students who declined to participate in the study. Five of those students had moved out of state after leaving Bay View, so I did not pursue an interview once I learned of their location, because it was likely that they left Bay View due to factors out of their control. There were three students who declined to participate in the study who attended online schools. After multiple attempts to reach these students or their parents, I moved on to other candidates, but these three students eventually re-enrolled at Bay View for the 2015-2016 school year. Conversations about educational options and school-based interventions for these three students at Bay View resumed once they re-enrolled.

There were eight other students who declined to participate who appeared to be strong candidates for the study. I am curious what insights would have been gained from hearing their

stories, too, and I wonder why they did not want to discuss the experiences that led to their decision to seek an alternative environment. I spoke to one of these students and his mother on multiple occasions. He even agreed to participate and we scheduled a meeting at a coffee shop, but he never showed up. From my brief conversations with some of the students or their parents, I can assume that some of the students were still dealing with the struggles that led them to leave Bay View. I know that four of the eight students had documented histories of illegal drug usage. The counselors of the other four students described them as students who struggled with anxiety or depression. Whether these students were struggling with mental health issues, illegal drug usage, or some other barrier to continuing their education at Bay View, I have assumed that they were either not proud of their situation and did not want to share their struggles with their former assistant principal, or the student had begun to move beyond the unpleasant circumstances of Bay View and did not desire to describe their experiences or feel that pain again.

The difficulty in finding willing participants increased my appreciation for the students who agreed to speak with me about their decision to leave. The case study approach allowed an opportunity to develop detailed profiles of a small number of individuals dealing with similar situations. Rather than gaining insight on a large population of students through the use of a survey, this study intended to identify a select group of participants and study them more thoroughly (Cameron, 2012). The insights gained from their experiences may help inform further research and may help educators understand the realities and challenges that compel some high school students to seek alternative placement.

The participants in this study were six students who requested alternative placement or withdrew from Bay View and enrolled in another school without a change in residence. Historically at Bay View the students who transfer to another school without a change in

residence are often unexpected departures. These students may withdraw and enroll in an online school, a private school, or choose to begin living with a different relative within another school's attendance boundary. The students who are alternatively placed go through a formalized process to gain district approval for a transfer. To receive approval for alternative placement, the students must have either an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a 504 plan, or not be on track to graduate. Students who meet the criteria and request alternative placement participate in an options conference with a parent, a counselor, and an administrator to determine if the student needs alternative placement. If a request is approved, the district pays the expenses for the student to attend another school.

All of the students at the school have a counselor who offers academic, emotional, and college counseling. Counselors provide an additional level of support for students who have a 504 plan. If a student has an IEP, then they also have a case manager, who helps support the student and enforces the IEP. The counselors offer a unique perspective on the experiences of the students because they have worked with the student, the student's parents, and the student's teachers to provide the student with the support they need. None of the participants had a 504 or an IEP, which would have provided formalized accommodations implemented in their classes to help the student succeed in the school setting. Several of the students had a medical diagnosis and the I Team considered the situations of several of the participants during their time at Bay View. If a student with a 504 or IEP sought alternative placement, they would have gone through an options conference, and the team would have considered the effectiveness of the supports that had been offered to the student and discussed some of the other available options that existed outside of Bay View.

None of the participants left Bay View through the options conference process. I attempted to include participants who left through that process; however, they all declined participation. Instead the participants all withdrew from school and enrolled in another school, the Job Corps, or pursued a GED. After a student withdrew without a change in residence, I was informed of their situation and contacted the student's parent or guardian to ask if the student would be willing to discuss their high school experience and participate in this research project. I let them know that they would remain anonymous, but their comments would help inform the school leaders and the larger education community about the challenges faced by students that eventually lead to school departure. The students understood that the information they provided could be used to improve the services and supports that are available to students at Bay View High School. If the student was interested and agreed to participate, I provided a consent agreement and we scheduled a personal interview.

Research Design, Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

This study is a qualitative research approach using a case study design to gain a more complete understanding of the challenges these students faced. This study was designed to balance the desire to learn from these students with the need to maintain appropriate methodology. I avoided threats to validity through the triangulation of data sources, kept a clear collection of evidence, and investigated alternate explanations for outcomes as they were discovered (Yin, 1994). This study had clear protocols in place to support the process of telling the stories of the individuals in each of these cases and through their stories I developed a better understanding of the factors that influenced their decision to leave Bay View.

Once the participants were identified and agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled a private personal interview. Prior to conducting the interview, I reviewed the student's records

including records for academic performance, testing, attendance, behavior, participation in co-curricular activities, and if applicable, an IEP, 504, or any other files that provided insight regarding interventions and accommodations that school staff offered the student during the time the student attended school. I paid particular attention to any record of the effect these interventions had on the student. My knowledge of these interventions became useful during the interview process, where I could ask the student to reflect on the interventions and the effect they experienced. I used several protocols during the data collection process, enumerated in the next section.

Protocols for Data Collection

1. When a student decided to seek alternative placement, or transferred without a change in residence, I contacted their parent or guardian and asked if the student would be willing to participate in the study.
2. If a student agreed to participate, I conducted a file review of the student's information prior to the interview.
3. I developed a preliminary student profile through the use of available data sources for academic achievement, school attendance, behavior, and counseling information.
4. I conducted an audio-recorded interview with the student, followed by the writing of detailed field notes and requesting the professional transcription of the audio recording.
5. I interviewed the student's counselor to gain a more thorough understanding of the student's experience, followed by field notes and professional transcription.
6. I reviewed the available data on the student to finalize their profile.

The semi-structured single interview was used to gain information on topics that could not be observed while allowing some flexibility to expand upon topics that emerged during the

interview (Gideon and Moskos 2012). The interview utilized a series of open-ended guide questions designed to generate comments that were directly related to the students' experiences in the school setting that contributed to the students' decision to seek alternative placement. These guide questions incorporated ideas gained from the existing literature and from counselors. After each interview, I considered if any questions needed to be revised or adjusted. I occasionally deviated from the guide questions, but they helped direct the conversations and keep the interviews focused consistently on the same topics.

The personal interviews with students were limited to a one-hour duration. I electronically recorded the audio from the interview and did not take any handwritten notes during the interviews so I could maintain an active presence. Following each interview with a student, I completed field notes about the interview (Mack, 2005). I began my field notes by documenting the factual data regarding my observations of the setting and the actions of the participant. Then I described my thoughts, concerns, and questions associated with the interview, including any concerns I had about my own involvement with the interview. Prior to conducting another interview, I sent the audio recordings to a professional transcription service, and I reflected on my role in the interview. I attempted to assess if any changes should be made to the way I would conduct the next interview. If I felt that I was intrusive or disruptive during the interview process, I tried to determine how my subjectivity affected the interview process and prepared to improve before conducting another interview (Josselson, 2013). An example of this occurred when I felt my role in the interview process shifting from interviewer to assistant principal while interviewing Amanda. I wanted to give Amanda advice; I wanted to interject my opinion about some of the decisions she was making. I was able to hold back during the

interview, and then in subsequent interviews, I was more prepared to ask questions and listen without expressing my own views.

Discussions with the Counselors

After conducting the personal interviews with the six former Bay View students, I scheduled and conducted interviews with each student's counselor during June 2015. For most of the students, their counselor was the person at the school who worked with them most closely, and was most likely to have the best understanding of the student's situation. The counselor was asked to provide information about the student with the understanding that my dissertation would maintain the anonymity of the school, the students, and the counselors who participated in the interviews. The interview with each counselor lasted approximately 25 minutes, covering important details related to the student's struggles in each of the following domains within the school setting: academic, social, physical, and emotional. I also asked each counselor to provide memories of the student's experience at Bay View and perceptions regarding the student's rationale for seeking alternative placement. The audio from interviews of the counselors was recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service for further analysis.

I maintained a field journal and took field notes throughout the case study. The field journal included my thoughts and perceptions about every aspect of the research process. As I conducted file reviews, scheduled interviews, uncovered relevant information, reflected upon a particular case, or noticed similarities between multiple cases, I documented those sentiments and ideas within my field journal. Immediately after conducting each interview I completed field notes that contained factual documentation as well as questions and concerns that arose after the interview. The field journal and field notes were valuable resources and tools as I searched for themes that were present in each of the cases. The audio recordings from each interview were

transcribed, and I completed a four-step coding process to support my analysis of the interview data (Creswell, 2013).

Four-Step Coding Process

1. Classification- The coding process became more focused, as similar portions of the text within each transcript were arranged into five themes for the transcripts.
 - a. Student mobility
 - b. Mental illness
 - c. Socio-economic pressure
 - d. Academic pressure
 - e. Availability of School-based interventions
2. In vivo codes- I highlighted excerpts from each transcript with different colors to help me identify the various topics of discussion within each interview. I then grouped these excerpts together and categorized them using terms from the participants' own words. For example, Jeff said "I don't fit in here" and many of the other students shared similar comments that were eventually grouped together.
3. Interpretation- I analyzed the theoretical connections between the various themes that were present in the stories of the various participants. I considered the similarities and differences among the views expressed by the various participants.
4. Visual Display of the Data-
 - a. I created student profiles for each of the six students.
 - b. After multiple readings of the thematic groupings of the transcripts, three sub-categories emerged for each of the five main themes. The quotes were

arranged in these sub-categories and I selected excerpts for inclusion in chapter four.

I attempted to identify how each piece of evidence fit within the chronological course of events for the case, and I developed clear descriptions of the students' experience while attending the school. After developing a preliminary profile for a student, I shared my emerging analytic conclusions with the counselor who participated in the interview about that student. These individuals have prior knowledge of the students because the students were once a part of their caseload. Their participation in the triangulation process was designed to help verify the consistency of the profile with their own knowledge of the student. They either verified the plausibility of the findings or pointed out inconsistencies, leading to additional research.

As I analyzed the data, I sought patterns and completed a cross-case synthesis to connect the similarities and expose the differences of the cases. As Creswell notes, the synthesis of the data could lead to naturalistic generalizations that may help educators transfer the essential elements of the study to similar situations at their schools (2013).

Research Ethics

The ethics of this research required careful consideration and intentionality. I paid special attention to proper procedures for securing consent. For each of the participants who departed the school, I contacted the parents of the student via email and phone calls to see if their child was willing to participate in a private personal interview. If the student was willing, I sent an informed consent agreement and scheduled a time for an interview.

If the student was under age 18, I required the consent of a parent or guardian on the agreement as well. In addition, I answered any questions that the students or parents had. I emphasized that the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants would be carefully and

faithfully maintained. I felt that it was important to initially contact the parents or legal guardians before arranging a meeting with a student. The first interview took place on the campus of Bay View, but for the following five interviews I elected to meet the students at a coffee shop on weekend mornings. It provided a more comfortable atmosphere, and it eliminated my concerns of meeting privately with a student in my office on a weekend. The coffee shop became neutral territory and may have helped to reduce the participants' perception of me as an authority figure because we were in a public space and they could end the conversation if they wanted to (Miller, Reid, & Fortune, 2012).

Counselors who participated in this study signed an agreement to maintain confidentiality with any information they gathered about the cases. I used pseudonyms for all of the individuals referenced in this study, and I attempted to avoid any information that could identify their actual names or the real name of Bay View High School or the alternative schools to which the students transferred. I avoided using any information that could be used to identify the participants or the school. If any of the collected data divulged the identity of a participant or the school but was very important for the story, it was adjusted so that the story would be accurate but not sacrifice the anonymity of the individual or the school (Flick, 2008).

All of the research materials, including signed letters of consent, were stored in a locked file cabinet, and electronic files are password protected. These materials will be securely stored for the three years following the completion of the dissertation. After five years, I will personally dispose of all of the research materials.

Addressing Subjectivity in Researcher Role

One issue that could pose a threat to the validity of the research is the financial benefit for the school district to retain students within the school system and my desire as an administrator

to support the interests of the school district. The information gained from this study could help the district adjust the services it provides students, improving the rate of retention within the district and preserving revenue from tax dollars. Because of this bias, I involved counselors in the analysis process to help me maintain objectivity. My selection of the research topic and my role as assistant principal at Bay View High School indicate some of my own subjectivity. Throughout the research process I remained aware of that subjectivity and understood how it may influence every portion of my work. The counselors and students involved with this study view me as something other than an objective interviewer. I am their supervisor or an authority figure. Prior to interviews I reminded myself of my role as a researcher, and I intentionally avoided interjecting comments that would reflect my judgments or opinions of the actions or decisions made by the participants. I also guarded against any desires to transform the work into an autobiographical depiction of my interaction with the students or an authorized account of their experiences within the school setting (Peshkin, 1988).

Reliability and Validity

Often case study research lacks clarity regarding the connections between observations and assertions drawn by the researcher. Researchers draw these connections based upon their understandings from personal experiences, prior education, and the assertions of other researchers (Stake, 1995). I relied on those resources when making my assertions as well, while attempting to make clear and justified connections. Through triangulation of data sources, I studied multiple perspectives for each case and checked for accuracy and significance of the data (Woodside, 2010). I reflected on whether the various perspectives were consistent or conflicting while interpreting the data. The views of the counselors included similarities and differences from those held by the students. When differences arose, they often pointed to areas that needed

further clarification. School records provided additional data that expanded my understanding of each case and helped to confirm the insights gained through interviews (Merriam, 1998).

As I began to form conclusions for each case, I conducted member checks by sharing my emerging analysis with the counselor who was interviewed for the study. I also was reflective as I questioned my own conclusions for these cases. Triangulation of data sources and the involvement of the counselors supported my efforts to make clear and justified analytic conclusions and construct accurate profiles. In the end, the analytic framework of the five themes as identified in the literature review proved to be accurate, informative, and inclusive: student mobility; mental illness; socio-economic pressure; academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions.

Summary

This study is important for the Bay View community as well as for school leaders elsewhere who have similar concerns over students departing their school. School districts receive funding from their state based upon the number of students who attend. Because of this funding structure, schools are motivated to retain their students. School leaders are also compassionate educators who want all of their students to grow and reach their potential. Educators want to meet all of their students' needs. Through a thorough analysis of these cases, I developed a more complete understanding of the challenges that these students faced and the factors that compelled them to seek an alternative school environment. Throughout this process I guarded against threats to the validity of the study by comparing the stories told by the students to the comments from the counselors and the available school records.

Perhaps one of the greatest concerns was the effect of my own position and familiarity with the students and the school. The students saw me as an authority figure, a researcher, a

confidant, and a doctoral student. The students knew that I was an assistant principal, but I only had a history of working closely with one of the six students. For the other students I was a familiar face and someone they felt they could trust. I met with most of the students at a local coffee shop. We sat in comfortable chairs in a public area and engaged in a friendly conversation. Holding the interview away from campus on neutral territory helped to minimize the impact of my role as assistant principal. They had already made the decision to leave Bay View, so they had nothing to be gained by influencing my perception of their experiences at the school. At least for that moment in time, I wanted them to perceive me as a researcher.

I met with the counselors at times when students were not on campus and so we could close the door to my office and have an uninterrupted conversation. Our working relationships were quite strong, and we trusted each other with confidential information on a daily basis. The conversations we had regarding these students were similar in nature to the conversations we regularly engaged in when we were deciding how to support a struggling student. There were times when they shared information that was an admission that we could have done more for the student, and at those times I avoided making any comments or expressions that could convey my disapproval or disappointment with their description of the students' experiences. I conducted the interviews in a way that allowed students and counselors to openly and honestly share their stories so that the profiles accurately described the students' experiences. My conclusions were based upon data gathered using these appropriate methods.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study includes the stories of six students who chose to leave Bay View High School to seek an alternative environment for their education during the 2014-2015 school year. I met once with each of the six participants individually after their decision to leave Bay View was official. The conversations were all pleasant, and the students seemed comfortable sharing the story of their school experience with me.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of each student's educational pathway up to the point of school departure. The overviews include relevant details from their life prior to attending Bay View, a description of their time at Bay View, and the factors that influenced the students' decision to leave. After introducing the six students, the chapter mines students' experience along the five thematic categories that were included in the literature review: student mobility, mental illness, socio-economic pressure, academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions. These five thematic categories for students seeking alternative educational environments effectively addressed the factors that were apparent in each of the six cases for this study. Within each thematic category, there are three sub-categories that emerged through the coding process described in chapter three. Quotes from the interviews of the students and their counselors highlight some of the factors that may have led to the students' decisions to leave Bay View.

Victoria and Phil were the two students who sought an alternative environment due to factors in only two of the thematic categories. The other four students had experiences that indicated that their decision to leave Bay View was influenced by factors in three or more thematic categories. These cases highlight the complexity associated with determining the most important factor that led to a student deciding to leave. As I listened to these students tell their

stories, it became clear that many of these students had spent a good deal of time considering their options. They estimated the cumulative benefits of leaving Bay View weighed against any desire or benefit to remain at the school. None of these students left due to a single incident, or even due to factors from a single thematic category. Each student's decision to leave Bay View was influenced by a variety factors.

Student One: Stacy

I shared part of Stacy's story at the beginning of chapter one. She spent her childhood in a neighboring state. During her freshman year, she attended a comprehensive high school, but after struggling academically and socially, she transferred to an alternative school where she completed online coursework and found more success. She moved to Bay View from out of state just before the beginning of her junior year. She had an intense dislike for her previous community, and so she was glad to be moving somewhere else:

I came from...a small town in the middle of nowhere that is a hell hole...For seventh through eighth I went to...a different school, because I was being bullied so bad at my old school...Then I went to high school for ninth grade...It was just a really bad town. Just the people were awful. So I'm like, *'I can't do this anymore. I can't deal with these people anymore.'* There, if you had a problem with someone, you could tell the principal all you want, they're not going to do anything. Nothing would get done. Nothing would happen. There's nothing you could do. You could be getting knifed every day and the teachers still wouldn't do anything (Stacy's Interview, 2-26-15).

Although she was excited for the opportunity to escape her old town, the school setting and academic expectations at Bay View were difficult for Stacy to adapt to. After a little more than a year at Bay View, Stacy was no longer on track to graduate in four years, and began

exhibiting some increasingly noticeable attention-seeking behaviors. The school administration called the paramedics for her once when she passed out in the hallway, she frequently came down to the health room, or the counseling office exhibiting symptoms of sickness and mental illness. She explained the triggers for her behavior this way:

A lot of it was the stress of finishing things on time, getting things done when I don't feel like I really learned it...or just the pressure of the school or the teachers. You can't really go at your own pace...I was freaking out and like, oh my gosh, I have got to get this done. I don't think I did it good enough. A lot of negative thinking (Stacy's Interview, 2-26-15).

Stacy's counselor provided further analysis of Stacy's experience at Bay View:

Especially at first, I think she wanted to be a presence in the school, wanted people to see her and wanted to form connections like all of our kids do. None of them want to just disappear into the anonymity of being the new kid no one knows. Her way of doing that was to seek a lot of attention. She started out by adopting a new name, Raven. She would call attention to herself in class by making inappropriate, out-of-context, attention-seeking statements - *'I think I'm bisexual,'* would be an example or, *'I've realized I'm gay.'* Then she had a lot of mental health breakdowns, I guess you could say, where she would report having a panic attack or she reported multiple personalities. She would exhibit her idea of a panic attack or she would speak as one of her other manifestations of multiple personality in conversations with counselors, with probably anybody who would hear it. I think that a lot of that was attention seeking, psychosomatic symptoms. People who are having panic attacks don't forget that they're having a panic attack 30 seconds in, because they get excited about telling you a story. I simply don't think she has

multiple personalities. Our school psychologist met far more than once or twice with Stacy and spoke far more than once or twice with her mother, Leslie and, in response to a direct question from Leslie said, '*She's acting*' (Stacy's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

Near the end of the first semester of her senior year, Stacy sought a transfer to an online school similar to what she attended as a sophomore. After transferring to an alternative school for the second semester of her senior year, Stacy completed nine courses with high marks. She designed the mascot for her new school, created the graduation video for her class, and graduated on time. Stacy's counselor summarized the second half of Stacy's senior year:

They went and looked at the (online) school first, loved it, transferred...there to finish high school. She and Leslie came by (after graduation) to visit and showed me pictures of the school and the graduation. I mean Stacy designed the mascot for the school, which is some sort of mythical bird that doesn't exist...I'm looking at other kids with rainbow-colored hair and different kinds of clothing, and just thinking here was her tribe. Here were kids that she felt comfortable with. Here at Bay View she found those kids, but they weren't a whole, cohesive group. Here at the online academy, she had more of a group. She's perfectly capable intellectually, so of course she could finish online coursework that, frankly, isn't very hard. It's a success. She graduated. She's happy and moving on (Stacy's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

This positive outcome would have been unimaginable for Stacy if she had stayed at Bay View. After she graduated high school, she planned to attend a community college in the fall.

My initial interactions with Stacy consistently led me to believe that personal factors such as student mobility and mental illness were leading Stacy toward a path away from Bay View. Initially it looked as though she was struggling with mental illness, but after further

investigation, it appeared that Stacy demonstrated those episodes of high anxiety and multiple personalities as a result of the stress of academic pressure at Bay View. Stacy's comments in the interview coupled with her academic success in an alternative school environment changed my perception of Stacy's experience. I now believe that school-based factors such as high academic expectations, fast-paced instruction and a lack of formalized support systems were very influential in Stacy's decision to leave Bay View.

Student Two: Jeff

Jeff attended kindergarten in Bay View and near the end of that year, his parents divorced, concluding their brief marriage. Over the next ten years, Jeff attended nine different schools. His travels with his mother took him to a wide variety of school settings. There was a period of time from third through seventh grade where he lived in the same house and attended an elementary school and middle school in the same district. At the end of his seventh grade year, Jeff had a 3.83 GPA with all A's and B's. Then he and his mother began moving again and Jeff attended a new school each year. During his freshman and sophomore year, he transferred between high schools in the middle of the school year. During my conversation with Jeff, he had a difficult time remembering all of the places he had lived and schools he had attended:

I've been to a lot of different schools...I was here for kindergarten, but I don't remember which school it was. That was a long time ago...we moved (out of state) when I was in first grade because my dad worked. I think mostly we moved because of my dad's work...I think he liked to move around. I think he liked it, something he wanted to do. I went to, I think, five elementary schools. Then I moved around a lot when I was younger...Then middle school I went to (two middle schools)...Then I moved to (another town) and went to high school, and then (moved across the state and attended another

high school), and...then I moved here mid-sophomore year... We just moved a lot. That's just what happened... It made it hard to settle down, and make friends, and that kind of stuff. I think when you're at a young age it's kind of hard. But I'm over it (Jeff's Interview, 5-16-15).

During the interview, it became apparent that the frequency with which Jeff and his mother moved had a damaging impact on his educational experience. There were significant gaps and overlaps in the curriculum that he was exposed to and perhaps more importantly, Jeff grew to learn that his relationships with other students and with peers were likely to end if his mother decided to move again. Consequently, Jeff was reluctant to invest in those relationships or apply himself in the classroom.

When he arrived at Bay View near the end of his sophomore year, he was unmotivated and unprepared for our school system. Jeff's counselor said, "Jeff is just one of those kids where the minute he walked through the door you just go, *'He's going to really struggle here'*" (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15). In a school filled with highly motivated students with nice clothing, Jeff could be found hiding in the hallways during class time, wearing camouflage hunting gear and staying chronically disconnected from coursework. His transcript for his time at Bay View was almost entirely F's. He skipped classes regularly and never felt like he fit in with his classmates. Near the end of his junior year, he withdrew so that he could join the Job Corps. Jeff's counselor recalled the decision making process Jeff went through as he entered the Job Corps:

He actually went to an information session (for the Job Corps), went through all of his interviews, backpedaled. He was really getting scared. Then, when they finally called to tell him, *'You're in and you report on this day,'* oh my gosh, he was crying in my office and crying with (the librarian). We thought *oh, he's going to back out. He's not going to*

do this. We spent a couple days just holding his hand...He was nervous, you know like be careful what you wish for, to thinking about leaving his mom and really missing his mom (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15).

Jeff's personal factors such as his family background and history of high mobility were very disruptive to his educational experience. There were also several socio-economic factors that may have influenced his decision to leave. Jeff showed that he was a capable student in seventh grade when he had attended the same school system for five years. However, high mobility, inconsistencies within the curriculum of various school districts, and chronic absenteeism seemed to have derailed Jeff in high school and led to him considering joining the Job Corps. Although schools nationwide have attempted to standardize their curriculum through Common Core State Standards, it would be difficult for any student to attend nine different schools without some undesirable academic consequences. Undoubtedly, Bay View could have done more to help Jeff succeed socially and academically, but personal factors appear to have had a great impact on his decision to leave Bay View.

Student Three: Victoria

Victoria was a quiet girl with a lovely smile. Her favorite activity was singing. She was proud of her ability and had a YouTube channel where she posted her performances from her home. Although she loved to perform, she struggled in social settings due to symptoms of anxiety and depression. She recalled the difficulty she experienced just attending Bay View, "I just couldn't get to school...freshman year I was just having a lot of issues with mental things." Her mental health struggles created a significant barrier to her educational experience. Victoria attended Bay View schools from kindergarten through tenth grade. In eighth grade Victoria began struggling with anxiety and depression. She missed a lot of school and was dropped from

the junior high after missing ten consecutive days. She eventually re-enrolled and finished out that year. That summer she sought a medical diagnosis for her symptoms of anxiety.

As a freshman at Bay View she struggled to come to school and was brought up at an intervention team meeting (I Team). Victoria's frequent absences made it difficult to determine if her academic struggles were due to a medical condition or non-attendance. The I Team suggested that online school could be an effective option for her. In November, she received a diagnosis of panic disorder with agoraphobia. In December, she was additionally diagnosed with chronic depression and anxiety disorder. Before winter break, Victoria and her counselor discussed her available options for alternative educational settings. They decided to request placement in an online school in the hope that she would be able to focus on academic work without the need to navigate through the social setting of a traditional high school. Bay View School District agreed to pay for Victoria to enroll in the online school. Although it seemed like an effective option for someone who had difficulty in the social setting of a large high school, Victoria did not spend much time working on her online schoolwork. She did not complete any of the online courses after eight months of non-attendance; she re-enrolled in Bay View for her sophomore year.

When Victoria came back to Bay View, she had a new counselor who worked at the school on a part-time basis. In the fall of her sophomore year, Victoria participated in the school musical. The attendance policy required her to attend classes to be able to participate in the show. Victoria's attendance improved for a few weeks. However, once the fall musical performances were completed, Victoria's academic and emotional struggles re-emerged and her counselor again brought her case up at I Team. The team suggested some trial accommodations in preparation for writing a 504 Plan to support Victoria. Victoria's counselor met with Victoria

and her mother on multiple occasions but could not find an effective strategy to help Victoria attend classes regularly at Bay View:

It was never a specific issue with a student. I mean it was never bullying or anything...She just genuinely had some real social anxiety...It got to a point where she was kind of afraid to leave the house...She's really unhealthy...Her dog passed away in the fall and (her parents) thought maybe that was one of the reasons her attendance was being impacted (Victoria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

Throughout the winter, Victoria's attendance got worse as did her symptoms of anxiety and depression. During the spring term of her sophomore year, she missed ten consecutive days of school and was dropped from enrollment from the high school for non-attendance. Upon Victoria and her mother's request, Bay View released Victoria from compulsory attendance. She enrolled in a few music classes at the community college and was pursuing a GED. She described the two months between her departure from Bay View and our interview as being quite busy:

Well, I'm taking classes at (the community college), a handful, all music related, 'cause music is where I see myself in the future. That is what I want to do...I've been doing a lot of travelling as well 'cause I maintain a YouTube channel. I have a lot of, I guess, YouTube friends that live in other states and things. We've been doing collaboration videos, and collaboration singing, and things like that, so a lot of travel for that, and then also my classes (Victoria's Interview, 4-19-15).

In our interview, she also expressed interest in enrolling in a music-oriented boarding school that incorporates other subject areas in the students' experience through music.

The personal factors associated with mental illness and socio-economic pressure made it nearly impossible for Victoria to succeed at Bay View. School staff attempted several different strategies to support Victoria and help her re-engage in coursework. Although school-based factors definitely impacted Victoria, it would be difficult to expect a comprehensive high school like Bay View to provide the treatment that Victoria needed in order to be academically successful with her mental health condition. If she could have accessed the appropriate medication and therapy that she needed, she felt she could have done well academically at Bay View.

Student Four: Amanda

Amanda was a young girl who wanted to be perceived as an adult. She was proud that she had two part-time jobs. She somewhat naïvely mapped out a pathway that would allow her to drop out of Bay View as a sophomore, earn a GED, and then go to beauty school so that she could eventually own her own beauty salon. She described what she anticipates for the next few years of her life:

On average the instructor says that it takes about a year for students to complete the prep courses to get ready for the GED, but I had my placement testing and they have different levels...He said that based on my placement testing scores it'll probably only take me six months, which I'm happy for...After that, I'm probably gonna work full-time until I'm 18, 'cause I want to go to beauty school after that, but none of the good beauty schools will take you before you're 18 so I'm probably just gonna work full-time until I am 18 and then start beauty school...After beauty school I'd probably do hair. I'd probably start—not at Great Clips, a little higher than Great Clips, but not at a full-fledged salon. I would probably work there for a little bit. Then I'd probably go back to (community

college) and do some business stuff 'cause I wanna have my own salon. That's my main goal. I want a hair salon, so I most definitely will be focusing on hair (Amanda's Interview, 3-15-15).

Amanda attended Bay View schools from first through tenth grade. In our interview, she detailed a string of traumatic events that appear to have influenced her experience at Bay View. In fourth grade she began taking anxiety medication. In fifth grade she witnessed her father having a seizure. In seventh grade, an older boyfriend assaulted Amanda. Amanda was subjected to harassment and bullying for the remainder of her seventh and eighth grade school years. Amanda and her mother both take the same anxiety and depression medication.

During her freshman year at Bay View, Amanda spent a lot of time reporting the inappropriate behavior of her classmates to the vice principal in charge of discipline. She said that she did this in an attempt to retaliate for the mistreatment she had received by these individuals in middle school. This behavior tore apart some of her friendships and contributed to Amanda disengaging from the school experience and seeking a way to escape.

Amanda's school counselor was unaware of Amanda's struggles with anxiety and depression and had no record of any medical diagnosis. Consequently, very few school-based interventions were attempted. Amanda's counselor described her perception of Amanda's experience at Bay View:

As a freshman, Amanda was pretty disengaged from school. She was one of those kids who wanted to get her diploma, wanted to pass her classes, but didn't really want to put in the time, and energy, and effort that would be required to do that. She's never expressed any interest whatsoever in going to college. From an early age, certainly before she started high school, her goal was, and continues to be, to be a cosmetologist. She's

always been very clear about her end game, which is to go to beauty school. [During her sophomore year, she was] basically losing momentum in school, becoming increasingly checked out. She relinquished her original goal of - originally she was very clear. *'I definitely want to graduate from high school. But that's it, and I want to go to beauty school,'* and then realizing that she wasn't going to graduate from high school without stepping up, including some credit recovery, she relinquished that goal. She decided that wasn't really important. She's got a very - and this will be a great strength for her, as long as she makes good decisions - she has a very strong will. She basically wore her parents down because they weren't, at all, open to the idea of a GED. But they came to see that she did have a plan, that she was committed to following through on her plan, and that, although they could force her to be in high school, they actually couldn't force her to graduate 'cause they couldn't make her pass classes and do the work to pass the classes. So eventually they agreed... They just decided they would get out of the way, basically, in signing the release from compulsory education and agreeing to the GED program, so that she was moving forward in a constructive manner. I know that part of what played into their decision is, well, if she's not moving forward with what she wants to do, what is she doing? Nothing good (Amanda's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

During Amanda's sophomore year, her sister, who was in the seventh grade and suffers from anxiety and depression, attempted suicide. After her sister's suicide attempt, Amanda asked her parents if she could drop out of high school, continue working, and pursue a GED. They supported her and at her parents' request, Bay View granted Amanda a release from compulsory attendance. Amanda intended to earn a GED and then enroll in a beauty school.

Amanda struggled with personal factors associated with mental illness, socio-economic pressure and academic pressure that influenced her experience at Bay View and her eventual decision to leave the school. Her experience in junior high and high school included some difficult social situations, and she became increasingly disengaged from the learning opportunities in high school. Many of the school-based factors that influenced her decision included difficulties in her interpersonal relationships with her peers rather than factors associated with curriculum and instruction.

Student Five: Phil

Phil began school in a nearby school district. Phil's two mothers separated when he was in third grade, and he moved with Laurel (one of his mothers) to Bay View. He attended Bay View schools from fourth through tenth grade. While in elementary school, school staff tested Phil and found he qualified for Talented and Gifted (TAG) in reading. His teachers reported that he was a social kid in elementary school, and they helped him set goals to focus on his academic work, to complete all assignments with quality, and work on neatness. They also reported that poor attendance was affecting his performance. His teacher wrote the following on his fifth grade report card: "It is going to be important for Phil's future achievement that he is at school everyday." Throughout junior high, Phil's teachers continued to report that Phil's attendance was affecting his performance, and schoolwork was either not turned in or turned in late and incomplete.

Phil speaks very articulately, and teachers and students understand that he is bright. Although he seems quite capable of doing schoolwork, in high school he was nearly completely disengaged from the school experience. Teachers reported that he often had his head down on his desk in class. Phil avoided social interaction with the exception of his two friends who he would

sit with in the academic hallway or library during lunch. After school he would interact with people online through video games. Phil reports that if he connects with a subject or likes a teacher, he will give greater effort, but the core classes are of little interest to him. In the fall of his freshman year, he missed nine school days and had a 2.86 GPA. In the spring, he missed 19 days of school and had a 1.57 GPA.

Phil was brought to Bay View's I Team in the spring of his freshman year. His teachers reported that he was detached from the class and seemed apathetic, depressed or downhearted. Although teachers and his counselor realized that he was struggling, they could not find a way to support him. During his sophomore year his attendance at school and his academic performance grew increasingly worse. Phil described his own academic habits that led to his departure from Bay View:

I think the main thing that led me to leaving was – it really started in sixth grade and became a habit for me to do...if I didn't agree with a teacher I would, out of spite almost, just not do things. It became a pattern in later years and if I didn't like the teacher, I wouldn't do anything in class. That became something that just defined how I did school work and kind of led to, well, if this continues on, I'm not going to be able to get anything done, so let's lose it so I'm the one controlling my education and get out of this loop (Phil's Interview, 3-24-15).

He was well aware of his academic situation and how it could impact his future and so he sought an educational pathway that would allow him to avoid the high school experience, avoid the core subject areas, and yet still have the potential to lead to a technical career field:

I got kind of into this routine where it's like I get into the class, and I get assigned something, it's like, well, '*why I am I doing this?*' I have other interests and I want to

focus on those, so I was looking at other options for non-compulsory education so that I could get to where I want to go faster and focus on things I wanted to do. It was like, *'well, you can get the GED and then after that you can go for college.'* I was like, *'yeah, it sounds like a pretty good idea.'* Then I was like, *'well, there's still the four subjects (English, math, science and social studies) that you need to get your associates degree.'* It's like, *'all right, that's kind of what I'm trying to get out of. What other options are out there?'* I learned about technicians' degrees, which are two-year courses for – it's almost like a trade school. You learn how to do this one trade and then you can get a job in it (Phil's Interview, 3-24-15).

Phil began looking for alternative educational pathways during his freshman year at the school. He eventually decided that dropping out of Bay View as a sophomore would allow him an opportunity to pursue a GED and then take classes at a community college which would prepare him to serve as a technician in a veterinarian's office. He sought a way to move into a desirable career field without studying the core subjects of math, English, science and social studies. He pursued this path for personal reasons, possibly stemming from socio-economic and academic pressure. By the estimation of teachers and counselors, Phil was capable of doing the work for these courses; he simply did not want to do so. Phil's counselor smiled with a look of both amusement and frustration as she described him:

You can't help but like him. He's a neat kid...his test scores would indicate that he's very capable...He's really articulate and you can have some cool conversations, but he's also very naïve and very stubborn. He had (the idea of pursuing a GED) in his head, that is the way that it was going to turn out (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

He withdrew from school in March of his sophomore year to pursue a GED and then possibly pursue technical training to work in a veterinarian's office. From my perspective as a school administrator, it would be difficult for a comprehensive high school to adjust their curricular offerings to meet the interests of a student like Phil. However, that lack of flexibility in course offerings and graduation requirements was a major factor in Phil's decision to leave.

Student Six: Maria

Maria came to Bay View after attending a Spanish immersion school from kindergarten through eighth grade in a less-affluent suburb called Novato. Maria's parents divorced when she was in the third grade and her brothers stayed with her father while she moved with her mother. An older boyfriend physically and emotionally abused Maria during seventh and eighth grade. That traumatic relationship eventually led to struggles with mental illness. Near the end of the summer after her eighth grade year, Maria's mother decided to move to Bay View. Maria was not involved with the decision, but went along with it, even though it meant that she would be moving further away from her father and two brothers.

Maria did well at Bay View socially, athletically, and academically. She participated in multiple sports, she was selected as a princess for a dance, and her transcript was filled with A's and B's. Maria's counselor said, "Academically I was quite surprised. She actually did quite well, I mean very significantly. She was very motivated. I think the goal is that she would probably – I think she was going to be the first one in her family to potentially go to college. She just had these big goals for herself" (Maria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15). Although Maria seemed to acclimate to her new surroundings, she found her friendships at Bay View to be superficial. Maria's counselor explained:

I know she didn't fit in in that respect. I know she knew she didn't have money. I think that was the hard thing. She wasn't like other people. Other people had tight-knit groups of friends. It was hard to kind of break in. I feel she had friends, but she had superficial friends...She had friends to eat lunch with. She had friends that she would kind of hang out with. But outside of school, I don't think she had any serious friendships that ended up developing here. Because if she had, then I think she probably would have stuck it out...She's not really from Bay View. I think maybe they saw her as different, and she knew that they saw her different, and that maybe just kind of ate at her a little bit and made her uncomfortable over time...Well, I don't think there's a lot we can do, as a school, to make people like one another, make people hang out with one another (Maria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

Maria remained in contact with her friends back in Novato and would spend evenings and weekends socializing with those people and attending her brothers' sporting events. She began to date a boy from Novato as well. During her sophomore year, she considered moving back with her father to attend Novato, but decided the academic opportunities at Bay View were too good to give up.

During Maria's junior year at Bay View, the academic pressure began to take its toll. She was completing about four hours of homework every night. Possibly due to the stress of the academic workload, she began to have flashbacks to the abuse that occurred during seventh and eighth grade. She was briefly hospitalized and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The stress and the hospital visit pulled Maria away from school, and when she returned, she felt increased anxiety and academic pressure as she tried to catch up to her classmates and maintain high grades. Maria described her struggle by saying:

Junior year was probably the worst year of high school. I had such a tough year...I was just tired and I missed my friends, my other friends. I mean I had friends at Bay View, but I missed my friends in Novato, I missed my brothers, so I was just kind of burnt out (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

She worked with her counselor and teachers and was able to salvage her fall semester grades. During the spring of her junior year, Maria did not participate in sports and began to disengage from the school community and her friends at Bay View.

Maria never fully disconnected from her friends and family in Novato, and that may have prevented her from fully experiencing all that Bay View had to offer. She said, "The communities are a lot different. I think I just missed that. I was always genuinely more happy, happier over there (in Novato), and I think my mom saw it too" (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15). She considered returning to Novato on multiple occasions, due to a variety of personal factors, but enjoyed the academic opportunities at Bay View. As academic pressure and socio-economic pressure began to mount, Maria's struggles with mental illness grew more acute. Over the summer before her senior year, she spoke with her mother and they decided it would be better for Maria to move back to Novato to finish out her high school experience with her friends and her brothers. Her counselor at Bay View was shocked to discover that Maria did not return for her senior year. Near the end of her senior year at Novato, Maria was convinced that she made the right decision; her grades were higher in Novato, and she planned to attend college to become a teacher.

I don't regret (going back to Novato) at all...Going back was much easier...I mean because I know a lot of people over there through my brothers' sports, my dad coaches

youth over there...my boyfriend already went there, I guess knowing all those people just made that transition so much easier (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

She described many of the differences between Novato and Bay View. Bay View is more rigorous academically, and she had a difficult time fitting in socially with the students at Bay View. She spent less time studying at Novato and received higher grades. The students at Bay View would be mean to each other, but the students at Novato were frequently physically violent toward each other. One of Maria's comments showed that although she did not feel physically safe at Novato, she preferred it there because she felt more emotionally safe because she was with her friends and family:

I mean, not that Novato has a bad reputation, but usually there's – there's been four fights in the last two weeks. A kid, he got his head stomped in in the bathroom. Yeah, it's ridiculous...At Novato I just feel comfortable (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

Maria's comments highlight some of the surprising perspectives uncovered in this study. There are a variety of factors that influenced the decision-making process for each of these students. Additionally, each student ascribes their own values on a school's attributes. Stacy and Jeff felt more comfortable attending a small school while Maria wanted a large school with a strong co-curricular program. Victoria and Stacy wanted to attend a school that is safe, while Maria just wanted to be with her friends. Many of the students at Bay View want to attend the school because it is academically rigorous, while the six students in this study were looking for the quickest way out.

Thematic Overview

The six students included in this study left Bay View due to a variety of factors. Although they each had unique circumstances that influenced their decision, their stories provide examples

of how the five thematic categories described in chapter two are represented in a student's decision to seek a different educational environment. Each of the following five themes will be used to frame the stories of the six students: student mobility, mental illness, socio-economic pressure, academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions. Within each of these five thematic categories, I elucidate three sub-categories that emerged through the coding process of closely examining students' words.

Theme One: Student Mobility

Students transfer between school districts for a variety of reasons. This movement can lead a student to struggle academically, socially or emotionally. The potential detriment of student mobility is especially evident in Jeff's story.

“Bounce around a lot”

Jeff attended nine different schools during a ten-year period of his school experience. When he came to Bay View, his counselor attempted to support him, but he was struggling in every class he was taking. His counselor recalled her experience as she brought him up for discussion at I Team:

It was a lack of instruction... He was just a lost little kid. He did bounce around a lot and he did, I think, really like it here and felt that the support was here, but it was just really hard for him...I remember mom sitting in a meeting one time. I think it was when we met last spring (sophomore year). I brought him in and we met before school was out. She's sitting next to him. *'Well, we're staying. I'm not moving you again.'* He just said, *'Yeah, mom. You always say that.'* I mean he didn't know from one minute to the next (where they would be living) (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15).

I asked Jeff what changes would have made his educational experience better and he replied,

Oh, definitely just settling down in one spot. ‘Cause moving around too much, it sucked. I kind of learned not to build friendships with anyone ‘cause I know, oh, this next year I’m probably going to move. Settling down in one spot and finding a good school that I fit into (Jeff’s Interview, 5-16-15).

Jeff was not the only student in this study with a history of mobility. Stacy and Maria also transferred into Bay View High School without attending Bay View Junior High. They all reported experiencing difficulty with the transition to Bay View.

“It was really tough”

Stacy and Jeff came to Bay View from smaller schools. Their transition to Bay View was difficult not only because it was a new setting, but also because Bay View was much larger than what they had previously experienced. Stacy said, “I was really uncomfortable with the amount of people in this school. I’ve never been really good about big crowds and big groups of people” (Stacy’s Interview, 2-26-15). Jeff shared a similar perspective when he said, “Compared to the school I was at, (Bay View) was huge. I came from a school of a hundred kids to this one, it was a couple thousands. I thought it was really big and I didn’t—I’m not a big fan of huge crowds so it was a little tough just settling in” (Jeff’s Interview, 5-16-15). In addition to Jeff adjusting to the size of the school, he struggled with some of the differences in curriculum and academic expectations:

I guess with any school, when you move into a school, you’re going to be learning different stuff. The stuff I was learning here, I didn’t know the background to it when I came into it, so it was really tough. Then the teachers, they’re so spread out over all the students, you can’t really get the help that you really need right away when there’s a lot

of kids. I'm not good at math so I kind of need that extra help...It's hard to catch on (Jeff's Interview, 5-16-15).

All three of the transfer students, Jeff, Maria and Stacy, had some difficulty adapting to Bay View. They all reported experiencing increased academic pressure, higher academic expectations, and faster pace of the classes at Bay View as compared to their previous school. Stacy and Maria are Hispanic females who transferred out of Bay View to another high school to finish out their senior year and found the academic workload and stress decreased significantly once they entered into a different educational environment. The three transfer students also reported difficulty fitting in socially at Bay View. They transferred to Bay View in the hope that it would be the right school for them. However, they found that the academic expectations at Bay View were higher than their previous school. To some degree, each of them felt that they were unprepared for the workload. When they found that the amount of homework and studying was difficult to manage and that they were not developing strong social ties with the other students, they began to look for other educational options.

“A fresh start”

Students who transfer from one school to another frequently have an underlying sense of hope that the next school will be better. That sense of hope was evident in some of the comments made about the three students who transferred to Bay View. Jeff's counselor recalled that Jeff had a “single mom...(and she) was coming here to try to get a fresh start” (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15). Stacy's counselor also characterized Stacy's move to Bay View as a family pursuing opportunity, “She moved from...a small town in a rural area in another state with her mother. They moved here to pursue a better economic situation for the family” (Stacy's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15). Stacy's initial experiences at Bay View were pleasant and were in stark

contrast to her previous school experiences. Coming in the doors of Bay View on the first day was “shocking. I was not used to people being so nice to me. I was like, *‘Oh, people are talking to me.’* It got my confidence up so I could talk to other people. That was really helpful for me” (Stacy’s Interview, 2-26-15). However, this feeling of a fresh start did not last long; within a few weeks, Stacy found the pace of instruction was quite challenging and although the students were cordial, she was not developing meaningful friendships. Within a year, she was looking for another school location where she could get yet another fresh start.

All six of the students expressed a similar degree of hopeful optimism regarding their plans for life after leaving Bay View. Stacy and Maria both transferred into Bay View and then transferred out for their senior year to graduate at another school. Stacy met with her counselor and considered several options eventually deciding that the online academy “just seemed like the best” (Stacy’s Interview, 2-26-15). Maria did not discuss her options with her counselor; she said, “I decided for my senior year I wanted to be back with my brothers, who are over there, and all my friends, so I could graduate with them, (and go to) senior prom with them” (Maria’s Interview, 4-18-15).

The experiences of Stacy, Jeff and Maria provide evidence that a history of student mobility can be a contributing factor for students to seek an alternative school location. Each of these students came to Bay View due to factors that were out of their control, but they entered the school with a sense of hope that the school would offer an opportunity to start over and leave some of their prior struggles behind. They each found it difficult to truly have a fresh start. Their emotional struggles, chaotic school experiences, and difficulty with the transition to Bay View all contributed to their desire to find another school that would be a better fit.

The next section explores the theme of mental illness and how it influenced the decision of some students to seek an alternative school setting. As I have previously stated, each of the six students were influenced by multiple factors. As an example, student mobility influenced the decisions made by Stacy and Maria, but these two students also struggled with mental illness.

Theme Two: Mental Illness

All four female students in this study had a history of struggles related to mental health conditions that impacted their behavior, relationships, or overall life experiences. Stacy, Amanda and Maria also reported abusive relationships with a male friend in junior high. It is difficult to tell if those abusive relationships were a cause for their struggles with mental illness, or if the abusive relationships exacerbated an already problematic condition. Nevertheless, mental illness was a significant factor that caused students distress and contributed to their decision to leave Bay View.

“Well, it actually started eighth grade year”

When I asked the students to describe some of the struggles that contributed to their desire to leave Bay View, all four of the female students shared stories that occurred during their middle school years. They explained the chain of events that occurred up until the point of departure from Bay View. Each of them described their symptoms getting progressively worse. Maria said, “sixth grade was when I started to feel kind of – I would just be sad for no reason, like overly sad. I’m always a really happy person so it was weird for me. I didn’t like it” (Maria’s Interview, 4-18-15). Stacy, Amanda and Maria had symptoms of anxiety and depression that grew much stronger after they were traumatized by relationships with boys during their middle school years. Maria described her middle school years when she said:

In seventh grade I made friends with a guy who I shouldn't have...He ended up physically and mentally abusing me for that year...That's why...I ended up being diagnosed with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). But I didn't tell anyone 'cause I was scared. I was embarrassed. I thought it was my fault until I was hospitalized (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

When Maria said she didn't tell anyone, she was referring to the four years between when the abuse occurred in seventh grade and the middle of her junior year in high school. During Maria's junior year she really struggled with the memories of the abuse and she was eventually hospitalized. It was at that time that she was diagnosed with PTSD.

Stacy was not diagnosed with PTSD, but she used the term to describe her ongoing struggles with her memories of a boy from her middle school years, "well, last year a lot of my issue was in biology class and that was because it brought back some bad memories from my PTSD stalker experience. That was one of the issues that was causing me to miss classes" (Stacy's Interview, 2-26-15). She explained that at her previous school a boy had threatened to drink "Sulfuric acid, water, drainer, hairspray" if she did not go back to him:

I was terrified that he would do something like that. I was terrified that he would come to my school and try and kill himself at the school. I was just terrified that he would see me, so I kept looking out the window, and looking out the window, and I was hearing the information from biology in my head. When I came here and I started doing biology again, I started hearing it in my head. I was like, "Oh my God, I remember that. Oh no." It was really freaking me out, 'cause it was a really scary time in my life and it was a really scary moment. I started thinking back to a bunch of other stuff, kind of domino effect, and it just really freaked me out (Stacy's Interview, 2-26-15).

One of Amanda's traumatic experiences occurred in fourth grade when she witnessed her father nearly die as the result of a brain tumor and a seizure. From that time on, she said that she was prescribed anxiety medication. In eighth grade a male student abused her, which led to significant social challenges as well as increased anxiety and depression. Amanda's eyes filled with tears as she explained some of the connections between those events and her struggles with mental illness:

When I was in fourth grade, my dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor. That was something that was hard. I was spending the night at my friend's house and I had this weird feeling I had to go home. An hour after I got home, I was sleeping in the living room right outside of my dad's bedroom, I woke up to him gasping for air. I went in there, and his face was turning purple, and he was seizing. He had a grand mal seizure... I've been on medication since like fourth grade for anxiety, but it's been, like, good medication since probably eighth grade. When I was in seventh grade I dated an eighth grader. He had a really shady past...He had been to juvenile detention before. I was popular at the beginning of seventh grade year. All through elementary school I was popular, I was skinny, up until eighth grade. He and I were dating. One day I stayed after school. He took me to the forest and he tried to force me to do things I didn't want to do with him. People went around calling me Herp because I got a staph infection from the stuff that he was trying to do to me in the woods, like with dirt all around us. It was disgusting...That's when it really started. He actually got transferred to another school (Amanda's Interview, 3-15-15).

Amanda's began taking anxiety medication after witnessing her father's seizure. She began taking "good medication" after she was abused by another student in eighth grade. During

our interview, it was clear that those memories are still traumatic for her. Perhaps equally significant for Amanda was the sense of ostracization and social isolation that followed the experience with the boy in the woods. This is another example of how it can be difficult to determine which factor was the most influential in a student's decision to leave Bay View. Amanda struggled at Bay View due to mental illness, socio-economic pressure, and academic pressure. All of her struggles in these three areas began before she attended Bay View.

Victoria did not share any stories of traumatic events. She said that she always liked school but during her middle school years she began struggling with anxiety that led her to miss a lot of school:

Well it actually started eighth grade year...my parents know that I am a good student. When I started to miss school, they knew it was obviously more than just (that I) didn't want to go to school, because I do enjoy it...Then we just kind of pursued getting a therapist and talking...I got diagnosed, I think it was, summer of eighth grade. They prescribed me medication. I've been on two...steadily ever since (Victoria's Interview, 4-19-15).

In addition to the traumatic experiences these girls faced, Amanda and Maria both shared stories of close relatives with a history of mental illness. Their relationships with family members struggling with mental illness made life more difficult for the girls. It also suggests that there may be some biological connection to their mental illness.

“It runs in our family”

Amanda's father had significant health concerns and her mother and sister both struggled with anxiety and depression. She described how her struggles with anxiety and depression were interwoven with her mother and sister's challenges:

My sister right now, she just dropped out of junior high. She's a straight A student, 100 percent. She's depressed. There are girls that call her fat. They're just mean. I've been at the hospital with her twice. She cuts herself...She was feeling really suicidal...She's on medication. She sees a psychiatrist and a therapist...My mom has anxiety too. She's on the same medication that I'm on. It's so helpful (Amanda's Interview, 3-15-15).

During Amanda's sophomore year she was feeling isolated at school and wanted to avoid that environment. With all of the other struggles that the family was facing at home, there was no one there who was able to provide the support that she needed to persevere through the challenges that Bay View presented.

Maria explained that her family also had a history of mental illness: "my dad was diagnosed as bipolar. He's also an alcoholic. His dad was an alcoholic and had mental illnesses, so it runs in our family." The relationships that she had with her mother and father did not make it easy for her to seek support from them. She did not tell her parents that her boyfriend abused her until four years after the abuse occurred. "A few people knew, like a few of my friends knew, but not my parents, not my counselors, not my therapist" (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

Amanda and Maria had a family history of mental illness that may have contributed to their own mental illness and certainly made it difficult for them to receive the support they needed at home. This lack of support at home, along with their mental illness, led to some challenging situations at high school.

"This isn't going to work. I need help"

The two males in this study appeared to have fewer challenges with mental illness. Jeff suffered a concussion that led to a prolonged absence and some academic struggles. Phil's mother was concerned that he was depressed, and some teachers' comments showed some

similar concerns for him as well. The four female students struggled with agoraphobia, anxiety, chronic depression, depression, panic-disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social anxiety, and one student displayed some bizarre unexplained behaviors that appeared to be intentionally enacted to give the impression that she had multiple personalities.

Victoria was diagnosed with anxiety and depression just before entering Bay View, and her first few months in high school were very difficult:

Then freshman year rolled around and it was, I guess, my illness got a lot worse...I was struggling with depression, anxiety, and stuff. It was hard for me to just make it to class...With my anxiety that makes things ten times worse because if I miss anything I start freaking out (Victoria's Interview, 4-19-15).

She explained how her mental illness made it difficult to attend classes due to the social aspects of a high school, but then when she missed a few class periods her symptoms got worse because she viewed herself as a capable student and did not want miss any assignments. When she fell behind in school, it made her want to seek an alternative setting.

Maria was another capable student, but as the stress of junior year began to mount, for some reason she began to reflect intensely on the abuse she experienced during middle school. The combination of academic pressure, a history of abuse, and mental illness led to her hospitalization:

I was dealing with a mental illness. I had to deal with that and I ended up actually having to be hospitalized for it. I couldn't do it anymore. I was like, *'Mom, this isn't going to work. I need help...*My junior year I actually started to have flashbacks and nightmares, which I hadn't had before. That was scary. That was freaking me out. It was distracting

me. It was keeping me up at night. In the middle of class I would start having a panic attack (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

Maria's counselor described her perceptions of Maria's struggles during her junior year:

Then junior year she started, I think, more mid-year she really kind of started falling apart...She had major attendance issues because her anxiety grew. Her depression set in...I feel like it was a culmination of her struggles, her academics...What I sensed was that socially there was also some issues going on...What got hard for her and embarrassing for her is when she wasn't here...she fell far behind...She was really drowning...She struggled with anxiety and depression a little bit. But no diagnosis, or did she have one? Well, I don't know if she actually – you know, I think the doctor said, *'Yeah, you're depressed,'* based off the initial signs of academics, lack of attendance, sleeping...It was situational depression...she was a good student, so it wasn't like parents came with a depression diagnosis that said, *'can you help my daughter? She needs academic support.'* It wasn't that severe kind of situation (Maria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

Victoria and Maria both exemplify a common occurrence for students at Bay View. It can be very difficult for a healthy student to catch up after missing a few class periods. It is much more difficult to catch up if a student misses a week or two due to a mental health crisis and then reluctantly returns while still being impacted by that health crisis. Frequently staff members at Bay View questioned the validity of a health crisis, too. Whether it was Jeff's concussion from football, or Maria's depression, or Amanda's anxiety, the teachers and even the counselors were skeptical of the severity of the crisis, even when the student supplied documentation from a health care provider. Without a formal diagnosis, it was even more difficult for students to

receive support. Although Amanda reported to me that she had taken anxiety medication since the fourth grade, her file did not contain any documentation of a diagnosis of mental illness. Amanda's counselor explained why the school did not attempt any interventions to support Amanda so that she would not withdraw from school as a sophomore:

She didn't have any kind of plan of accommodation because she has absolutely no diagnosis. There was never any reason to consider the possibility of any kind of - she's not depressed. She's not anxious. She has no learning disability. She's not attention deficit (Amanda's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

The internal struggles of students suffering from mental illness went largely unnoticed until there was a crisis, or until the student decided to leave Bay View. Some of the students who struggled with mental illness did not seek or did not receive academic support at Bay View. It was clear that students' mental illness were affecting their academic performance. This was especially evident when a crisis resulted in absences from school. All four of the female students struggled with mental illness and decided that they would be more successful in a different academic setting.

The students who struggled with mental illness also struggled to fit in. The next section explores the social and economic pressures that all six of the students faced at Bay View.

Theme Three: Socio-Economic Pressure

All six of the students involved in this study struggled with social and economic pressures. They all experienced social interactions that made them feel diminished as a person and they assumed other students held economic advantages over them. They also grappled with some aspect of their home life. Stacy, Jeff, Phil and Maria had divorced parents. All six of the participants made comments that indicated that they felt like they just didn't fit in at the school.

Even Victoria, Amanda and Phil, who attended elementary school in the district, found it difficult to fit in socially at Bay View. For one reason or another, each of the students felt like an outsider.

“I don’t fit in”

Stacy and Jeff wore clothing that was very different from the majority of students at Bay View. Stacy wore dark clothing and black lipstick. Jeff frequently wore camouflage to school. Although they appeared to intentionally try to not fit in, they both expressed a desire to attend a school where they could be who they are and be socially accepted. Stacy described the social setting at Bay View:

They talk amongst themselves and their friends. A lot of it is on social media. I was never a part of the Bay View social media, nor am I in a giant friend group, so I never really got to experience that as much as I could have...Here people are like, *‘Oh my God, look at her.’* They’ll talk amongst themselves and gossip here...(a friend of mine) got bullied a lot...other girls calling her a slut and telling her to go kill herself. That was pretty bad. I only went (to the Gay Straight Alliance meetings) a couple times, and then I realized that a lot of them are jerks...a lot of the main people are really shady...really judgmental (Stacy’s Interview, 2-26-15).

Stacy wandered the halls without being noticed much, even though she looked different. She felt disconnected from the other students. Jeff had a small group of friends that he hung out with. They all had poor attendance, and frequently got in trouble for misbehavior. Although he had a few friends, he described a similar distaste for the students at Bay View:

Honestly I didn’t really make many friends last year (as a sophomore at Bay View). I come from a little redneck town. I don’t fit in here. I’m not one of the city people I guess.

I didn't really fit in, so I had one or two people that I would talk to. That kind of sucked 'cause I like having friends...I'm not really going to fit into a city school with a bunch of people that are richer than me, that think they're better than me. I'm not going to fit into those people...they have the nice cars, they have the nice clothes, they have the money, they have a job. I don't have that. I have a job, sure, but I'm not having my family buy me these nice cars. I don't even have a car...If you don't have money, then they think that they're better than everybody...coming from a small town where you work for your stuff. If you want to get a new car or truck, you're going to work for that, not have your parents buy it for you...I love the layout of the school. It's a nice school and everything. The teachers are great. It's just the students, I'm not a big fan of them...I hated it here. I never fit it (Jeff's Interview, 5-16-15).

Stacy and Jeff were two of the students with a history of mobility. The other student was Maria. Maria participated in sports and tried a bit harder to fit in at Bay View. However she had similar comments about the culture of the school:

I feel like at Bay View there's that stigma that everyone's perfect, there's nothing wrong...Bay View is perceived as preppy. Going back to Novato, people (who learn I attended Bay View)...expect me to have tons of money...People don't think Bay View is an accepting community. I feel like people just think it's like a rich, wealthy, preppy type of thing...it's very apparent, very apparent. I mean the clothes...what people wear or how people act. People feel very entitled. I mean Novato is definitely toward the opposite end of the spectrum. There's tons of diversity in Novato...I'm Hispanic, but people can't always tell...I like the diversity of (Novato). I don't know. I think my heart's always been with Novato anyway (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

It may be easier to understand how the three students who transferred to Bay View during their high school years did not feel that they fit into the social setting. Victoria, Amanda and Phil attended elementary school and middle school in the Bay View School District, and yet they still felt as though they were not socially accepted. Amanda's experience with abuse in middle school coupled with the social conflicts that continued on as a result of that incident led her to feel isolated at Bay View. Her counselor described how that sense of isolation contributed to her departure from school:

The one thing that I think would have kept her in high school is friends. I think she would have tolerated classes if she were coming to school and enjoying friends here, but she wasn't at all (Amanda's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

Amanda's social isolation stemmed from a traumatic event and was difficult for her to deal with because she wanted to have friends, but did not. Phil also experienced social isolation, but it was due to a lack of effort on his part to initiate contact with other students. He had a few friends that he communicated with, but he was silent and disconnected from others for most of the time he attended Bay View. He said, "I was pretty much under-the-radar in high school" (Phil's Interview, 3-24-15). His counselor acknowledged that Phil did not fit in and did not appear to want to fit in, when she said, "This isn't the right place for everybody" (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

Comments from the counselors indicated that for a variety of reasons, these students did not develop strong relationships with many students at Bay View. The feelings of isolation did not encourage the students to stay at Bay View, and for some of the students, it seemed to have contributed to their desire to seek an alternative school setting.

“He didn’t feel like going to school”

Jeff and Phil were the only two male students in the study and they both made comments indicating that they lost their motivation to regularly attend school. Jeff described some of the factors that contributed to his disengagement from school:

Well, I started hanging out with the wrong crowd who wouldn’t attend school. They’d go out and hang out in the forest and all that area. I just started doing that...the little forest behind the school. We’d just go up there and hang out, and not have to do school pretty much... Well, most kids go out there and smoke or drink, but I’m not going to do that. I’m not a big smoker at all. I don’t drink... One thing I’ve noticed is there’s a lot of kids that come to school and they’d be high or they’d be drunk... I look everywhere, there are high people. There are people that are drunk. I wasn’t used to that. I was like, *‘Why is this school just letting them get away with it?’* I was like, *‘Oh, there’s too many of them. They can’t really catch them all.’* It was mainly the periods I didn’t want to go (to class) I’d just go up there (to the forest) or I’d (go to a coffee shop) and just get a coffee, hang out... I would get behind in school and then I’d feel like oh, I’m so far behind. I can’t catch up, so I’m just not going to go to class. Then I got into a little fight with a couple kids. They would be in the same class or the class next to it and I’d be like, *‘I don’t want to go near them,’* so I just wouldn’t go to that class (Jeff’s Interview, 5-16-15).

Jeff’s counselor shared her perspective on Jeff’s attendance at school:

He came to school. I mean he was in school. I don’t know how much he was in class. I mean he liked to come and hang. You saw him everywhere. He would always come up with an excuse why he had to leave class... He was a wanderer, or he’d hide out in the library... In the meantime, he ran with some pretty rough kids last year and this year. It

was always kind of on the fringe of people using or distributing drugs. He was adamant that he never did them. They did part ways this year, most of those kids (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15).

Jeff intentionally avoided schoolwork at Bay View, coming to school but not going to his classes. His history of being bounced around from school to school made academic work difficult for him, so he didn't want to do it.

Reports from Phil's elementary and middle school years show that he was a capable student who was bored in class. As he lost interest in school, he stopped trying and eventually fell behind. Phil's counselor recalled some of her first conversations with him:

(Phil) sought me out, even as a freshman, to talk about his ideas and plans for his future, because he didn't see him getting a traditional education even as a freshman...He was bored with school and I imagined him sitting at home in a dark basement on the computer just teaching himself all of this computer (programming)...Spring of his freshman year (his mom) was worried about him because she saw him as being depressed. He would say he didn't feel like going to school...He never wanted to do the work...then sophomore year came and that's when his attendance really tanked. From the beginning of the year, he just wanted an alternate placement...Even when school's too hard for kids they'll go, *'Well, I just don't care'* so that's how they explain it to their peers as opposed to seeking out resources and getting help to do better. It was that kind of cycle. I think, as he continued to do that, that he just got more and more ostracized because...he couldn't find a partner-in-crime (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

Jeff and Phil were both disengaged from school and they both had challenging home lives, which are discussed in the next section. The financial pressures their families were facing may have led to their disengagement from school and to diminished access to support.

“They were also struggling financially”

Jeff and Phil both lived with their single mothers in small apartments. Phil described his living situation:

Well, first semester a lot of my absences came from when we were moving into a smaller apartment. We live two people, (in a) one room apartment plus an office, which might as well count as a second room...(I sleep on the) couch (Phil’s Interview, 3-24-15).

Jeff and his mother were also struggling financially and that led to his chaotic history of moving from school to school. He described why all of those moves took place:

Yeah, well, I settled down in (one town) for about four years. Then my parents got divorced, so then we kind of moved away...We moved from there to (another town). Then my mom just, we kept finding houses that were better and cheaper, so we just kept moving...(My mom) met my stepdad and he used to live out there. He got his old job back there, so then we just moved back (halfway through my freshman year) (Jeff’s Interview, 5-16-15).

Jeff’s counselor added that in addition to their struggling financial situation, Jeff’s mother’s work schedule made him even more isolated, and the counselor was trying to help Jeff identify an alternative school setting that would prepare him for the workforce:

I had already started talking to him about Job Corps because of also their financial status...He didn’t have...a lot of connection with his dad...mom, maybe she had a funky schedule too or worked odd days, but she was pretty frustrated with him...I think she

worked weird hours because it was hard to get her in here. If I remember right, she'd come in in the morning before she went home and slept (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15).

Phil and Jeff had similar living situations. Phil's counselor recalled her interactions with Phil's mom:

His mom was tired of trying to get him to come to school. She works an odd shift...like swing or nights. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to get him to school...Every time they came in they just reeked of cigarette smoke. I would imagine that (their apartment) is pretty cramped...a lot of kids think that everybody that lives here (in Bay View) has wealth, and that's not the case at all...But they're thinking *'I'm the poorest kid here'*...I hear that all the time. *'We moved here for the schools. I was willing to sacrifice to come here for the schools and this is the stress my kids are under?'* (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

The financial struggles that Jeff was facing may have led him to believe that college was not a realistic option and he did not wish to be a burden on his mother so he sought a way to be self-sufficient. Some students who are struggling financially decide to take on an after-school job like Jeff and Amanda or choose to avoid asking for things that they need but their parents cannot afford, like when Victoria stopped seeing a therapist. Compared to the other students in this study, it appears that Victoria had the most stable home life. Both of her parents were healthy and still living together. However her counselor informed me that, "they were also struggling financially, and she'd left her therapist...probably at a challenging time for her" (Victoria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15). However Victoria said that she perceived her family's standing as average for the community:

Obviously the school is one of the more rich...I'd say I'm in the middle but I'd say there is a huge push to own the things or have things that I may not necessarily want...It's just kind of awkward to be the one that's like – we're not struggling, but we're definitely not as wealthy as some of the others (Victoria's Interview, 4-19-15).

The families of Jeff, Victoria, and Phil all had financial struggles that may have exacerbated their perception of not fitting in within an affluent school community. Their financial struggles may have also decreased the opportunities for support of these students when they struggled academically, behaviorally, or mentally. Victoria could not have regular visits to her therapist due to financial concerns. Jeff and Phil lived with their single mothers who worked odd hours and were not able to hold them accountable for attendance, behavior, and academic work.

Overall, the relationships that Jeff, Amanda, and Maria had with their parents and peers were strained by their social and economic standing. The condition of those relationships influenced those three students to leave Bay View. Teenagers need social acceptance. All six of these students felt as though they were not fully accepted at Bay View. They did not fit in for social or economic reasons, so they sought a different educational setting in the hope that it would offer an environment that would be a better match. In the next section, I discuss how academic pressure also influenced some of these students to pursue an educational setting that was a better fit.

Theme Four: Academic Pressure

All of the students felt socio-economic pressures that contributed to their decision to leave Bay View. There were academic pressures, too. Stacy, Jeff, Amanda, Phil and Maria indicated that academic pressure was an important factor in their decision to leave Bay View.

Stacy, Jeff and Maria transferred into Bay View during their high school years from school systems with a different academic tradition. This brought difficulties.

“Incredibly unprepared”

The counselors for Stacy, Jeff and Phil attributed students’ feelings of academic pressure to the students’ comparably lower levels of academic preparation. Stacy’s counselor recalled the dramatic difference between the academic expectations at Stacy’s previous school and what was expected at Bay View:

Well, for her to not really be successful in the academic reality of her old small-town’s high school, whatever it may be called, meant that she was incredibly unprepared for the rigor of our standard high school program. It was very difficult for her to wrap her head around the expectations and the requirements for passing our classes. English classes were challenges. No one invited her to be creative very often in her writing. It was far more formulaic than she was used to. There’s a right way and a wrong way. That was really hard for her to grasp with writing (Stacy’s Counselor’s Interview, 6-12-15).

Jeff’s Counselor described a similar discrepancy between what Jeff was prepared for and what he needed to be able to do at Bay View:

He’s not a student. He didn’t know how to be a student. He didn’t have any real skills in that arena. I think he wanted to try...He would sit in English class and...he just couldn’t even follow the conversations (Jeff’s Counselor, 6-29-15).

Jeff’s comments were consistent with those of his counselor:

The stuff I was learning here, I didn’t know the background to it when I came into it, so it was really tough. Then the teachers, they’re so spread out over all the students, you can’t

really get the help that you really need right away when there's a lot of kids. I'm not good at math so I kind of need that extra help (Jeff's Interview, 5-16-15).

Phil once was perceived to be one of the brighter students in his class. He was identified as Talented and Gifted in elementary school, but his consistent lack of effort led to his lack of development. Phil's counselor said, "He doesn't have the skills to figure it out. He's not organized enough. His smarts have gotten him through school so far just by being smart. Then as school gets harder, he doesn't have the skill set to maneuver through it" (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

The classes these students took were challenging, and many of them struggled with the teachers' expectations that students would spend several hours each night doing homework. All of these students could handle the workload for any of their classes if there were no other distractions. However, their struggles outside of the classroom, coupled with the cumulative total of all of their classes at Bay View, made it difficult for them to keep up with the pace of instruction, especially since many of them had regular absences from school.

"Homework load was insane"

Stacy had difficulty making the transition to Bay View. Her counselor explained that Stacy didn't understand that all of the students at Bay View spend significantly more time on homework than the students did at her old school:

She really didn't understand that she had to spend so much time on homework. She had been primarily doing online work with no homework at all and it was just very difficult for her to accept the reality of spending an hour, two hours, or even more on homework (Stacy's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

Stacy described her objection to the teaching styles and expectations at Bay View:

I think just the way that we're learning at Bay View is just so harsh. I think teachers and just this curriculum seems to have such a high expectation of students. I think it's just kind of crazy sometimes because not every student can follow that high path...I felt like I couldn't really get a hold of my education, what I was learning. I felt like I wasn't really learning much of anything, which is proven by a lot of my tests and grades. I didn't really feel like I was able to learn the way that I like to (Stacy's Interview, 2-26-15).

Stacy's transition from a small school to Bay View was similar to the experience that Jeff classroom experience:

(It) was really different (than my previous school), 'cause when we were (there), it would be a class of five or ten students, and then you'd have that help. If you needed help, the teacher would notice it, and they would walk right up to you and help you. Here, with all the big classes, the teacher has to go around to everybody and help them, so you don't get as much assistance...I'm not saying I'm not smart enough to do it, but I wasn't capable at the time to do it (Jeff's Interview, 5-16-15).

Jeff's assessment of his capacity to keep up was consistent with the perceptions of his counselor:

He'd put little spurts of effort, but most of his teachers just say he doesn't even give me enough to really even see what his skill level. I mean it was not good... he just couldn't get the work done. But again, he didn't try...I remember when we summed things up at the end of the (sophomore) year last year, that was part of the question. *'What do you want to do and what are you going to decide to put your efforts into?'* But nothing changed. I signed him up for some...scholarships (for)...summer school classes. He didn't do them. He didn't work on them. He didn't finish them, you know kind of the same thing...English class was the one that he skipped the most because he just thought,

'I don't understand what they're reading. I don't understand how they see the things that they see.' Give him a mechanics book and he'll—that's what he wants to do (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15).

The decisions Jeff made about where and when to direct his effort were similar to how Phil navigated his coursework. Phil said:

It wasn't really failing (a lot of classes) – one or two classes, yeah. It was the way I did in school there, was I focused on two or three classes that interested me, and then everything else kind of fell on the back burner. They were kind of like I had two or three classes that were As and then everything else was like Cs, Ds, and Fs (Phil's Interview, 3-24-15).

Phil's Counselor and Phil's mother attempted to convince him that he should give more effort in classes, but he did not change his behavior:

Second semester (of his freshman year there were) a lot of conversations between mom and the teachers and what they had tried, but just trying to engage him more, encouraging him, encouraging that you have the brain power, you can come in and work with me after school. But, see, to him it was like, *'Why would I have to work with you after school? I can do it on my own.'* I mean that was his attitude, which he could (do the work on his own), but he didn't...(Phil's mom) was going to start checking (the online grade book) more but I don't know that she did...When we met to do the withdrawal paperwork, she wanted to keep the relationship with her son and she just didn't want to be hammering on him all the time (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

Maria's level of motivation was much higher than any of the other five students. Her academic record for elementary school and middle school was quite strong. She recalled her

initial struggle with the transition to Bay View, and how that affected her relationship with her counselor:

I'm a super perfectionist about my grades. I had a B in that class (freshman year) and I was freaking out. I went to my counselor I was like, *'Is there anything you can do?'*...She's like, *'I mean you can drop the class and get an F.'* I was like, *'I was just wondering if there was makeup work or something we could figure out.'* She's like, *'It's a B. Get over it.'* It made me really – I don't know why. I was so emotional from everything that was going on, missing school, so I started crying. I actually ended up talking to the principal, then the assistant principal about the possibility of switching counselors. 'Cause that was the first experience I didn't feel comfortable with (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

Maria's counselor recalls what happened when the level of expectations finally exceeded Maria's capacity to keep up during her junior year:

(Junior year) She was taking...a couple college classes or AP level courses. I think the homework became overwhelming and she really didn't know how to kind of overcome that. Instead of coming in for help or talking with teachers, I think she just kind of started shutting down (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

Maria described the academic experience during her junior year, "I mean academics at Bay View already are very rigorous. Then junior year it was just- my first AP class that I had taken, homework load was insane...That (mental illness) was hard to deal with on top of school, 'cause, I mean, keeping my grades up" (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

For some of the students, the workload was manageable until they reached a point where other factors influenced their attendance at school, factors such as an illness, a concussion, or a

mental health crisis. The students reported that once they fell behind by even a few days in school, they either felt increased academic pressure to catch up and maintain their expected level of academic performance, or they gave up and disengaged from their academic experiences. Once they disengaged from the school experience at Bay View, they began to look for an alternative school setting.

“I just fell behind”

It can be difficult for teachers and counselors to know when a student is falling behind. It may take a few consecutive days of absences to realize that a student has a significant health concern, and it may take a few weeks to get a reliable grade report from a teacher that shows a student has stopped turning in homework. Each of these students fell behind in their own unique way, but once they fell behind, it was so difficult to catch up that several of them gave up entirely. Jeff described how a concussion led to his predicament:

First quarter (of Junior year) I got a concussion. That made it really hard to pay attention during school, like that kind of stuff. Then all that homework that was built up, I never ended up doing. That just built up. I had all this work and I didn't have time to do it. I had to catch up on all the stuff I was already doing then, so I just fell behind. Then I felt like I was so far down that I couldn't dig back out, so I just gave up pretty much...about mid-second quarter I started falling behind in school. I felt like I was so far behind I wasn't going to be able to get back out, so I started looking for alternatives. Like I could stay here and struggle or I could go somewhere else and get my diploma fairly easier. I just found this and it just looked like a better plan (Jeff's Interview, 5-16-15).

Jeff's Counselor recalled the process they went through to eventually look for alternative education opportunities:

He's a neat kid, a sweet kid...He was a storyteller. He'd tell you what you wanted to hear. It wasn't until he got really real and started really saying how he felt that we really started finding a path for him to go. We're not trying to get rid of him at all (by sending him to Job Corps)...I just felt like it was a really good decision for him. He was going to be able to get through, and work hard, and get his studies done (Jeff's Counselor, 6-29-15).

Jeff couldn't keep up with the pace at Bay View, and it became apparent that it was not the correct pathway to the workforce for him. Stacy had a similar struggle with the pace of instruction; She described her perceptions of the Bay View's expectations and how she fell behind:

Ultimately, (what drove me to a different school) was the way that the learning is set up here, just the pace that it's going at and how many assignments are due in one day. But definitely the pace and how fast it's going, how fast all the lessons are. Notes go by blazing fast and everything is just super-fast in my mind. You have so much time dedicated to this, but then the teachers try and cram more information in there that really should fit. I wish they would kind of slow down and take more time with the learning. I mean you have all this time (Stacy's Interview, 2-26-15).

Maria fell behind like Jeff and Stacy did. Maria's counselor described what happened after she missed a few days of school:

Then the academics slipped and then it was hard to catch up. Then she had attendance issues...I thought if she could make it through her junior year, her senior year should be fine because she didn't have a lot of requirements. She would have made it through, really, the toughest years. We could have offered to work with her schedule, her teachers,

whatever she needed that would make her just feel more comfortable and help her balance her life (Maria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

After Maria transferred back to Novato she reflected on how the academic expectations and her academic performance changed in her new environment:

(This year at Novato) I got straight A's... Teachers, I was going in expecting that because it's such a big school that I wouldn't get the same support from teachers... Students who want help there get it, absolutely. It's like 100 percent... I get one hour of homework every other night (At Novato) and (I am) taking two AP classes. The homework load, the workload, and the expectations are a lot different. The classes at Bay View required me to work on homework for four to five hours every night. It was extreme... I like most of the intensity and expectations. I think there needs to be a better balance a little bit, but just the support from certain teachers was phenomenal. Each teacher genuinely... cares about their students and wants them to do good (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

When Amanda realized that she no longer wanted to keep up with her coursework during her sophomore year at Bay View, she decided that pursuing a GED was her best option:

The GED... It just accelerates the time that I have before I can get to do what I actually enjoy doing. 'Cause I don't need to know all the stuff they teach you in high school in order to be a beautician... it's just not something that's beneficial to me... (I will) Probably not (ever attend a four-year university), but I know it's an option for me. 'Cause when you get your GED, if you go to community college for a year or two years and you get your associates, if you have a 2.5 GPA or above you can transfer to the state schools... I don't think that's something that's going to happen (Amanda's Interview, 3-15-15).

Phil also fell behind during his sophomore year, so he also decided to pursue a GED. His counselor recalled:

As he saw other kids, the growth of his peers, and they were taking school more seriously and getting involved in things, see I think that's when he became disconnected. He just didn't know how to keep up with them. I think he'd been on top of his game (in junior high), and then he got here and it was, you know, kids weren't so inclined to hang out after school maybe and play video games with him. They were doing homework...He just started missing more and more school, and there didn't seem to be many consequences for him (Phil's Counselor's Interview, 6-29-15).

When Phil was asked if there was anything that the school could have offered that would have kept him engaged and pursuing a high school diploma at Bay View, he said:

The only thing that I can think of is more digital classes, like one or two more, but that's just me. No, I really can't think of much you can change. It was more of just that's how I go through life and stuff, more of a personal path than anything the school did." (Phil's Interview, 3-24-15).

Bay View's rigorous academic structure prepares a lot of students for college and careers, but for some it can be an extremely difficult educational environment. As Phil's counselor said, "This isn't the right place for everybody." The next section examines some of the interventions offered by the teachers and counselors at Bay View to provide academic and emotional support for these students.

Theme Five: Availability of School-Based Interventions

Just prior to the end of the 2013-2014 school year, Bay View learned that a local alternative school that served nearly 20 former Bay View High School students with documented

learning disabilities would be closing. Then, in the fall of the 2014-2015 school year, the Bay View School District reported that due to the high cost of sending the students to a high school completion program and a GED program at the local community college, they no longer had any additional slots available for students. The district had exceeded the limit for the number of students in those programs based upon a contract with the community college. Due to the closing of the alternative school and the restricted access to the programs at the community college, students were left with fewer alternative education options for the 2014-2015 school year. One desirable option for students was to seek an inter-district transfer to another district in hopes of accessing the other district's alternative school. Stacy and a few other students who were not included in this study were able to get into a popular alternative school in another district. However as that program filled to capacity, Bay View counselors learned that that alternative school would no longer accept inter-district transfers for the 2015-2016 school year.

During the 2014-2015 school year, Bay View had four sophomores withdraw from school to pursue a GED without financial support from the district. The lack of district-funded alternative educational opportunities did not change their desire to leave Bay View. Three of those students, Victoria, Amanda and Phil, were included in this study and they indicated that they intended to complete the GED and then enroll in a technical school. Victoria wanted to enroll in a music-themed boarding school, Amanda intended to go to beauty school, and Phil wanted to pursue veterinarian technical training. When asked about the increase in young students pursuing a GED, Phil's counselor said, "I've never had it like this. I've never ever. I mean it started last year. We lost a freshman and a sophomore. That was a new twist for me. Neither one of them were our kids (they were both transfer students). I've just seen...a change

where they're seeing that... (they) do have other options. There are other things out there for (them) to do.”

School counselors and teachers were involved in the academic lives of all six students. It was typical for counselors to work with students to adjust class schedules and engage in conversations to help a student work through challenging situations. Teachers at Bay View regularly noticed struggling students and provided extra attention as they helped the students to get back on track for graduation. Because those types of interactions were standard at Bay View, for the sake of this study, they were not considered to be school-based interventions. Instead, a school-based intervention was an intentional attempt to provide a student with the extra help they needed either within Bay View or in partnership with school personnel.

There were three students in this study who were involved in what I consider to be a thorough intervention at Bay View. The counselors for Stacy, Victoria and Maria attempted a variety of strategies to help those two students make it through school days and persevere in the face of significant challenges related to mental illness, socio-economic pressure, and academic pressure.

“In partnership with us”

Students at Bay View typically have families that can afford the cost of medical care, mental health services, academic tutoring, and credit recovery. School staff members in some less-affluent communities help students access these services if they do not have health insurance or financial resources. Rather than connecting the students directly with these outside agencies, the counselors at Bay View frequently discuss the problems a student is facing with the student's parents and help develop an appropriate plan to support the child. An example of this partnership is evident in Stacy's counselor's description of how the school supported her needs:

In partnership with us, advising, guiding, and being advised and guided by her mom, Stacy has had ongoing therapy. She has also taken enrichment courses in the summer to build her writing skills and to allow her to develop her artistic ability, which is considerable. Her mom has connected her with lots of different opportunities to learn and grow (Stacy's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

When Maria had her crisis during her junior year, she needed medical care and mental health services from outside of the school setting:

I was diagnosed, actually, when I went to the hospital with PTSD, so definitely more the anxiety part of that. I think my junior year it was more depression to be honest...After I got out of the hospital I had to go in for a weekly therapy...(Now back in Novato) I'm still dealing with (depression and anxiety). There's still some stuff I have to work out, but I go to counseling every month (Maria's Interview, 4-18-15).

Once she returned to Bay View her counselor worked with her and her teachers to get her back on track academically. However, all of the mental health support took place with her therapist.

During Victoria's freshman year, the school district paid for her to attend an online school in the hope that it would provide her with the academic instruction that she needed without the social setting that caused her such anxiety. She spent one semester in the online school setting before returning to Bay View for her sophomore year. Victoria did not enjoy taking classes online:

I definitely didn't like (online school) as much because when, like I said, when I'm in school, I really enjoy it. It's just getting there that's the issue. I like having things shown to me. I'm a very visual learner...I can't remember what online program I was through - but it was...very lenient, and I like to have guidelines and rules. It's something that I like

to have. It just seemed like there wasn't a lot of that in place, very, kind of like, you do your work and you get what you get. There were Skype sessions available, but it just wasn't the same. You weren't getting face-to-face interaction. I felt like it was a lot harder, if you had a question about something, to be able to get that to your teacher because you have to email them and do all these different steps to get your answer (Victoria's Interview, 4-19-15).

The three full-time counselors at Bay View each have approximately 380 students to look after. Their workload does not allow much time for personal counseling. They are able to respond in a crisis and they often focus their attention on providing support and encouragement intended to get a student back into the classroom as quickly as possible. During discussions about how they supported a struggling student, the most frequently mentioned strategies that they used were adjusting a student's schedule or informing teachers of a concern.

“We kind of looked at her schedule”

Students at Bay View could take up to eight classes each semester and credit for courses was only earned at the completion of each semester. Counselors worked with students and parents throughout the year to make sure that a student's schedule will give the student the opportunities he or she needs to learn about the topics he or she is interested in, place the student at the appropriate ability level, which will lead the student to graduate high school and have the best possible post-secondary opportunities. The counselors for Stacy and Victoria needed to make several changes to the students' course schedules and take other interventions designed to help them get back into the classroom. Stacy's counselor described her efforts:

Here at school we've made placement changes in her schedule. We looked at teacher fit for her. We're pretty careful to try to give her teachers that she could connect with. We

worked on keeping her on track to graduate. She spent lots of time with mostly people down here (in the counseling office area), administrators, myself, our counseling intern, and our school psychologist. She spent lots of time getting counseling. We had this contract with her and her mom that was designed to keep her here and keep her in class, because she was seeking the attention of adults and exhibiting mental health crises to keep that attention or get that attention at the expense of just going to class and being a student. The contract was actually developed by Leslie (Stacy's mother), tweaked by us. It basically outlined: stay in class (and) practice your coping strategies. If that doesn't work, ask the teacher if you can step outside of the classroom and breathe, and take a few minutes and go back to class. If that doesn't work, go down and see one of these professionals down here that can work with you for no more than 15 or 20 minutes, something like that. Then go back to class. Calling mom and going home, if mom gives permission, was just the last resort as opposed to her almost instantaneous default. That was extremely helpful (Stacy's Counselor's Interview, 6-12-15).

Stacy's counselor spent a lot of time supporting Stacy. Victoria changed counselors between her freshman and sophomore year. She described her experience working with both of her counselors at Bay View:

My counselor was huge, especially my freshman year, just very understanding, and wanting to help, and find answers or what accommodations are going to work for me... Who's the new counselor that replaced him? She's lovely, but because she works part-time, it was really hard to schedule times to meet with her. When I wasn't attending class, like I said, missing a lot of school is something that causes me a lot of anxiety, so even the missed 30, 40 minutes of class to be able to talk with her and tell her things is

really difficult. For me, I would rather meet on my lunch or after school, but because of her part-time it was really hard to schedule those things (Victoria's Interview, 4-19-15).

Victoria's counselor from her sophomore year described the work that she completed throughout the year:

We met right away (sophomore year) and we kind of looked at her schedule. I tried to even look at students - there were certain students that she felt anxiety around, that made her more stressed out or worried, and so we kind of even handpicked some of her classes. I felt like we established a good relationship from the beginning of the school year (Victoria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

The counselors at Bay View all wished that they had smaller caseloads because it would allow them to do more for struggling students. A lot of their effort for struggling students was directed at identifying students who were already struggling and working with teachers to find ways to get them back on track. As discussed in the academic pressure section, once a student falls behind it is difficult to catch up. If the counselors could find ways to systematically support students early on, there would be fewer crises.

“Get involved in the school”

One informal way that counselors tried to prevent disengagement was to encourage students to get involved with the school, participate in activities and make connections with other students and their teachers. Stacy's counselor detailed some of the informal ways that she attempted to support Stacy:

We talked about ways for her to get involved in the school, like drama or places where she could find a home, clubs that might interest her. What I kind of think happened with Stacy is I think that, at a certain point, with her mother's help and support and with our

help and support, I think she moved beyond the attention-seeking drama that she was creating, settled into better school performance, although not good. But I think when the drama in her life dissipated, which was the healthy thing to do, she was left feeling like, ‘Yeah, I really don’t like it here. This really isn’t the place for me.’ I agree (Stacy’s Counselor’s Interview, 6-12-15).

When a student has a documented medical diagnosis for something that affects their ability to complete school work or access their education, counselors will discuss that student’s situation in I Team and consider implementing formalized supports through either a 504 plan or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Victoria’s counselor described the attempts she and the previous counselor made to provide support for Victoria:

She was on the I Team agenda last year...October of last year she...was referred to the I Team. They decided not to develop a 504 plan last year. Maybe that’s because she just wasn’t here long enough. She tried online school (last year) and didn’t complete any of that coursework. She had no credits for second semester of her freshman year (Victoria’s Counselor’s Interview, 6-15-15).

When Victoria returned to Bay View for her sophomore year she began working with a new counselor and the year began fairly well according to her counselor:

She was involved in theater, which was a real positive, I think because of the attendance requirement. I feel like she did her best when she was involved in that theater...We referred her to the I Team this year. I was basically already asking teachers to make accommodations. I was already following accommodations that we probably would have had, like option to have lunch in a more quiet location. She could have her study hall in the library. We were on route to definitely moving forward with a 504. She checked in

with me, (it) was a little bit difficult at the beginning of the year because she was establishing a relationship with a new counselor, but I felt definitely around the play and then after the play we were really meeting pretty regularly. We made accommodations, reduced her schedule (Victoria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

After the theatre performance was complete and as winter break approached, Victoria's attendance at school grew worse:

I met with Victoria and her mom, a handful of times to kind of try and rework things, emailed her teachers - her teachers were very supportive - tried to communicate directly with Victoria. I was hoping to help her get through finals week and look at even making up finals with an administrator, but things just really fell apart for her. She wasn't able to make finals week at all at that point (Victoria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

Victoria and her mother began to seek a different learning environment at the end of Victoria's fall semester of her sophomore year, and she eventually withdrew from school:

I think that was the point where (her) mom was going to look into some other options. We had even sat down and looked at second semester. She got approval for online coursework...I changed it so she was going to have basically two study halls in the library for second semester so she could work on online coursework. I was really trying to keep her invested in being here. I offered to meet with her mom. She just never followed up with me about any additional options that they might be interested in. I haven't heard from them (Victoria's Counselor's Interview, 6-15-15).

The school-based interventions offered to Stacy and Victoria show some of the limits to what the counseling department is able to do for a struggling student without a documented medical diagnosis. These two counselors went to great lengths to support these students as they

transitioned into and out of Bay View. Students who need medical treatment, mental health therapy, academic tutoring, or credit recovery frequently need to pay for these services on their own. If they can afford those services, the counselors and teachers can partner with outside agencies to improve the level of support and care for a student. This creates an equity problem, however, as economically disadvantaged students may not have access to the support they need.

The students and counselors described some of the interventions that they thought would be effective for students in similar situations at Bay View. Stacy said that the school needs “more programs for students who just took things at a slower pace, or just didn’t quite understand something, or if they just wanted to finish really fast and they had different opportunities” (Stacy’s Interview, 2-26-15). Jeff felt that it would be important to decrease class sizes and provide opportunities for hands-on learning opportunities like auto shop, wood shop, and Future Farmers of America. Victoria had a similar interest in changes to our course offerings: “You should be able to start what kind of career path you’d like to go on and then have some of those classes” (Victoria’s Interview, 4-19-15). Amanda also wanted “more unique electives...have a film class...fashion design classes...makeup classes...more career-focused electives...sports medicine classes...hair classes” (Amanda’s Interview, 3-15-15). Phil was interested in online courses: “Offer more digital classes... It’d probably be online, similar to a college experience where you choose...classes that meet a few times a month. Besides that, you work on what’s assigned, not much homework...but there’s still the final” (Phil’s Interview, 3-24-15). Maria felt that any program designed to support students should keep in mind that students “want support in different ways. Each person is very different in the ways that they deal with things, and cope, and coping mechanisms, and stuff like that. So I feel like really individualizing a program like that to help students” (Maria’s Interview, 4-18-15). The students’ comments describe the type of

school they would like to attend: one with small class sizes, hands-on learning opportunities in courses that help prepare them for careers and individualizes support.

Summary

The decision a student makes to leave a school seems like it could be a simple choice. They either stay or they go. However, the decision to leave is far more complex because there are so many factors that influence the student's school experience. The student may want to leave because the current setting is painful, or because they think another setting will be a better social, academic, or even athletic fit for them. The student may also feel compelled to stay at their current school out of fear of the unknown or due to the difficulty associated with the transition to a new setting. The student may also have a misconception of what options are available to them within their current setting or the resources available to them at a new setting. Chapter five provides further discussion of the results of this study as well as implications and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted to investigate the personal and school-based factors that students self-reported as contributing to their decision to seek an alternative school placement from a comprehensive high school with a reputation for academic excellence. From the review of the literature, five organizing themes were identified to guide the coding portion of the study: student mobility, mental illness, socio-economic pressure, academic pressure, and availability of school-based interventions. This proved to be a comprehensive organizational framework; no other themes emerged from the study.

It turns out that the decision to leave a high school is not a quick, “should I go or should I stay” decision. Rather, it is a long, complex, and often painful struggle to strategically change the student’s learning environment (Schafft, 2006). In this chapter, I will discuss this struggle, offer some conclusions, suggest some implications for policy and practice, and identify some avenues for future research.

Findings

The decision to seek an alternative school environment was made after months of consideration. It was a personal struggle, and more often than not, a complex and painful one. Leaving Bay View meant choosing to leave a familiar environment where they knew the students and teachers, and had friends and teammates, too. The students who chose to leave Bay View had a sense of hope that the next school would provide an opportunity where they could experience success after a prolonged period of struggle at Bay View.

As a member of the staff at Bay View, I know that the teachers and counselors want students to be successful. They care deeply about their students, and it is painful for them to see students leave the school before graduation, not because of the lost revenue for the district, but

because our system had somehow failed to help them succeed. Unfortunately these students did not feel a strong connection to the staff members or other students at this school. Their lack of a strong relationship with an adult at the school may have contributed to their decision to leave Bay View in order to complete their education, which was something they felt would not happen if they stayed. The factors that influenced their decision to leave that emerged throughout the study were consistent with the themes that were identified in the review of the literature: student mobility, mental illness, socio-economic pressure, academic pressure and availability of school-based interventions.

Personal Factors

Several of these students struggled with personal factors that may be difficult for teachers and counselors to even know about or effectively support in a comprehensive high school setting that lacks a school-based health center (Parasuraman and Shi, 2015). The students at Bay View would benefit from having more trained staff and resources at the school to support students struggling with social, emotional, and mental health challenges (Levitt, Saka, Hunter Romanelli, & Hoagwood, 2007).

The six students included in this research came from a variety of backgrounds, and each had unique experiences that eventually led them to decide to leave Bay View during the 2014-2015 school year to seek an alternative educational environment. There were two seniors, one junior, and three sophomores included in the study. They each had unique skills and interests, and they each struggled in different ways while at Bay View – but struggle they did.

Some students had a challenging home life that contributed to their struggles at school. The students who had a history of transferring to other schools may have experienced more difficulty attending Bay View than students who had attended Bay View schools since

elementary school. The students who experienced at least one transfer during high school may have faced the most difficult academic challenges (Rumberger and Larson, 1998). The four female students in this study struggled with mental health issues that were exacerbated by the other struggles they faced while at Bay View. It can be time consuming and expensive for a family to get a medical diagnosis for their child. These barriers to mental health care create an inequity among students, where economically disadvantaged students are less likely to have the support that they need (Miech, Caspi, Moffitt, & Wright, 1999). At Bay View there has been an increase in the number of parents seeking a 504 or an IEP for their student to receive academic accommodations and modifications. This increase in requests has been met with some skepticism, as some affluent families appear to be doing it to provide every possible advantage for their child. Consequently, the I Team occasionally reviews cases for students with a history of extremely high academic performances. There are students on the other end of the socio-economic spectrum who quietly struggle for an extended period of time without anyone advocating for their needs. Some of these students lack parental support and the financial resources to seek a medical diagnosis. They do not know that they could request consideration for a 504 or an IEP.

Of the six students included in this study, none had an IEP or a 504. Victoria submitted documentation of her medical diagnosis to the school, which opened the door for her to enroll in an online school halfway through her sophomore year. Maria, Victoria, and Stacy all saw doctors for their mental health and reported access to either medication or therapy on a consistent basis. For these students, their counselors were either unaware of any medical diagnosis or felt that the symptoms that the students were experiencing did not meet the threshold for a medical diagnosis or academic interventions.

All of the students struggled to fit into the social setting of an affluent suburban school. It could be argued that social troubles led directly to their disengagement from the school experience, leading to seeking a way out (Fall and Roberts, 2012). If not a direct relationship, then at least their social troubles may have led to struggles with their schoolwork or mental health issues, which in turn led the students to seek a way out. When compared to other schools in the area, Bay View has a high percentage of students who perform well academically and enroll in college after high school. It also has an affluent population. Because of the reputation for high academic achievement and wealth in this community, struggling students may feel an even greater sense of inequity, inferiority, and discouragement.

School-Based Factors

By looking at the alternative school settings that the students chose we can see that four of the six students will likely earn a GED rather than a high school diploma. These students were in their sophomore or junior year and struggled to meet the academic expectations and the pace of instruction at Bay View. In addition, they felt that many of the classes focused on subjects that were not applicable to their desired career path. More hands-on learning opportunities while at school would have been welcomed, and less homework would have been appreciated, too. The counselors were confident that these students were capable of meeting the high school graduation requirements, but each of them had barriers that either prevented them from having a traditional high school experience or reduced their motivation to complete the required coursework.

All of the students struggled to meet the demands of the academically rigorous school system. Stacy and Maria were the only two seniors in the study and after they transferred to another high school, they performed much better academically in an environment with different

academic expectations or more support. Stacy enrolled in an online academy that allowed students to work at their own pace with support from teachers. Maria transferred to a comprehensive high school where she found that her daily homework was dramatically reduced from about four hours per night to no more than an hour. Both students reported that they preferred the new school setting and felt more successful because they were earning higher grades in their classes.

Discussion of Results

Obviously, Bay View High School can improve how they identify and support struggling students. The school district could provide more vocational opportunities for students to receive training that is aligned with their career aspirations, and students could have access to online coursework and alternative options to earn high school credit (Joselowsky, 2007). I intend to use the results from this research to guide the continuous improvement conversations and efforts at Bay View and to help our educators develop a more complete understanding of our students' experiences in our school. I hope that we will be able to develop more effective strategies to support all of our students, and to reduce the number of students who wish to leave Bay View High School to pursue their education in an alternative school environment – particularly if with administrative responsiveness and creativity, their academic needs could be addressed at Bay View.

In this study, none of the students had a singular factor that drove them to leave Bay View. For each of them it was a decision they reached after months, and sometimes even years of consideration. For most of these students it was a decision based on a variety of personal factors along with contributing school-based factors – including the lack of support. Clearly, school leaders do not have the resources or expertise to address all of the needs of all of their

students. For example, the counselors for Amanda and Phil felt they did not have any other options to offer them. Amanda and Phil both wanted to leave Bay View as sophomores to pursue a GED, and after several conversations, they were released from compulsory education.

However, some of these students were offered support as they thoughtfully considered their situation and their goals for the future. School staff helped Jeff research some alternative school settings. He was accepted into Job Corps. Maria's counselor worked with her to get through some challenging academic situations and was surprised that she decided to leave Bay View.

Ultimately the efforts of teachers and counselors to make adjustments to meet the unique needs of all six students were not enough to help the students feel that they could be successful at Bay View. Each of the students believed that the resources and opportunities outside of Bay View would put them on a more desirable pathway for their post-secondary life. The counselors shared their interest in having more options to offer struggling students, which would allow those students to continue to pursue a high school diploma within the Bay View School District. The lack of options for alternative school settings and the lack of support for struggling students were contributing factors for these students to leave Bay View.

Many school districts have found it to be beneficial to create alternative educational pathways for students struggling academically, socially, emotionally, physically, or cognitively. By providing thoughtfully created educational options for students, the districts can effectively meet the needs of diverse learners while still operating within their budget. Every time a student leaves Bay View, the school district loses approximately \$10,000 in funding. That level of per-pupil funding is an ample amount to offer struggling students online coursework and expanded options with the community college. If Bay View School District could retain more of the students who leave due to struggles similar to those outlined in this study, they would also retain

the tax dollars that follow those students, which could be used to support them and other students who find themselves in similar difficulties.

At Bay View if a student has a 504 or an IEP and requests alternative placement, the counselors and administrators are involved in the placement decision during an options conference, and these decisions require approval from the district office. I initially thought that many of my participants would come from students who participated in an options conference. I was surprised to find that many of my participants came in with their parents and requested a “release from compulsory education form.” That form still requires a high school administrator’s signature, but the process can be much faster than an options conference, and it does not require approval from the district office. Students who go through this process like Victoria, Amanda and Phil can potentially be in school one day and be released the following day.

From a teacher’s perspective this can be a frustrating experience because they develop supportive relationships with their students, invest an inordinate amount of time and effort in them, and carry real concerns about the students who struggle. Then one day a student disappears from their class roster, and it can be difficult to even find out what happened to the student. The teacher may wonder, “*Did they switch to another class? Did they transfer to another school? Did they just drop out?*”

At Bay View most students are highly motivated and supported by their parents. If they leave the school they will simply re-enroll somewhere else and be just fine. However, in the back corner of Bay View’s file room, there is a drawer that is filled with cumulative files for students who withdrew from school and no other school has yet requested their files. These students are likely to have withdrawn from school with the intention of enrolling somewhere else but never

completed that process. Bay View needs a more effective way to support students like the ones who have files in that drawer.

Perhaps an initial step that school administrators could take to improve their high school is to sit down with students who withdraw from school, have a conversation with them, and listen. They can ask the students why they are leaving and where they intend to go. If administrators listen to the students and attempt to understand and learn from the students' experiences at their school, they may develop a more thorough understanding of their own school system. At that point the administrators would be in a better position to direct school improvement efforts to be more effective in meeting the needs of more of their students. Ideally, school administrators will be able to initiate strategic interventions that can be targeted to the students who need them before they begin to take classes at the school, or soon after they begin to struggle. The interventions can then be adjusted as needed throughout the students' high school experiences.

When I began this study I knew that students who struggle academically at Bay View frequently chose to leave the school. I was viewing their departure as a problem that was affecting the school system, a loss of revenue problem. I wondered why these students were leaving us and what we could do to encourage them to stay. And as an administrator who sets the master schedule and works closely with teaching assignments, I knew that a drop in enrollment would result in the loss of employment for some of our staff, too. After meeting with these students I began to perceive the more human and tragic side of this problem. I heard stories of pain and prolonged periods of struggle due to a variety of factors. I learned that these students wrestled with their decision for extended periods of time, but each of them needed something that Bay View was not providing. Simply put, their Bay View experience was painful. It is my

responsibility to take what I have learned from these students and seek out opportunities to improve our school. Too many students leave simply because the school system is not effectively meeting their needs. I hope to improve the school system so that students will know that they can stay at Bay View and receive the support that they need and deserve. It is likely that if there were more school-based supports at Bay View High School, all six of the students in the study could have found a way to be academically successful without leaving the school.

Suggestions for Policy and Practice

I am making recommendations for policy and practice beginning with the school from which these students came.

At Bay View

1. The staff at Bay View could identify students who may struggle and provide them with appropriate supports:
 - a. School staff could review transfer students' prior academic performance and select the appropriate courses and supports the students will need throughout the school year.
 - b. At the end of each grading period, school staff could review the academic performance of each student and consider possible interventions for struggling students.
 - c. Teachers and counselors could have a strategic approach to use student data to track student progress, select appropriate interventions, and monitor the students' responses to those interventions.
2. School leadership could provide access to online coursework for students who struggle to earn credit in the traditional classroom setting.

3. Students would be well served if school leaders provided processes and venues for students to advocate for their needs.

My role as an administrator at Bay View allowed me to take what I learned from these six students and work to immediately begin improving our school. In the fall of 2015-2016 the enrollment at Bay View increased by approximately 60 students from the previous year. The increase in enrollment provided an opportunity to hire additional staff members at the school. Discussions amongst the school staff and the central office led to the approval of a proposal to hire a full-time teacher to work with struggling students in a study hall environment and a half-time licensed employee who is trained in the Response To Intervention protocol. This RTI Coordinator will support all of the students who are not on track to graduate. Students will be able to work on online coursework to get back on track to graduate while receiving support from licensed teachers on campus at Bay View. The teaching staff at Bay View also began meeting in Professional Learning Communities and selected their own areas of focus. They selected: Struggling Freshmen, Struggling Sophomores, Students with Social and Emotional Challenges, and Issues Facing Students of Color. Conversations within these groups of educators were focused on ways that the teachers could help identify and intervene with students who need support before a crisis occurs, and changes that the school system could make to improve the educational experience for all of our students.

In the Educational Field

1. School districts could evaluate the strategies they use to track and support the students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

2. When students who were not considered to be at risk of dropping out decide to seek an alternative school setting, school personnel could arrange exit interviews with them as an opportunity to learn why the students have decided to leave their school system.
3. Based upon information gained through the study of students who either drop out of school or seek an alternative school environment, school districts could identify specific school-based interventions and educational opportunities that would be beneficial for the remaining student population at the school. For example, the participants in this study suggested that the school district could increase the number of vocational opportunities for students to receive technical hands-on training to develop 21st century skills that lead to a career pathway. If needed, school districts could look to develop relationships with local community colleges to provide expanded options for students to access diverse learning opportunities in a variety of curricular areas.
4. Because student mobility is a factor that contributes to struggling in school and seeking alternative school settings, policy makers could evaluate the steps students must go through in order to transfer from one school to another. Efforts could be made to confirm the necessity and appropriateness for each student's request to transfer.
5. Because mental illness is a factor that contributes to students struggling in school, policy makers could look to eliminate or reduce the barriers that prevent people from receiving appropriate mental health care.

These are practices all school districts could employ and policies that all communities could support to help improve the educational experiences for all of their students. These practices and policies will be especially beneficial to the students who are at risk for dropping out of school, or are seeking an alternative school setting that can more effectively meet their

needs. I will continue to focus improvement efforts in these areas as I work to create an educational environment at Bay View that meets the needs for all of our students. If other districts are able to improve their ability to meet the needs of their students as well, we may see a decrease in the number of students who continue to struggle to find a place where they feel they fit in and succeed.

Suggestions for Further Research

One of the more challenging aspects of this study was finding the time to schedule meetings with students. If a researcher or a school system intended to regularly interview departing students, they would need to develop a more systematic approach to this process. At the time that a student withdraws from school, they would be asked to schedule an appointment for an interview. For this study there were only six participants, but it was challenging to get in contact with them and arrange for an interview after they had left the school.

If this study were to be expanded, it would be interesting to identify at least one additional person to interview who could verify some of the details from the students' stories, and share their perspectives of things that the students experienced away from the high school setting. After the interviews with the students, I could have asked them to share the name of a family member, or a person at their previous school who would be able to have a similar conversation about their experiences. All of the students mentioned struggles at home or in a previous school that influenced their experience at Bay View. Without interviewing someone that knew them in that other setting, I have to trust that their memories are accurate, but also realize that their memories are selective at best.

This study was focused on the students who left Bay View, but each year there are students who intentionally transfer into Bay View and find it to be a great fit for them. It would

be interesting to do a similar study with students from that population. After students graduate, we could identify those who transferred into Bay View and found the school to be just what they were looking for. We could conduct interviews to identify why they left their previous school and what Bay View offered that really met their needs. Results from such a study could help school leaders understand what programs and curricular offerings need to remain in place to meet the needs of some students.

Policy makers may find it helpful to conduct a similar study that includes students who transferred through the recently developed open-enrollment process. The open-enrollment process makes it easier for students to leave the school that they would normally attend due to their residence. When demand for enrollment opportunities at a school exceeds their capacity, a lottery is held to determine who gets in. It would be interesting to see which students perceived their outcome at the new school to be preferable to what they anticipated at their previous school and which ones regretted transferring. If trends emerged in the data, it may help identify profiles of students likely to seek a transfer and what reasons they provide for their request. Additionally, the study could identify the students who benefit from transferring and those who do not. Results from that study may help policy makers improve the open-enrollment process so that those who truly need a different educational environment have the opportunity to go to a school that will meet their needs. More importantly, results from the study could help inform policy makers' decisions upon how they could improve their school systems to meet the needs of all of their students.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Informed Consent Form: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENTS SEEKING AN ALTERNATIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING

Purpose

I am a doctoral student at George Fox University and my dissertation involves research designed to help school administrators understand some of the factors that influence students to leave this school and seek educational opportunities in alternative settings. I would like to invite you to participate in a private personal interview so that I can learn more about your experience while attending this school, and understand why you have decided to seek another environment for your high school education.

Procedure

If you are willing to participate, we will schedule a private personal interview that will take approximately 60 minutes. The questions will be focused on your experience at this school. Following that interview, I will interview your counselor and review your school records.

Risks and Benefits

The interview could lead you to discuss difficult experiences that you had while attending this school. We will keep the conversation focused on the school setting and you can decline to answer questions if you do not feel comfortable sharing some aspects of your experience. Although this study may or may not provide any benefit for you personally, I hope that your story will help our school improve the services we offer students in the future.

Anonymity

The research study will not use your name or the name of the school. I will not include in this study any information that could be used to identify you. I will use pseudonyms for all of the individuals involved in this study and as I construct a profile of your experience that will be used to complete my dissertation. If any data divulges the identity of a participant or the school, but is very important for the story, it will be adjusted so that the story is accurate but the data does not sacrifice the anonymity of the individual or the school. All data associated with this study will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet and password protected computer files. All of these records will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to end your participation at any time.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact, Patrick Allen, Professor of Higher Education and Leadership at George Fox University, by calling 503-554-2858.

By signing below you are indicating that you:

- are informed about the research that is being conducted,
- have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study,
- agree to allow your anonymous profile to be included in the research project.

Participant

Signed _____

Date _____

Printed Name _____

Guardian of Participant (if Participant is under age 18)

Signed _____

Date _____

Printed Name _____

APPENDIX B

Counselor Informed Consent Form: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENTS SEEKING AN ALTERNATIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING

Purpose

I am a doctoral student at George Fox University and my dissertation involves research designed to help school administrators understand some of the factors that influence students to leave this school and seek educational opportunities in alternative settings. I would like to invite you to participate in a private personal interview so that I can learn more about the experiences of one of your students while attending this school, and understand why that individual decided to seek another educational environment.

Procedure

If you are willing to participate, we will schedule a private personal interview that will take approximately 25 minutes. The questions will be focused on your student's experience at this school. There will be situations where counselors will be asked to view emerging data and analysis that is associated with one of their students. They will be required to treat that information with strict confidentiality.

Risks and Benefits

The interview could lead you to discuss difficult experiences that your student had while attending this school. We will keep the conversation focused on the school setting and you can decline to answer questions if you do not feel comfortable sharing some aspects of your experience with that student. Although this study may or may not provide any benefit for you personally, I hope that your comments will help our school improve the services we offer students in the future.

Anonymity

The research study will not use your name or the name of the school. I will not include in this study any information that could be used to identify you or your student. I will use pseudonyms for all of the individuals involved in this study and as I construct a profile of each student's experience that will be used to complete my dissertation. If any data divulges the identity of a participant or the school, but is very important for the story, it will be adjusted so that the story is accurate but the data does not sacrifice the anonymity of the individual or the school. All data associated with this study will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet and password protected computer files. All of these records will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to end your participation at any time.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact, Patrick Allen, Professor of Higher Education and Leadership at George Fox University, by calling 503-554-2858.

By signing below you are indicating that you:

- are informed about the research that is being conducted,
- have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study,
- agree to allow your anonymous profile to be included in the research project.

Counselor

Signed _____

Date _____

Printed Name _____

APPENDIX C

Guide Questions for Student Interviews

1. You recently decided to leave this school. Please tell me where you are currently attending school.
 - a. How do you feel about your decision to leave?
 - b. Please explain how the transfer to another school has affected you.
2. Please describe your journey at Bay View up to the point of school departure.
 - a. What were some of the most important things that occurred at this school that led you to consider seeking an alternative school environment?
 - b. As you look back on your experience, can you identify an experience or exchange that was difficult?
 - i. Will you tell me about it?
 - ii. In hindsight, how do you think that event played into your decision to leave?
3. Who were some of the people who provided you with support at this school?
 - a. And what are some examples of things that they did that you appreciated?
4. If we could go back and change a few things from your experience at this school, what changes would have made the biggest impact for you?
 - a. What could the school have offered you that would have addressed major challenges and eliminated the need for you to transfer?
5. Were there any challenges within your personal life outside of school that affected your ability to attend classes and complete school work?
 - a. Will you describe those challenges to me?

- b. How did those challenges impact your performance in school?
 - c. Was anyone at the school able to provide you with support for those challenges in your personal life?
 - i. What did they do?
 - ii. How did it help?
 - d. Looking back on your experience, is there anything that you wish someone at the school would have done to help you with challenges in your personal life?
 - i. What could they have done?
 - ii. Describe the way you would have needed the help to be offered in order for you to accept it.
 - iii. What kind of impact do you think that support would have had on you?
6. Has this conversation made you think of anything else that you would like to share?

APPENDIX D

Guide Questions for Counselor Interviews

1. Describe the student (age, grade, academic performance, and history of behavior).
2. What obstacles has the student faced?
3. What interventions has Bay View offered the student?
 - a. What is your knowledge of how the student responded to those interventions?
4. Why is the student choosing to leave Bay View?
 - a. Do you know what the other school offers that Bay View does not?
5. Please provide me with copies of any relevant documentation regarding the student and share any additional information you have to offer.