

RURAL MISSOURI ADMINISTRATOR PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL  
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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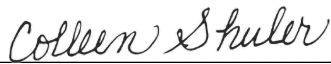
RURAL MISSOURI ADMINISTRATOR PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL  
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Graduate Education Department  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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By  
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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges and barriers involved in implementing successful alternative education programs within rural Missouri school districts. Using a qualitative narrative approach based around the theoretical framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study focused on the differences between the recognized measures for success in alternative education programs and what rural Missouri administrators perceive as barriers to implementing effective programs.

The research methodology involved administering perception surveys to Missouri public school administrators throughout the state's nine regions, conducting interviews with the participants to gain deeper insights, and analyzing district documents such as Board of Education Policy, student handbooks, and accountability data. Findings indicate that staffing challenges and negative community perceptions are the largest barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs in rural Missouri.

Despite these challenges, administrators demonstrate a commitment to meeting students' basic needs through various strategies, including forming partnerships with community organizations and leveraging external resources. The study highlights the importance of aligning policies with educational goals, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and addressing the diverse needs of students in alternative education settings.

Implications for practice include the need to address discrepancies between perception and practice, initiatives to improve community perceptions, and the importance of comprehensive support services for students. Recommendations for future research include exploring specific staffing challenges, understanding the root causes of negative community

perceptions, and conducting longitudinal studies to track the long-term outcome of alternative education programs.

Key words: alternative education, rural schools, Missouri, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, barriers, strategies, staffing challenges, community perceptions, funding constraints, student needs, qualitative narrative.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many complex factors intertwine to contribute to the alarming rate of students failing to complete high school. Suspensions due to discipline, substance abuse, social challenges, unstable home life, trauma, poverty, unplanned pregnancy, and legal troubles are all factors that contribute to students dropping out of high school (Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019; McGee & Lin, 2020). The consequences of dropping out extend far beyond the classroom and can lead to incarceration, persistent poverty, reliance on welfare systems, and single parenthood (Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019).

Within the landscape of education, it has become increasingly evident that conventional educational settings are not universally effective for all students. Rigid schedules, frequent distractions, and a one-sized fits all approach leaves students feeling overwhelmed and frustrated (McGee & Lin, 2020). Recognizing this, alternative education programs and schools have emerged as last-resort options for students who have encountered persistent challenges within traditional or vocational environments. Originating as a private-sector movement in the 1960s, alternative education was conceived as a means to provide a culturally diverse curriculum tailored to the needs of at-risk students (Kamrath, 2019). These programs have demonstrated success in both urban and rural settings (Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019; McGee & Lin, 2020), offering students an alternative pathway to high school completion that aligns with their unique needs.

It is crucial to recognize that unraveling the complexities of student dropout rates and the role of alternative education programs is not merely an academic pursuit.

Research in this area holds the potential to bring tangible improvements in educational practice and, subsequently, transform the lives of countless students. By delving into the perceptions of Missouri public school administrators regarding the barriers to successful alternative education programs, this study aims to bridge the gap between identified success measures and practical implementation challenges. The insights derived from this research can empower administrators, policymakers, and educators to enact meaningful changes that enhance the educational landscape, foster inclusivity, and bolster the prospects of at-risk students.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, the researcher will present the theoretical framework and problem statement that will guide the study. The purpose and significance of the study will be outlined for the reader as well as the research questions used to collect data. A definition of key terms is included to assist the reader. Limitations, delimitations, and reasonable assumptions based on available evidence and prior research are identified by the researcher. Finally, chapter one will outline the design control for the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Global COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020 not only disrupted the traditional education system but also highlighted the critical role that schools play in meeting students' basic needs on a daily basis. For many students, schools are more than just places of learning; they are essential sources of food, warmth, safety, belonging, and love (H. Gross, 2020). Educators began to rally around the slogan "Maslow before Bloom", underscoring the need to address students' foundational needs before expecting them to excel academically (Fisher & Crawford, 2020). It has become increasingly clear that

students who struggle with unmet basic needs or a lack of safety and security may find it challenging to succeed in an academic setting. This study draws upon the theory Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs developed by Maslow (1943) to provide a theoretical framework that supports the ideas that academic success can be achieved by systematically addressing students' needs in alignment with the hierarchical structure delineated by Maslow's theory.

In this research, the primary objective is to gain a deeper understanding of how rural Missouri administrators' perceptions of alternative education and the barriers they perceive to successful programs influence student outcomes within these programs. This study aims to investigate the extent to which administrators' awareness of student needs aligns with the theoretical framework, ultimately impacting student learning outcomes. The research questions within this study are designed to mirror the hierarchical levels of Maslow's hierarchy, encompassing physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). These questions aim to explore how effectively addressing these needs can help overcome barriers associated with successful alternative education programs and subsequently enhance outcomes for students who are at risk of not graduating high school. The ensuing literature review will offer a comprehensive examination of how the educational system can support students' progression through these hierarchical needs, thereby fostering motivation and promoting educational success.

### **Problem Statement**

Between 1960 and 2019, high school graduation rates in rural areas of the United States saw a substantial rise, surging from 40% to 87% (U.S. Department of Agriculture,

2021). This upward trajectory can be attributed in part to educational reforms, including the implementation and evolution of alternative education programs. The number of alternative schools in the United States has grown significantly to address the diverse learning needs of at-risk students and reduce the high school dropout rate (Free, 2017; Lange & Sletten, 2002). However, dropout rates are higher in high-poverty rural and urban areas (Snyder et al., 2021). Many of these districts report that just over six in ten students graduate within four years of entering high school (J. Johnson et al., 2010). Adding to the complexity of the issue, dropout rates may be manipulated or misrepresented by reporting districts due to changes in accountability and educational reporting.

The U.S. Department of Education has found that as states raise the standards expected of public school districts, districts are responding by manipulating their dropout rates, a practice that has led to underreported dropout numbers (Hanson, 2021). This alarming trend not only casts doubt on the accuracy of reported graduation and dropout rates but also obscures the true extent of the problem. For instance, the state of Missouri, reported a graduation rate of 89.6% for the 2019-2020 school year, but a dropout rate of only 1.4% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021a). The deeper concern is whether these statistics accurately reflect the educational outcomes and challenges faced by students in our school systems.

Alternative education programs are designed to help students at risk of dropping out to graduate from high school and prepare for the next step. Administrators in rural school districts may fail to see the value in alternative education programs due to the small number of students at risk of dropping out in proportion to the number of resources

it takes to implement an effective alternative education program (National Rural Education Association, 2021). Conversely, administrators may understand the value and know what it takes for an alternative education program to be successful, but incorporating and implementing those success measures is daunting (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). The problem is that research does not fully examine how administrator perceptions of alternative education, barriers to successful programs, and administrator's level of awareness of student needs are affecting at-risk students in rural school districts. Past research has identified the common variables and structural components of successful alternative education programs (Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019) and explored how meeting student basic needs can positively impact student achievement (Fisher & Crawford, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). This study will adopt a qualitative research approach, specifically narrative inquiry, to examine the perceptions and experiences of rural Missouri administrators regarding alternative education programs, barriers, and student needs. This approach will allow the researcher to uncover the rich, subjective insights of administrators and provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the context of rural education.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri as perceived by administrators. At this stage in the research, the perceptions of rural Missouri administrators regarding alternative education and its barriers will generally be defined as the understanding and perspective of these administrators on alternative education and the obstacles to successful programs. The

negative economic and societal implications of dropping out of high school have a devastating impact on the country. Students who dropout are significantly more likely to engage in criminal activity, more likely to be incarcerated, and have lower lifetime earnings and income tax payments (Antoni, 2021). Alternative education programs actively seek to decrease the factors that lead to failing to complete high school and offer alternatives that meet individual students' needs. Alternative education programs can be effective in reducing truancy, improving student attitudes toward school, increase the acquisition and recovery of credits toward graduation, and reduce problem behaviors (Free, 2017; Lange & Sletten, 2002; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.).

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by the following research question:

1. What do rural Missouri public school administrators perceive as barriers to successful alternative education programs?
  - a. What role do funding and resource allocation play in the success of alternative education programs?
  - b. How do administrators perceive the influence of cultural and community factors on the success of alternative education programs?
  - c. To what extent do administrators perceive the involvement of parents and guardians as a barrier to the success of alternative education programs?
  - d. To what extent do administrators perceive meeting students' basic needs as a crucial factor in the success of alternative education programs?
  - e. What strategies do administrators employ to address barriers to the success of alternative education programs?

## **Significance of Study**

This study will contribute to the conversation on administrator views on alternative education and the implementation and effectiveness of these programs in rural school districts of Missouri. By exploring administrators' perspectives on barriers to success, this study can help identify areas where resources and support may be lacking. Past research has identified the life-altering benefits of graduating from high school (Antoni, 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2016), how to identify at-risk students (Antoni, 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019; Johnson, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Schmidt, 2021), how to prevent students from dropping out (M.K. Johnson et al., 2021; Leban & Masterson, 2022; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; McDermott et al., 2019), the common variables and structural components of successful alternative education programs (Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019), and how meeting student basic needs can positively impact student achievement (Fisher & Crawford, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). However, the problem is that the research has not identified if administrator perceptions of alternative education impact the availability, effectiveness, and graduation rates of schools with alternative education programs in rural Missouri school districts.

Current research does not fully explore how administrator perceptions of alternative education are impacting educational outcomes for at-risk students. Seventy-five percent of high school dropouts have never attended, or participated in, an alternative education school or program (Hanson, 2021). Of the 13,800 school districts in the United States, only approximately 2,000 have alternative education programs available (Fresques et al., 2017). Understanding the challenges that administrators face in implementing and

sustaining effective alternative education programs can inform the development of strategies to address these challenges and improve program outcomes.

This study will provide insights into how administrators can address issues related to meeting the basic needs of students utilizing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which may be critical to their academic success. The researcher sought to determine what administrators perceive as barriers to implementing alternative education programs to identify those barriers so that educators can begin finding solutions to the dropout problems that continue to plague the country and the state of Missouri. The findings of this study may inform policy and practice, guide the development of effective alternative education programs, and promote educational equity for at-risk students. This study will add to the current body of literature by contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with alternative education and help create more equitable educational opportunities for all students.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

To assist the reader, the terms that are frequently used in this study are identified and defined below.

**Alternative education.** Any non-traditional educational setting designed to assist students at risk of dropping out of high school (Free, 2017; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee & Lin, 2020; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.; Nelson, 2019; Smith, 2019).

**Alternative program.** A non-traditional curricular program designed to aid students in recovery and/or acquiring credits to graduate within the walls of a traditional

school building (Free, 2017; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee & Lin, 2020; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.; Nelson, 2019; Smith, 2019).

**Alternative School.** A non-traditional school, outside a traditional school building, designed to aid students in recovering and/or acquiring credits to graduate or attain a high school diploma equivalent. For this study's purposes, charter and/or magnet schools will not be included in the definition of alternative schools (Free, 2017; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee & Lin, 2020; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.; Nelson, 2019; Smith, 2019).

**At risk.** Any student who is in danger of academic failure, substance abuse, early pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, truancy, and not completing high school (Free, 2017; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee & Lin, 2020; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.; Nelson, 2019; Smith, 2019).

**Dropout.** Students who leave high school prior to graduation (Free, 2017; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee & Lin, 2020; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.; Nelson, 2019; Smith, 2019).

**Traditional education setting.** Conventional education that follows established norms and customs that have been historically accepted as effective practice (Free, 2017; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee & Lin, 2020; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.; Nelson, 2019; Smith, 2019).

## **Limitations**

Limitations to this study included the following:

- Self-reported data: The study relied on self-reported data from administrators, which may be subject to bias or social desirability effects.

- Lack of reliable data: This study may be limited by accuracy of dropout rate reporting by school districts.
- Limited generalizability: The findings of this study may not be applicable to other geographic regions, as perceptions and experiences of administrators may differ based on location.
- Researcher as a data collection instrument: The biases of the researcher when analyzing the perception scales and interview recordings may limit the scope of the study to predefined perceptions and not fully capture the context specific factors that may influence administrator perceptions.

### **Delimitations**

The researcher delimited the study as follows:

- Chosen population: The researcher interviewed only secondary school administrators, including superintendents and high school principals, in Missouri Public Schools.
- Geographical location: The study is limited to school districts in the state of Missouri as defined by the Missouri Regional Planning and Development Center (RPDC).
- Theoretical framework: The researcher focused only on the theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.
- Limited focus on student experiences: The study primarily focused on the perspectives of administrators, with limited attention to the experiences and perspectives of students and families.

- Type of alternative education program: The study focused on a specific type of alternative education program which was not representative of all alternative education programs.
- Method of collection: This study utilized an administrator perception scale and research questions.

### **Assumptions**

The researcher made the following assumptions:

- The selected geographic location, type of alternative education program, and method of data collection were appropriate for achieving the study's research goals.
- The perceptions and experiences of the administrators who participated in the study were representative of those of other administrators in similar contexts.
- The selected method of data collection was reliable and valid, and accurately captured the perceptions of the administrators regarding the barriers to successful alternative education programs.
- The responses of the administrators were truthful and accurate, not influenced by social desirability bias or other factors that may impact response accuracy.
- The study accounted for all relevant limitations and delimitations that may have impacted the accuracy and generalizability of the findings.
- The researcher diligently mitigated potential biases and errors in the study design, data collection, and analysis.

### **Design Control**

In selecting the design for this qualitative narrative study, careful consideration was given to the nature of the research questions and the depth of understanding sought. The aim of this study was to explore and comprehend the nuanced perceptions of rural Missouri administrators regarding alternative education and its barriers. A qualitative narrative design was chosen as it allows for a rich exploration of participants' experiences, viewpoints, and the contextual factors that influence their perceptions (Mills & Gay, 2019; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

The qualitative narrative approach is well-suited to uncovering the complex nature of administrator perceptions. It provides the flexibility to capture the narratives, insights, and unique perspectives of administrators involved in alternative education, shedding light on the how and why behind their views. This design also aligns with the overarching goals of gaining a deeper insight into the lived experiences of administrators, going beyond surface level responses.

The selection of this design facilitates the exploration of the central phenomenon, which is the understanding and perspectives of administrators within the specific context of rural Missouri. By utilizing qualitative interviews and a perception survey, the researcher can fully explore the narratives of administrators and gain a comprehensive understanding of the barriers they perceive. Document analysis complements this approach by providing additional context through an examination of relevant policies and procedures.

The researcher selected limitations and delimitations and made reasonable assumptions based on available evidence and prior research. The researcher emailed secondary school administrators in the nine Missouri RPDCs throughout the state to seek

interview participants and disseminate surveys. Interviews and surveys were then conducted to gather perceptual data regarding administrator perceptions of alternative education in the state of Missouri. Document analysis was employed as a systematic review of key policies and procedures surrounding alternative education. All data was analyzed to draw conclusions and provide recommendations for future research.

Potential for self-reported data bias may limit the representativeness of the findings; however, the researcher addressed these limitations through careful design, data collection, and analysis. The survey instrument and interview questions reduced the potential for bias in the data collection process. By selecting a specific geographic location and type of alternative education program, the researcher was able to focus on specific factors that impact the success of alternative education programs and provide detailed insights into the barriers faced by administrators in those contexts.

Through clear delimitations, the researcher was able to accurately identify and measure the factors that are most relevant to the research questions. The delimitation to a specific geographic location, type of alternative education program, and method of data collection allowed for a more detailed and accurate analysis of the specific factors that impact the success of alternative education programs in those contexts. This allowed the researcher to identify and measure the factors that are most relevant to the research question.

The researcher carefully considered assumptions and biases to minimize their impact on the study. By selecting a validated survey instrument, the researcher was able to reduce the potential for bias in the data collection process. By addressing these

assumptions, the study can provide valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of administrators regarding the barriers to successful alternative education programs.

### **Summary**

Student dropout trends have shown that traditional educational settings are not effective for all students. Alternative education programs may provide students the opportunity to complete high school in a setting that meets their needs; however, these programs are not readily available throughout the state of Missouri. In framing this study, the researcher acknowledged that student success is a heterogeneous concept, and its definition can be influenced by one's progression through the tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943.)

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri as perceived by administrators. Previous research has identified measures for success in alternative education programs. This research will fill the gap in literature by bridging the gap between identified success measures and perceived barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs. This will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing school administrators as they work toward equitable educational opportunities for all students.

This chapter provided a brief overview of the concerns associated with not graduating high school and the use of alternative education programs and schools to provide students with a non-traditional opportunity to complete their high school education. Chapter two will provide a literature review of current research on high school dropout statistics and the potential negative life implications of not graduating from high

school. The literature review will also provide a brief history of alternative education, its purpose, and the previously identified components of successful alternative education programs. In chapter three, the researcher will explain the methodology of the study, including the research design, specific procedures used in conducting the study, and an explanation of the data analysis. Chapter four will provide a detailed analysis of the data collected. Chapter five will present the author's conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

You cannot turn on the news or scroll through social media without hearing discussion regarding public education, educational accountability, and transparency. Legislation at the state and federal level demands accountability for student learning outcomes, or a lack thereof. Test scores are decreasing (Dorn et al., 2020) and rates of discipline and mental health-related concerns are increasing (Ansorger, 2021; Sherzai et al., 2020). Teachers and administrators are leaving education in droves, leaving behind a national educator shortage crisis and overcrowded classrooms (Bryner, 2021; Chu et al., 2023; Craig et al., 2023). This increased pressure on school districts and school administrators is creating a shift in traditional educational practices and policies (Castro, 2023; Dorn et al., 2020), but not all change is negative. Schools are recognizing that a strictly academic focus is not enough for students to be successful in this post-pandemic era, a holistic whole student approach is necessary (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). Equity, inclusion, differentiation, engagement, social-emotional learning, and culture of continuous improvement are more than just buzz words; they are the framework for success in a new era of education.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri as perceived by administrators. Alternative education programs are an integral part of the framework for success. Alternative education programs have evolved drastically since their inception and are designed to meet the

needs of at-risk students, decrease dropout rates, and support students toward graduation (Free, 2017; Lange & Sletten, 2002). To better understand this evolution, a review of literature regarding the importance of a high school diploma and current and historical research relevant to alternative education will be examined. Alternative education program best practices and current research on administrator perceptions regarding alternative education will demonstrate the potential impact alternative education programs can have on the future of public education and what barriers are standing in the way of their successful implementation.

The review of literature is influenced by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (HON) developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. The theoretical framework will explain how the theory applies to student learning outcomes and translates to student success in an alternative education setting. Understanding this theoretical framework will assist schools in meeting the needs of their students while decreasing dropout rates and increasing student achievement.

Chapter two will provide a comprehensive examination of the literature that serves as the theoretical underpinning for this study. The examination begins with an exploration of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the theoretical framework guiding the investigation. The far-reaching implications, for both individuals and society, of not attaining a high school diploma will be investigated. This will extend to identifying at-risk students and preventing students from dropping out of high school. The researcher will then examine the historical evolution of alternative education and the variables that contribute to successful programs. Additionally, the researcher will address the barriers to

successful alternative education programs and the noted gap in current research, demonstrating the need for this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

In his Theory of Human Motivation, Abraham Maslow (1943) introduced the concept of the Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow identified five basic human needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. He theorized that humans are motivated by their intrinsic desire to achieve each of these needs in a hierarchical order beginning with their basic physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter. The most basic need will be the focus of an individual's consciousness, and they will not be motivated toward the next level, and more cognitively complex functions, until the basic needs have been satisfied (Maslow, 1943). His motivational theory introduced the concept known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (HON) and was intended to aid in individual journeys of growth and fulfillment, knowing oneself, and reaching one's fullest potential (Bridgman et al., 2019). Maslow's theory provides a framework for understanding human behavior.

Maslow's theory is often geometrically represented as a pyramid, but that was not his original intent and was never presented that way by himself personally (Bridgman et al., 2019). The pyramid representation gives the illusion that a person can only occupy one level of the hierarchy at a time; however, the theory itself indicates that an individual can be simultaneously working to fulfill esteem while beginning work on self-actualization (Wren, 1972, as cited in Bridgman et al., 2019). Conversely, there is potential for individuals to move in reverse and lose progress gained. When applying

Maslow's HONs to a school setting, it is important not to oversimplify the theory as steps that must be achieved one at a time, but to look at a holistic overview of human needs and intrinsic motivation.

Educators can utilize Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to increase student achievement and learning outcomes by understanding the importance of meeting basic needs before focusing on higher order needs. Maslow's HONs indicates that a student's ability to be motivated by growth needs (esteem and self-actualization) is built upon the satisfaction of deficiency needs (physiological, safety, and love) (Ansorger, 2021; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). A safe, positive learning environment that fosters a sense of community and provides resources and support for students can allow students the security they need to focus on higher order needs. Fisher and Crawford (2020) found that struggling schools could propel students to success by first focusing on the physiological needs of students and then providing additional support to move them through the hierarchy. By first meeting students' physiological needs, then ensuring their sense of safety while at school, schools can then help students move into the category of love. Noltemeyer et al. (2021) found that a holistic education program that addresses the basic needs of students, meeting their deficiency needs, can promote their academic achievement over time. Additional research has identified positive environment, caring staff, and a sense of belonging as essential to student success in the educational setting and satisfying the intrinsic need for love (Amitay & Rahav, 2018; Fisher & Crawford, 2020; Janey, 2017; Smith, 2019).

Incorporating Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in an alternative education setting is an essential component of successful programs. Meeting students' basic needs,

personalizing their learning experiences, and building relationships increase esteem and an intrinsic sense of value and respect, which increase motivation and engagement in learning. Amitay and Rahav (2018) found that the success of an alternative school was directly tied to the school's emphasis on providing an accepting environment that supplies students “with the love and support they need to succeed” (p. 1251). Janey (2017) identified the importance of creating a safe environment where students felt empowered to take risks without fear of judgement or failure. Conversely, poor school relationships and a climate of rejection and failure play a role in students’ decisions to drop out of school (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Gubbels et al. (2019) also found that negative school or class climate has a significant effect on whether at-risk students stay in school or choose to drop out.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs outlines a hierarchical progression of needs that has long been a foundational theory in understanding human motivation and behavior. However, perspectives on the application of this theory in educational settings vary. While proponents argue that educators should prioritize meeting students' basic needs (Fisher & Crawford, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2021), there is also a more nuanced perspective that acknowledges individuals may simultaneously work on different levels of the hierarchy (Bridgman et al., 2019). Educators must recognize that the nature of human needs are complex and there is no one size fits all approach.

Understanding how the perceptions of administrators and their personal interpretations of Maslow’s theory influence how they facilitate programs and support at-risk students has direct relevance to this study. These perceptions could significantly impact the design and implementation of alternative education programs and ultimately,

student success. The methodology, centered on interviews, perception surveys, and document analysis enabled the researcher to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by administrators in promoting student success within alternative education.

### **Importance of a High School Diploma**

The culmination of years of learning, study, and assessment is the celebration of graduation. The benefits of graduating from high school are expansive and include factors such as better quality of life, decreased mortality rate, higher income over a life span, and decreased marital problems (Antoni, 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2016). Individuals with a high school diploma earn more money over their lifetime. Likewise, earning gaps between diploma holders and non-diploma holders have increased over time (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

Other benefits of a high school diploma include increased job opportunities and access to higher education. Flint (2007) found that employment rates were higher for individuals with a diploma and that they were more likely to have stable long-term employment. Post COVID-19 pandemic, high school graduates have better job prospects and are less likely to be laid off or experience job loss than non-graduates (Hansen & Rose, 2021). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2020 the median weekly earnings for employees with a high school diploma was \$781, compared to \$591 for those without a diploma (Torpey, 2021). A 2021 report (Carnevale et al.) found that individuals with a high school diploma earned 30% more than those without and that the earnings gap has increased over time. Students who graduate from high school are more

likely to enroll in college, persevere throughout, and complete their degree (J.P. Gross et al., 2020; Kurlaender, 2009).

Earning a high school diploma increases esteem and self-efficacy. Individuals who have earned a high school diploma are shown to have improved cognitive, social, and emotional well-being (Bridgeland et al., 2006). They have more positive outlooks, relationships and higher levels of self-esteem (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2021). These skills are valuable intrapersonal skills that demonstrate higher order attainment of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to reach one's fullest potential.

A high school diploma is not just an academic achievement, but a crucial milestone in an individual's journey toward self-actualization. Better employment opportunities, job stability, and income allow individuals to meet their basic physiological and safety needs. The relationships developed and fostered at school contribute to the social and emotional well-being of individuals. A diploma serves as a foundation for personal growth, self-improvement, and the pursuit of one's aspirations.

## **Failing to Complete High School**

### **Overview of Dropout Statistics in the United States**

Just over two million students were identified as high school dropouts in 2019, with the overall dropout rate in the United States hovering at 5.1% (National Center of Education Statistics, 2021a). Urban dropout rates were highest, at 5%, rural students at 4.2%, and suburban students were the lowest at 3.6% (Snyder et al., 2021). Dropout statistics reflect not only educational outcomes but also the broader well-being and needs of individuals. Addressing dropout rates requires a solution-oriented reflection into the factors that contribute to failing to complete high school.

There are a variety of factors that contribute to dropout rates including socioeconomic status, academic challenges, personal or family responsibilities, disengagement, and school factors such as discipline and systemic inequities. These challenges directly relate to individuals' abilities to meet their physiological and safety needs as outlined in Maslow's HON. In both rural and urban areas, dropout rates are highest among students of color and students from low-income families (National Center of Education Statistics, 2021a; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2018). Poverty, lack of access to academic resources, and limited job opportunities all contribute to rural dropout rates (National Rural Education Association, 2021). Less than half of female students who birth a child prior to 18 years old will earn a high school diploma (Brouwer et al., 2019). Suspension from school due to discipline infractions increases the odds of dropout regardless of race (Coffman, 2019; Leban & Masterson, 2022). The challenges surrounding socioeconomic factors and racial inequality relate to a student's need to belong and feel loved, in addition to their safety and physiological needs.

Dropout rates have been trending downward since the late 1970s (McFarland et al., 2020); however, many fear that the United States is getting ready to experience a significant spike in high school dropouts. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on racial disparities, including structural discrimination and access to educational opportunities (L.J. Samuel et al., 2021), with projections suggesting that dropout rates could increase by as much as 2-9% (Dorn et al., 2020). A study published in the *Journal of Education and Practice* found that the pandemic has led to increased stress levels, decreased motivation, and reduced social support for students, all which negatively impact student performance and increase the likelihood of not completing high school

(Sherzai et al., 2020). Dropout statistics provide valuable insights into how educational outcomes are intertwined with individual's needs across Maslow's Hierarchy. The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on dropout rates reinforces the importance of addressing these needs to ensure that students can reach their full potential.

### **Economic and Societal Impact**

The negative economic and societal implications of dropping out of high school have a devastating impact on the country. Students who dropout are significantly more likely to engage in criminal activity, more likely to be incarcerated, and have lower lifetime earnings and income tax payments (Antoni, 2021). The generational legacy of students who dropout of high school is a repeated cycle of poverty, abuse, and neglect.

J.L. Johnson (2007) found that high school dropouts are less likely to be able to support themselves, placing a burden on the government and taxpayers to do so. Students who dropout and engage in criminal activity can be a drain on government resources. A 2012 study found that it costs approximately \$10,826 to educate a child, while the average annual cost of juvenile incarceration was \$88,000 (Nelson, 2019; Taylor et al., 2012). On average, a high school dropout earns \$10,000 less a year than a high school graduate (Castillo et al., 2019). Vining and Weimer (2019) found the calculated net value (social value over time, adjusted for inflation and interest rates) was around \$300,000 for each person who successfully graduates from high school. These compelling financial implications accentuate the critical need for effective interventions and support systems to prevent high school dropout rates and ensure a more productive and economically sustainable future.

Dropping out of high school can negatively affect a person's mental and physical health and wellness. Lawrence et al. (2016) found that educational opportunities, such as graduating high school, can lead to better health and a longer life. Additionally, people without a high school diploma have a 22% higher mortality risk than those with a high school diploma or high school diploma equivalent (GED).

The economic and societal impact of dropping out affects the broader well-being of individuals. Lower lifetime earnings can potentially hinder an individual's ability to meet their physiological and safety needs. It can contribute to a cycle of poverty, abuse, and neglect, affecting individuals' sense of esteem, belonging, and love. Completing high school is a crucial step in the path toward self-actualization, as it opens doors to educational and career opportunities.

### **Incomplete Dropout Reporting**

Dropout reporting, and what constitutes dropping out, has become an increasingly debated concern in public education. Following the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, there has been a dramatic increase in high school graduation rates (Harris et al., 2020). However, there is doubt surrounding the rise. The graduation rate in the United States “is neither as low as some claim nor as high as many believe” (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010, p. 260). Oftentimes, the data on dropout rates is incomplete and misconstrued as school districts find ways to deceive the systems of accountability put in place by state departments of education, and discrepancies in reporting as high as 30% have been found (Weissberg, 2010). To meet increasing accountability demands, many educators strategically report practices that increase test scores, graduation rates, and other student success indicators (Edwards & Mindrila, 2019). Inconsistencies in defining

dropout rates and incomplete reporting have led to doubts about the accuracy of reported graduation rates.

Data collection sources and errors, inconsistency in defining dropout rates, data collection methods, and lack of reporting requirements are all factors that contribute to inaccuracies in graduation rates (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Orfield (2004) found that school districts and states do not always count students who fail to receive diplomas as dropouts. Students completing alternative paths to graduation such as a General Educational Development (GED) programs are counted toward graduation rates even though their requirements have been modified (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). While graduation rate distortion due to systemic changes brought on by high stakes accountability measures like NCLB are a concern, Harris et al. (2020) found that while graduation rates did increase following NCLB, there was limited evidence that the rising graduation rate is due to lower standards or less seat time.

Inaccuracies in reporting and dropout statistics may negatively impact a student's educational and overall well-being. Incomplete reporting not only affects the accuracy of statistics but also has implications for students' access to resources, support, and opportunities to fulfill their basic needs, particularly related to students' physiological and safety needs in Maslow's hierarchy. Furthermore, incomplete reporting can perpetuate a cycle of neglect, as the true extent of the challenges faced by students may remain obscured. Educators have a responsibility to address the alarmingly large number of students nationwide that fail to complete high school. These students face a lifetime of challenges and hardships that could potentially be avoided by earning a high school

diploma. Identification of at-risk students is the first step in preventing them from dropping out.

### **Identifying Students At-Risk of Dropping Out**

Various identifying risk factors contribute to students dropping out of high school. Chief among these is chronic absenteeism, recognized as the primary indicator of students not completing high school (Antoni, 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019; J.L. Johnson, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Schmidt, 2021). In addition to absenteeism, Gubbels et al. (2019) stress that students with a history of retention, low IQ, learning difficulties, and diminished academic achievement are more prone to dropping out. Boyaci (2019) further demonstrates the impact of low socioeconomic status on dropout rates. Sarra et al. (2019) also confirm the correlation between academic struggle and heightened dropout risk, emphasizing that academic challenges often correlate with dissatisfaction in the educational journey. Research by West et al. in 2019 solidifies the importance of identifying potential dropouts during grade nine, revealing that peer influences are pivotal, and adolescents affiliated with peers holding low educational aspirations are more susceptible to dropping out. Disengagement (Antoni, 2021; Sarra et al., 2019), anti-social behavior, risky or deviant conduct, substance abuse, and adverse childhood experiences (Gubbels et al., 2019; Johnson, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; McGee & Lin, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2018) are also recognized risk factors contributing to high school non-completion.

Identifying students at risk for dropping out is the first step in dropout prevention. Schools can use a data driven approach to identify students at risk of dropping out through data mining or the use of Early Warning Systems (EWS) and machine learning.

Data mining can provide detailed insight into student profiles and risk factors associated with dropping out (Sarra et al., 2019) and machine learning can be utilized to identify students at risk of dropping out (Chung & Lee 2019; Sansone, 2017; Sorensen, 2019). Machine learning techniques can accurately predict students at risk of dropping out using administrative data such as absences, discipline referrals, grades, tardiness (Baker et al., 2020; Chung & Lee, 2019; Sansone, 2017; Sorensen 2019). However, the use of EWS is dependent on the unique indicators to specific student groups. It cannot directly predict school or academic failure but can help identify students who might be at risk (Newman et al., 2019). Additional findings indicate that EWS may not be effective unless paired with an individualized intervention plan that provides specific support for student needs (Davis et al., 2019). Once students at risk for dropping out have been identified, schools can shift their focus to prevention.

Identifying students at risk of dropping out is a foundational step in dropout prevention, echoing the principles of Maslow's HON. Chronic absenteeism, academic struggles, and various risk factors highlight the complicated elements that can hinder students from fulfilling their potential and achieving academic success. The identification process recognizes that students' educational journeys are influenced by an array of factors, from physiological needs like attendance to higher-level needs like social belonging and esteem. Utilizing data-driven approaches, such as Early Warning systems and machine learning, schools can pinpoint students in need, fostering a proactive response to address their unique challenges. By embracing this proactive stance, educators align with Maslow's concept of self-actualization, striving to provide equitable opportunities for all students to reach their fullest potential and navigate successfully

through their educational journeys. Identifying and supporting at-risk students are essential steps toward fulfilling the overarching goal of ensuring a more inclusive, supportive, and successful educational environment.

### **Dropout Prevention**

Research has identified the importance of a high school diploma, how to identify students at risk of dropping out, and the detrimental societal and economic impact of failing to graduate. Deterring and preventing dropout by proactively addressing the challenges faced by at-risk students is a necessary next step for school administrators (Antoni, 2021). Community, school, and student level factors both contribute to on-time graduation (Uretsky, 2019). Rural communities, facing challenges in supporting disadvantaged youth during times of crisis that can disrupt their education (Dupéré et al., 2019), can benefit from prevention programs emphasizing positive peer interactions and social norms to enhance student attitudes toward school. Through targeted outreach and intervention, systemic change within the public school system, and fostering relationships and a sense of belonging, administrators can work with teachers, students, and parents to create a positive effective learning environment for students at risk of dropping out (Antoni, 2021; Cockerill, 2019).

Targeted interventions to support the well-being of all students are an essential part of dropout prevention (Austin, 2022; M.K. Johnson et al., 2021; Leban & Masterson, 2022; McDermott et al., 2019). Kurlaender (2009) found that targeted academic and social support for at-risk students played a critical role in improving graduation rates. A tiered intervention framework that incorporates both academic and behavioral support can be utilized to promote a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention (Mac Iver &

Mac Iver, 2010). Tiered models incorporate school-wide initiatives, but also utilize targeted interventions for at-risk students such as individual academic support and mentor programs (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010). Additional interventions include utilizing predictive analytics to identify factors such as attendance, behavior, and academic performance can decrease dropout rates by allowing schools to identify students and implement early interventions and support (Sorensen, 2019).

Systemic factors, encompassing policy, procedure, and district practices, can significantly contribute to students not completing high school. Academic struggles, behavioral difficulties, inadequate social and emotional support, and a lack of resources and backing from the educational system can markedly heighten the risk of dropout among at-risk students (J.L. Johnson, 2007). Leban and Masterson's study in 2022 underscores the concerning association between school suspensions, higher dropout rates, and increased likelihood of arrest, emphasizing the necessity of addressing the foundational causes of school suspensions and their repercussions on the prospects of young individuals. McDermott et al. (2019) further reveal that academic struggles, disengagement from school culture, family obligations, and employment opportunities collectively contribute to student dropout rates. Their findings highlight the urgency of targeting these underlying issues in dropout prevention strategies. Investing in early childhood education, expanding access to advanced coursework and career and technical education, and improving support and resources for rural schools and communities emerge as pivotal steps in fostering educational equity and holistic student success (J. Johnson et al., 2010). Beyond the educational realm, Yeung's discovery in 2020 amplifies the societal impact; states embracing Medicaid Expansion displayed reduced

dropout rates, suggesting the Affordable Care Act holds the potential as a comprehensive dropout prevention initiative.

Fostering a sense of belonging, cultivating supportive relationships with teachers and peers, and establishing an inclusive and nurturing learning environment are crucial to the success of students at risk of dropping out (Cockerill, 2019; McGee & Lin, 2020). A study by Lewis and Basford in 2020, concentrated on an intensive dropout recovery model and highlighted the impact of social emotional support and a flexible personalized learning environment in effective dropout prevention. Reinforcing this notion, Sarra et al. (2019) found that effective dropout prevention begins with a supportive learning environment. A positive school climate and culture not only instill school satisfaction but also curtail absenteeism while fostering positive academic outcomes (Daily, Smith, et al., 2020; Beard & Thomson, 2021), with both academic performance and improved attendance correlating with heightened graduation probabilities.

The importance of a high school diploma, the strategies for identifying at-risk, and the far-reaching consequences of non-completion demonstrates the pivotal role of dropout prevention in education. Addressing the intricate challenges faced by at-risk students demands a comprehensive approach. This holistic perspective aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, highlighting the necessity of fulfilling students' basic needs for security, belonging, and self-esteem as a foundation for their educational success. The integration of targeted interventions, predictive analytics, and a holistic support system is essential in ensuring students' ability to ascend the tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy and reach their full potential.

Prior research has illuminated the issue of high school dropout rates in the United States. While there is a recognition of the profound impact of socioeconomic status, academic struggles, and family responsibilities on students' decisions to drop out, there is conversely the viewpoint that dropout rates are also influenced by systemic factors, including school policies, inadequate resources, and societal factors like access to healthcare. These perspectives emphasize the complexity surrounding dropping out and understanding these varying viewpoints is essential in the study of rural Missouri administrators' perceptions of alternative education programs and how they address dropout-related challenges. The researcher aimed to capture administrators' viewpoints through interviews, perception surveys, and document analysis. Examining the relevance of these perspectives to the field of alternative education and the barriers faced by administrators is crucial in offering recommendations for improving student outcomes in alternative education programs.

Alternative education programs have historically emerged as a response to systemic issues. Administrators, educators, and policymakers have sought innovative ways to fulfill students' physiological, safety, and belonging needs, creating more inclusive and flexible educational environments. This historical perspective sheds light on the evolving approaches and challenges in alternative education which informed the researcher's analysis of administrators' perceptions and barriers.

### **History of Alternative Education**

Alternative education programs can be effective in reducing truancy, improving student attitudes toward school, increase the acquisition and recovery of credits toward graduation, and reduce problem behaviors (National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.).

The number of alternative schools in the United States has grown significantly in an effort to address the diverse learning needs of at-risk students and reduce the high school dropout rate (Frank, 2019; Free, 2017; Lange & Sletten, 2002). There are currently approximately 5,312 public alternative schools and programs serving 529,535 students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). However, alternative education is not a new practice. The roots of alternative education can be traced back to various educational movements throughout history that sought to provide innovative and tailored approaches to learning.

Alternative schools became prevalent in the 1960s in an effort to help students who had already dropped out (National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.). Alternative education, as we know it today, found its roots in the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 put an emphasis on academic excellence and spawned a new wave of alternative education programs (Young, 1990). This was a decade of innovation in education that inspired reform within public schools.

In their book *The Fourth Way*, Hargreaves & Shirley (2009), give a history of educational reform in the United States. They describe the 1960s and 1970s as a time of passive trust in education in which societal movements such as Civil Rights, anti-war sentiment, and women's liberties led to reforms within public education. This social reform led to the 1970s emergence of charter schools and vocational education, some of the first forms of alternative education. Throughout the 1980s and mid 1990s, educational reform strategies shifted from innovative forward-thinking models toward centralization and standardization. As innovation decreased, dropout rates increased (Hargreaves &

Shirley, 2009). Alternative education programs geared towards students who were struggling with behavior issues, disruptive to the educational setting, or failing to be academically successful (Young, 1990) began to emerge. As states began to adopt accountability measures and publish school performance data in the late 1990s (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), alternative education began to narrow in scope to the current practices that are used today.

As alternative education has evolved, many programs began to offer alternate pathways to graduation, including the opportunity to earn equivalency credentials. Equivalency credentials, such as the HiSET, have been shown to be effective alternatives to a high school diploma (Miller et al., 2023). Cullen Bott-Lyons and Guillaume (2023) found that effective equivalency programs serve as a solution to not only attaining a high school diploma but also as a support network for future postsecondary success. Successfully completing the HiSET is associated with increases in income, job satisfaction, less reliance on public assistance, and overall improvement in quality of life (Klieger et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2023). The state of Missouri implemented an equivalency-based program, the Missouri Option Program in 2002. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reports that the program is used at Missouri high schools and alternative learning programs to retain students, decrease dropout rates, and increase work readiness (2023). Students enrolled in the program must complete competency-based requirements and show mastery utilizing the HiSET examination. While DESE reports successful outcomes, Armstrong and Trogdon (2020) found that there is no set success measure for the Missouri Option Program and no steps being taken to validate claims of success.

## **Types of Alternative Education Programs**

Alternative education programs serve as a critical bridge between students and the fulfillment of their educational potential. By recognizing and accommodating the diverse needs of at-risk students, alternative education programs play a pivotal role in supporting their journey toward academic success and self-fulfillment, thereby aligning with the core principles of Maslow's theory. Due to the broad nature of how alternative education has been defined, there are many different types of schools that could be included when identifying the types of alternative schools. Alternative classrooms, school-within-a-school models, separate alternative schools, continuation schools, magnet schools, and charter schools are all models of different types of alternative schools (National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.). For the purpose of this study, the researcher will focus on the two most common types of alternative education programs: school-within-a school models will be referred to as alternative programs and separate off-campus alternative schools will be referred to as alternative schools.

## **Variables for Success in Alternative Education**

Successful alternative education schools and programs all exhibit common variables and structural components that make them effective. These programs find success by addressing the physical, social-emotional, and academic needs of the students. A personalized approach that considers the unique experiences and psyche of each student can deter dropouts (Morrow & Villodas, 2018) and elevate students to find success. This holistic, or whole student approach to meeting student needs allows students to satisfy their physiological, safety, and esteem needs and begin developing self-actualization.

Maslow (1943) identified having a sense of belonging as an essential milestone on the way to achieving esteem and actualization. Successful alternative education programs focus on educational practices such as positive classroom atmosphere, individual curricular differentiation, and student-teacher relationships (Free, 2017; Glavan et al., 2022; Lewis & Basford, 2020; McGee & Lin, 2020). Cockerill (2019) found that strong student-adult relationships, student voice, peer relationship development, self-belief, support, and emphasis on emotional and social development all increased a student's sense of belonging and led to academic success. Students themselves have identified social emotional support, effective teaching, supportive staff, and a positive climate and culture as necessary components for success (Sanders & Galindo, 2022). Students who have not developed a sense of belonging at school can exhibit negative behaviors as a rejection of the environment that failed to meet their needs (Cockerill, 2019). Utilizing research based social emotional learning strategies and curriculum can decrease negative behaviors, improve student esteem, and lead to increased academic outcomes (Szlyk, 2020).

A 2019 study found that the decision to drop out of high school is not necessarily dependent on long-term experiences (McDermott). Short-term experiences such as school engagement and environment “weighed heavily in the decision to dropout” (McDermott et al., 2019). Smaller class sizes, flexible schedules, lower student to teacher ratio, focused curriculum, and individualized curricular differentiation provide opportunities for student growth and achievement (Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019).

Student-centered programs that adapt in response to student needs, utilize flexible curricula, focus on project-based learning, and implement differentiated instructional

approaches (Lewis & Basford, 2020) regain student trust and place them on a trajectory of success. Students at risk for dropping out need specific supports to be successful (Antoni, 2021) and successful alternative education programs and schools are designed to meet those needs.

### **Structural Components**

One of the reasons students may not be successful in a traditional education model is the way that it is structured. The five-day week, seven-hour day, traditional setting can be cumbersome and long. Large class size lend themselves to behavior concerns and are distracting environments. Lack of one-on-one assistance from teachers can increase frustration and anger in students who are already struggling academically. Flexible schedules, smaller class environment, a structured environment, individualized learning, consistency in expectations, social supports, counseling, strong rapport and a personalized experience (Johnston et al., 2018; McGee & Lin, 2020; Oligschlaeger, 2017) have been identified as components of successful alternative education programs.

Successful alternative education programs provide flexible scheduling and uniquely structured smaller learning environments. Meeting student needs in a flexible, smaller, family-like environment is the key to effective alternative education programs (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Smith, 2019). McGee and Lin (2020) found that flexible scheduling and shorter days were crucial to alternative student attendance, GPA, and discipline improvement. Students also reported a preference for a structured environment with a predictable schedule and consistency in expectations (McGee & Lin, 2020). Nelson (2019) found that smaller class sizes enabled one-on-one instruction and students were actively engaged in their learning. When an education program is intentionally

structured to meet the individualized needs of students, a personalized learning connection occurs.

A personalized one-on-one approach is a beneficial structural component of successful alternative education programs. The development of a positive student-teacher relationship is necessary for students to make academic progress and have positive outcomes (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). In their 2020 study, McGee and Lin found that a personalized experience, facilitated by self-directed individualized learning with staff support, as well as social skill development, goal setting, and individual counseling services, was instrumental in student success. Smith (2019) found that when student needs relating to their personal goals are met, the students are given power over their education. This personal buy-in motivates students toward success. Incorporating structural and relational strategies make the alternative education environment a place where students can and want to be (te Riele et al., 2020).

The structural components of successful alternative education programs can be seen as a practical application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs within the educational context. Just as Maslow's theory emphasizes the importance of fulfilling basic physiological and safety needs before addressing higher-level psychological and self-fulfillment needs, successful alternative education programs prioritize creating an environment that ensures students' basic needs for safety, belonging, and esteem are met. Successful alternative education programs prioritize creating an environment that ensures students' basic needs for safety, belonging, and esteem are met. These programs employ target interventions, tiered support systems, and systemic changes that not only address academic and behavioral challenges, but they also foster a sense of belonging and

emotional support. By nurturing relationships, providing individualized academic support, and promoting a positive and inclusive learning environment, these programs align with the foundational principles of Maslow's theory, ultimately helping at-risk students progress toward self-actualization through the attainment of a high school diploma.

### **Curriculum**

Rigorous, relevant, and culturally responsive instruction and curriculum are essential components for a successful alternative education program (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). Students in an alternative setting tend to need remedial instruction, self-paced instruction, and intense intervention (Amitay & Rahav, 2018). Curriculum that is specific to the needs and interests of students and is designed to promote both academic and socioemotional development can increase the likelihood of school completion (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; te Riele et al., 2020). A well-structured curriculum that offers real world applications and interactive learning experiences can help students see the direct relevance of their education to their future goals.

Teachers in an alternative education setting must be given the autonomy to adapt and modify the curriculum to meet the needs of students in the alternative setting. Nelson (2019) found that teachers in alternative education programs were frustrated that the district curriculum did not support students in the alternative school setting. te Riele et al. (2020) highlight the need for alternative school curricula to be flexible, adaptable, and engaging. Promoting opportunities for real-world learning and community engagement through a tailor-made curriculum generates interest and increases opportunities for academic success (te Riele et al., 2020). Nelson (2019) suggested that curriculum design

teams include representatives from the alternative setting, especially since there is a noted lack of curriculum specific to the alternative education setting.

Traditional curriculum is typically modified or shortened to make it more applicable to an alternative education setting (Nelson, 2019). However, diluting the curriculum and making it less rigorous creates the perception that while students are deserving of a personalized educational experience, they may not be deserving of rigorous academic learning (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). A student perception study conducted in 2022 found that students in an alternative setting spent most of their time on an online curriculum program that allowed them to “cheat the system” by clicking through answers repeatedly to get the correct answer (Glavan et al., 2022). Free (2017) found that educators in the alternative setting were conflicted about promoting the social and emotional well-being of their students while trying to balance the pressure of ensuring academic progress and success. Nelson (2019) found the same frustration as teachers and staff in alternative learning environments struggled with the format and structure of district mandated curriculum that does not adapt well in the alternative setting.

There is a significant lack of alternative curriculum available for educators to utilize (Nelson, 2019). Curriculum development for students in alternative education settings is a relatively new practice. As online programs, virtual learning, and private sector curriculum companies continue to expand, curriculum specifically geared toward alternative education is more readily available. Relevant curriculum that focuses on literacy and real-world application will aid educators in leading students down the path to graduation (Free, 2017; te Riele et al., 2020).

Maslow's hierarchy emphasizes the importance of addressing lower-level needs before progressing to higher-level ones just as the curriculum in alternative education programs must be tailored to fulfill the foundational academic and socioemotional needs of at-risk students. Curriculum serves to address students' immediate academic needs and the curriculum's relevance and real-world application correspond to Maslow's notions of self-actualization. By making learning experiences meaningful, ensuring that the curriculum is flexible and adaptable, and allowing teachers the autonomy to modify and tailor the curriculum as needed, schools can meet students where they are and responsively address lower-level needs while promoting self-actualization through relevant and adaptable learning experiences.

### ***Social Emotional Support and Classroom Culture***

Student's perceived connectedness to their school environment impacts their margin of success and decreases the likelihood of dropping out (Daily, Mann, et al., 2020; Holen et al., 2018; Wayman et al., 2021). McGee and Lin (2020) identify relationships between students and staff, available counseling, and adult mentors as having the highest influence on student success in an alternative learning setting. Students feel safe and welcome at school when they are able to build trusting relationships with teachers in a caring environment (Daily, Mann, et al., 2020; Holen et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). Janey (2017) found that the sense of belonging generated by the culture of community led students to feel safe and be more willing to take risks in their alternative learning environment. A positive, supportive, calm, welcoming environment where students feel connected, valued, and cared for empowers them to confidently take control of their individual success.

Students at risk of dropping out have often experienced adverse childhood experiences (Bae, 2020; Lewis & Basford, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2018). In their 2020 study over risk and protective factors for school dropout intentions and dropout, Samuel and Burger found that negative life events are related to an increase in dropout intentions as well as an increase in the probability of student dropouts. Adverse childhood experiences are associated with school absenteeism, retention, and disengagement (Bae, 2020; Crouch et al., 2019) all of which have been shown to increase the likelihood of not completing high school. Samuel and Burger (2020) defined negative life events as events that generate significant physiological, psychological, and/or behavioral responses that bring about unexpected change, generate stress and anxiety, and disrupt normal functioning. Maslow's research (1943) suggests students cannot focus on their educational needs until their basic needs are being met; the connection between adverse childhood/negative life events and increased risk of failing to complete high school is evident. Students who have experienced adverse childhood events and negative life events benefit from teachers who are trained in trauma informed practices (Lewis & Basford, 2020).

There are many programs and interventions aimed toward improving student academics through social emotional learning, character building, and the acquisition of life skills. The implementation of intervention programs has shown promising outcomes including increased student academic success, decreased absenteeism, and increased student motivation and overall sense of belonging at school (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Wayman et al., 2021). Intervention programs such as Reconnecting Youth, Check and Connect, Check In and Check Out, PREPaRE, School Wide Positive Behavior

Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS), and School of Life Foundation (SOLF), have also shown improved academic outcomes through interpersonal and social skills training (Ballard & Bender, 2022; Wayman et al., 2021).

Griffiths et al. (2019) found that interventions are more effective when they are tailored to a student's individual needs, not a universal approach. Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (SW-PBIS), a multitiered system of support (MTSS), is a popular program that focuses on enhancing school climate and culture by decreasing negative behaviors through a universal framework of clearly defined and taught expectations that are reinforced through positive behavior supports and rewards (Elrod et al., 2022). Traditional school settings that have implemented SW-PBIS over multiple years have found positive effects on behavior and learning outcomes (Elrod et al., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2021). Educators have begun adapting MTSS's in restrictive settings such as alternative education programs with mixed results. Grasley-Boy et al. (2021) found that while restraints and seclusions decreased following implementation of SW-PBIS in alternative settings, results for behavior incidents and academic outcomes were mixed. Other research has shown that to attain positive results using SW-PBIS in alternative settings, students need targeted and individualized support beyond the universal structure to decrease unwanted behaviors and increase academic outcomes (Ballard & Bender, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2019). A school-wide model is ineffective in providing the personalized support that at-risk students need to be successful.

Addressing students' social and emotional needs within alternative education programs is intricately tied to Maslow's theory of human motivation. Just as Maslow emphasized the significance of fulfilling basic needs as a prerequisite for self-

actualization, the provision of a positive, supportive, and nurturing school environment in alternative settings is foundational to supporting students' growth and development. Establishing trusting relationships with teachers and mentors, creating a caring and welcoming atmosphere, and the development of a sense of belonging all align with Maslow's notion of meeting students' need for safety and belonging. The recognition of adverse childhood experiences and the impact of negative life events on students' well-being corresponds with Maslow's insight that students cannot fully engage in their educational endeavors if their basic psychological and safety needs are not addressed. The implementation of intervention programs aimed at enhancing students' social emotional skills reflects Maslow's emphasis on self-actualization and personal growth. Alternative education programs can promote student success by prioritizing the fulfillment of foundational needs and empowering students with a strong sense of safety, belonging, and self-actualization.

Prior research has emphasized the importance of the variables for success discussed throughout this section; however, opposing perspectives challenge these ideas and question the efficacy of non-traditional approaches. Esteemed educators like Wong and Wong (2018), Hattie (2009), and Marzano (2007) have dedicated their careers to the conviction that well-structured learning environments, characterized by clearly defined schedules and expectations, serve to mitigate distractions and cultivate ideal settings for effective learning. Proponents of rigorous curriculum feel like the curriculum in alternative programs is diluted and not an accurate reflection of student learning (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Free, 2017; Nelson, 2019). Traditionalists contend that a focus on social emotional support should be a secondary focus, academics and knowledge-based

curriculum first (Hirsch, 2007). These opposing viewpoints challenge the conventional framework for success in alternative education. By examining these differing perspectives and their implications, the researcher was able to offer a nuanced understanding of the variables that contribute to success and the trade-offs involved in designing alternative education programs.

### **Barriers to Successful Alternative Education Programs**

Administrators may know what it takes for an alternative education program to be successful, but incorporating and implementing those success measures is challenging (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). Alternative education programs are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of students and the structure and context of programs differs from district to district. However, some common barriers to successful alternative education programs include a lack of funding, limited access to qualified staff, stigma and negative perceptions, and a lack of collaboration and communication between staff.

Alternative education programs often require additional resources to provide personalized instruction, mental health services, and other support services for at-risk students. Public schools, particularly in rural areas, may not have sufficient funding to support these programs adequately (National Rural Education Association, 2021). The National Dropout Prevention Center (n.d.) found that successful alternative education programs often have dedicated funding sources that support the program's staff, materials, and resources. This funding allows for individualized instruction, small class sizes, and other supportive services that help students succeed. Funding is critical to the success of alternative education programs and insufficient funding can limit a program's ability to help at-risk students (McGee & Lin, 2017).

Working with high needs at-risk students requires specialized skills and training. Finding qualified staff who are willing to work in these programs can be challenging. Finding qualified staff in a rural school district amid a nationwide educator shortage is nothing short of daunting. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) found that alternative schools are more likely to have teachers with less experience and those teachers were less likely to be appropriately certified. Goldhaber et al. (2020) found that rural school districts have significantly and substantially higher staffing challenges as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. Special education teachers in particular are in high demand and hard to find in rural areas, leaving many districts and alternative education programs reliant on uncertified and undertrained teachers (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

Alternative education programs are often considered a last chance for troubled or delinquent youth. This negative perception can make it difficult to recruit students and staff and gain support from parents, community members, and policy makers. Duke and Tenuto (2020) found in their study of administrator perceptions that most administrators feel that others view alternative education programs as “dumping grounds” for at-risk students, leading to isolation, marginalized status, and negative stigma for the program and students. Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) found that educators see alternative schools as both punishment and providing needed support for at-risk students. Educators may justify exclusionary practices by claiming moving students to alternative education programs due to behavior is better for the student because they will get the support they need, while the reality is that the alternative program did not have the resources available to fully meet students’ needs and student behavior did not improve (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016). The most frequently measured outcomes in alternative learning settings are negative,

while positive desirable outcomes are not frequently measured. By adopting a strength-based approach to monitoring alternative education, facilitators can increase appropriate desired behaviors (Ballard & Bender, 2022). Actively highlighting the diverse achievements and positive outcomes of alternative education programs while providing adequate resources to implement supportive programs can contribute to reshaping these perceptions over time.

Many alternative education programs operate independently of the traditional school. This can lead to a lack of collaboration and communication between staff and students in the separate settings, creating a disconnect between the two groups and limiting the opportunities for students to transition back into the traditional educational setting (Burkett, 2012; Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Nelson, 2019). Nelson (2019) found that there is disconnect between administrators and educators in alternative programs. Burkett (2012) suggests that alternative school administrators collaborate with stakeholders and provide education on the purposes and function of the alternative school, needs of at-risk students, transition services needed to increase student outcomes, and support needs of alternative students once they return to the regular setting. It is important that all stakeholders work together to create a supportive, caring community with high academic standards to enable students to succeed (Duke & Tenuto, 2020).

Another barrier to successful alternative education programs includes mixed data regarding a lack of impact on student outcomes and ongoing behavioral issues. A 2020 report by the United States Government Accountability Office found that alternative schools often lack adequate class options, are plagued by chronic absenteeism, and have substantially lower academic outcomes than nonalternative schools (Nowicki, 2020).

Using traditional accountability indicators in alternative settings may not accurately reflect the outcomes due to the unique nature of alternative programs (Newton et al., 2022). Students in alternative programs often face behavioral challenges and managing classroom behavior can be more complex in a non-traditional setting. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders have the highest placement rates in alternative education settings (Kumm et al., 2020) and these students need specific individual support to be successful. Teachers in alternative education settings also report being inadequately prepared to meet the challenging and diverse needs of students with extreme behavioral issues (Pettit, 2023; Siegel & Valtierra, 2021) which may impact their ability to be effective in the classroom.

The barriers faced by alternative education programs, including funding shortages, a lack of qualified staff, negative perceptions, and issues related to collaboration are intertwined with Maslow's theory and hierarchy of needs. Inadequate funding and staffing can hinder students' access to a safe and supportive learning environment, impacting their physiological and safety needs. Negative perceptions and stigma can erode students' sense of belonging and self-esteem needs. Addressing these barriers is vital to creating a nurturing and empowering environment for students in alternative education, aligning with Maslow's vision of holistic well-being and self-actualization.

Students in alternative education programs have unique needs and challenges in and out of school that may impact their performance and ability to be successful. Access to resources and funding, a lack of qualified staff, negative perceptions, and a lack of collaboration are all barriers to successful alternative education programs. Looking to the

future, school administrators must reflect on how their practices and perceptions impact their ability to meet, or stand between, their students' success (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). Addressing these challenges can lead to more effective alternative education strategies and improved outcomes for students.

### **Gap in Literature**

The existing body of scholarly, peer-reviewed literature on alternative education programs provides a comprehensive overview of the factors contributing to their success and the barriers they face. Research has revealed several key components associated with successful alternative education programs, including personalized instruction, small class sizes, social-emotional support, positive environment, flexible curricula, and dedicated funding sources (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Free, 2017; Glavan et al., 2022; Lewis & Basford, 2020; McGee & Lin, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2018). These components align with Maslow's theory of human motivation, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling basic physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs before students can progress toward self-actualization (Fisher & Crawford 2020; H. Gross, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies have highlighted the significance of addressing the unique needs of at-risk students in alternative settings such as those with emotional and behavioral disorders (Bae, 2020; Crouch et al., 2019; Kumm et al., 2020; Siegel & Valtierra, 2021).

Alternative education has evolved since its inception. Earlier forms of alternative education often had a punitive focus, where students who faced disciplinary issues or academic challenges were removed from mainstream schools. However, findings have shown the focus has shifted toward providing supportive interventions and a personalized

approach to learning in alternative education (Antoni, 2021; Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Lewis & Basford, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2018; Smith, 2019). Over time, alternative education programs have increasingly recognized the significance of creating a positive classroom atmosphere, fostering strong student-teacher relationships, promoting a sense of belonging, and focusing on social-emotional development (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Cockerill, 2019; Daily, Mann, et al., 2020; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; Holen et al., 2018; McGee & Lin, 2020; Smith, 2019; Szlyk, 2020; te Riele et al., 2020; Wayman et al., 2021). Research has also highlighted the importance of a flexible schedule, (McGee & Lin, 2020; Johnston et al., 2018; Oligschlaeger, 2017; Nelson, 2019) personalized student-centered curriculum, academic interventions, and smaller class sizes in alternative education programs (Amitay & Rahav, 2018; Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Free, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018; Kamrath, 2019; Lewis & Basford, 2020; te Riele et al., 2020). These changes are based on research findings and a greater understanding of the complex needs of at-risk students.

Despite the information available, there are still gaps in the literature. Further investigation is required to understand the long-term academic and life outcomes of students who have completed alternative education programs successfully, including educational attainment, career trajectories, and overall life outcomes (Donnelly, 2021; Fossett, 2018). While some research has explored short-term academic outcomes, there is a need for more longitudinal studies to understand the long-term impact of alternative education on students' self-actualization and life fulfillment related to Maslow's goal of self-actualization. More comparative research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of different models of alternative education (McGee & Lin, 2017; Pettit, 2023) and how

alternative education programs address the physiological and safety needs of at-risk students. Research should examine the preparation and training of teachers and staff working in alternative education (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Pettit, 2023; Siegel & Valtierra, 2021). The perspective of students themselves, particularly those who have faced adversity and succeeded in alternative settings, remains underrepresented in the literature (Cooper, 2019; Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Glavan et al., 2022; Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020). Addressing these gaps is not just a matter of academic interest, but is crucial for providing support for students in their journey toward self-actualization and personal growth.

While research has illuminated the structural and programmatic aspects of successful alternative education, there is a need for further exploration into the differences concerning the link between these recognized success benchmarks and the perceived barriers to their effective implementation in real-world educational settings. This study is designed to fill the gap in literature between previously identified measures for success in alternative education programs and barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs as perceived by administrators. An inclusive holistic approach to understanding alternative education programs is essential for comprehensively addressing the needs of at-risk students. While substantial progress has been made in understanding alternative education programs, these areas of research will help to deepen our knowledge and inform the development of more effective programs.

### **Summary**

Students must have their basic needs met to achieve academic success, and this responsibility often falls on the shoulders of the nation's public schools. This concept of

academic success hinging upon having their fundamental needs adequately addressed is rooted in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which emphasizes the importance of physiological and safety needs as foundational to learning. While educational reform has made strides to provide differentiated instruction for all students, some students fail to be successful in traditional education programs. When these students drop out of high school, their quality of life, economic success, and societal impact are adversely affected.

Alternative education programs and schools are working to decrease the number of high school dropouts and increase student success in non-traditional settings. While there is some research on barriers to successful alternative education programs, there is limited research on how administrator perceptions of the barriers impact the success and availability of alternative education programs in rural areas. Effective dropout identification and prevention strategies play a pivotal role in ensuring that students are equipped to reach the milestone of high school graduation. Research has illuminated the various factors contributing to dropout rates, including chronic absenteeism, adverse childhood experiences, academic struggles, and behavioral issues. To address these challenges, alternative education programs emerged as vital components in the educational landscape. These programs are tailored to meet the unique needs of at-risk students, offering personalized instruction, mental health services, and support services. By emphasizing social-emotional learning, character building, and life skills acquisition, alternative programs foster a sense of belonging, connection, and trust between students and staff, aligning with Maslow's HON.

One of the fundamental aspects of educational success is ensuring that students' physiological and safety needs are met. When students enter alternative education

programs, it is often because these basic needs have not been adequately addressed in traditional settings. Understanding what administrators perceive as barriers to alternative education can be seen as a way of assessing the extent to which these foundational needs are being met. The research framework of this study investigates what Missouri public school administrators perceive as barriers to successful alternative education programs, implicitly addressing the foundational importance of meeting students' physiological and safety needs for academic success. This study is rooted in the core principles of Maslow's theory, aiming to assess the extent to which these principles are acknowledged and applied in the context of alternative education programs.

Prior studies have established key success measures within the realm of alternative education programs. However, a gap exists concerning the link between these recognized success benchmarks and the perceived barriers to their effective implementation in real-world educational settings. This study aims to bridge the gap by shedding light on the intricate interplay between established success metrics and the practical obstacles encountered by school administrators in the pursuit of equitable educational opportunities for all students. By addressing this critical junction, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges and potential avenues for innovation in alternative education administration.

Chapter three will explain the methodology used to conduct the study, including the research design, specific procedures used in conducting the study, and an explanation of the data analysis. Chapter four will provide a detailed analysis of the data collected, including an examination of the variables for successful alternative education programs and the barriers they face as perceived by administrators. Chapter five will present the

author's conclusions, synthesizing the importance of addressing basic needs, the significance of a high school diploma, the complexities of dropout identification and prevention, and the role of alternative education programs in achieving academic success. Recommendations for future research and education policy will also be discussed.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

Alternative education programs play a crucial role in addressing the diverse needs of students who may not thrive in traditional educational settings. Alternative education programs can offer valuable pathways to success for students. However, the impact of administrator perceptions and barriers associated with implementing and sustaining these programs remains relatively unexplored. Research to date does not fully examine how administrator perceptions of alternative education, barriers to successful programs, and administrator's level of awareness of student needs are affecting at-risk students in rural school districts. This qualitative narrative study aims to examine the perceptions of rural Missouri administrators regarding alternative education programs and identify the barriers they perceive in implementing and maintaining these programs and the impact alternative programs may have on student learning outcomes. By understanding the perspectives of administrators, who play a vital role in shaping educational policies and practices, this study seeks to shed light on the challenges and opportunities associated with alternative education in rural Missouri.

The use of qualitative methods in this study offered a unique opportunity to explore the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of rural Missouri administrators in their own words. Roberts and Hyatt (2019) explained how qualitative research allows the researcher to look at the essential character or nature of a particular phenomenon through real-world issues and settings. The qualitative narrative approach allows for in-depth exploration of the complexities and nuances surrounding alternative education, offering

insight into the factors that impact the successful implementation and sustainability of these programs.

To gather comprehensive data, this study employed three primary data collection instruments: a perception survey, interviews with school administrators, and a document analysis of district policy. The perception survey provided a broad overview of administrators' beliefs and attitudes toward alternative education, while the interviews offered a deeper exploration of their experiences and perspectives. The inclusion of a document analysis further enriched the study's depth by providing insights into the formal framework and expectations set for alternative education programs which may align or contrast with administrator perceptions. By utilizing these three district methods, this study aimed to triangulate the findings and enhance the validity and reliability of the results.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri as perceived by administrators. By focusing specifically on rural Missouri, this study recognized the unique challenges and opportunities associated with alternative education programs in rural settings. The geographic and demographic particularities of rural areas necessitate an in-depth examination, acknowledging factors such as limited resources, isolation, and unique community dynamics (Goldhaber et al., 2020; J. Johnson et al., 2010; Johnston et al., 2018; National Rural Education Association, 2021; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2018) that can impact the success of such programs. The findings will not only contribute to the existing body of

literature on alternative education, but hold implications that extend beyond the confines of academia. Rural communities often serve as the backdrop for the implementation of alternative education initiatives and the insights gleaned from this study will provide valuable awareness and recommendations for policy makers, educators, and stakeholders involved in implementing and supporting these programs in rural areas.

In subsequent sections of this chapter, the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analysis techniques will be described in detail. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study will also be discussed. Ultimately, this study seeks to advance the understanding of how administrator perceptions of alternative education programs impact program availability, learning outcomes, and contribute to the ongoing efforts to create inclusive and effective educational environments for all students.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative narrative study was guided by the following research question:

1. What do rural Missouri public school administrators perceive as barriers to successful alternative education programs?
  - a. What role do funding and resource allocation play in the success of alternative education programs?
  - b. How do administrators perceive the influence of cultural and community factors on the success of alternative education programs?
  - c. To what extent do administrators perceive the involvement of parents and guardians as a barrier to the success of alternative education programs?

- d. To what extent do administrators perceive meeting students' basic needs as a crucial factor in the success of alternative education programs?
- e. What strategies do administrators employ to address barriers to the success of alternative education programs?

### **Participants**

Participants for this study included nine administrators at rural secondary public schools across Missouri. The researcher used a random sampling technique to select school districts from each of Missouri's nine Regional Professional Development Center (RPDC) regions to ensure a representative sample of the rural Missouri administrator population. School districts that were identified as rural by DESE were selected from this sampling to maintain consistency with the purpose of the study identifying the perceptions of rural public school administrators in the state of Missouri.

Once the schools were identified, the next step was to select the administrators within those schools who would participate in the study. The selection of administrators was based on their roles and responsibilities within the schools, specifically targeting those who held positions such as principals, superintendents, or other administrative positions directly involved in the decision-making processes related to alternative education programs. Of the participants seven were superintendents, one is an assistant superintendent, and one is a high school principal. Three were female and six were male. All participants had been administrators for more than five years and had experience with alternative programs or schools.

In accordance with the guidelines of Southwest Baptist University regarding the protection of human participants, a request for review was submitted to the Research

Review Board (RRB) for approval to interview the appropriate participants for this study. Upon receiving RRB approval, the researcher began recruiting participants and collecting data. Participant consent was required for participation in the interview process. The researcher sent requests for participation (Appendix A) to each school district. Structured interviews were then conducted with each of the nine participants. Final participation in the study was dependent on the willingness and availability of administrators to engage in the research activities.

### **Research Setting**

The research setting for this study consisted of rural public high schools in Missouri's nine RPDC regions: Southeast, Heart of Missouri, Kansas City, Northeast, Northwest, South Central, Agency for Teaching Leading, and Learning, St. Louis, and Central. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are 308 rural school districts in the state of Missouri, accounting for 59.9% of the total schools and 32.2% of total enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). This varied geographic location was chosen to capture a broad range of administrator perceptions in different rural contexts across the state of Missouri.

Participant one (P1) works for a rural district in the Southeast RPDC. P1 is a high school principal with over 25 years of educational experience and over 11 years of experience as a public school administrator. P1 has a doctorate degree and has been with the same district their entire career. P1's school district has a total enrollment of 3,927 students with 1,278 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$494,887,914 and a free and reduced lunch population of 48.8%. The district has an annual performance report score of 78.0 % and a graduation rate of 94.04%. P1's

district operates an alternative learning facility located on a separate campus. Their alternative center houses 72 high school students and employs 30 staff members. P1's involvement with the alternative school includes student referrals, working directly with the director of the alternative school, and facilitating the transition back to the traditional high school when applicable.

Participant two (P2) works for a rural district in the Heart of Missouri RPDC. The Heart of Missouri RPDC is based out of Columbia, Missouri and serves 57 school districts within 15 counties. P2 serves as superintendent at a K-12 school district in the Heart of Missouri region. They have been in their position for 6 years and have over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator. The school district has a total enrollment of 867 with 323 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$151,550,765 and a free and reduced lunch population of 45.5%. The district has an annual performance report score of 72.7 % and a graduation rate of 97.4%. The school district has a credit recovery program located in a classroom within the high school and offers Missouri Options for students at risk of not graduating. The district also partners with an outside co-op for students with severe needs. P2's involvement with the alternative education program in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant three (P3) works for a rural district in the Kansas City RPDC. The Kansas City RPDC is based out of Kansas City, Missouri and partners with 34 school districts within four counties. In the Kansas City region serves primarily urban and suburban school district. P3 serves as superintendent at a K-12 school district in the Kansas City region. They have been in their position for 4 years and have over 11 years'

experience as a public school administrator. The school district has a total enrollment of 739 students with 206 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$236,565,330 and a free and reduced lunch population of 25.3 percent. The district is a top performing district and has an annual performance report score of 93.7% and a graduation rate of 98%. The school district has a small credit recovery program. As superintendent of the district, P3's involvement with district programs includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant four (P4) works for a rural district in the Northeast RPDC. P4 serves as the superintendent for their district, a position they have held for seven years. They have worked in public education for over 25 years and hold a doctorate degree. The school district has a total enrollment of 1,331 students with 364 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$165,468,393 and a free and reduced lunch population of 39.8 %. The district has an annual performance report score of 84.2 percent and a graduation rate of 93.26 percent. The school district has a small alternative education program located in a classroom within the high school for students at risk of not graduating. P4's involvement with the alternative education program in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant five (P5) works for a large rural district in the Northwest RPDC. P5 serves as superintendent at a K-12 school district and they have been in their position for 6 years. P5 has over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator and holds a doctorate degree. The school district has a total enrollment of 10,604 students with 3,145 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$1,201,350,390 and a free and reduced lunch population of 73.4%. The district has an

annual performance report score of 63.2% and a graduation rate of 76.95%. The school district has a large alternative learning center that serves students grades K-12. As superintendent of the district, P5's involvement with district programs includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant six (P6) works for a rural district in the South Central RPDC. The South Central RPDC is based out of Rolla, Missouri and partners with 63 school districts within 13 counties. P6 serves as the assistant superintendent at a K-12 school district in the South Central region. They have been in their position for 3 years and have five years' experience as a public school administrator. The school district has an enrollment of 1,787 total students with 548 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$204,836,139 and a free and reduced lunch population of 47.8%. The district has an annual performance report score of 66.1% and a graduation rate of 92.3%. The school district has an alternative education program located within the high school and offers evening classes for students at risk of not graduating. The district is piloting a middle school alternative education program for the 2023-2024 school year. P6's involvement with the alternative education program in their district primarily includes oversight of the curriculum and assessment process.

Participant seven (P7) works for a rural district in the Agency for Teaching, Leading and Learning RPDC, in the southwestern area of the state. The Agency for Teaching, Leading and Learning (ATLL) RPDC is based out of Springfield, Missouri and partners with 94 school districts within 20 counties. P7 serves as superintendent for a K-12 school district in the ATLL region. They have been in their position for 2 years and have over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator. The school district has a

total enrollment of 350 students with 139 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$28,029,052 and a free and reduced lunch population of 100%. The district has an annual performance report score of 83.8% and a graduation rate of 85.7%. The school district offers credit recovery, Missouri Options, and is a part of the rootEd alliance. As superintendent, P7's involvement with alternative education in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and evaluation.

Participant eight (P8) works for a fringe-rural district in the St. Louis RPDC. The St. Louis RPDC is based out of St. Louis, Missouri and partners with 63 school districts within 3 counties. The St. Louis region serves primarily urban and suburban school districts. P8 serves as the assistant superintendent of finance for a PK-12 district. They have been in their position for 3 years and have been a public school administrator for over 11 years. The school district has a total enrollment of 3,318 students with 981 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$365,819,889 and a free and reduced lunch population of 33.8 percent. The district is a top performing district and has an annual performance report score of 90 percent and a graduation rate of 98.5 percent. The school district does not have an alternative education program but offers credit recovery and Missouri Options for its small number of at-risk students. P8's involvement with the alternative education in their district includes overseeing finances and facilities. However, at a previous district P8 oversaw the development and implementation of an alternative education program.

Participant nine (P9) works for a rural district in the Central RPDC. The Central RPDC is based out of Warrensburg, Missouri and partners with 71 school districts within 14 counties. The Central region serves primarily rural school districts. P9 serves as

superintendent at a K-12 school district in the Central region. They have been in their position for 1 year and have over 20 years' experience as a public school administrator. The school district has a total enrollment of 756 students with 356 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$81,117,330 and a free and reduced lunch population of 52.1%. The district has an annual performance report score of 78.2% and a graduation rate of 96.6%. The school district offers credit recovery and Missouri Options for students at risk of not graduating. P9's involvement with alternative education in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and evaluation. However, at a previous district P9 oversaw the development and implementation of an alternative education program.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative narrative study design was chosen to facilitate a holistic exploration of rural Missouri administrators' perceptions. Qualitative research can be defined as a "collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (nonnumeric) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon or interest" (Mills & Gay, 2019, p. 20). Qualitative narrative inquiry focuses on the stories, experiences, and meanings that individuals attribute to their lived experiences (Mills & Gay, 2019; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). By utilizing a narrative approach, this study aims to capture the subjective experiences of administrators, providing a platform for them to share their perspectives and reflect on the intricacies of alternative education in their rural contexts.

The primary data collection methods employed in this study include a perception survey, interviews with school administrators, and a document analysis of policy. The perception survey serves as a tool to gather broad information about administrator

perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Mills & Gay, 2019) regarding alternative education. Interviews are valuable in collecting complementary data (Mills & Gay, 2019) and provide an avenue for administrators to express their experiences, opinions, and challenges related to alternative education programs in a more detailed and narrative manner. The document analysis will look at district-level policies, procedures, and guidelines to allow the researchers to comprehensively understand how alternative education programs are structured, supported, and expected to operate within compared to the perception of the administrators in that district.

Qualitative data analysis is a process that requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data to truly understand, describe, and classify the information gathered (Mills & Gay, 2019). To comprehensively explore the data, the researcher's methodological approach will combine descriptive statistics, thematic analysis, and policy analysis. This strategy aims to uncover the intricate layers of administrator's perspectives and experiences and the tangible outcomes of alternative education programs. Descriptive statistics will aid in quantifying aspects such as the frequency of themes, patterns of response, and variations in the occurrence of specific codes. Simultaneously, the narrative within the data will be explored with the aid of thematic analysis. Through thematic analysis the naturally occurring themes will be organized into categories that capture the essence of administrator's perceptions. This integrated approach enables the identification of overarching trends while delving into the nuances within the individual narratives. The examination of district policy, procedure, and expectations surrounding alternative education will complement the other data sources

and provide insight into the formal framework and expectations set for alternative education programs which may align or contrast with administrator perceptions.

Data triangulation enhances the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the analysis (Noble & Heale, 2019). In this study, the validity of the findings was ensured by employing various methods of data analysis. Methodological triangulation, which involves using multiple data collection approach to confirm findings (Noble & Heale, 2019), was meticulously followed. This approach involved integrating descriptive statistics with data from perceptions surveys, thematic analysis of interviews, and an examination of district policy. By aligning these analytical perspectives, the researcher's interpretations gained validation. Interview recordings underwent joint transcription and verification by both the researcher and participants to ensure data accuracy. The analysis of the interview data included generating codes that captured key concepts, ideas, and patterns within the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Gay, 2019). Using multiple analytical methods to explore the data from different angles and perspectives allowed the researcher to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. This comprehensive approach, merging qualitative insights, provided a richer understanding of rural Missouri administrator perceptions.

### **Researcher's Role**

In this study, the researcher assumed the role of an impartial investigator with a commitment to ethical and unbiased exploration. As the principal investigator, the researcher was responsible for designing the study, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting the findings. To ensure methodological rigor and minimize potential biases, certain precautions were taken.

Implicit bias, also known as unconscious bias, refers to the subtle, subconscious prejudices that individuals may unknowingly hold (de Houwer, 2019; Fazio et al., 2020; Thien, 2023). Recognizing the potential impact of implicit bias on research findings, the researcher took deliberate steps to minimize their influence on every phase of the study. An awareness of one's own potential biases is essential to maintain the integrity of the research (J. Johnson et al., 2020).

The role of the researcher in this qualitative narrative study was that of facilitator, data collector, analyst, and interpreter of participant perceptions while upholding ethical standards and contributing to the current body of research (Mills & Gay, 2019). Prior to data collection, the researcher engaged in self-reflection to identify any personal biases that could impact the study. The researcher also engaged in regular discussions with colleagues and mentors, inviting diverse perspective to challenge assumptions and mitigate potential blind spots. During data collection, efforts were made to establish rapport with participants without revealing personal opinions or biases that could sway their responses. Interview questions were carefully crafted to be neutral and open-ended, minimizing potential leading language that could inadvertently influence participant responses. During analysis, the researcher employed a systematic approach that focused on the data itself, aiming to identify themes and patterns based solely on the content rather than preconceived notions.

While every effort was made to minimize potential biases, it is important to acknowledge that complete elimination of bias is an ongoing challenge. Transparency and reflexivity were maintained throughout the study to provide a clear account of the researcher's actions, decisions, and reflections. By explicitly addressing implicit bias,

employing methods of self-awareness, and engaging in transparent and rigorous analysis, the researcher strived to maintain a neutral stance in order to present an accurate and unbiased portrayal of the findings. The researcher's aim was to contribute to the scholarly discourse surrounding rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education programs while acknowledging and addressing the potential for bias.

### **Procedures**

In this study, proper ethical foundations were established through the acquisition of RRB approval and permission from Southwest Baptist University. The RRB procedures increase autonomy and respect while safeguarding participants (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Following RRB clearance, the researcher utilized the school district information provided on each RPDC public website to generate a list of RPDC participating districts in each region. The school districts were then entered into a Google Sheet organized by region. Utilizing the random selector procedure in Google Sheets, one district per region was selected. Random sampling, or random selection, ensures that the sample is representative of the population from which it is drawn and is “the best way to obtain a representative sample” (Mills & Gay, 2019, p.149). If a chosen district did not have an alternative program, or declined to participate, the next district on the list was chosen.

Upon selection of each school district, invitations to participate in the study were extended to the superintendent of each selected school district through official email (Appendix A). The invitations explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of responses. As outlined in the email, the superintendent of each district could name a designee to participate in the study based on

their knowledge and involvement with available alternative education programs within their school district. If a school district did not wish to participate, the researcher eliminated them from the random selector and began the process of selection again. Administrators who expressed interest in participating were provided with informed consent forms (Appendix B), including consent to the recording of the interview, which they were required to review, sign, and return before their inclusion in the study.

Upon receiving participant's consent, data collection commenced with the distribution of the "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs" survey. The perception survey was used to gather broad information about administrator perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Mills & Gay, 2019). The perception survey was updated to a digital format through the use of Google Forms. The form was sent to each participant requesting completion within seven days of receipt. If a response was not received within the requested time frame a follow-up email was sent. This instrument aimed to gauge administrators' perceptions of alternative education programs and barriers to implementing successful programs in rural Missouri.

To gain deeper insights, structured interviews (Mills & Gay, 2019) were then conducted. Interview questions were developed based on the review of literature and research questions for this study (Appendix D). Participants were contacted to set up interview times. Teleconference interviews via Zoom were conducted when in-person interviews were not a possibility due to time constraints or geographical barriers. Zoom was used to transcribe the interviews.

At the onset of the interview, participants were informed a second time that the interview was being recorded. To maintain consistency and comparability, a standardized

interview protocol was used to provide a framework for the interviews. Interview questions were presented in the same order at each interview to foster a systematic approach to data collection. No time limit was imposed upon the participant responses and the researcher utilized pre-established structured questions and prompts (Appendix D) to clarify information and maintain focus. Participants' initial responses were recorded and transcribed using Zoom. This recording process facilitated accurate transcription and analysis of the interview data.

In addition to survey responses and interviews, document analysis was employed as a data collection method in this study. This systematic review and interpretation of relevant district documents allowed the researchers to extract valuable insights and contextual understanding. In this research, policy documents, guidelines, and official reports (Mills & Gay, 2019) related to alternative education programs in the districts specified were meticulously examined to uncover underlying themes, priorities, and potential barriers that could shed light on administrators' perceptions. Upon completing the data collection phase, the researcher compiled the gathered information, reviewed the data, and began the analysis process.

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used to gather data on rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education programs and barriers include the *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs* and a series of interview questions. The original survey developed by Dr. Ben Burnett, "*Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs*" was adapted for use in this study and draws upon the foundational work of Burnett, as originally developed for his 2002 dissertation titled "*The Perceptions*

*of Secondary Principals of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Schools.*" Burnett (2002) identified 26 effectiveness characteristics through an expansive review of literature and created the perception survey to analyze if there was a significant difference between perception and practice (Burkett, 2012). Burnett's research and expertise in the field of alternative education have contributed to our understanding of the perceptions surrounding these programs. Burnett's 26 characteristics have been validated with literature and research applicable to each characteristic (Burkett, 2012). His survey, recognized for its validity and reliability, has been utilized and refined over the years, making it a well-established and robust instrument for assessing administrators' perspectives on alternative education programs.

Upon completion of their own review of literature, the researcher has found that the perception survey created by Burnett serves as an effective tool to capture the nuanced perceptions and attitudes of educational leaders. Based on the common principles and variables of successful alternative education programs identified in the review of literature (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Johnston et al., 2018; Lewis & Basford, 2020; McGee & Lin, 2020), the validity of this survey extends to Missouri and other similar contexts. Its reliability is demonstrated by its consistent application in various contexts and its demonstrated ability to yield meaningful and consistent results. Moreover, the survey aligns with the core objectives of this study, allowing for a comprehensive examination of administrators' viewpoints regarding alternative education programs in rural Missouri and barriers to their success. The author received permission from Burnett (Appendix C) to modify the survey for use in Missouri. By utilizing Dr. Burnett's established instrument, this research benefits from a validated tool that is tailored to

assess the effectiveness and challenges of alternative education programs, providing a solid foundation for the study's data collection and analysis.

*Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs* assesses administrators' perceptions of alternative education programs. The survey comprises a series of prompts that address various aspects related to alternative education and survey items are designed to measure both the overall perception of alternative education and specific barriers identified by administrators in implementing and sustaining these programs in Missouri. The use of this survey will enhance the understanding of the challenges and opportunities within alternative programs.

In addition to the perception survey, a series of interview questions were developed by the researcher to gather in-depth qualitative data based on findings in the review of the literature regarding dropout reporting (Edwards & Mindrila, 2019; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Weissberg, 2010), alternative education, and barriers to implementing alternative education programs (Goldhaber et al., 2020; Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; McGee & Lin, 2017; Nelson, 2019; ). The interview questions were designed to elicit rich narratives and insights from participants, allowing them to share their unique perspectives and reflect on their experiences. The use of both the perception survey and interview questions provided a comprehensive approach to capturing data and offering a better understanding of rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis involves immersion of the researcher in the data, consolidating data, focusing on the data that provides insights into the research questions,

identifying patterns and themes, and making meaning from those patterns and themes (Butina, 2015). The perception survey, interview responses, and accountability data were reviewed, analyzed, and evaluated. The researcher analyzed the data by utilizing descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The analysis aimed to uncover patterns, themes, and insights related to rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education programs and barriers to their success.

The data obtained from the perception survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey utilized a Likert scale that ranges in numerical value from one to five, strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively (Mills & Gay, 2019). The researcher calculated the frequency of responses for each item on the survey to identify how many participants selected each response option. Then the researcher calculated the percentages of participants who chose each response option to provide a clearer picture of the distribution of responses. The researcher then calculated the mean score for each item by summing up all the numerical responses and dividing them by the total number of participants. By calculating the mean, the researcher was able to get an idea of the average perception of participants regarding each item. The researcher calculated the median score for each item to identify outliers in the data that could skew the mean. The researcher looked for patterns, trends, and variations in the data (Mills & Gay, 2019). Means and percentages across different items were analyzed to identify areas of consensus or divergence. This analysis generated an overall snapshot of administrators' perceptions and identified significant relationships, differences, and trends in the survey responses. These findings provided insights into the prevalence of certain perceptions among rural Missouri administrators.

The data obtained from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns and themes within qualitative data (Mills & Gay, 2019). First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, ensuring accurate representation of participant responses. Participants were asked to review the transcripts for accuracy. The researcher then familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. The researcher then analyzed the content by generating codes that captured key concepts, ideas, and patterns within the data. The codes were then organized into broader themes that represented recurring patterns and topics across the interviews.

The document analysis involved identifying key policy objectives, eligibility criteria for alternative education programs, curriculum guidelines, provisions for support services, reporting mechanisms, and strategies for fostering equity and access for each of the selected school districts. The content of these documents was subjected to scrutiny, allowing for the identification of patterns, discrepancies, and alignment with administrators' viewpoints. This document analysis extends the study's reach beyond individual perceptions and interviews, offering a broader perspective on the structural and systematic factors (Mills & Gay, 2019) that influence the success of alternative education programs.

Throughout the analysis, attention was given to any contrasting or outlying data that provided unique perspectives or that challenged the emerging themes. By scrutinizing these divergent elements, a meticulous effort was made to ensure that the analysis encompassed not only the predominant trends but also the intricacies embedded

within the data. This deliberate approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration that captures the breadth and depth of rural Missouri administrator perceptions related to alternative education programs. As a result, the analysis authentically captures the richness and complexity of their perspectives, painting a vivid and holistic portrait of their experiences and insights.

### **Summary**

This study is designed to fill the gap in literature between previously identified measures for success in alternative education programs and barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs by contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing school administrators as they work toward equitable educational opportunities for all students. In this chapter, the researcher identified the methodology used to conduct this qualitative study. The focal point of the methodology lies in the data collection and analysis. The perception survey provides an overview of administrator beliefs, while interviews explore their experiences and perspectives. Document analysis offers a broader perspective on structural and systemic factors that may influence student outcomes. The participants were identified and a summary of the research setting, design, instrumentation, interviews, and data analysis were explained. Through triangulation, acknowledging potential biases, and employing a diverse set of analytical tools, this research aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities encountered by rural Missouri administrators within the realm of alternative education programs. In chapter four the researcher will provide a detailed analysis of the data collected. Chapter five presents the author's conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

#### **Introduction**

In the preceding chapters the researcher explored the varied landscape of alternative education, exploring its historical foundations, theoretical underpinnings, and the variables influencing its success. The review of literature provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and potential opportunities inherent in alternative education programs, underscoring the importance of understanding the experiences of at-risk students, and the factors that affect their educational trajectories. In chapter four, the researcher will transition from the contextual background to the heart of this qualitative narrative study.

This qualitative narrative study aimed to understand rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs by contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing school administrators as they work toward equitable educational opportunities for all students. Guided by the theoretical framework, A Theory of Human Motivation, primarily Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the researcher sought to explore how the realization of essential human needs materializes within the context of alternative education.

The need for this study emerged from the gap in existing literature, where prior research has primarily focused on quantitative measures of success and outcomes in alternative education, often overlooking the holistic experiences of at-risk students. While quantitative data provide valuable insights, they often fail to capture the intricate narratives of administrators who are navigating a range of challenges. This qualitative

narrative study is essential to gain a deeper appreciation of the nuance factors influencing success within alternative education programs and how those factors are perceived by administrators.

Central to the inquiry are the research questions that have guided the study:

1. What do rural Missouri public school administrators perceive as barriers to successful alternative education programs?
  - a. What role do funding and resource allocation play in the success of alternative education programs?
  - b. How do administrators perceive the influence of cultural and community factors on the success of alternative education programs?
  - c. To what extent do administrators perceive the involvement of parents and guardians as a barrier to the success of alternative education programs?
  - d. To what extent do administrators perceive meeting students' basic needs as a crucial factor in the success of alternative education programs?
  - e. What strategies do administrators employ to address barriers to the success of alternative education programs?

These questions aim to explore how effectively addressing these needs can help overcome barriers associated with successful alternative education programs and subsequently enhance outcomes for students who are at risk of not graduating high school.

In this chapter, the researcher will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the extensive qualitative data gathered throughout the study, integrating multiple data sources for triangulation purposes. By using descriptive statistics, thematic analysis, and policy

analysis the researcher will provide an understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and tangible outcomes of alternative education programs as perceived by administrators. The researcher will quantify various aspects of the data, including the frequency of emerging themes, patterns of responses, and variation in the occurrence of specific codes. Simultaneously, the researcher will analyze the naturally occurring themes and organize them into meaningful categories that capture the essence of administrators' perceptions. The researcher will also examine district policies, procedures, and expectations governing alternative education. This examination will shed light on the formal framework and the standards set for the programs enabling the identification of alignments and disparities between the perceptions of administrators and the formal policies in place. The presentation of results will highlight both overarching trends and the intricacies within individual narratives, offering a multi-dimensional view of the complex landscape of alternative education programs and their potential impacts.

Chapter five will provide a synthesis of the findings from this qualitative narrative study, drawing connections between the perceptions of administrators, the lived experiences of at-risk students, and the theoretical framework based around Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The implications of these findings for both theory and practice will be discussed, and recommendations for future research will be presented. Together, these chapters will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the intricate interplay between the perceptions of school administrators, the needs of at-risk students, and the outcomes within alternative education programs.

## **Participants**

The researcher used a random sampling technique to select school districts from each of Missouri's nine Regional Professional Development Center (RPDC) regions to ensure a representative sample of the rural Missouri administrator population. The researcher created a Google Sheet with separate tabs for each region. Districts from each region were then added to an alphabetical list. The researcher then used the randomize feature to generate a random list from the alphabetical list. Schools that did not meet the parameters of the study (i.e. did not have a high school or were not rural) were eliminated from the list. The researcher then went down the list contacting administrators in the districts. If an administrator did not respond to the request within five days, the researcher moved to the next school district on the list. Once the participants were identified, the researcher collected informed consent forms, sent the participants the perception survey, and scheduled the interviews.

Participant one (P1) works for a rural district in the Southeast RPDC. P1 is a high school principal with over 25 years of educational experience and over 11 years of experience as a public school administrator. P1 has a doctorate degree and has been with the same district their entire career. P1's school district has a total enrollment of 3,927 students with 1,278 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$494,887,914 and a free and reduced lunch population of 48.8%. The district has an annual performance report score of 78.0% and a graduation rate of 94.04%. P1's district operates an alternative learning facility located on a separate campus. Their alternative center houses 72 high school students and employes 30 staff members. P1's involvement with the alternative school includes student referrals, working directly with

the director of the alternative school, and facilitating the transition back to the traditional high school when applicable.

Participant two (P2) serves as superintendent for a rural district in the Heart of Missouri RPDC. P2 has 6 years' experience as a superintendent and over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator. P2 has a doctorate degree and has been an administrator at three rural school districts throughout their career. P2's current school district has a total enrollment of 867 with 323 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$151,550,765 and a free and reduced lunch population of 45.5%. The district has an annual performance report score of 72.7% and a graduation rate of 97.4%. The school district has a credit recovery program located in a classroom within the high school and offers Missouri Options for students at risk of not graduating. The district also partners with an outside co-op for students with severe needs. P2's involvement with the alternative education program in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant three (P3) works for a rural district in the Kansas City RPDC. P3 serves as superintendent at a K-12 school district and they have been in their position for 4 years. P3 has over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator and holds an Education Specialist degree. The school district has a total enrollment of 739 students with 206 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$236,565,330 and a free and reduced lunch population of 25.3 %. The district is a top performing district and has an annual performance report score of 93.7% and a graduation rate of 98%. The school district has a small credit recovery program. As

superintendent of the district, P3's involvement with district programs includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant four (P4) works for a rural district in the Northeast RPDC. P4 serves as the superintendent for their district, a position they have held for seven years. They have worked in public education for over 25 years and hold a doctorate degree. The school district has a total enrollment of 1,331 students with 364 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$165,468,393 and a free and reduced lunch population of 39.8%. The district has an annual performance report score of 84.2% and a graduation rate of 93.26%. The school district has a small alternative education program located in a classroom within the high school for students at risk of not graduating. P4's involvement with the alternative education program in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant five (P5) works for a large rural district in the Northwest RPDC. P5 serves as superintendent at a K-12 school district and they have been in their position for 6 years. P5 has over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator and holds a doctorate degree. The school district has a total enrollment of 10,604 students with 3,145 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$1,201,350,390 and a free and reduced lunch population of 73.4%. The district has an annual performance report score of 63.2% and a graduation rate of 76.95%. The school district has a large alternative learning center that serves students grades K-12. As superintendent of the district, P5's involvement with district programs includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and program evaluation.

Participant six (P6) works for a rural district in the South Central RPDC. P6 serves as the assistant superintendent at a K-12 school district in the South Central region. They have been in their position for 3 years and have 5 years' experience as a public school administrator. P3 holds a doctorate degree. Their current school district has an enrollment of 1,787 total students with 548 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$204,836,139 and a free and reduced lunch population of 47.8%. The district has an annual performance report score of 66.1% and a graduation rate of 92.3%. The school district has an alternative education program located within the high school and offers evening classes for students at risk of not graduating. The district is piloting a middle school alternative education program for the 2023-2024 school year. P6's involvement with the alternative education program in their district primarily includes oversight of the curriculum and assessment process.

Participant seven (P7) works for a rural district in the Agency for Teaching, Leading and Learning RPDC, in the southwestern area of the state. P7 serves as superintendent and has been in their position for 2 years. P7 has over 11 years' experience as a public school administrator and holds a doctorate degree. P7 has worked in multiple rural school districts of varying size, and their current district has a total enrollment of 350 students with 139 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$28,029,052 and a free and reduced lunch population of 100%. The district has an annual performance report score of 83.8% and a graduation rate of 85.7%. The school district offers credit recovery, Missouri Options, and is a part of the rootEd alliance. As superintendent, P7's involvement with alternative education in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and evaluation.

Participant eight (P8) works for a fringe-rural district in the St. Louis RPDC. P8 serves as the assistant superintendent of finance for a PK-12 district. They have been in their position for 3 years and have been a public school administrator for over 11 years. P8 holds an Education Specialist degree. Their current school district has a total enrollment of 3,318 students with 981 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$365,819,889 and a free and reduced lunch population of 33.8%. The district is a top performing district and has an annual performance report score of 90% and a graduation rate of 98.5%. The school district does not have an alternative education program but offers credit recovery and Missouri Options for its small number of at-risk students. P8's involvement with the alternative education in their district includes overseeing finances and facilities. While P8 currently works at a larger district, they previously worked in a smaller rural district and oversaw the development and implementation of an alternative education program.

Participant nine (P9) works for a rural district in the Central RPDC. P9 serves as superintendent at a K-12 school district in the Central region. They have been in their position for 1 year and have over 20 years' experience as a public school administrator. P9 holds an Education Specialist Degree. They are passionate about rural education and have worked in rural districts across the state and are an active member of the Missouri Association of Rural Education. Their current school district has a total enrollment of 756 students with 356 students enrolled in the high school. The district has an assessed valuation of \$81,117,330 and a free and reduced lunch population of 52.1%. The district has an annual performance report score of 78.2% and a graduation rate of 96.6%. The school district offers credit recovery and Missouri Options for students at risk of not

graduating. P9's involvement with alternative education in their district includes oversight, fiscal responsibility, and evaluation. P9 oversaw the development and implementation of an alternative education program at a previous district and is working toward doing the same in their current district.

### **Verification/Trustworthiness**

The qualitative narrative design of this study serves as the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of rural Missouri administrators' perceptions. Qualitative research, as defined by Mills and Gay (2019), involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon. Within this narrative inquiry framework, the focus is on capturing the stories, experiences, and meanings attributed by individuals to their lived experiences (Mills & Gay, 2019; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Multiple data collection methods were employed by the researcher. The perception survey serves as a broad tool to gather information about administrator perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Mills & Gay, 2019) regarding alternative education. Interviews complement the survey by providing a platform for administrators to express their experiences, opinions, and challenges in a detailed and narrative manner (Mills & Gay, 2019). Document analysis of district-level policies, procedures, and guidelines offered a deeper understanding of how alternative education programs are structured and supported within districts, compared to administrators' perceptions.

Ensuring the credibility and validity of the data analysis was of utmost importance to the researcher. To uphold credibility, rigorous data verification processes were employed, including member checking, triangulation, and maintaining an audit trail

(Mills & Gay, 2019). Adherence to established qualitative research standards, transparency about potential biases, and thorough documentation of the analytical process further enhanced the study's validity. By taking the time to employ these measures, the findings reflected in this chapter represent an accurate and trustworthy analysis of the perspectives of rural Missouri administrators regarding the challenges, barriers, and successes of alternative education programs.

### **Methods used for Data Collection**

In qualitative research, ensuring the validity and credibility of the data is essential to establishing trustworthiness and reliability in the findings (Mills & Gay, 2019). Various strategies were employed to validate the data, including member checking, triangulation of data sources, and maintaining an audit trail. These techniques aim to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the study by corroborating findings and ensuring alignment with participants' perspectives.

The document analysis involved a systematic review of key documents, including student handbooks, mission statements, district accountability data, alternative education program guidelines, and Board of Education (BOE) policies over attendance, discipline, at-risk student interventions, promotion/retention, and graduation requirements. This method provided valuable contextual information and allowed for a thorough understanding of the formal framework and expectations surrounding alternative education programs within each district. To ensure accuracy and reliability, the researcher reviewed and analyzed the documents multiple times and generated a summary of findings (Mills & Gay, 2019).

The perception survey was designed to gather information on administrators' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding alternative education programs. The survey chosen, *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs*, was modified with permission and has been used in previous studies as a comprehensive reliable tool. The survey included 26 characteristics of effective alternative education programs. Participants first had to rank each characteristic from their perspective on a scale of 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. Participants then completed the same process from the perspective of the existence of those characteristics in their school district. The data from the survey were subjected to rigorous analysis, including descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, to identify patterns and trends. This data provided valuable insights into the broader perceptions of administrators across multiple districts and compared their perceptions to the existence of the specific characteristics within their districts.

Interviews were conducted with the school administrators to explore their experiences, opinions, and challenges related to alternative education programs in a narrative manner. All participants were asked the same series of questions and allowed to share their insights and experiences without interruption. This allowed for participants to share their perspectives authentically. The interviews were recorded by Zoom and transcribed using the Zoom AI feature. The researcher then reviewed the transcript for accuracy and sent the transcript to the participant for them to review and provide feedback.

Member checking, a form of data validation (Mills & Gay, 2019), involved having participants review the transcripts of their interviews to confirm the accuracy and interpretation of their responses. This process served to enhance the credibility and

trustworthiness of the data by ensuring that participants' voices were accurately represented and that interpretations were aligned with their perspectives. Any discrepancies or clarifications identified during member checking were addressed through further discussion with participants, contributing to the overall validity of the study's findings.

By employing these methods of data collection and validation, the study aimed to ensure the reliability, credibility, and validity of the data, thereby strengthening the overall quality of the research findings. The application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as the theoretical underpinning for this study provides a compelling lens through which to interpret the findings and understand the dynamics of rural Missouri administrators' perceptions of alternative education programs. Maslow's framework emphasizes the fundamental human needs that form the foundation for individual motivations and behaviors, highlighting the significance of factors such as safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). By exploring how administrators perceive the importance of meeting these needs through the context of alternative education programs in rural Missouri, this study sheds light on the complex interplay between educational initiatives and individuals' innate drives for growth and fulfillment. Through the data collection methods employed, the study explored administrators' perceptions, experiences, and challenges, revealing insights that resonate with Maslow's framework. The use of member checking as a validation method ensured that the findings authentically reflected participants' perspectives, further enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. By synthesizing these elements, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how alternative education programs can meet the diverse needs

of students and administrators in rural settings, advancing efforts to foster equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Data triangulation enhances the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the analysis (Noble & Heale, 2019). In this study, the validity of the findings was ensured by employing various methods of data analysis. This approach involved integrating descriptive statistics with data from perceptions surveys, thematic analysis of interviews, and an examination of district policy. By aligning these analytical perspectives, the researcher's interpretations gained validation. Interview recordings underwent joint transcription and verification by both the researcher and participants to ensure data accuracy. The analysis of the interview data included generating codes that captured key concepts, ideas, and patterns within the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Gay, 2019). Using multiple analytical methods to explore the data from different angles and perspectives allowed the researcher to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. This comprehensive approach, merging qualitative insights, provided a richer understanding of rural Missouri administrator perceptions.

### **Clarifying Bias**

Implicit bias, also known as unconscious bias, refers to the subtle, subconscious prejudices that individuals may unknowingly hold (de Houwer, 2019; Fazio et al., 2020; Thien, 2023). Recognizing the potential impact of implicit bias on research findings, the researcher took deliberate steps to minimize their influence on every phase of the study. An awareness of one's own potential biases is essential to maintain the integrity of the research (J. Johnson et al., 2020).

Prior to data collection, the researcher engaged in self-reflection to identify any personal biases that could impact the study. The researcher also engaged in regular discussions with colleagues and mentors, inviting diverse perspectives to challenge assumptions and mitigate potential blind spots. During data collection, efforts were made to establish rapport with participants without revealing personal opinions or biases that could sway their responses. Interview questions were carefully crafted to be neutral and open-ended, minimizing potential leading language that could inadvertently influence participant responses. During analysis, the researcher employed a systematic approach that focused on the data itself, aiming to identify themes and patterns based solely on the content rather than preconceived notions.

While every effort was made to minimize potential biases, it is important to acknowledge that complete elimination of bias is an ongoing challenge. Transparency and reflexivity were maintained throughout the study to provide a clear account of the researcher's actions, decisions, and reflections. By explicitly addressing implicit bias, employing methods of self-awareness, and engaging in transparent and rigorous analysis, the researcher strived to maintain a neutral stance to present an accurate and unbiased portrayal of the findings. The researcher's aim was to contribute to the scholarly discourse surrounding rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education programs while acknowledging and addressing the potential for bias.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The analysis of the data was guided by research-based best practices for qualitative analysis and interpretation, including descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes and making meaning of those theme (Butina,

2015; Mills & Gay, 2019). Building upon the methodological framework established in chapter three, the focus now shifts toward unpacking the qualitative data collected through perception surveys, interviews with rural Missouri administrators, and document analysis. As qualitative research is interpretive, the methods chosen for analysis are essential in recanting the narrative within the complexities of the data. Through the application of these research-based methods, the author aimed to uncover insights, identify emerging patterns, and build a constructive narrative that reveals the intricacies around rural Missouri administrator perceptions to the barriers and challenges surrounding implementing effective alternative education programs.

### **Perception Survey**

The data obtained from the perception survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey utilized a Likert scale that ranges in numerical value from one to five, strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively (Mills & Gay, 2019). The researcher calculated the frequency of responses for each item on the survey to identify how many participants selected each response option. Then the researcher calculated the percentages of participants who chose each response option to provide a clearer picture of the distribution of responses. The researcher then calculated the mean score for each item by summing up all the numerical responses and dividing them by the total number of participants. By calculating the mean, the researcher was able to get an idea of the average perception of participants regarding each item. The researcher calculated the median score for each item to identify outliers in the data that could skew the mean. The researcher looked for patterns, trends, and variations in the data (Mills & Gay, 2019). Means and percentages across different items were analyzed to identify areas of

consensus or divergence. This analysis generated an overall snapshot of administrators' perceptions and identified significant relationships, differences, and trends in the survey responses. These findings provided insights into the prevalence of certain perceptions among rural Missouri administrators.

### ***Perception of Importance for Effective Alternative Schools/Programs***

The first section of the perception survey asked administrators to rate their perception of the importance of each of the identified 26 characteristics for effective alternative education programs. The data derived from the nine participants provides insights into the relative importance assigned to each characteristic. A summary of responses is provided in Table 1.

Administrators rate nine of the 26 characteristics as highly important, with an average rating of 4.5 or higher. Well-defined standards, rules, and expectations rated the highest out of all the characteristics. This highlights the importance of establishing clear guidelines for behavior and academic performance necessary to maintain a structured and conducive learning environment. Caring supportive climate, sense of community, commitment to staff development, and communication were all perceived by administrators as essential characteristics for effective alternative education programs. This demonstrates that administrators believe a strong sense of community with an emphasis on creating a positive and nurturing environment within the school is essential for fostering student well-being and engagement. School commitment to student success while providing students with the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED were highly valued among administrators highlighting the commitment to supporting diverse pathways to academic success and attainment for students in alternative education

programs. The recognition of frequent home-to-school communication as essential demonstrates that administrators perceive strong partnerships between parents, teachers, and administrators as instrumental in supporting student success and well-being.

Administrators' perceptions of several key aspects of alternative education fall within a moderate range, with ratings averaging between 4 and 4.49. Administrators recognize the importance of teacher choice, emphasizing the need for educators dedicated to the alternative education setting, and the significance of an engaging instructional program tailored to diverse student needs. This acknowledgement extends to the role of staff members with mental health expertise; the recognition of the role of mental health support in addressing the diverse needs of students in alternative education settings is noted among administrators. However, the availability of group or individual counseling was rated lower, indicating differing priorities among administrators in terms of support services. Administrators acknowledge the potential benefits of regular attendance and smaller school and class sizes, facilitating personalized attention and fostering a stronger sense of community. Furthermore, the importance of community support and leveraging community resources were perceived as moderately important, underlining the collaborative efforts needed to enhance alternative education programs and support student success.

The perceptions of administrators regarding the importance of various characteristics for effective alternative education programs can be closely linked to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The emphasis placed on establishing clear standards, rules, and expectations reflects the foundational need for safety and structure within the educational environment, aligning with Maslow's concept of physiological and safety

needs. The recognition of a caring and supportive climate, sense of community, and commitment to student success demonstrates the significance of addressing belongingness and esteem needs, crucial for fostering a positive and nurturing atmosphere conducive to learning. By prioritizing frequent communication between home and school, administrators acknowledge the importance of fulfilling students' social and emotional needs, contributing to their sense of belonging and self-esteem. Additionally, the recognition of diverse pathways to academic success, including the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED, reflects a commitment to fulfilling students' esteem and self-actualization needs by providing them with opportunities for achievement and recognition. The alignment between administrators' perceptions and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs highlights the integral role of holistic support in promoting student well-being and academic success within alternative education settings.

There were characteristics that were perceived as less important to the effectiveness of alternative programs by administrators. Student enrollment by choice received an average rating of 3.00, suggesting it may not be considered as critical in the alternative school contexts as many students are placed there due to at-risk behaviors. Similarly, housing the alternative program in a separate facility, the presence of an advisory committee, and freedom for alternative schools to make site-based decisions, had minimal strong agreement among administrators, indicating it might not be a top priority. A multi-tiered behavior management system and addressing cultural and learning style differences both received a moderate rating of 3.56; most administrators acknowledged their importance, with varying levels of emphasis. Access to medical care

received a significantly lower rating of 3.0, implying it may be perceived as less crucial compared to other aspects of support in alternative education environments.

**Table 1**

*Importance for Effective Alternative Schools*

Characteristic	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Average
The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible.	5	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	5	4.67
Teachers work in the alternative school because they choose to work here.	5	3	5	5	2	5	4	5	5	4.33
Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate.	2	3	3	5	2	2	3	3	4	3
There are well defined standards, rules and expectations.	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4.89
The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and noncompetitive.	4	5	4	5	4	3	5	4	5	4.33
There is a sense of community between staff and students.	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4.78
Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health.	5	4	5	5	4	3	5	4	4	4.33
The total school size is less than 250 students.	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	3	5	4.33
The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility.	2	1	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	3.67
Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED.	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	4.67
Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate.	4	5	4	5	2	5	5	4	4	4.22
Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.	3	5	4	5	3	5	5	2	4	4
There is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.	5	3	4	5	4	4	5	2	4	4
There is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12.	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	3	4	4.44
Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions.	4	5	5	4	3	2	4	3	5	3.89
The school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.	4	1	5	5	4	3	4	5	5	4
There is school commitment to have each student to be successful.	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	4.67
The staff has continual staff development.	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	4.67
There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	4.78
Students have access to medical care.	3	1	3	5	4	2	3	3	3	3
There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.	3	3	5	4	4	2	4	4	3	3.56
Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	4.56
The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.	4	1	3	5	4	4	4	3	4	3.56
There is administrative and community support for the program.	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4.33
The staff is motivated and culturally diverse.	3	1	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	3.67
There is an advisory committee for the alternative program.	3	1	5	4	4	3	4	3	4	3.44

### *Existence in Alternative School/Program*

The second section of the survey asked participants to rank the existence of various characteristics in their current school district's alternative school or program. Each characteristic was evaluated based on its presence within the school environment. The ratings provide insights into the implementation and prevalence of key aspects within the alternative education setting. A summary of responses is provided in Table 2.

There was a stark contrast between administrator's perceptions of effectiveness and the existence of those characteristics in their alternative programs or schools. Administrators reported 19 of the 26 characteristics with an average existence rating of under 4.00. Administrators reported the existence of a caring supportive school climate with an average rating of 3.89, indicating room for improvement in fostering a more nurturing atmosphere. Similarly, the presence of teachers actively choosing to work in alternative schools received a moderately low average rating of 3.11, indicating potential challenges in attracting educators dedicated to the alternative setting.

Certain characteristics received relatively low ratings. Student enrollment by choice had an average existence rating of 2.11, suggesting that in most cases, students may not actively opt for enrollment in alternative programs. Staff members with mental health expertise received a moderately low average rating of 3.00, and only four of the school districts reported group or individual counseling in their alternative programs. This may indicate limitations in providing comprehensive support for addressing diverse social-emotional needs.

When viewing these contrasting results through the lens of Maslow's HON, the challenges of meeting students physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-

actualization needs are brought to light. The lower average ratings for characteristics such as a caring and supportive school climate, teacher dedication to the alternative setting, and the presences of mental health expertise highlight the potential challenges in addressing students' safety and belongingness needs within alternative settings. The limited existence of student enrollment by choice and comprehensive mental health support services may hinder students' sense of autonomy and self-esteem, thereby hindering their progress toward self-actualization.

While some characteristics showed moderate presence, such as community involvement and continual staff development, others varied across districts. The utilization of community resources to support the curriculum and the presence of motivated and culturally diverse staff received moderately low average ratings, highlighting potential challenges in these areas. The presence of an advisory committee was rated lowest, with only two administrators indicating its existence, emphasizing a perceived lack of need for advisory input in some districts.

The existence of several key aspects of alternative education as reported by administrators fall within a moderate range, with ratings averaging between 4 and 4.49. The existence of well-defined standards, rules, and expectations received a moderately high average rating of 4.11, indicating a strong emphasis on establishing clear guidelines for behavior and academic performance. The presence of attendance policies leading to a reduction in dropout rates received an average rating of 4.11, suggesting consistent efforts across districts to support student retention and success. Additionally, maintaining a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12 was prevalent in most districts, underscored by an average rating of 4.11, highlighting the importance placed on

manageable class sizes for personalized instruction and support. Administrators also reported a shared commitment to student success, reflected in an average existence rating of 4, indicating their desire to provide comprehensive support and resources. A clearly stated mission and discipline code were commonly present, with an average rating of 4, demonstrating a collective emphasis on establishing clear guidelines and expectations for behavior and decision-making across districts.

Only two characteristics were reported with a rating average over 4.5. Having a school size of less than 250 was present in all participants school districts, with an average rating of 4.56. This may indicate the significance of maintaining smaller school communities for enhanced personalized attention and stronger sense of belonging, or that rural Missouri school districts typically have smaller enrollments. All administrators indicated that their school district provides students with the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED, with an average rating of 4.67. This reflects a commitment to offering diverse pathways to academic success.

Characteristics such as well-defined standards and expectations, attendance policies leading to dropout reduction, and manageable class sizes demonstrate efforts to address students' safety and belongingness needs by providing structure, support, and personalized attention. The prevalence of smaller school sizes and the availability of diverse pathways to academic success through diploma or GED attainment further reflect a commitment to fulfilling students' physiological, safety, and esteem needs, facilitating their journey toward self-actualization. Overall, the findings regarding the existence of various characteristics within alternative education programs highlight both the progress

made and the areas requiring further attention in creating supportive and empowering learning environments aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

**Table 2**

*Existence in Alternative School Program*

Characteristic	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Average
The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible.	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	3.89
Teachers work in the alternative school because they choose to work here.	2	5	3	3	2	4	4	2	3	3.11
Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate.	2	1	2	3	2	1	3	2	3	2.11
There are well defined standards, rules and expectations.	5	4	5	4	3	4	4	5	3	4.11
The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and noncompetitive.	3	5	4	4	4	2	2	3	3	3.33
There is a sense of community between staff and students.	2	3	4	3	3	2	3	3	3	2.89
Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health.	4	4	3	3	4	2	2	2	3	3
The total school size is less than 250 students.	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	3	4.56
The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility.	5	4	3	1	3	1	2	2	3	2.67
Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED.	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	4.67
Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate.	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	3	4.11
Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.	3	5	5	5	4	5	3	1	3	3.78
There is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.	5	1	3	5	4	1	4	2	3	3.11
There is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12.	5	5	2	5	4	5	4	4	3	4.11
Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions.	4	5	4	4	4	1	4	2	3	3.44
The school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.	4	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3.33
There is school commitment to have each student to be successful.	4	5	4	5	4	3	4	4	3	4
The staff has continual staff development.	4	5	3	5	4	4	2	4	3	3.78
There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.	4	3	5	5	4	4	4	4	3	4
Students have access to medical care.	3	1	2	5	4	2	2	2	3	2.67
There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.	3	1	3	5	4	4	2	4	3	3.22
Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.	4	1	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	3.44
The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.	3	1	3	3	4	2	2	2	3	2.56
There is administrative and community support for the program.	4	5	3	5	4	1	3	3	3	3.44
The staff is motivated and culturally diverse.	2	1	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	2.78
There is an advisory committee for the alternative program.	1	1	4	1	4	1	2	3	3	2.22

### *Comparison of Perception vs. Existence*

Understanding the alignment between administrators' perceptions and the existence of key characteristics in their alternative programs is crucial for understanding the challenges and barriers to implementing effective alternative programs in rural Missouri. A comparative analysis, detailed in Table 3, reveals disparities between administrators' perceptions and the actual presence of specific attributes. While administrators rate the school climate highly, with an average perception score of 4.67, the actual existence of such a climate in schools is rated lower, with an average score of 3.89. Additionally, administrators perceive the importance of various factors, such as teacher placement by choice and school-to-home communication, differently from their actual existence within the alternative education setting.

Further examination sheds light on discrepancies between perception and reality across various characteristics of effective alternative education. Despite administrators strongly believing in the presence of well-defined standards and a supportive community, the actual existence of these attributes falls short of their perceptions. Similarly, while there is consensus on the importance of providing students with diverse pathways to academic success, the reality of some aspects, such as access to medical care and cultural inclusivity in the curriculum, lags. These findings underscore the need for administrators to address gaps between perception and reality to enhance the effectiveness of alternative education programs.

The analysis reveals areas of alignment between administrators' perceptions and the actual existence of certain characteristics. Administrators' perceptions of the importance of reducing dropout rates through attendance, small class sizes, and students

having the opportunity to graduate with a GED or diploma closely match the reality of such efforts within alternative schools. There is also consistency between perception and reality regarding the importance of continual staff development and the presence of a clearly stated mission and discipline code. These areas of alignment highlight opportunities for leveraging existing strengths to further improve alternative education programs.

**Table 3***Comparison of Perception vs. Existence*

Characteristic	Perception	Existence	Difference
The school climate is caring, supportive, friendly and flexible.	4.67	3.89	0.78
Teachers work in the alternative school because they choose to work here.	4.33	3.11	1.22
Student enrollment is by choice, not a mandate.	3	2.11	0.89
There are well defined standards, rules and expectations.	4.89	4.11	0.78
The instructional program is engaging, student centered, challenging and noncompetitive.	4.33	3.33	1
There is a sense of community between staff and students.	4.78	2.89	1.89
Staff members have experience with and have been trained in mental health.	4.33	3	1.33
The total school size is less than 250 students.	4.33	4.56	-0.22
The alternative program is housed at a separate and adequate facility.	3.67	2.67	1
Students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED.	4.67	4.67	0
Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in drop out rate.	4.22	4.11	0.11
Attendance at the alternative school leads to a reduction in absences.	4	3.78	0.22
There is group and/or individual counseling in the alternative program.	4	3.11	0.89
There is a teacher to student ratio of no greater than 1:12.	4.44	4.11	0.33
Alternative schools are given the freedom to make site-based decisions.	3.89	3.44	0.44
The school utilizes community resources to support their curriculum.	4	3.33	0.67
There is school commitment to have each student to be successful.	4.67	4	0.67
The staff has continual staff development.	4.67	3.78	0.89
There is a clearly stated mission and discipline code.	4.78	4	0.78
Students have access to medical care.	3	2.67	0.33
There is a behavioral management system in place that includes a level system and positive rewards.	3.56	3.22	0.33
Parents, teachers and administrators are involved with frequent home/school communication.	4.56	3.44	1.11
The curriculum addresses cultural and learning style differences.	3.56	2.56	1
There is administrative and community support for the program.	4.33	3.44	0.89
The staff is motivated and culturally diverse.	3.67	2.78	0.89
There is an advisory committee for the alternative program.	3.44	2.22	1.22

## **Interviews**

This section presents an analysis of themes drawn from nine interviews conducted with Missouri public school administrators. Building upon the perception surveys, the focus of this qualitative narrative study now shifts to exploring emergent themes reflecting participants' experiences, perspectives, and beliefs. Through qualitative narrative inquiry, the researcher aimed to uncover the intricacies of alternative education through the lens of the practitioners. These themes provide insight into the challenges, successes, and transformative aspects of alternative education practice and policy.

After the interviews were conducted, the researcher generated transcripts of the interviews utilizing the Zoom artificial intelligence transcription feature. The researcher emailed the transcripts to participants to review for accuracy. The researcher then read the transcripts multiple times and generated summaries of participant responses to each question in a Google Sheet, a method of reading and memoing described by Mill & Gay (2019). From the summaries, the researcher then clustered related themes or patterns within the data. From the theme clusters, the researcher grouped the themes that shared similar concepts or meanings to create a cohesive organizational analysis that captured the essence of the participant's experiences and perspectives. From the themes, the researcher generated specific codes to systematically organize the themes and synthesize the data. By marking units of text with codes and labels to indicate patterns and meaning, the researcher was able to reduce the narrative data into manageable forms (Mills & Gay, 2019). Throughout the nine interviews, three common themes emerged as barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs: staffing challenges, community perception, and the importance of meeting students' needs. A description of the codes

generated can be found in Appendix F. A summary of interview themes can be found in Appendix G.

Across participants, staffing emerged as a predominant challenge, with concerns ranging from forced placements leading to turnover to perceptions of staff mindset affecting school culture. This directly affects the safety and belonging needs of students by influencing the stability and continuity of support within the alternative education environment. Community perception was a reoccurring barrier, with multiple administrators sharing how negative perceptions of alternative education impact their ability to provide the ideal alternative setting for their students. Negative community perceptions compound the barriers to meeting students' esteem needs, as they can lead to stigmatization and a lack of acceptance, hindering students' sense of worth and belonging. Additionally, funding and resource allocation were consistently identified as significant hurdles, impacting infrastructure development and the ability to address student needs effectively. These limitations in funding and resource allocation may impede the fulfillment of students' physiological needs by restricting access to essential resources and infrastructure necessary for their well-being and academic success. Addressing these barriers is essential to creating an environment conducive to meeting students' holistic needs and facilitating their self-actualization in alternative education settings.

Despite these barriers, participants demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in navigating the challenges surrounding alternative education programs in their districts. Strategies to address funding limitations included seeking grants, forming partnerships, and leveraging local resources. Proactive measures such as stipends for alternative

education staff, early intervention programs, and community partnerships were employed to mitigate staffing challenges and foster a supportive school culture.

Administrators highlighted the influence of community perceptions and cultural factors on alternative education. Most participants did not elaborate on cultural factors, with only P4 sharing “there was some racial tension when I got here...they made national news”. P4 went on to discuss racial tensions and the strategies employed to mitigate and problem solve, including character education and interventions to promote inclusivity and student success.

Negative community perceptions posed one of the greatest challenges, with administrators sharing anecdotes of how these perceptions impacted their ability to implement successful programs and student support systems. Misconceptions of student laziness, community members not understanding the need for alternative learning, and derogatory comments by community members and staff were prevalent. P5 commented that “the community support is not there because they don’t understand it”. P1 elaborated on this lack of understanding, saying “they think we’re just shoving them through high school like an assembly line and giving them diplomas they didn’t earn”. P2 addressed the lack of understanding around the diverse needs of students in alternative settings. P2 explained how the community does not understand “why we are taking money from the regular ed kids and spending it on these kids (referring to alternative education students), when they just need discipline”. P6 felt that their community perception was centered around the underlying belief that “if the kids can’t hack it to get their high school diploma, then maybe they don’t deserve to get a high school diploma”. P9 iterated that perception sharing that “there’s still more of a roadblock in terms of the perception that if

they just work hard, if they just do the work (then they will graduate)”. These negative perceptions highlight the importance of trauma informed practices, training, and public awareness. P4 shared how those negative perceptions add to the stigma associated with alternative learning and can impact a student's sense of belonging; “if I was a kid and was going to go to an environment where there is that kind of mindset, I wouldn’t want to go either...I want it to be somewhere they felt like a welcome part of the community”. The administrators shared multiple strategies to overcome these barriers, including launching public relations campaigns, rebranding efforts, sharing success stories, and inviting community members in to address misconceptions and misinformation.

Parental involvement was another area that the researcher explored with participants. Reported parental involvement varied among administrators, with some citing absentee parenting as a barrier to student success. Many commented on how students would not be in an alternative education situation if their parents were involved or that they are involved in the wrong ways. P4 felt that parents are “not nearly as hands on, as that’s probably part of why we’re in this problem” and P5 shared that their parents of at-risk students were “very involved in the wrong way”. Administrators indicated that regardless of parental involvement, their goal is to meet all the needs of the students and to take on the parent role when necessary. Initiatives such as progress meetings, family-school liaisons, and continued communication (regardless of response) were implemented to increase parental engagement and collaboration.

Ensuring the meeting of basic needs emerged as a priority across interviews, with participants recognizing its profound impact on student outcomes. Administrators described meeting student needs as essential to student success, the first thing that must

be done, and of the utmost importance Administrator responses included comments such as “if they don’t feel safe, they aren’t going to learn” (P3), and “alt ed can only be successful if you meet their needs” (P9). P3 elaborated further stating, “it is the first thing you have got to do. If they’re hungry and they’re cold or they’re tired or they don’t feel safe...then none of this (education) matters”.

The strategies the administrators used to address student needs are all encompassing. Providing food, clothing, alternative options toward graduation, and meeting basic needs were uniform across all participants. Other strategies ranged from providing mental health services to addressing homelessness and substance abuse within the student population. Two participants shared how they worked with a student and community member to get the student their driver’s license and a car so that they could get themselves to school and to work. Participants highlighted innovative approaches and successful practices including credit recovery programs, community partnerships, and personalized learning initiatives tailored to meet individual student needs. Administrators shared that they look primarily at quantifiable measures such as graduation rate, with P4 sharing that their graduation rate has improved by over seven percentage points since the addition of their alternative classroom. All participants shared that the Missouri Option program has given their most at-risk students a path to graduation that did not exist prior to its inception. While success measures and accountability are important, the importance of meeting students' needs was perceived as more important by participants. P5 summed it up well, “sometimes success is not always about getting your high school diploma...for some of these students, keeping them off the street and out of jail is success”.

Administrators shared that they evaluate the effectiveness of their alternative education programs and schools in various ways. Data metrics such as graduation rates, dropout rates, discipline numbers, and persistence to graduation were universal across all participants. However, strategic planning was also emphasized to gauge the success of interventions and programs.

### **Document Analysis**

The researcher then employed a document analysis as a complementary method to the qualitative interviews and survey data, aimed at triangulating findings and deepening the understanding of barriers and challenges to implementing successful alternative education programs in rural Missouri. By examining various documents such as school district DESE report cards, annual performance ratings (APR), student handbooks, district mission statements, and board of education policies, the researcher sought to verify the themes generated from the interviews. Staffing challenges, the impact of community perception, and the importance of meeting students' basic needs emerged as common themes throughout the interviews. The researcher focused the document analysis on key areas including attendance, discipline, graduation requirements, and promotion and retention policies to glean insights on how these policies may or may not support administrator perception and district practices.

The researcher spent time analyzing the documents by reading through each participant's documents one at a time. The researcher then generated a summary of the documents in a Google Sheet. Additionally, due to the vast amount of accountability information provided in the APR and DESE report card, the researcher generated a separate table of accountability data as shown in Table 4. The researcher compared the

information in the document analysis to the data from the survey and interviews to look for similarities and contrasting policy and practice, validating and enriching the interpretation of each.

Regarding attendance policies, while all districts emphasize the importance of regular attendance, there are differences in the enforcement of policies and interventions. Districts P1, P3, and P5 provide various options for attendance recovery and credit recovery, including virtual learning opportunities and summer school. Districts P2, P4, P6, and P7 employ stricter measures such as withholding credit for excessive absences or implementing grade reductions based on attendance.

There were a wide range of disciplinary actions outlined across the districts, including detention, in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), and expulsion. Districts P1, P2, P4, and P5 have detailed policies specifying disciplinary procedures and consequences. In contrast, the outdated policies of districts P3, P6, P7, and P9 are less detailed.

Academic requirements and support services varied among the districts. Districts P1, P4, P5, and P8 have higher credit requirements for graduation, ranging from 24-42 credits, compared to Districts P2, P3, P6, and P9, where the credit requirements are lower. Also, while all districts offer the Missouri Options program, the type of alternative learning available varies widely with most housing a small credit recovery program in a single classroom in their high schools.

There was noted variation between district policies and the content of student handbooks. Districts P4 and P8 had handbooks that closely mirror their BOE policies, providing consistency in information dissemination. In Districts P1, P2, P3, and P6, there

are discrepancies between the handbook content and BOE policies, indicating potential gaps in communication or policy information.

Analyzing the accountability data further expanded the disparities and correlations between district policies and their outcomes. Districts with higher assessed valuations and expenditure per pupil (i.e. P1, P5, P8) may have more resources available for implementing comprehensive attendance, discipline, and support programs. This financial capacity could contribute to their higher APR scores and attendance rates.

Districts with higher percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (i.e. P1, P5, P9) may face additional challenges related to student attendance and academic performance. These districts may require more robust support services and interventions to address the needs of economically disadvantaged students. P5 has the second highest free and reduced lunch percentage at 76.95% and the lowest graduation rate at 76.95%.

There is a positive correlation between APR scores and graduation rates. Districts P2, P3, P4, P8, and P9 have APR scores above 90% and graduation rates exceeding 90%. These districts may have more effective policies and practices in place to support student success and academic achievement. Additionally, Districts P2, P3, P8 have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates demonstrating successful strategies in retaining students and facilitating their progression towards graduation.

Discrepancies in Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) percentages, APR scores, graduation rates, and dropout rates across districts underscore the influence of socioeconomic factors, educational resources, and district policies on student outcomes. Districts with lower FRL percentages and higher funding per pupil tend to have higher

APR scores and graduation rates. This may indicate the impact of socioeconomic status and resource allocation on academic performance.

The document and accountability data analysis highlight the complexities of district level policies and practices related to student attendance, discipline, academic requirements, and support services. Policy addressing the challenges associated with staffing and community perception were not evident in the document analysis. This may indicate a difference between policy and practice, highlighted by the strategies to overcome barriers that the participants discussed in their interviews. Additionally, there was limited evidence of meeting the basic student needs of students through supportive policies. However, many administrators shared the supportive practices they have in place in their districts. The discrepancies between policy and practice indicate that administrators may place limited value on policy, intentionally writing it in vague legal terms to cover required statutes. The older adoption dates on many policies also demonstrate that while practices have changed, policies have not been updated to reflect those changes.

The discrepancies between policy and practice identified in the document analysis reflect a fundamental disconnect that resonates with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. While policies aim to address the holistic needs of students, the lack of alignment between policy intentions and practiced implementation suggests a gap in fulfilling these needs effectively. The limited evidence of supportive policies addressing basic student needs highlights the challenges in meeting students' physiological and safety requirements through systemic approaches. Furthermore, the observation that administrators may prioritize practical strategies over policy adherence implies a recognition of the

immediate needs of students, reflecting Maslow’s principle of prioritizing lower-level needs before higher-level ones. By focusing on implementing supportive practices despite limited policy guidance, administrators demonstrate a commitment to addressing students’ immediate needs for safety, belonging, and esteem within their districts.

This analysis underlines the importance of aligning policies with educational goals, ensuring clarity and consistency in communication, and addressing the diverse needs of students across different districts. Furthermore, understanding the relationship between district demographics, financial resources, policy implementation, and student outcomes is essential for identifying areas of improvement and implementing targeted interventions to support student success and equity across the state.

**Table 4**

*Accountability Data*

Participant	Assessed Valuation	Expenditure per Pupil	FRL %	APR %	Grad Rate	Dropout Rate
P1	494,887,914	10,502	48.8	78	94.04	1.5
P2	151,550,765	12,290	45.5	72.7	97.4	0.6
P3	236,565,330	14,656	25.3	93.7	98	1.4
P4	165,468,393	12,067	39.8	84.2	93.26	1.1
P5	1,201,350,390	12,133	76.95	63.2	76.95	3.4
P6	204,836,139	10,169	47.8	66.1	92.3	0.4
P7	28,029,052	13,512	100	83.8	85.7	1
P8	365,819,889	9,076	33.8	90	98.5	0.1
P9	81,117,330	9,902	52.1	78.2	96.6	0.8

**Triangulation**

By utilizing multiple sources of data, including perception surveys, interviews with administrators, and document analysis, the researcher aimed to verify and corroborate the three main themes identified: staffing challenges, community perception,

and the importance of meeting student basic need. Staffing challenges emerged across the various data sources as a challenge for administrators. Through interviews with administrators, it became evident that staffing shortages and turnover significantly impacted the implementation of successful alternative education programs. The perception survey demonstrated that while administrators value staff and the power of a positive influence, the challenges in alternative education require them to place staff in programs unwillingly. The document analysis further demonstrated the importance of aligning policies with educational goals, ensuring clarity and consistency in communication, and addressing the diverse needs of students in alternative education settings.

Community perception emerged as a challenge among rural Missouri school administrators attempting to implement effective alternative education programs. Perception surveys provided insight into administrators' perceptions of community attitude and perceptions toward alternative education programs. Interviews offered qualitative depth, allowing administrators to elaborate on community dynamics and the challenges they face in overcoming negative perceptions. Document analysis supplemented these insights by examining official policies regarding alternative education, student discipline, attendance, and the availability of at-risk interventions. Policy is developed locally and punitive policies that impact students are a direct reflection of community beliefs and standards. The consistency of findings across these sources confirmed the significance of community perception as a key factor influencing the success of alternative education programs.

The importance of meeting the basic needs of students was validated through triangulation of perception surveys, interviews, and accountability data. Perception surveys gauged administrators' perceptions of the importance of meeting student basic needs, while interviews provided qualitative narratives and examples of strategies employed to address these needs. Document analysis explored accountability measures and data and provided quantitative evidence of student outcomes related to basic needs, such as graduation rates and dropout rates. By triangulating these diverse sources of data, the researcher ensured a comprehensive understanding of the efforts and challenges associated with meeting student basic needs in alternative education settings.

### **Summary**

Chapter four provided a comprehensive examination of alternative learning program characteristics and practices through administrator surveys, interviews, and a comprehensive document analysis. The survey administered to Missouri public school administrators aimed to identify prevalent characteristics in both perception and practice within alternative education settings. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which emphasizes the significance of fulfilling physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs for individuals, this chapter sought to identify prevalent characteristics in both perception and practice within alternative education settings. Qualitative interviews were conducted with the administrators to gain deeper insights into the challenges, strategies, and successes encountered within alternative education programs. A document analysis was conducted, scrutinizing school district documents such as DESE report cards, student handbooks, and BOE policies, to

triangulate the findings from the survey and interviews and provide a comprehensive understanding of alternative education operations and policies.

This chapter synthesized findings from the survey, interviews, and document analysis to bring to light prevalent themes and practices within alternative education programs in rural Missouri. Staffing challenges, negative community perception, and strategies for meeting student needs emerged as common themes surrounding the barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs. The analysis revealed discrepancies between practice and policy, with many administrators reporting different practices than those established in district policy. Varying approaches and challenges across the different districts reflect the diverse contexts and priorities within alternative education settings.

Chapter five will present the conclusions drawn from the study, based on the synthesized findings from the survey, interviews, and document analysis. These conclusions will highlight the key insights regarding effective practices, challenges, and areas for improvement. Chapter five will offer recommendations for policy makers, educators, and stakeholders, leveraging the theoretical underpinning of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to address students' holistic development and promote their journey to self-actualization by enhancing the effectiveness and equity of alternative education programs. Implications and significance of study findings will be further explored and discussed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

#### Introduction

Chapter four of this qualitative narrative study examined the data collected from the perception survey, interviews, and document analysis. Challenges and barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs as perceived by rural Missouri public school administrators were identified. By synthesizing the insights from the surveys, interviews, and document analysis, the researcher aims to provide actionable insights that can inform policy, practice, and future research in the realm of alternative education.

Grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study sought to advance the understanding of how administrator perceptions of alternative education programs impact program availability, learning outcomes, and contribute to the ongoing efforts to create inclusive and effective educational environments for all students. Through this lens, one can better appreciate the significance of meeting students' fundamental physiological and safety needs as foundational to their academic success within alternative education settings.

The need for this study emerged from the gap in existing literature, where prior research primarily focused on quantitative measures of success and outcomes in alternative education, often overlooking the holistic experiences of at-risk students. The problem is that research does not fully examine how administrator perceptions of alternative education, barriers to successful programs, and administrator's level of awareness of student needs are affecting at-risk students in rural school districts. While

previous research has identified measures for success in alternative education programs, this study aimed to fill the gap in literature between identified success measures and perceived barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs.

The central research question of this qualitative narrative study prompts an exploration of the perceptions held by rural Missouri public school administrators regarding barriers to successful alternative education programs. The dynamics surrounding funding and resource allocation, community influences and perception, parental involvement, the importance of meeting student basic needs, and strategic interventions were explored to further expand upon the central research question. These questions helped frame the study as the researcher aimed to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in administering alternative education initiatives in rural settings.

In subsequent sections of this chapter, the researcher will detail the limitations and delimitations, provide a summary of methods, revisit the summary of findings, and provide an in-depth interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the findings. The researcher will then explore the implications of the findings and provide recommendations for future research. The researcher will offer reflections on the study's significance within the broader educational setting, highlighting its potential impact on policy, practice, and further scholarly inquiry.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations to this study are significant, primarily due to its reliance on self-reported data from administrators, which may introduce bias or social desirability effects. The accuracy of dropout rate reporting by school districts could also potentially limit the

reliability of the data. Furthermore, the generalizability of the findings may be restricted, as the perceptions and experiences of administrators could vary across different geography regions. The researcher as a data collection instrument further limits the study. The researcher's biases during the analysis of perception surveys and interview recordings may have constrained the study's scope to predefined perceptions. This could potentially cause the researcher to overlook context-specific factors influencing administrator perspectives.

The chosen delimitations by the researcher may have also influenced the outcome of the study. The study focused exclusively on secondary school administrators, including superintendents and high school principals within rural Missouri Public Schools. Geographically, the research was confined to school districts in the state of Missouri included in the RPDC. The theoretical framework centered solely on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and there was limited exploration of student and family perspectives. The study specifically targeted a particular type of alternative education program, stand alone and in-district programs, which may not be representative of all alternative education programs. The data collection methods employed in the study included an administrator perception scale, structured research questions, and a document analysis, all chosen by the researcher.

### **Summary of Methods**

The methodology employed in this study involved a qualitative narrative approach to explore rural Missouri administrators' perceptions of alternative education programs and to identify barriers and challenges associated with implementing such programs. The research design included a comprehensive investigation into these

perceptions utilizing multiple data collections methods including a perception survey, interviews, and document analysis.

Perception surveys asked administrators to rate the importance of 26 characteristics associated with effective alternative education programs and to expand upon the existence of those characteristics in their school districts. Additional data were collected through semi-structured interviews with secondary school administrators, including superintendents and high school principals in rural Missouri public schools. The interviews were designed to explore administrators' perspectives on various aspects of alternative education, such as funding, community factors, parent involvement, meeting student's basic needs, and strategies to address barriers. Document analysis was conducted on school district reports, mission statements, student handbooks, and BOE policies related to alternative education to explore the alignment of district policy with administrator perception, practice, and the interview themes.

Data analysis techniques such as thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were employed to uncover patterns, themes, and insights within the data. Member checking was utilized to ensure data accuracy and validity. This methodology aimed to provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding alternative education programs in rural Missouri.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of this study reveal insights into the perceptions of rural Missouri public school administrators regarding alternative education programs and the barriers encountered in their implementation. Three common themes emerged as barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs: staffing challenges, community

perception, and the importance of meeting students' needs. Through the perception survey, administrators identified funding and resource allocation constraints, staffing issues, community factors, limited parent/guardian involvement, and the critical importance of meetings students' basic needs. The interviews highlighted deeper insights into the identified barriers, including the impact of staffing dynamics, the impact of negative community perceptions, and the challenges school districts face in addressing the diverse needs of students. Policy documents revealed variations in approaches across districts and a discrepancy between district policy and practice, reflecting the intricate context in which alternative education programs operate.

Administrators noted funding constraints as a staffing and facilities challenge. These constraints were reported as affecting staffing levels, program offerings, and support services, directly affecting the safety and belonging needs of students by influencing the stability and continuity of support. Limited resources hampered efforts to implement extensive alternative education programs and may potentially impede the fulfillment of students' physiological needs by restricting access to essential resources and infrastructure necessary for their well-being and academic success. However, all participants reported outside partnerships aiding schools in providing resources to meet students' basic needs.

Cultural and community factors were identified as influential in shaping program effectiveness. Negative community perceptions and misunderstanding surrounding the scope, purpose, and need for alternative education programs were reported as a challenge among administrators. Despite these challenges, administrators highlighted the importance of building trust and partnerships within the community to support program

goals. By leveraging external partnerships to meet the basic needs of students, administrators demonstrated a commitment to supporting students' holistic development and promoting their overall well-being within alternative education settings.

Limited parent/guardian involvement emerged as a barrier for some school districts, impacting students' progress and engagement in alternative education settings. Administrators reported a lack of involvement on behalf of parents/guardians as a precursor to at-risk behaviors and future placement in an alternative education setting. Administrators recognized the need for increased parent/guardian collaboration to support student success and empower them on their journey to self-actualization.

Administrators overwhelmingly acknowledged the critical importance of meeting students' basic needs for program and student success. Adequate support in areas such as mental health, nutrition, and stability were deemed essential for fostering a conducive learning environment, aligning with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which emphasized the foundational role of physiological and safety needs in educational attainment. Administrators reported a dependence on outside partnerships to meet the needs of students.

Administrators employed various strategies to address barriers and improve outcomes for students in alternative education settings. Forming partnerships with community organizations, implementing personalized student support initiatives, and leveraging existing resources creatively were all strategies employed by administrators, reflecting their commitment to fulfilling the foundational needs outline by Maslow. Collaboration and communication with stakeholders were emphasized as essential

elements in overcoming barriers, demonstrating the administrators' dedication to ensuring that no student's basic needs go unmet.

The findings emphasize the intricate relationship between various factors influencing the success of alternative education programs. Administrators' insights provided invaluable perspectives on the challenges and opportunities surrounding providing equitable educational opportunities for at-risk students in rural Missouri. The findings also highlight the resilience and innovation demonstrated by educational leaders in their efforts to address these barriers and foster student success.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The continued examination of the interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the findings of this study extend across four distinct yet interconnected dimensions: the disjunction between perception and reality, the alignment of perception and reality, unexpected revelations, and the significance of meeting student needs. Through the analysis and triangulation of perception surveys, interviews, and document analysis, the researcher will explore the complexities of the perception and practice of rural Missouri administrators tasked with overcoming the challenges of implementing successful alternative education programs. By unpacking these findings and examining the corresponding literature, the researcher will uncover valuable insights regarding the current state of alternative education in rural Missouri and offer a roadmap for future research and practice aimed at enhancing educational equity and student success.

#### ***Perception vs. Reality***

In examining the perceptions of administrators regarding the effectiveness of alternative education programs and contrasting them with the actual realities within their

districts, several notable trends and disparities emerged. Discrepancies surrounding community perception, mental health needs, staffing challenges, and curriculum delivery were most notable. These disparities further showcase the complexities involved in implementing successful alternative education programs and underscore the importance of bridging the gap between perception and reality for effective educational outcomes.

Community perception and involvement emerged as significant considerations in the design and implementation of alternative education programs. In the perception survey, administrators highlighted the significance of utilizing community resources, with an average rating of 4.33. This demonstrates a keen awareness of the value of external support in enriching alternative education programs. Through the interviews, participants expanded upon the significance of community support by discussing the negative connotations associated with the term “alternative school” and the impact of negative community perceptions on implementing successful alternative education programs. The term “dumping grounds”, in reference to alternative programs, was used by multiple participants and corresponds with Duke and Tenuto’s 2020 study. The document analysis revealed vague out-of-date policies for at-risk students and punitive practices, further highlighting the lack of urgency and misconceptions surrounding at-risk students and alternative education. This negative perception makes it difficult for administrators to recruit staff and gain support from parents, community members, and policy makers. Actively communicating the positive outcomes of alternative education while providing adequate resources to implement supportive programs can contribute to reshaping these perceptions over time. P9 shared how they hosted community service days with their alternative students to gain work experience but also to increase

awareness in the community. Additionally, administrators who leverage community partnerships, such as advisory committees and community partnerships for work experience and community service, can actively dispel negative perceptions while enhancing student experiences.

Declining mental health among both adults and students was also reported as having an impact on program operations. At-risk students have often experienced adverse childhood experiences (Bae, 2020; Lewis & Basford, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2018) which generate significant physiological, psychological, and/or behavioral responses that disrupt normal functioning (Samuel & Burger, 2020). The perception survey revealed that administrators recognize the importance of providing students with access to mental health resources, as shown in Table 3 by the 4.33 average importance rating for mental health training and rating of 4 for the importance of having counseling available. However, even though they recognize the importance, administrators struggle to find the resources their students and staff need. Through the interviews, some participants in larger rural districts (P1 and P5) reported partnerships with area hospitals or mental health service providers, while most shared that the resources are not available in their area. Administrators are often frustrated with how to help parents, students, and staff with extreme student behaviors and needs. Student handbooks and district policy further highlighted the lack of specific services available to students and families. Students in alternative education programs would benefit from teachers who are trained in trauma informed practices (Lewis & Basford, 2020) and having access to behavioral and mental health interventions (Austin, 2022; M.K. Johnson et al., 2021; Leban & Masterson, 2022;

McDermott et al., 2019), something that administrators recognize but have difficulty implementing due to the lack of resources in their rural districts.

Significant challenges related to staffing repeatedly emerged as barriers to the successful implementation of alternative education throughout the study. Teacher shortages, specifically a lack of appropriately certified staff, and motivated staff with a passion for at-risk students posed the greatest threats to implementation. The perception survey revealed a stark difference in administrators believing teachers should work in the alternative education setting by choice and the reality that they are often placed there unwillingly by administrators. The difference between perception of importance and existence in their district was 1.22, the third highest difference on the table. This was expanded upon in the interviews, where administrators shared there were cases where teachers were assigned to the alternative school against their preferences, leading to dissatisfaction and turnover. Some directly placed teachers in the alternative space as direct result of their lack of success in the traditional education setting. P1 shared that while this practice was not their preference, it does sometimes happen. P4 shared that their alternative education instructor “got sideways with the board” when coaching and was placed in the alternative classroom. P5 disclosed that they offer their teachers an additional \$5,000 stipend to work in their alternative school. Forcing or bribing teachers to work in alternative settings undermines the importance of teacher influence. Research has demonstrated repeatedly that teacher influence has the highest effect on student success (Hattie, 2009). Students feel safe and welcome at school when they are able to build trusting relationships with teachers in a caring environment (Daily, Mann, et al., 2020; Holen et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022) and forcing a teacher to

work in an environment that they do not want to be in will ultimately negatively impact the success of the students in that classroom. Such staffing issues have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of alternative education programs and while administrators expressed a willingness to adapt and make necessary adjustments to ensure the programs' smooth functioning, BOE policy and contractual language indicate that administrators may continue the practice of placing teachers instead of allowing them the autonomy of choice.

Research has shown that curriculum in the alternative education setting should be specific to the needs and interests of students, designed to promote both academic and social-emotional development (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; te Riele et al., 2020), and provide opportunities for real-world learning (Free, 2017; te Riele et al., 2020). While administrators in this study emphasized the importance of engaging curriculum and flexible paths to graduation, there was a discrepancy in academic standards and practices. The perception survey, interviews, and document analysis underscored these variations, raising questions surrounding the equity and rigor of the curriculum. Administrators indicated that it was not beneficial for students in an alternative setting to sit in front of a computer and answer questions through an online program all day. However, the reality of practice is that is what most of them are doing. Additionally, the document analysis revealed that many districts are imposing academic consequences for behavior and attendance infractions, which increase the odds of dropout (Coffman, 2019; Leban & Masterson, 2022) and are in direct contradiction of the participants expressed beliefs that the school climate should be caring, supportive, friendly, and flexible.

The analysis of administrator perceptions and realities within alternative education programs offers valuable insights into the areas of strength and opportunities for growth. By addressing disparities and leveraging areas of alignment, districts can work toward creating more effective and inclusive alternative education environments that better serve the diverse needs of students. Continued assessment and adaptation will be crucial in ensuring that alternative education programs evolve to meet the ever-changing landscape of educational needs and priorities.

### ***Aligned Perceptions and Realities***

Certain aspects of alternative education showcased a closer alignment between perceived importance and reality. These included characteristics such as small class sizes, having well-defined rules and expectations, and the provision of opportunities for students to graduate with a diploma or a GED. These areas of alignment highlight the successes within alternative education programs, emphasizing strengths that could serve as foundations for further enhancement.

The importance of small class sizes with a student-teacher ratio of less than 12:1 and a structured environment with well-defined rules and expectations was emphasized through the triangulation of data. Not only do administrators perceive their importance, but they also report that it is in practice in their schools and an important aspect of meeting the diverse needs of at-risk students in the alternative education setting. Smaller class sizes and a structured environment enable increased one-on-one instruction and interventions tailored to student's individual needs (Griffiths et al., 2019; Johnston et al., 2018; McGee & Lin, 2020; Nelson, 2019; Oligschlaeger, 2017) leading to increased student success. All participants had specific district-wide policies outlining behavior

expectations and those with alternative schools had handbooks detailing additional expectations for the alternative school students. The alignment with perception, practice, and policy demonstrates that administrators in rural Missouri school districts understand the importance of small class sizes and clearly defined expectations to implementing effective alternative education programs.

All participants emphasized the importance of providing students with the opportunity to graduate with a diploma or a GED. Successful completion of a diploma equivalent program is associated with increases in income, job satisfaction, less reliance on public assistance, and overall improvement in quality of life (Klieger et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2023). The perception survey revealed no difference between perception and existence in school districts; this was the only characteristic of the 26 to rate the same on both scales. All administrators discussed their options for graduation through the interview process, highlighting their effort to assist students to persist to graduation through credit recovery and the Missouri Option program. Additionally, all districts had policies in place to support the programs. This demonstrates that administrators recognize that not all students are successful in a traditional education setting and need additional support to persist to graduation.

### ***Findings Contrary to Existing Research***

Three perceptions emerged from the research that opposed current literature. Through the perception survey, interviews, and document analysis, administrators deemphasized the importance of student placement by choice, utilizing a multi-tiered system of support with positive rewards, and having a culturally diverse motivated staff, disclosing those characteristics as unimportant to the success of the alternative education

program. These contrasting perceptions underscore the need for further investigation into the factors driving administrator attitudes and decisions, illustrating potential areas where current practices diverge from established research findings.

Student placement in an alternative setting is commonly due to negative behaviors, attendance, and failing grades (Frank, 2019; Free, 2017; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). Very rarely are students placed in an alternative setting by choice, which can lead to a sense of disempowerment and a disconnect from the learning environment. Forced placement can lead to frustration, resentment, and disengagement, while student voice can increase a student's sense of self-belonging and ultimately determine their success (Cockerill, 2019). This study demonstrated that administrators do not perceive student choice as important and student choice is typically not considered when making placement decisions. To overcome this barrier, rural Missouri alternative learning educators must focus on student connectedness to their education setting. Students' perceived connectedness to their school environment impacts their margin of success and decreases the likelihood of dropping out (Daily, Mann, et al., 2020; Holen et al., 2018; Wayman et al., 2021). The development of a positive student-teacher relationship (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Fitzsimmons et. al., 2021) and personal buy-in (te Riele et al., 2020) are necessary for motivating students to make academic progress. Involving students in decision-making processes promote a culture of respect, trust, and collaboration within the educational community, ultimately enhancing student engagement, satisfaction, and success.

Tiered models with targeted interventions for at-risk students are an essential part of dropout prevention (Austin, 2022; M.K. Johnson et al., 2021; Leban & Masterson,

2022; McDermott et al., 2019). The absence of perceived importance of a tiered system of support among administrators in this study accentuates the need to understand this critical gap. Through the perception survey, administrators shared their perceived lack of importance of a tiered system, rating its importance 3.56. This was further iterated by the lack of systems in place in their districts, confirmed through interview and policy. By developing and implementing tiered systems tailored to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students, alternative education programs can better support their academic progress, promote social-emotional well-being, and mitigate the risk of dropout. This must be addressed to enhance support for at-risk students and improve overall educational outcomes.

The presence of a culturally diverse staff and a curriculum that addresses cultural diversity emerges as another significant gap in implementing effective alternative education programs. Administrators consistently rated these aspects lower on both the perception and existence scales, as seen in Table 3. During the interviews, many administrators evaded this topic entirely, or swiftly shifted the conversation away from it. Two dismissively remarked, “that’s not a problem here” indicating a reluctance to address potential shortcomings in cultural representation. Only one of the administrators, P4, highlighted the strategies, interventions, and character education they had in place to address cultural differences within their school district. It is crucial to recognize that at-risk students benefit significantly when they can relate to the instructional content and their educators. Dropout rates are highest among students of color and students from low-income families (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2018). Limited diversity within staff and curriculum can hinder

students' ability to engage with the material, potentially diminishing their academic success and overall educational outcomes. Addressing this gap is essential for fostering an inclusive learning environment that promotes student success and celebrates diversity.

### ***Importance of Meeting Student Needs***

Meeting basic needs was identified as a foundational element for student success in alternative education programs, aligning with the theoretical framework of this study. All participants emphasized the importance of comprehensively meeting students' needs. Interviewees unanimously indicated that for learning to take place, students cannot be focused on their basic survival. Examples for meeting those needs included partnerships with external organizations to provide resources such as counseling, dental care, food, and clothing. These initiatives aimed to create a supportive environment conducive to student learning and well-being. By prioritizing the fulfillment of these basic physiological and safety needs, educators create an environment conducive to higher-level learning and self-actualization, echoing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

### ***Unanticipated Findings***

Based on the review of literature, the researcher was expecting to find a lack of funding, limited access to qualified staff, and stigma and negative perceptions as barriers to implementing successful programs. The researcher was surprised to discover that while funding was mentioned by participants, it was not their biggest barrier to implementing effective programs. Issues surrounding staffing, including a limited access to qualified staff, but also the desire of staff to work in the alternative setting, were barriers to successful programs. Additionally, negative community perceptions were discussed far more frequently than the researcher was expecting. Misunderstandings surrounding

student discipline, the needs of at-risk students, trauma-informed practices, and non-traditional educational practices were topics of discussion across the interviews conducted. Participants also addressed the significance of early elementary interventions in deterring future at-risk behaviors and academic failure, which was not anticipated by the researcher.

Although funding was discussed by participants, it did not emerge as their primary obstacle to implementing effective programs. Funding is critical to the success of alternative education programs and insufficient funding can limit a program's ability to help at-risk students (McGee & Lin, 2017). Prior research has shown that rural school districts may not have sufficient funding to support alternative education programs (National Rural Education Association, 2021; National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.). While only two of the districts included in this study have standalone alternative education schools, all nine districts offer some type of alternative education program. The administrators shared that they make alternative education a priority and utilize local funds and grant opportunities to support their students.

Participants focused more on their staffing challenges and discussed the critical role of funding and resource allocation in shaping the trajectory of alternative education programs. While specific examples of funding impacting decisions were not provided, administrators emphasized the importance of securing adequate resources to support program initiatives effectively. Strategies to address funding constraints were not explicitly outlined, suggesting a need for further exploration in this area. While administrators recognize the impact of resource allocation on program effectiveness and student outcomes, most reported through the interviews that funding was not a concern.

Participants shared that strategic planning, utilizing grants, and local funds help them overcome challenges in funding and resource allocation. Implications on program initiatives and student support due to lack of funding were emphasized mainly in justifying why an off campus standalone alternative facility was not available. Disparities in assessed valuation and expenditure per pupil were examined through the document analysis and findings were inconclusive on whether they may contribute to differences in program quality and student performance indicators.

The interviews unexpectedly touched on the significance of early interventions, particularly at the elementary school level. Administrators discussed the pivotal role of proactive measures in mitigating dropout rates and redirecting the educational trajectory of at-risk students. They emphasized the critical window of opportunity presented during the formative years of elementary education, where interventions can have a profound and lasting impact on a student's academics and socio-emotional development. Four of the nine participants reported incorporating middle school age students within their alternative education programs and two participants, P1 and P5, went as low as kindergarten. P2 described incorporating behavioral interventions at the elementary level to support teachers with the increasing number of escalating behaviors in the classroom. Interventions this early did not come up in the review of literature; most interventions focused on beginning in a student's freshman year of high school. The researcher feels that this is an area that warrants additional research.

The unexpected findings from this study reveal insights that resonate with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. While funding is often considered a significant barrier in education, the data highlighted staffing issues, such as limited access to qualified staff

and the alignment of staff mindset with the alternative setting, as primary concerns. These staffing challenges directly impact the safety and sense of belonging needs of students within alternative education programs. The prevalence of negative community perceptions underscores the importance of addressing esteem needs, as perceptions can influence students' sense of self-worth and belonging within their community. Additionally, the recognition of early elementary interventions as crucial in deterring future at-risk behaviors and academic failure speaks to the significance of fulfilling physiological and safety needs early on to support students' long-term well-being and academic success. These unexpected findings underscore the connection between Maslow's hierarchy and the challenges and strategies encountered in alternative education settings.

### **Implications for Teachers and Administrators**

The findings of this study underscore the importance of aligning perceptions with practices in alternative education programs. Prior research has revealed several key components associated with successful alternative education programs, including personalized instruction, small class sizes, social-emotional support, positive environment, flexible curricula, and dedicated funding sources (Duke & Tenuto, 2020; Free, 2017; Glavan et al., 2022; Lewis & Basford, 2020; McGee & Lin, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2018). For teachers and administrators in the field, it is crucial to recognize and address the discrepancies between perceived importance and actual implementation of key success measures. Specifically, attention should be paid to areas such as teacher placement choice, differentiated curriculum and instruction practices, and implementing targeted interventions to support at-risk students where notable disparities were

identified. By acknowledging and bridging these gaps, educators can better support at-risk students and enhance the overall effectiveness of alternative education programs.

Furthermore, this study highlights the significant barriers faced by rural Missouri school districts, particularly in terms of staffing challenges and negative community perception. For teachers and administrators, understanding and actively addressing these barriers is essential for creating a supportive and empowering learning environment. By advocating for adequate staffing, combating negative perceptions, and fostering positive community relationships, educators can work towards overcoming these obstacles through promoting student success.

Unexpected findings, such as the emphasis on early elementary intervention have future implications for teachers and administrators. By addressing challenges and providing support early on, educators can potentially prevent issues from escalating, therefore fostering a more conducive learning environment for all students. This highlights the importance of adopting a proactive approach to identify and address potential barriers to success, laying a strong foundation for students' educational journeys.

Aligning with Maslow's theory, educators should prioritize meeting students' basic needs. By emphasizing the importance of fulfilling basic physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs, educators can create a learning environment that assists students in progressing toward self-actualization. Additionally, fostering collaboration and communication among staff members is crucial for addressing barriers such as staffing shortages and access to qualified staff. Through collective efforts and partnerships with external organizations, educators can work toward enhancing the

quality and effectiveness of alternative education programs, benefiting at-risk students and contributing to their long-term success.

This study was designed to fill the gap in literature between previously identified measures for success in alternative education programs and barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs as perceived by administrators. Educators working in alternative education settings can benefit from the insights provided by this study to enhance their practices and improve outcomes for at-risk students. Additionally, policy makers and stakeholders involved in education funding and policy development can use the findings to inform decision-making and resource allocation to better support alternative education programs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To further advance understanding and address the identified gaps, future research should explore the specific staffing challenges faced by rural Missouri school districts in implementing successful alternative education programs. This reoccurring theme throughout the study was identified as the greatest barrier to implementing successful programs. Administrators in this study shared examples of offering additional stipends, placing teachers in alternative settings unwillingly, and hiring uncertified staff to cover the alternative classroom. Future research could involve a more comprehensive investigation, examining factors such as recruitment strategies, retention efforts, training initiatives, and professional development opportunities tailored specifically for alternative education staff.

Future studies could also focus on understanding the root causes of negative community perceptions towards alternative education programs in rural areas. Second

only to staffing, negative perceptions regarding alternative education pose a challenge to school administrators trying to help at-risk students through the alternative education setting. Administrators in this study shared strategies including public relations campaigns, community service events with alternative education students, inviting stakeholders in, and sharing student success stories. Future research could involve qualitative inquiries to uncover underlying beliefs, attitudes, and cultural factors influencing community perceptions, providing valuable insights for developing targeted interventions and strategies to foster community support and understanding.

Longitudinal studies tracking the academic and socio-emotional progress of students enrolled in alternative education programs over time could provide valuable data on program effectiveness and long-term outcomes. While there is a plethora of data available, there is a noted lack of longitudinal research. Administrators in this study shared that they track graduation rates, attendance, discipline incidents, and dropout rates but did not discuss what happens to at-risk students after graduation. By following students from enrollments to graduation and beyond, researchers could assess the impact of alternative education on academic achievement, graduation rates, post-secondary success, and overall well-being providing valuable insights for informing policy and practice in alternative education settings.

## **Conclusion**

Students must have their basic needs met to achieve academic success, and this responsibility often falls on the shoulders of the nation's public schools. While educational reform has made strides to provide individualized educational opportunities for all students, some students fail to be successful in traditional education programs.

When those students drop out of high school, their quality of life, economic success, and societal impact are adversely affected.

Alternative education programs and schools exist to decrease the number of high school dropouts and increase student opportunities for personal growth and academic advancement. This study has provided valuable insights into the perceptions, challenges, and practices surrounding alternative education programs in rural Missouri. Staffing challenges, negative community perception, and strategies for meeting student needs emerged as common themes surrounding the barriers to implementing successful alternative education programs. These barriers often intersect with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as they can lead to challenges that hinder students' access to supportive practices that meet their needs.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of addressing the holistic needs of students in alternative education programs, aligning with Maslow's vision of human motivation and well-being. By prioritizing students' physiological, safety, and belonging needs, administrators can create nurturing and empowering environments that facilitate academic success and holistic development. The findings address the gap in the literature by exposing the interplay between established success metrics and the practical obstacles encountered by school administrators in rural Missouri.

Moving forward, future research should focus on exploring innovative strategies to overcome barriers to successful alternative education programs such as staffing challenges, negative community perceptions, and longitudinal studies. By addressing these barriers and prioritizing students' needs, administrators can create inclusive and supportive learning environments that promote student success and well-being.

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## APPENDIXES

### **Appendix A: Request for participation**

Subject: Request for Participation in Rural Missouri Administrator Study on Alternative Education

Dear [Administrator's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Myra Siebert, and I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University. I am reaching out to request your valuable participation in a qualitative narrative study that aims to understand rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri, as perceived by administrators like yourself.

Your expertise and insights as an administrator in a rural Missouri educational setting would be incredibly valuable to this research. The study will employ a combination of perception surveys, interviews, and a policy review to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with alternative education in our rural communities.

Study Overview:

Objective: To explore the perceptions and barriers related to alternative education programs in rural Missouri.

Methods: Participation in a perception survey and a follow-up interview (approximately 30-45 minutes).

Confidentiality: Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and your identity will be anonymized in the study.

Your Participation:

1. Perception Survey: We kindly request you to complete a brief online perception survey, which should take approximately 10-15 minutes of your time.
2. Interview: We are also interested in conducting a follow-up interview to examine your experiences and perceptions. If you are willing to participate, we will schedule a convenient time for the interview, which will be conducted via Zoom.

Benefits of Participation:

- Contribution to valuable research that can inform policy and practices in rural education.
- The opportunity to voice your insights and experiences.
- A summary of the study findings upon its completion, which may provide valuable insights for your institution.

Your participation in this study will greatly contribute to our understanding of alternative education in rural Missouri and the challenges administrators face in implementing such programs. Your input is vital to ensuring that educational policies and practices are relevant and effective in our rural communities.

If you are willing to participate, please respond to this email with the completed informed consent form. If you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please feel free to contact me at [s785228@sbuniv.edu](mailto:s785228@sbuniv.edu) or (573) 220 - 8195.

Thank you in advance for considering this request, and I look forward to the possibility of working with you on this important research endeavor.

Warm regards,

Myra Siebert

Southwest Baptist University

[s785228@sbuniv.edu](mailto:s785228@sbuniv.edu), (573) 220-8195

## **Appendix B: Informed consent form**

Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Rural Missouri Administrator Perceptions of Alternative Education and Barriers to Programs

Principal Investigator: Myra Siebert

Doctoral Candidate: Southwest Baptist University

Contact Information: [s785228@sbuniv.edu](mailto:s785228@sbuniv.edu), (573) 220-8195

You are invited to participate in a qualitative narrative study that aims to explore rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri. This informed consent form is provided to ensure that you fully understand the nature of the study and your role in it.

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the perceptions and barriers related to alternative education programs in rural Missouri, as perceived by administrators in these educational settings. Your participation will provide valuable data to inform educational policy and practices.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete a perception survey, which should take approximately 15-20 minutes.
2. Participate in a follow-up interview, which will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and recorded to enable accuracy in transcribing and analyzing the data.

There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and your identity will be anonymized in the study. The benefits of participating include contributing to valuable research, sharing your insights and experiences, and receiving a summary of the study findings upon its completion.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate, and your decision will not affect your relationship with Southwest Baptist University or any other organization.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason. Your decision to withdraw will not result in any negative consequences. All information collected during this study will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely, and your identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. If you have any questions about the study, your participation, or your rights as a participant, please contact:

Myra Siebert

[s785228@sbuniv.edu](mailto:s785228@sbuniv.edu)

(573) 220-8195

Fill out the form below and return it to Myra Siebert.

I have read and understand the information provided in this informed consent form. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study, and I consent to the use of the data I provide for research purposes.

Participant's Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C: Permission to use survey**

Subject: Request for Permission to Use and Modify the "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs" Instrument

Myra Siebert

Cuba, Missouri

[s785228@sbuniv.edu](mailto:s785228@sbuniv.edu)

(573) 220 – 8195

September 19, 2023

Dr. Ben Burnett, PhD

President and Chief Executive Officer

William Carey University

Hattiesburg, MS 39401

Dear Dr. Burnett,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to seek your permission to use and modify the instrument titled "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs," which you created for your 2002 dissertation. Your work in this area is highly regarded, and I believe that your instrument could be a valuable tool for my research.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri. My qualitative narrative study aims to explore rural Missouri administrator perceptions of alternative education and the barriers to alternative education programs in rural Missouri. Your instrument, "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs," aligns closely with the objectives of my study and could provide invaluable insights into the perceptions of participants.

I am writing to request your permission to use your instrument as part of my research. I believe it would greatly enhance the quality and depth of my study, and I assure you that I will adhere to all ethical guidelines and standards in using this instrument.

In addition to using your instrument, I am also seeking permission to make specific modifications. I would like to remove the section of the instrument that measures the existence of characteristics state-wide as Lori Burkett did with your permission in her 2012 dissertation. This modification is necessary to align the instrument more closely with the scope and objectives of my research. I would also like to remove the word "Mississippi" from the title. I believe your instrument is relevant in all settings and geographic locations. Finally, I would like to utilize a digital format, placing your prompts into a Google Form to streamline the data collection process.

Should you grant permission for the use and modification of your instrument, I will ensure that proper citation and credit are given to you as the original creator of the instrument in all research materials and publications related to my study. I am committed to sharing the results of my research with you, should you express interest in the findings

or outcomes related to the modified instrument. Your insights and feedback would be highly valuable to me.

I would greatly appreciate your prompt response to this request, as my research is time sensitive. Your permission to use and modify the instrument would significantly impact the progress of my study. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for considering this request. Your contributions to the field of alternative education are noteworthy, and I am eager to build upon your work to advance our understanding in this area.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Myra Siebert

Doctoral Candidate

Southwest Baptist University

**RE: Request for Permission to Use and Modify the "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs" Instrument**

Ben Burnett <bburnett@wmcarey.edu>

Tue 9/19/2023 9:31 AM

To: Myra Siebert <s785228@sbuniv.edu>

**\*\*\* External Email: Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe. \*\*\***

Myra,

I'm happy for you to use my work to help you in your research. Please share with me your completed work if you don't mind so I can see how it was a benefit to you. Good luck in your research.

**Dr. Ben Burnett**

President and CEO

William Carey University

Phone: 601.318.6144 | Office: Tatum Court-140

*"Therefore, put on the full armor of God."*

Ephesians 6:13

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**From:** Myra Siebert <s785228@sbuniv.edu>

**Sent:** Tuesday, September 19, 2023 9:03 AM

**To:** Ben Burnett <bburnett@wmcarey.edu>

**Subject:** Request for Permission to Use and Modify the "Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mississippi Alternative Programs" Instrument

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## **Appendix D: Interview questions**

Research Question: What do rural Missouri public school administrators perceive as barriers to successful alternative education programs?

2. Can you describe the most significant challenges or barriers you perceive in implementing successful alternative education programs within your school or district?
3. Are there any specific instances or examples of barriers you have encountered that you can share?
4. In your opinion, which barriers have the most substantial impact on the success of alternative education programs, and why?

Sub question A: What role do funding and resource allocation play in the success of alternative education programs?

5. How do you perceive the role of funding and resource allocation in supporting or hindering the success of alternative education programs in your school or district?
6. Can you provide examples of how funding and resource allocation decisions have affected your ability to provide effective alternative education options?
7. What strategies or approaches have you employed to address resource-related challenges in your alternative education programs?

Sub question B: How do administrators perceive the influence of cultural and community factors on the success of alternative education programs?

8. How do cultural and community factors impact the design and implementation of alternative education programs in your context?
9. Can you share any specific instances where cultural or community factors have either facilitated or hindered the success of your alternative education initiatives?
10. What steps or strategies do you take to ensure that your alternative education programs are culturally responsive and responsive to community needs?

Sub question C: To what extent do administrators perceive the involvement of parents and guardians as a barrier to the success of alternative education programs?

11. How would you describe the level of parent and guardian involvement in your alternative education programs?

12. Have you encountered situations where the involvement of parents or guardians has posed challenges to the success of these programs? If so, could you provide examples?
13. What initiatives or strategies have you implemented to foster positive engagement and collaboration between parents, guardians, and your alternative education programs?

Sub question D: To what extent do administrators perceive meeting students' basic needs as a crucial factor in the success of alternative education programs?

14. From your perspective, how important is addressing students' basic needs in the context of alternative education programs?
15. Can you share instances where meeting basic needs has significantly impacted the outcomes of your alternative education initiatives?
16. What specific actions or resources do you allocate to ensure that students' basic needs are adequately met within your alternative education programs?

Sub question E: What strategies do administrators employ to address barriers to the success of alternative education programs?

17. Could you describe any strategies or interventions you have implemented to overcome the barriers or challenges you mentioned earlier in our conversation?
18. Are there successful practices or innovative approaches you have adopted to enhance the effectiveness of your alternative education programs?
19. How do you evaluate the outcomes and effectiveness of these strategies in addressing barriers to program success?

## **Appendix E: Study participation follow up**

Subject: Thank You for Participating in Our Study and Next Steps

Dear [Participant's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. I wanted to express my heartfelt gratitude for agreeing to participate in our study focused on the perceptions of Missouri public school administrators regarding barriers to successful alternative education programs. Your insights are invaluable to this research, and I genuinely appreciate your willingness to contribute.

As we move forward with the study, I kindly request your assistance in completing two important components:

Perception Survey:

I have prepared a perception survey that will help us gather valuable data related to your experiences and perceptions. Your responses to this survey will play a crucial role in the research. Please take a moment to complete the survey by clicking on the following link:

[Insert Survey Link Here]

The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your honest and thoughtful responses will greatly enhance the depth of the findings.

Zoom Interview:

In addition to the survey, I would like to schedule a Zoom interview with you. This interview will provide an opportunity for you to share your insights, experiences, and perspectives in more detail. The interview will be conducted at a time that is convenient for you and is expected to last approximately 30-45 minutes. To schedule the

Zoom interview, please send me three dates/times that are convenient for you. Your participation in the interview will allow me to explore the nuances of your perceptions, and I look forward to engaging in a productive and insightful conversation.

Please rest assured that all the information you provide, both in the survey and during the interview, will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your identity will be protected, and your responses will be anonymized in the study.

Thank you once again for your commitment to this research. I look forward to connecting with you for the interview and reviewing your survey responses. If you have any immediate questions or concerns, please feel free to reply to this email or contact me at [s785228@sbuniv.edu](mailto:s785228@sbuniv.edu), or (573) 220 – 8195.

Warm regards,

Myra Siebert

Doctoral Candidate

Southwest Baptist University

## Appendix F: Coding for Themes

### *Coding for Themes*

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Code	Description
BR	build rapport
C	culture
CE	character education
CP	community perception
CR	credit recovery
D	data
EI	early interventions
F	funding/finances
FC	frequent communication
G	grant
HI	high importance
HY	hybrid (combination of online & traditional instruction)
L	limited
LF	local funding
MH	mental health
NA	not applicable
NC	no concern
NE	nonexistent
NS	needs survey
O	online
P	partnership(s)
PR	public relations
PTC	parent teacher conferences
S	staffing
SA	student attendance
SA	stand alone
SFL	school family liaison
T	traditional
TL	tax levy
TR	transition

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## Appendix G: Alternative Education Interview Themes

### *Alternative Education Interview Themes*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
challenges/barriers	S	CP F S	F	SA	S	CP	F	CP	CP F
most substantial impact	S	CP S	S	F	S	CP F	F	CP S	F F S
role of funding/resource allocation	S	F	NC	NC	NC	F	F	NC	
strategies to address funding	NA	EI P	G	G LF P	LF	TL	G	NA	G P
community & cultural factors	CP MH	CP	NC	CP	CP	CP	CP	CP	CP
strategies to ensure responsiveness	MH PR	PR	NS	CE EI P	PR	EI	C P	C CE	P PR
level of parent involvement	L	L	NE	NE	NE	NE	NE	L	L
initiatives or strategies for collaboration w/ parents	FC	BR	FC	FC	FC PTC SFL	FC SFL	FC PTC	FC	FC PTC
importance of meeting basic needs	HI	HI	HI	HI	HI	HI	HI	HI	HI
strategies to meet need	P	P	P	P	MH P	P	P	SFL P	P
strategies/interventions to overcome barriers	S	C S	F	CP	S	NA	C CP	P	F
evaluate effectiveness	D TR	D TR	D NS	D NS	D	D	D	D	D
type of ALC offered	CR SA	CR	CR	CR	CR SA	CR	CR	CR	CR
curriculum	HY	O	HY	HY	HY	O	O	T	O
staffing	30	1	1	1	20	2	1	1	1