2024

A Program Evaluation of the Special Programming for Achievement Networking of Alabama- Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program

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A Program Evaluation of the Special Programming for Achievement Networking of Alabama-Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of Murray State University

The College of Education and Human Services

Department of Educational Studies, Leadership, and Counseling

at Murray State University

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

P-20 & Community Leadership

Specialization: K-12 Education

Under the supervision of Professor Dr. Brian Bourke

Murray, KY

August 2024

Acknowledgments

I would personally like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Brian Bourke, for his continuous support throughout my dissertation journey. You were extremely patient with answering my endless questions about the small details. You always were able to calm my anxiety when I felt clueless. Thank you again for all the Zoom meetings and emails. I also would like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Jeffrey Cornelius and Dr. Jay Parrent. Thank you for all the suggestions you have given me and the time you spent reading and assisting with my edits. Thank you again, Dr. Cornelius, for accepting my personal request to serve on my committee. You have been a great mentor throughout this dissertation process and educational career. Most importantly, thank you to my husband, Collin, and son, Reed. You two are my rock stars. You both gave me grace and support while working on this dream. I could not have completed this without you all.

Abstract

This study evaluates the perceived effectiveness of an alternative education program, specifically the structure and mission. The program focused on three groups for the evaluation: staff, students, and stakeholders. The conformity of each of the three groups thoughts and beliefs outlined the perception of the program's effectiveness. The evaluation sought to determine the positive or negative impact of the program's mission and core values of academics, counseling, employment, and transition services. Understanding how stakeholders perceived SPAN's mission and students' impacts of strategies and services allowed coherence in the program's effectiveness and allowed the opportunity to outline the program's positive impacts and improvement benefits. This study implemented a summative program evaluation using a mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative data tools of a document review, site observations, interviews, and surveys. The summative evaluation was chosen to offer accountability for the outcomes and impacts of the SPAN Program.

Table of Contents

Lists of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

This program evaluation study examines the purpose, structure, and effectiveness of the Special Programming for Achievement Network (SPAN) of Alabama-Lauderdale County, one of the seven SPAN of Alabama programs serving at-risk students in a non-traditional school setting. Although the SPAN program is funded through the State of Alabama and linked to local school districts, no formal program evaluations are currently conducted to assess the program's effectiveness. The lack of program assessments to formally understand purpose and structure leads to variability of goal success. Understanding the objective and organization of a program allows effective program implementation for all participants and partners. This evaluation will offer recommendations and suggestions for best practices to implement and improve the success of SPAN of Lauderdale County.

Students who are unsuccessful in a traditional school setting are referred to alternative schools and programs, especially at-risk students with specific academic and behavioral needs. Unfortunately, very few at-risk students are provided with adequate educational settings designed to meet their reclamation needs and assist them with their success (*A Nation Still at Risk, n.d.*). Evaluating the alternative program's structure, strategies, students, teachers, counselors, and stakeholders is essential for an alternative school or program to succeed.

In the past, alternative schools have been eliminated from policies of accountability. Therefore, many students were recommended for alternative education as "dumping grounds" to avoid school accountability for dropout and graduation rates (*Policy Research Brief: Alternative Schools and the Students They Serve: Perceptions of State Directors of Special Education*, 2003, p. 13). Since NCLB and other legislative processes, alternative education has grown to assist intervention programs with at-risk student dropouts and graduation rates, encompassing higher accountability for these programs. Alternative education funding increased with the federal laws,

which entails more responsibility for the existing programs to provide adequate interventions for student success.

Context

Evaluating an educational program is vital to give necessary accountability to the people being served, those serving, and those supporting the program. The first step in assessing the purpose and perceived effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County is to understand the historical process of alternative education. In the United States, the first schools to be known as alternatives began in the 1960s, first as private and now as public sectors (Raywid, 1999). Alternative programs originated for student populations that were not succeeding among the minority and poor and were considered dropout prevention programs (National Dropout et al., 2022). This concept is similar to alternative education programs for today with the graduation rate accountability from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESSA requires states to be accountable for concepts of standards, achievement, and school success using graduation rate as a progress/failure indicator (Alabama's Accountability System- Technical Guide, 2019). Before ESSA, the NCLB originated in 2002 to offer students additional support regardless of their background (US Department of Education, n.d.). Because of federal laws for accountability, alternative education is trending (National Dropout et al., 2022).

In 2015, the ESSA was signed to re-authorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) fifty years before to give equitable access to all students. The ESEA was signed in 1965 for the "first national goal of full educational opportunity" (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d., p. 2). In between the ESEA and ESSA, NCLB was implemented to measure achievement gaps among students and peers. This law granted flexibility for states to plan for accountability, which offered financial assistance for alternative education. Highlights of these laws geared toward alternative

education focused on equity for disadvantaged students with higher needs, college and career readiness, support of innovative ways to provide evidence-based interventions, and expectation for accountability for low-performing and low graduation rate schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.). With the funding available, states must have established plans to show progress.

Since the establishment of alternative education programs in the 1960s, many students have been referred to non-traditional settings. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the enrollment for secondary students in alternative schools for the 2021-2022 school year was 313,530 (2022). This number has consistently remained in the 300,000 range over ten years but has decreased since the 2010-2011 school year enrollment of 377,262 students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). In Alabama, 56 public alternative schools currently serve 241 total students (Public School Review, 2024). These numbers are a low representation of the statistic since many alternative school locations had zero as their student population. If all 56 schools had a minimum set number of students represented as 15, the total enrollment number would be around 840 students.

Purpose of the Study

Although alternative education is not a new concept, it is trending because of increased student placement from implementing accountability indicators of federal laws such as school attendance and graduation rates. Because of these accountability factors and the lack of evaluations for program implementation of alternative programs, this research aims to address the effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County, specifically with its mission and structure. The structure of SPAN to complete this mission is to use counseling, education, and cooperation with local businesses and services. This research will be accomplished by investigating results with the SPAN's mission which "is to prevent incarceration of at-risk youth and prepare them to become productive community citizens" (SPAN of Alabama, n.d.). The research will also evaluate the

organization factors and effectiveness of the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County to be able to provide suggestions on improving the structure and use of strategies for student success.

Conceptual Framework Guiding Research

Edward Earl Earnest, founder of the SPAN Program, began his dream with one goal: to turn at-risk youth away from lives of crime and incarceration. He believed that given the opportunity, every child could succeed. Therefore, the mission of SPAN of Alabama "earnestly seeks to help troubled youth achieve success and become productive adults through education, counseling, and positive influences within their communities" (SPAN of Alabama, n.d.). The goal is to change the direction of a teen who is or has been in the juvenile system, giving opportunities for them to prosper. SPAN continues to evolve on three philosophies:

> 1) SPAN is a non-residential, co-educational, comprehensive strategy for meeting the needs of at-risk youth and their families; 2) SPAN strives to prevent these youth from continued involvement with the justice system by developing social, behavioral, academic, and family skills needed to become productive members of the community, and 3) SPAN accepts any youth with an active juvenile court record and valid court order referred from a local juvenile or family court unless the program simply cannot provide services (SPAN Operations Manual, 2013).

Ed Earnest was a product of his program, spending 12 of his first 25 years in jail. His experience taught him that juvenile detention centers were only there to prepare individuals for prison. Although he was incarcerated, a determined warden saw his potential, and a pioneering educational system enabled him to learn practical techniques to gain his GED while in prison, then a bachelor's degree in social work, where he started this dream project of the SPAN Program. Today, seven SPAN program locations serve over 600 students a year. Each program has unique ways to provide services for its students, but all offer the same four learning objectives: academic

services, counseling services, employment services, and transitional services. With practical tools and determined individuals implementing a program, student success can be attained as living proof through Ed Earnest.

SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County addresses four learning outcomes with the assistance of community leaders and service providers. These four learning outcomes are 1) Academic Services, 2) Counseling Services, 3) Employment Services, and 4) Transitional Services. The providers assisting SPAN consist of board members and community service providers who structure advisement for the program. The table below lists program providers and services that help organize SPAN to implement the four learning outcomes.

Table 1

SPAN Program Service Providers

Academics	Counseling	Employment	Transitions
Apex Edgenuity Florence City Schools Lauderdale County Schools Northwest-Shoals Community College Adult Education and Youth Services University of North Alabama	Bradford Health Services Council on Substance Abuse Cramer's Mental Health Center Florence Police Department Healing Hearts Health Connect Lauderdale County Extension Office Lauderdale County Sherrif's Department Riverbend Center for Mental Health Tennesse Valley Pediatrics United Way UAB	Alabama Department of Public Health Local Banks and Credit Unions- Listerhill CareerLink- LCS Tech Representative Choices- Financial Literacy Local Stores- Lowe's, Office Depot, Publix, Sam's Club, Walmart Marriot of the Shoals Military Recruiting- Army and Marines Old Navy- Employment Opportunities	ADPH Lauderdale County ADRS Boys and Girls Home Churches- Greater St. Paul Methodist Episcopal, Roger's Chapel & Trinity City Hall- Mayor's Office and City Councilmen DHR Lauderdale County Juvenile Court System Rotary Club Safe Place

Other than the advisement of board members, there are no formal evaluations of SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County. The program is located in the Burrell Slater Building in Florence, Alabama. The program has an academic classroom, counseling room, lunchroom, and gymnasium. The staff consists of a program director, two certified teachers (math and English), two licensed counselors, and one part-time special education teacher from Lauderdale County School System. Currently, less than fifteen students attend SPAN of Lauderdale County. These students are from the Lauderdale County and Florence City School Systems. The Lauderdale County Juvenile System has referred all students for reasons requiring a juvenile probation officer. The students attend SPAN from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. following a structured daily schedule. New referrals are made throughout the school year, while the current students will complete the program in May. There is also a summer program offered to student referrals.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission?
2. To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served?

Significance of the Study

As the education system continues to address school behavior, attendance, and graduation rates as accountability, more alternative education programs and schools will become necessary for school districts. "Under federal law, high schools with graduation rates that are less than 67% or meet other criteria for low performance are subject to intensive improvement strategies" (Jimenez et al., 2018, p. 1). This federal law now applies to alternative education. Because of the inclusion of accountability for alternative schools and programs, there is a need for program evaluation to provide specific services to address school behavior and attendance. (Jimenez & et. al, 2018).

SPAN of Alabama is the alternative education program chosen for this study. SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County is the specific location to be reviewed. Students are referred to SPAN to address student behavior, school attendance, and juvenile delinquency. Students referred have been assigned a juvenile probation officer through the Lauderdale County Court System. The referral from the court and the school system is made to give the student tools to turn their direction around positively to find success within their community.

Definition of Terms and Abbreviations

The terms of this study are addressed as follows:

Accountability System

An accountability system is how schools are responsible for meeting specific criteria set forth by federal laws. The federal law ESSA requires each state's educational system to develop an accountability system based on academic standards for the course areas of reading, language arts, and mathematics to address and improve student achievement. Accountability systems must include indicators that measure Academic Achievement, Academic Growth, Graduation Rate, Progress in English Language Proficiency, and school quality or student success (Alabama's Accountability System- Technical Guide, 2019).

Alabama Accountability System

Alabama's State Department's Educational plan was submitted to the United States Education Department Alabama's Report Card Law is categorized under Alabama Act No. 2012-402, which states that the State Superintendent of Education will develop a grading system reflective of school and district performance. For Alabama, the accountability indicators are referenced as College and Career Readiness and Chronic Absenteeism (Alabama's Accountability System-Technical Guide, 2019).

Alternative Education

There are many ways to define alternative education. Still, the most common is represented at the federal level: “An alternative school is defined as a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education” (Sable et al., 2014, p. 1; Palmer, 2018, p. 1; Hazeldine, 2017, p. 6).

Apex Learning

A learning platform using an online curriculum with designed instruction and support for mastery of concepts and skills (*Learning et al.*). Apex is the learning platform used for SPAN students from the Florence City School System.

At-Risk Students

Students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school setting are categorized as at-risk because they have a higher probability of failing or dropping out of school due to their circumstances (Sabbott, 2013).

Chronic absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism occurs when students continuously miss school. Absenteeism is calculated as a percentage on the 9-month attendance report of students in grades K-12 who missed 18 or more days of school, regardless of excused or unexcused absences, during the student's enrollment time for the school year (Alabama’s Accountability System—Technical Guide, 2019).

Dropout

A dropout is a child over 17 who quits coming to school and does not complete the graduation requirements (2022 Code of Alabama, n.d.).

Dropout Rate

The rate calculating the percentage of students enrolled in secondary 7-12 schools who left a particular school during the year and did not enroll in a different school (*High School Dropout Rate*, n.d).

Edgenuity

A learning platform using an online K-12 curriculum for core instruction, supplemental support, and personalized intervention (Imagine Learning LLC, 2023). Edgenuity is the learning platform for SPAN students from the Lauderdale County School System.

Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA)

The Civil Rights law was signed in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson to offer complete educational opportunities. This law provided new grants to districts serving low-income students, textbooks and library books, special education centers, and scholarships for low-income students (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Education law was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to provide equal opportunity for all students. This law gives allocations for schools to increase equity for disadvantaged and high-need students, to promote high academic standards for college and careers, to verify annual statewide assessments to measure the progress of high standards, to support and implement innovations, and to preserve expectations for accountability for positive change in low performing schools no progress schools and low graduation rate schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.).

Graduation Rate

The rate calculates the percentage of high school students who graduated within four years of first entering the 9th grade (Alabama's Accountability System—Technical Guide, 2019).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The federal law before the ESSA was enacted in 2002 but revamped by the Obama administration in 2010. This law represented crucial steps for students to make progress and gain the need for additional support, regardless of background. After 2002, the Obama administration found that the original requirements were increasingly impossible for schools, therefore creating a law that focused on a clear goal to prepare all students for success in college and career readiness (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.).

School Discipline

The use of procedures implemented in schools to address and manage student behavior (National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environment, 2024). Alabama Legislature states that "no student has the right to be unruly in his or her classroom to the extent that such disruption denies fellow students of their right to learn" (National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environment, 2024 p. 5).

Special Programming for Achievement Network (SPAN)

SPAN is a nonresidential educational program serving at-risk youth and their families throughout Alabama. Educational tools, counseling techniques, and community services are implemented within the program to meet the needs of students who are defined as troubled youth. SPAN referrals come from various placements, including the educational and juvenile court systems. They partner with community leaders, politicians, local businesses, law enforcement, mental health organizations, churches, and schools. They offer behavior workshops, college and career readiness skills, academics, and preventive strategies for their students. (SPAN of Alabama, n.d.)

Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a foundational framework for evaluating the success of the Special Programming for Achievement Network Program (SPAN) located in Lauderdale County, Alabama. SPAN is an alternative education program focusing on problematic youth and their families. This review will examine alternative education topics emphasizing alternative education purposes, students attending alternative schools and programs, and alternative education designs. Exploring the standard concepts of alternative education definitions and types, at-risk factors, including family and school, and behavioral indicators, including school discipline, attendance, dropout rate, alternative education practices and strategies, recidivism, graduation rate, and dropout prevention will establish how an alternative education program should exhibit and facilitate students' reclamation needs to be successful. Researching familiarity with alternative education components will enable how the SPAN Program utilizes effective strategies. Finding success within alternative education programs is the underlying subject of this evaluation study, so having an in-depth and extensive understanding of the alternative education subjects will impact the validity of the evaluation of the SPAN program.

Alternative Education

Alternative education schools and programs were established back in the 1960s. Some educators refer to schools and programs as "Alternative Settings." Glavam et al. (2022) suggest that there are different variations between alternative schools and alternative programs, with the main difference being that alternative programs remain located within the base school setting while alternative schools are usually in a different location (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Even though alternative education originated in 1960, it has continued to rise.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1965 (ESEA) authorized funding for alternative education settings (Mazzara, 2014). This act promoted education equity and a resource

to avert academic failure (Kumm et al., 2020). Therefore, alternative education schools and programs originated to create additional school settings for students who have been identified as at-risk. Logsdon states that “alternative schools are designed to educate students who have not been successful in regular schools, often because of behavior, disciplinary, and safety concerns” (2023, p. 1). The ESEA was implemented through Title I, which promoted programs for “disadvantaged students, student assessment, migratory students, and neglected and delinquent students” (Skinner, 2022, p. 2). The grant funding was provided to schools to address the students' needs that were not addressed in the traditional school setting to meet unique individual needs. Since then, the NCLB and ESSA 2015 have replaced the ESEA. These most recent acts emphasize alternative education programs' academic proficiency measures to ensure a quality education (McGee & Lin, 2020). In 2002, NCLB added the Academic Achievement Indicator for high school graduation requirements, which changed the focus to a stricter high-stakes policy (McGee & Lin, 2020). This high-stakes policy also applies to each state's alternative education programs.

With the national guidelines and policies of completion rate and test score implementation of 2002, alternative setting enrollments increased moderately (Fresques et al., 2017). There was an increase from 2002-2008 in the number of alternative schools. Obeadon (2023) reported from other researchers that more than 500,000 students were enrolled in alternative schools during this time frame (Jimenez et al., 2018; McGee & Lin, 2020). In 2015, ESSA set mandates to ensure student success, including “advanced equity for upholding critical protections for America’s disadvantaged and high-need students” (US Department of Education, n.d.).

ESSA also requires states to create statewide accountability plans to identify support and improvement (Kannam & Weiss, 2019). Within these plans reported to the state and federal governments, states must include accountability measures for success within alternative settings to verify that students receive an appropriate education with an opportunity to succeed (Kannam &

Weiss, 2019). Because of these legislative efforts to meet educational needs and improve graduation rates, alternative educational programs are on the rise (Pettit, 2023). The National Dropout Prevention Center calculates that the number of alternative schools and programs in the United States is around 10,000, indicating that six percent of the nation's high schools are considered alternative education (Addis et al., 2020). Additionally, to the number of alternative settings, with the focus on increasing graduation rates and our nation's dropout crisis, there needs to be an evaluation system in place for assessments of alternative school programs. Since so many different alternative education models exist, little research has been conducted on alternative programs' inner structures and settings.

Alternative Education Definition

No established national alternative school and program definitions are identical. (Ewing et al., 2021) Therefore, many ways exist to express alternative schools and programs because states and school districts determine the individual features of their alternative education programs. Porowki et al. reported to the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance that "forty-three states and the District of Columbia have their own formal definitions of alternative education" (2014, p. 3). The multiple definitions also exist because of the different types of alternative education settings the schools in the United States have to offer. These settings encompass a variety of educational environments apart from the traditional school setting. School setting types are considered just one of the criteria for any alternative education definition. Measures for the criterion include the student population served and instructional and environmental characteristics (Kannam & Weiss, 2019). Other key elements include services and structure offered within the program. Some of the most common alternative programs provide academic instruction, counseling and therapy, social and life skills, career preparedness, and behavioral services (Porowski et al., 2014). With those services attached, Porowski et al. define

alternative education as “educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 curriculum-frequently serve students who are at risk of school failure” (2014, p. 1). While clarifying how to define alternative education, Porowski et al. (2014, p. 1) referenced a quote:

> “At the federal level, an alternative school is defined as a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education” (Sable et al., 2014, p. 1; Palmer, 2018, p. 1; Hazeldine, 2017, p. 5). This exact quote was presented in a study by McGee and Lin (2020. p. 183) during the Common Core era, stating the overall mission is “to support students who function poorly within conventional school systems and seeks to provide an innovative curriculum that effectively engages student learning.”

In addition to the national definition by Sable et al., Aron and Zweig (2003) provided the most prevalent perspective on alternative education in the research literature. These standard features offer specific guidelines for establishing and creating programs: 1) Whom the program serves, 2) Where the program operates, 3) What the program offers, and 4) How the program is structured. Alternative education can also be defined as a school or program that provides a curriculum different from the district norm (Rhone, 2022). Rhone (2022) adds that alternative education derives from settings not specified as regular, special, or vocational education. Substantially, alternative education ensures that all people can and should have the opportunity to be educated, regardless of the circumstances.

Alternative Education Types

Although alternative schools were established in the 1960s, alternative education is trending. The early establishment of alternative schools had implications for at-risk students only. These programs were designed for students as a dropout prevention option. Kamruth (2019) further

emphasizes that alternative programs can give students opportunities for academic success. “As time has progressed, the term “alternative school” has evolved in meaning and no longer offers the services that were provided by the earliest alternative schools” (Rhone, 2022, p. 13). The most recent trend of alternative education is having innovative possibilities for achieving a high school education. Despite the current trend, alternative schooling models have been explored, even in the 1900s. Hefner-Packer (1999) studied the following five models that are still trending in modern education: (a) the alternative classroom, (b) the school within the school, (c) the separate alternative school, (d) the continuation school, and (e) the magnet school.

Many of these alternative models are implemented throughout the United States and described in the database of effective dropout prevention initiatives created by the National Dropout Prevention Center. However, most are models for initiatives to stay in school, while others are for innovative ways to provide an education. When describing the models, it was noted that each differs in various ways due to the students, curriculum, and program structure (National et al., 2022). These five models can be categorized into three types: remedial schools, last-chance schools, and innovative schools, which are classified as schools of choice (National et al., 2022). Remedial schools would be for students who need additional resources to be successful in an educational setting. These students can gain strides from an environment that provides emotional and social reclamation with the support of academic remediation (Rhone, 2022). Students attending remedial programs are considered Type 2 students since remedial programs serve on a short-term basis, with students having multiple serious discipline problems (Rhone, 2022). The base school system refers Type 2 students to alternative programs. Last-chance schools are utilized when students have exhausted all resources and could be up for suspension or expulsion. Last-chance schools provide provisions of final opportunities for students to continue their education before being sent to a more restrictive environment (Rhone, 2022). The students attending last-chance

schools are considered Type 3 students with proper diagnosis of an emotional or behavioral disorder and have been referred by a doctor or juvenile court system (Rhone, 2022). Innovative schools or schools of choice would be magnet schools or schools specializing in a particular curriculum. These schools are consciously designed to be more rigorous and engaging than traditional schools (Rhone, 2022). The students attending innovative schools are considered Type 1 students since they are academically advanced and thus only admitted to these alternative programs by application acceptance (Rhone, 2022).

The alternative classroom model was created to function as a stand-alone classroom in the conventional school, much like a self-contained classroom. This model may provide a variety of programs in the stand-alone classroom. An example of this model would be for serving students with severe disabilities that require specialized instruction with alternate standards to learn. These students take different state assessments than others but participate in the alternate academic achievement assessments. The school within the school model is similar to an alternative classroom, which is included in the conventional school but only specializes in specific curricula. The program offers academics in addition to specialization areas. An example of the school within a school model would be for serving students specializing in a particular subject, such as fine arts. The students complete their core subjects online and come to school for fine arts classes, where they train with a specialized teacher in dance, music, or another fine arts area. Another example of the school within a school model would offer social and behavioral type programs. Being on the campus of a traditional school would allow an alternative environment without being in a separate building away from typical peers (Glavan et al., 2022). The separate alternative school acts individually from the leading school, offering distinct academics and socialization activities. According to the National Dropout Center (2022), these schools are the most common type of alternative education. Foley and Pang also report that this type of alternative school has been

common since 1993 (2006). An example of a separate alternative school would be a program for students who can no longer attend the base school for behavioral reasons. The continuation school was created for students who no longer participate in traditional school, but a school training for the workforce. An example of a continuation school would be a student who works during the day and follows a rescue-type program, only focusing on academics for a few hours in a non-traditional setting. This type of alternative program is beneficial for students who are parents. The most recent trending alternative program is the magnet school. These schools offer a more rigorous curriculum in subjects such as math and science.

Alternative Education Students

Students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school setting are categorized as at-risk. Alternative schools and programs have been perceived as the schools where the "bad kids" attend (Logsdon, 2020, p. 1). Glavan et al. (2022, p. 33) echoed past researchers, stating that some alternative programs have become "dumping grounds" for disruptive students and students who do not fit in socially (Foley & Pang, 2006, p. 11). This label is not necessarily factual since not all students have severe behavioral problems. Some students just need a resource to help them return to a successful path. These students are in situations that cause them to be at risk. Students labeled as at-risk are trending toward dropping out of school. Some of the individual factors that may contribute to dropout probability are substance abuse, teen pregnancy, social skills dysfunction, academic remediation, unstable home life, family poverty, single-parent homes, divorce, and or physical abuse. Students are classified due to circumstances that place them in jeopardy of not completing high school. Sabbott (2013) reiterates the point made about contributing factors by stating that these circumstances can include homelessness, teenage pregnancy, health issues, domestic violence, transiency, disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retention, and other learning factors that adversely affect the student.

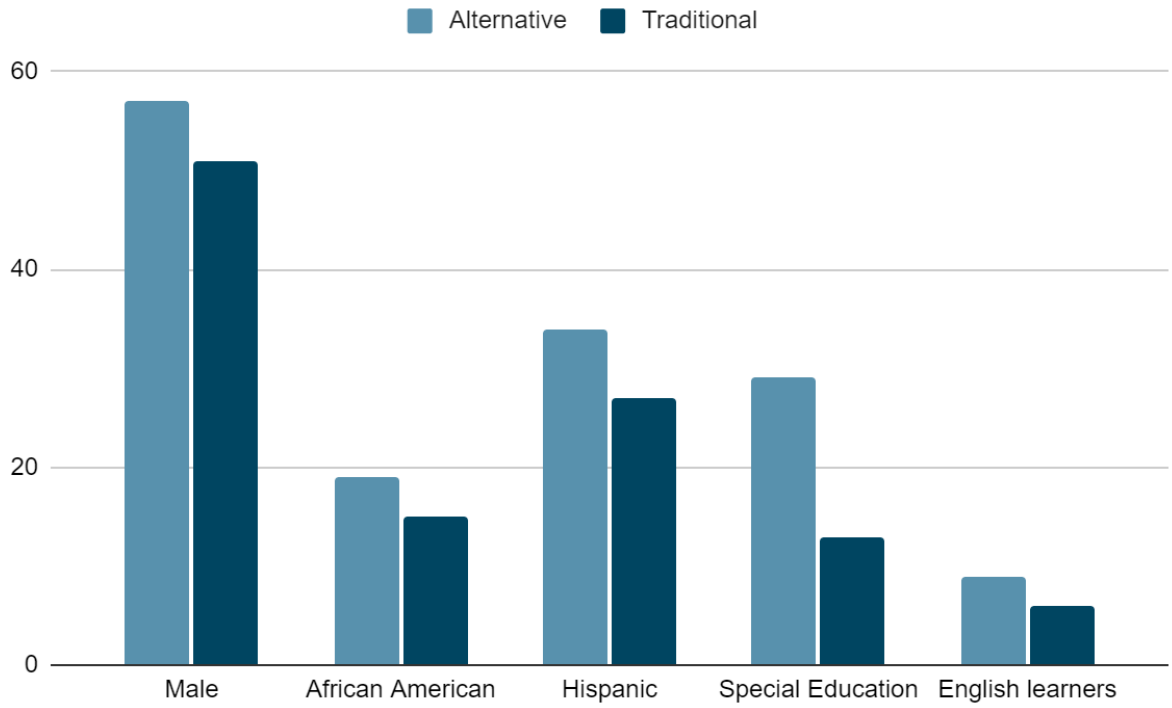
As legislative mandates place accountability for alternative education, the students attending these programs must be defined to receive equitable education. The Urban Institute reports that nearly 800,000 students are enrolled in alternative education, which is 1.6% of all students (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). This number is an increase from the statistics provided by Rhone (2022) when 500,000 students were enrolled in alternative education in 2014 (Fresques et al., 2017). Urban school districts comprise the vast majority of students attending alternative education (Obeahon, 2023). Ewing et al. (2021) note that the number was significant as 94% of all alternative education schools and programs are located in urban areas. Other key findings of the students served in alternative education were reported by the Urban Institute (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022) as follows:

- Thirty percent of mainstream students attend urban schools, but forty-five percent of alternative school students attend urban schools.
- Fifty-seven percent of alternative school students are male, while fifty-one percent of mainstream students are male.
- Nineteen percent of alternative school students are black, while fifteen percent of mainstream students are black.
- Thirty-four percent of alternative school students are Hispanic, while twenty-seven percent of mainstream students are Hispanic.
- Nine percent of alternative school students are English Language Learners, while six percent of mainstream students are.
- Twenty-nine percent of alternative school students are students with disabilities, while thirteen percent of mainstream students are students with disabilities. This statistic is more than double for alternative students versus mainstream students with disabilities.

In an analysis of national data, alternative schools serve disproportionately high numbers of African American and Hispanic students, special education students, English language learners, and male students (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). The United States Department of Civil Rights Data Collection and Common Core of Data convey this distribution in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Students served alternative versus traditional



Note. Figure adapted from “The students alternative schools serve” by A. Kho and S. Rabovsky. Kho, A., & Rabovsky, S. (2022).

.

These findings are consistent with previous data from earlier years. In addition, findings from Hall (2019, p. 40) reported that “in alternative schools, ethnic minorities and students from low socioeconomic status neighborhoods are disproportionately overrepresented” (Carver & Lewis, 2010; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993).

Characteristics of students attending alternative schools and programs vary among their circumstances. Mainly, disciplinary infractions are the occurrences that cause the conditions. In most cases, the students were disruptive or expelled from their previous school. Although discipline and behaviors occur most often, there are other attributes. Frank (2019, p. 3) listed from other researchers alternative school characteristics as students having a history of the following: "social-emotional problems, physical aggression, truancy, substance use, early pregnancy, academic failure, disruptive classroom behavior, and involvement in the juvenile justice system" (Carver & Lewis, 2010; Foley & Pang, 2006; Gable et al., 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Morley, 1991; Raywid, 1994; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Van Acker, 2007). More alarming student elements have been identified from past studies as well. These studies found that alternative students are more likely to be involved in a gang, carry a gun to school, and fight yearly, causing injury to themselves or others (Frank, 2019). Mental and emotional health characteristics are also prevalent among alternative school students. Frank (2019, p. 3) noted that "students are more likely to suffer from one or more mental health concerns, have lower self-esteem, and are at significantly higher risk for suicide (Cocozza & Skowyra, 2000; Dugger & Dugger. 1998; Fulkerson et al., 1999; Grunbaum & et al., 1998 and 2001). In addition to mental health, students look to other things to satisfy their emotions. Frank (2019) states that students attending alternative schools are likely to participate in unsafe sexual behaviors. This type of behavior could cause health concerns, diseases, and even teenage pregnancy. Regardless of the factors, students' behaviors position them to become at-risk for dropping out of school or becoming a part of the juvenile justice system.

At-Risk Factors

The phrase "at-risk" originates from the word risqué, meaning peril (Ghongkedze, 2018). Educators use the phrase frequently to describe a "categorized" group of students. More specifically, teachers use the phrase as it relates to students who have displayed behaviors or have

worries about their likelihood of failing or dropping out. This concept could be challenging to understand what the phrase means precisely within educational settings and clarification details. The term could become meaningless without defining the circumstances of the "categorized" group. The phrase could also be interpreted as a negative connotation to the group of students. Ghongkedze (2018) reported that the Glossary of Education Reform states that "at-risk" is applied to "the group of students" who are jeopardizing their completion of graduation requirements. Therefore, the phrase can be explained in ways that meet the group of students within individual educational systems since systems vary with graduation requirements. Nonetheless, at-risk factors suppress students from achieving their full potential. Numerous students worldwide are exposed to one or more risk factors that can decrease their success, whether a family or school factor. Rhone (2022), citing Gibson (2006), stated that although the term at-risk may have different meanings, the students labeled have encountered deficit and unfair experiences in their family, school, or community.

Family Factors

Family dynamics mold who children are and become. "The element of family factors in terms of influencing the development of adolescents is generally associated with the family structure and family process" (Tan et al., 2019, p. 147). Research has linked delinquent behaviors to family structures; for example, divorced and single-parent structures have noted anti-social, delinquency, cognitive, and emotional effects on children (Tan et al., 2019). The significant component is the influence of parents' relationship with the child or children. If a child does not have a proper relationship with their parents, negative behaviors may transpire. Evidence has linked positive family relationships to preventing problematic behaviors and risk factors (Tan et al., 2019).

Early childhood experiences are essential in growth and development. In the ideal situation, a child should experience a positive environment of security and nurturing, which is not the case at all. Maslow's hierarchy theory illustrates that basic needs must be met before higher requirements can be fulfilled. To succeed, students must pass through the hierarchy of physiology, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Ghongkedze, 2018). When students do not share the same healthy and positive environment, the growing cultural, linguistic, social, and emotional differences hinder their educational success (Ghongkedze, 2018). The National Dropout Prevention Center reported that childhood traumas significantly and negatively impact students attending alternative schools (Addis et al., 2020).

The primary risk factor for family crises that result in child abandonment and family disintegration in some countries is poverty (Ghongkedze, 2018). According to the United States Census Bureau, the U.S. poverty rate in 2022 was 11.5%, with 37.9 million people living in poverty (Creamer et al., 2023). The report also noted, "Of people in families, those in married-couple families had the lowest poverty rate of 5.4 while those in female-householder families had the highest at 24.7%" (Creamer et al., 2023, p. 3). The statistics for child poverty were reported from 2021 to 2022, and the supplemental poverty measure more than doubled from 5.2% to 12.4% (Creamer et al., 2023). There is no denying that poverty affects students' academic performance. Yarbrough (2020) indicated that the achievement gap between students at a disadvantage economically and those with high economic status is greater than the racial gap. Poverty leads to missed learning opportunities that contribute to the achievement gap.

Deprivation can cause homelessness for some families and children. The McKinney Vento Act defines homeless students as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (Educating Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness, 2023). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) calculated that in 2022, 582,462 people were considered

homeless (HUD et al., 2022). When children worry about their next meal or where they will sleep that night, the priority of school decreases. Students experiencing homelessness are challenged with educational difficulties because of the trauma from the circumstances. These children would be classified as “at-risk” because they have to adjust to the situation and possibly develop health problems from malnutrition and lack of medical resources.

School Factors

Children spend twelve or more years of their lives within the school environment. From the beginning, elementary school children spend at least seven thousand hours at school and are taught appropriate social skills in preparation for society. While attending school at all levels, students learn and gain experience of becoming independent. The goal is for youth to grow socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively. Children start classes with the same age group, working together through the same curriculum to gain experience. Although they have the same age group and curriculum, not all children receive the same experience. Without a meaningful experience, school contributes to the negative impact—the number one reason schools can contribute to factors causing delinquency.

School culture can cause student disengagement, leading to dropout (Flores & Brown, 2019). Students develop a negative perception of school that leads to disconnection. Reasons for disengagement could be no interest in coursework, lack of motivation, need for a job, failing courses, reading below grade level, and repeating grades. The contrary is school engagement, which represents the positive relationship between student and school experience. School engagement is essential to academic and social success (Lea et al., 2020). Lea (2020) further expanded on school engagement from Skinner and Frederick (2010), stating it is understood by three components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Students who do not engage tend to fall in at least one or all of these components. Glavan et al. (2022) state that students in the past have

described their school experiences as a general lack of respect, evident peer group division, and no connection with teachers and staff (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In addition, “students reported that rules in a traditional school setting are rigid and do not consider individual cases or rationale for breaking rules. Therefore, students felt bullied and isolated and reported acting out due to feeling withdrawn and misunderstood” (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 105). The alienation the students feel from not being a part of the school community leads to a negative connotation and school experience for them.

Teacher effectiveness is vital for determining student success (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). Many factors play a role in students' failure or success, like characteristics, family, and experiences, but teachers rank higher when comparing teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Opper, 2019). Opper (2019) suggested that teacher effectiveness exceeds other factors when measuring student performance on reading and math assessments, including services, facilities, and leadership. Teachers set the tone for the classroom environment for students to experience. A contribution of the tone in a classroom environment is the relationship between teacher and student. The teacher is responsible for creating an effective learning environment that is supportive and nurturing, one where the teacher knows the students and can connect with them, regardless of the circumstances they present. Obeahon (2023) quoted two different research studies regarding students' sentiments toward their teachers in traditional schools versus teachers in alternative schools. The study by McGee and Lin (2020, p. 185) quoted that students viewed their teachers in conventional schools as “not caring.” The other reference was by Ewing et al. (2021, p. 1385), stating that students reported their relationship with teachers at alternative schools was “superior relative to prior experiences at traditional school.” Teachers need to understand the impact they have on their students.

Behavioral Issues

There are some common behavioral issues among students attending alternative schools and programs. The at-risk behaviors position students for future negative consequences. Behaviors develop over time in children. Physical and emotional changes occur daily in the first few years of a child's life and continue to change throughout development (Barrington, 2023). A young child cannot handle their emotions and deal with frustration and disappointment. However, when this type of behavior continues as they enter the youth and teen stages, it stimulates at-risk factors of behavioral issues in the home, school, and community. Though not all behaviors lead to a diagnosis, the most common behavioral problems diagnosed are attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, autism spectrum disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, learning disorders, and conduct disorders (Barrington, 2023). In the school setting, these behaviors lead to discipline referrals to alternative education, the most prominent referral for students.

School Discipline

School discipline is a prominent challenge for school systems nationwide. School discipline refers to the policies and procedures implemented in school settings to control student conduct and support them in acquiring self-management skills (Wriston, 2023). "School discipline policies are broadly intended to foster a high-quality learning environment by maintaining safety in the classroom; however, far too often, schools adopt measures that harm a student's social, emotional, academic, and, in some cases, physical health and well-being" (Wriston, 2023, p. 1). Schools must endorse evidence-based discipline techniques such as restorative justice to build and mend relationships while providing behavior accountability for actions (Wriston, 2023). Discipline must also consider race-equity to create positive learning environments and student development.

Exclusionary discipline practices are widespread. Yarbrough (2020, p.1) cited the quote:

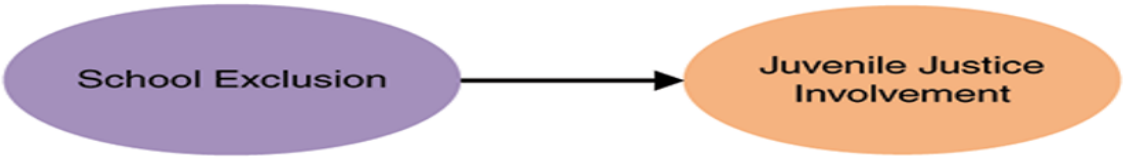
> "School practices and policies have yielded disproportionately high exclusionary discipline rates for the most vulnerable students; the economically disadvantaged, minorities, those with special needs, and those that identify as bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender" (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Losen, 2015b; Mallett, 2017; Meeks, 2012; Mittleman, 2018b; Vincent et al., 2012).

Welsh (2022) states that the well-established racial, gender, and economic inequities for the consequences of exclusionary discipline have drawn the attention of researchers and policymakers to school disciplinary practices. Welsh (2022, p. 550) quoted research stating that "exclusionary discipline results in lost instructional days and school exclusion associated with adverse educational outcomes" (Skiba et al., 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018). Welsh and Little (2018) describe four types of exclusionary discipline: in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsions, and assignment to alternative schools. Suspension and expulsion are frequently substituted for alternative school commission. In most cases, for alternative school referrals, discipline is the leading cause for placement instead of suspension and expulsion of the student. Having an additional resource for at-risk students to complete a high school program and earn a diploma is essential for the student, school system, community, and nation as a whole.

There are numerous ways that the criminal justice system and schools interact. One primary interaction is school exclusion, which includes discipline transfers, suspensions, and expulsions that involve the strict implementation of a zero-tolerance policy (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018). Exclusionary discipline and future involvement in criminal justice have been linked to a high correlation (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018). Crawley and Hirschfield (2018) presented an image from Skiba (2014) to illustrate the simple connection between school and the justice court system.

Figure 2

School-to-prison pipeline

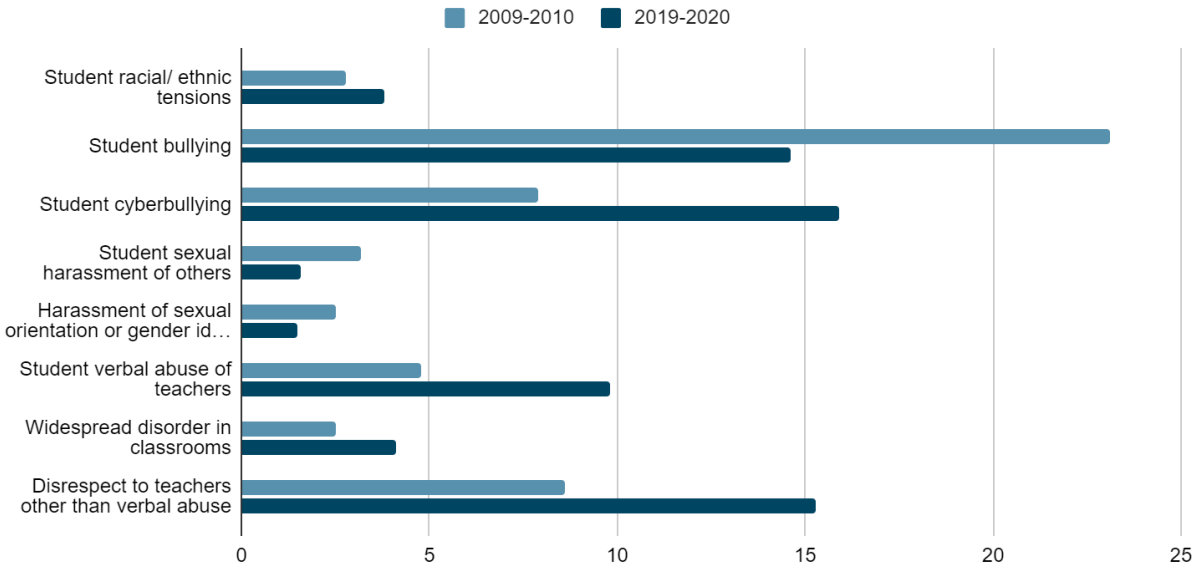


Note. Figure adapted from "More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline" by R. Skiba, M. Arredondo, and N. Williams. Skiba, R., Arredondo, M., & Williams, N. (2014).

Regardless of the type of discipline, the behaviors acquire consequences for actions. Schools must hold students accountable for their actions. Students who disrupt the school environment keep all other students from acquiring an education. Disciple referrals are written daily. Some common behaviors occur frequently, and some more severe behaviors do not necessarily occur frequently but happen more than they should within a school. The figures below indicate the offenses that are reported for disciplinary action. Figure 3 displays data for commonly reported discipline occurring at least once weekly for ten years (Irwin, 2023). Figure 4 indicates the more severe behaviors reported for discipline over ten years (Erwin, 2023).

Figure 3

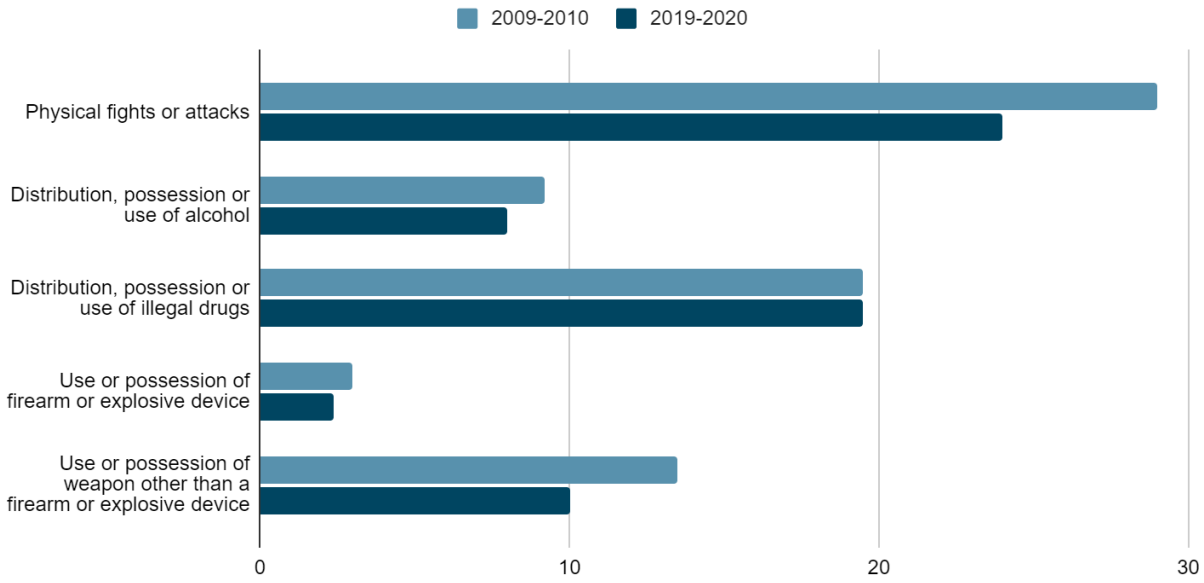
Public schools discipline report



Note. Figure adapted from "Report on indicators of school crime and safety" by V. Irwin. Irwin, V. (2023). Report on indicators of school crime and safety: 2022.

Figure 4

Discipline report of specific offenses



Note. Figure adapted from "Report on indicators of school crime and safety by V. Irwin." Irwin, V. (2023).

Attendance

Attendance plays a vital role in school success. Peters et al. state, "Attendance is an individual issue, but it is also a culture, climate, family, and community matter" (2022, p. 1). One missed school day is equivalent to losing eight hours of instruction and continues to build up absences for the student. Due to the increased accountability, school officials are concerned with the connection between attendance and student achievement. A teacher can only be effective when a student attends school. "Chronic student absence reduces even the best teacher's ability to provide learning opportunities" (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d., p. 1). School students receive the instruction and tend to have a better success rate. Chronic absenteeism usually appears early while attending elementary school. Attendance at that age could be linked to the parents and have severe implications in high school. Ewing et al. studied absenteeism-related

factors (2021). Student attendance is facilitated by four factors: stable housing, means of transportation, feelings of belonging, and flexible support from staff (Ewing et al., 2021).

Attendance also plays a part in the development of dropping out. “Attendance issues may develop during students’ transitions between levels of school campuses due to the added demands of changes in school structure, academic rigor, and credit requirements” (Flores & Brown, 2019, p. 63). High school dropouts manifest ongoing negative behaviors, including prominent absenteeism levels (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Schools are using disciplinary actions for chronic absenteeism, which may exacerbate the situation. Consequences implemented most often are loss of course credit, some type of detention, and even suspension. Even the judicial court system can charge a student with truancy.

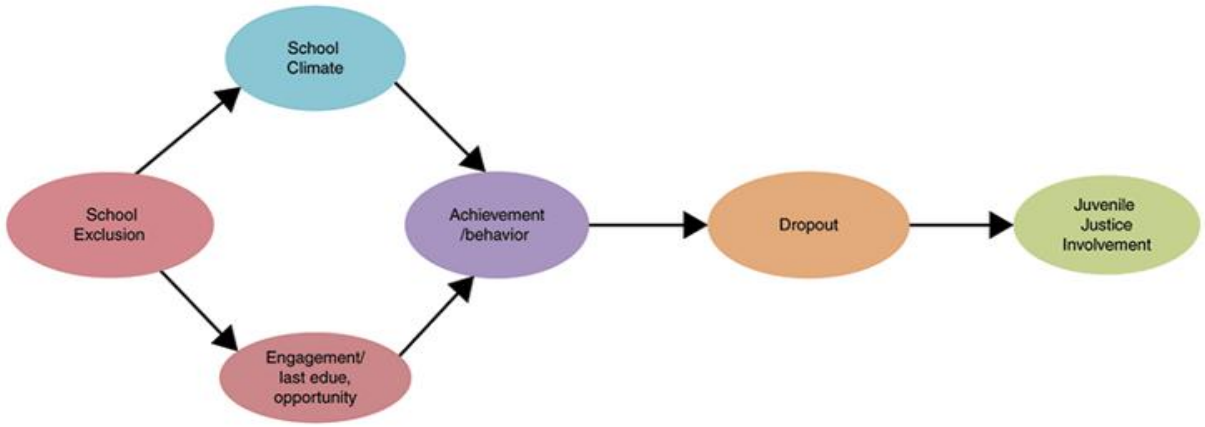
Dropout Rate

Although graduation rates are rising, there is still a dropout epidemic (Heppen et al., 2017). “Approximately one million high school students each year fail to earn a diploma” (Jimenez et al., 2018, p. 1). The dropout rate for the school year 2021 noted that two million students aged 16 to 24 did not complete high school (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d). The national school dropout rate is 5.9% (Jimenez et al., 2018). School dropouts impact individuals, their families, and the nation. Dropping out of school occurs for many reasons and in stages. Flores and Brown state that “systematic and campus culture factors can lead to push-out and pull-out factors that can cause students to disengage and drop out” (2019, p. 62). Push-out factors include high absenteeism and classroom disruptions, leading to instruction loss (Flores & Brown, 2019). Pull-out factors include parenthood, homelessness, and students' need to work to help support families (Flores & Brown, 2019). These factors and negative experiences within the school environment cause students to disengage from participation, leading to absenteeism and eventually dropping out. Research reported in the 2000s examined student experiences that led to dropout rates: 69% stated that they

were not motivated to work hard, 47% said classes were not interesting, 45% stated students started high school unprepared from earlier schooling, 35% indicated that students were already failing, 32% stated students had to drop out to get a job, and 32% said they were required to repeat a grade or drop out (Flores & Brown, 2019; Tabrizi, 2013). These reasons are just a few of the reasons reported by students. Among the most prominent factors for school dropout are shown in Figure 5 below- school climate, engagement, and exclusion. These three factors have an impact on student achievement. When students are not achieving, their behavior may cause them to react, which could lead to at-risk behaviors that contribute to the dropout rate. Students who drop out are more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system. Youth not enrolled in school have more opportunities to participate in criminal activities since they are not responsible for attendance and school activities during the school day.

Figure 5

"More Fully Articulated" school-to-prison pipeline



Note. Figure adapted from "More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline" by R. Skiba, M. Arredondo, and N. Williams. Skiba, R., Arredondo, M., & Williams, N. (2014).

Alternative Education Designs

The daily activities and organizational structures of alternative schools and programs are multifaceted and intricate (Frank, 2019). The daily makeup of the organization depends on various factors. According to Frank (2019), the factors are as follows:

- student target population
- student education needs
- school type
- operational setting
- purpose

- curriculum
- student services and administration
- entrance and exit criteria
- diplomas and certifications offered
- agency connections
- funding sources

> "High-quality alternative settings can provide students the opportunity to attend a smaller school with greater personalization, caring culture, opportunities for credit recovery and acceleration, meaningful relationships with caring adults, flexible scheduling and curriculum, and opportunity for youth voice and leadership which can have a positive impact on student outcomes" (Kannam & Weiss, 2019, p. 2).

Alternative education settings may build individualized, nurturing conditions for students struggling in conventional classrooms and traditional school settings (Rhone, 2022). The setting can be compared to a triage unit where the faculty is highly qualified to provide individualized interventions to responsively meet the needs of various students (Rhone, 2022). Students connect to a community when alternative education models develop meaningful and relevant lessons and experiences. Some alternative schools are well established with financial support, adequate resources, superb facilities, and highly qualified staff, while other programs work with remnant resources, facilities, and inadequate staff. "If districts can improve the student outcomes of their alternative schools by making those schools more efficient and effective, they are likely to achieve significantly higher system-wide graduation rates and system accountability ratings" (Addis et al., 2020, p. 5).

Effective Alternative Education Practices

Upon leaving an alternative school, students must receive the necessary practices to succeed. For an alternative school to succeed, it must be built on the basis that students can achieve and will graduate. It is critical to focus on the advancement, administration, and assessment of the overall interventions (Hall, 2019). Hall (2019) also discusses self-efficacy, social and emotional learning, and authentic instruction as essential practices for alternative education. Rhone (2022) quoted Flower et al. (2011), stating that alternative school experiences must implement strategies to communicate and demonstrate acceptable behaviors for students to grow and become productive members of society. For students to grow and develop, practices must reconnect and engage them. Strategies and interventions should be implemented systematically. One intervention strategy may not be successful with one student, but it could be for another because strategies can work better when used together.

Strategies that are supportive within alternative education settings include both teachers and students giving and receiving respect, both teachers and students building trust, teachers having a personal interest in students, teachers going out of their way to help students, teachers maintaining a positive school environment, students being given more responsibility and control over decisions, and students being more included within the school (Glavan et al., 2022). Effective practices and strategies will provide students to feel they are a part of their school community when they are offered adequate school cultures, climates, instruction, and resources.

Schools must have established their most important policies and evaluation focus areas for this alternative setting. Addis et al. (2020) developed domain and focus areas to identify the "Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement Practice Guide." The domains and focus areas are in the table below:

Table 2

Domain and Focus Areas for Alternative Schools and Programs

Domain	Subject	Focus Area
I	Government, Practices, and Policies	Systematic Approach Philosophy and Mission Referral and Entry Flexibility and Options Policies, Rules, and Practices Exit and Completion Exit Transition Improvement Planning Program Evaluation Prioritization
II	Culture and Climate	Internal Culture and Climate Relationships and Connections Security Achievement Autonomy Fulfillment Service Learning Student Perception and Motivation
III	Instruction and Effective Practices	Instructional Program Rigor Relevance Technology Remediation and Recovery Mentoring and Tutoring Career and Technical Education Extra-Curricular Options
IV	External Factors	Community Engagement Family Engagement External Supports Resources
V	Resources	Internal Supports/ Resources Staffing, Facilites Professional Development

Note. Table adapted from "Effective strategies for alternative school improvement: A practical guide" by S. Addis, K. Greer, and L. Dunlap. Addis, S., Greer, K., & Dunlap, L. (2020).

To improve the quality of alternative education, the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) also developed fifteen exemplary practices for schools and programs in 2014. The practices were revisited and revised again in 2018. “The identified practices are appropriate for all nontraditional and alternative education settings…and is designed to ensure quality nontraditional and alternative education programming occurs, is accountable to and for students, parents, and stakeholders, and fulfills the mission of helping matriculate to the next grade level on their path to graduation” (Exemplary Practices, 2018; Thomas, 2017). The practices are designed to (Exemplary Practices, 2018, p. 3):

- Assure high-quality educational services for any student served by nontraditional or alternative schools are delivered with fidelity and accountability.
- Develop standards and indicators that will serve as operational and performance guidelines.
- Promote 21st-century learning in the creation of new nontraditional and alternative programs.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of new and existing programs based on standards and indicators
- Create a common framework for future nontraditional and alternative education policy development.

The table below lists the 15 practices and describes the actions that need to be implemented for the success of an alternative program determined by the National Alternative Education Association.

Table 3

NAEA Exemplary Practices

Practice	Focus	Description
1	Vision and Mission	-Develop a mission that drives the overall operation of the program -Stakeholders share in developing, implementing, directing, and maintaining mission -Identification of the target student population and promote the success of all students -Embody high expectations for academic achievement and the nurturing of positive social interactions between staff and students
2	Leadership	-Employs passionate, innovative, competent, and experienced leadership -Engages in opportunities to promote program success and strategically includes community, business, and media in celebrations -Committed to full implementation of the mission and core values of the school -Utilizes and engages in a collaborative approach that ensures shared decision-making, high expectations, and continuous monitoring of program quality -Sustains the independence of the school and allocates sufficient resources to protect the integrity of the program
3	Climate and Culture	-A safe, caring, and orderly climate and culture that promotes collegial relationships among students, parents/guardians, and staff is maintained -School culture and climate are characterized by a positive rather than a punitive atmosphere for behavioral management and student discipline -Establish clear expectations for learning and conduct -Actively model and reward appropriate student behavior -Implement proven practices to foster healthy communities -Connections among stakeholders that are positive and encourage academic, behavioral, and social success
4	Staffing and Professional Development	-Staffed with practical, innovative, and qualified individuals trained in current research-based teaching methods that facilitate active learning, promote creativity, and encourage self-evaluation
5	Curriculum and Instruction	-Instructional practices and curriculum are rigorous and inclusive, support the needs of second language and disabled students, and are individualized to meet the needs of all learners
6	Student Assessment	-Includes screening, progress monitoring, diagnostic and outcome-based measurements, and procedures to improve short and long-term results at the student level -Student assessments are used to measure achievement and identify specific learner needs, using reliable measures to monitor student progress and adjust program services

Practice	Focus	Description
7	Transition Planning and Support	-Clear research-based procedures in place to address student enrollment, transfers, and reintegration back to traditional settings (if applicable) -Transition plans include college and career readiness support for high school students -School counselors or transition specialists trained to address student transitions -Transition process ensures the most appropriate placement based on the student's effective and affective needs, academic requirements, and post-baccalaureate goals
8	Family Engagement	-Actively involves parents/guardians beyond parent/teacher meetings -Non-judgemental, solution-based approaches that incorporate parents/guardians as respected partners throughout the student's length of stay at the school -School works with parent/guardians to provide proper training and support to advance learning and personal success of each student
9	Collaboration	-Partnerships with community agencies, businesses, and groups based on trust, open communication, clearly defined goals, and shared responsibility -Collaborative efforts to enhance the student's performance in school, home, and community -Collaborative partnerships promote opportunities for life skills, soft skills, service learning, and career explorations for all students -Community representatives have a role in the planning and resource development of the school
10	Program Evaluation	-Conduct systematic program evaluations for continuous school improvement -Data triangulation employed with three different data sources: program implementation ratings, student achievement data, and student/parent surveys -Data sources are gathered and used to assess quality, provide a course for improvement, and direct future activities of the school
11	School Counseling	-Counseling program that serves student target academic performance grounded in research-based practices and addresses the current and future needs of students -Integrate effective strategies to enhance student achievement -Counselors collaborate with stakeholders to support best practices, articulate instruction, and create influential citizens
12	School Social Work	-A social work program that is proactive promotes educational equity and removes barriers to learning -Practices are consistent with local, state, and federal mandates -Promotes the academic mission by fostering responsive policies, rigorous and emphasized intervention and prevention services -Receptive to growth-producing feedback from stakeholders to maintain sustainability

Practice	Focus	Description
13	Digital and Virtual Learning	-Digital or Virtual learning programs implemented and accessible via the Internet and secure facilities -Digital or Virtual courses aligned to state/national standards to meet local education agency course content guidelines -Digital and Virtual courses are rigorous, prescriptive, and standard and assessment-based
14	Policies and Procedures	-Current policies and procedures manual consistent with the vision and mission approved by the local board of education and articulated to all stakeholders -Manual reviewed and updated every year -The manual is made available in electronic and hardcopy format
15	Personalized Education Plan	-Implement individualized curriculum and instruction using individualized learning plans -Individual student plans target student achievement, affective growth, social skill development, and college and career readiness skills

Note. Table adapted from "Exemplary practices." *Exemplary practices*. (2018).

Alternative Settings that emphasize evaluating their practices, beginning with their mission statement and ending with their plans, will likely establish strengths and weaknesses for the program to build upon progress.

Recidivism

With the increase in alternative placement enrollments, there is also an increase in juvenile recidivism rates (VanRensselaer, 2022). Recidivism describes a person's return to criminal activity frequently following punishment or treatment of an earlier or same offense or crime. Recidivism is measured by behavior acts that cause re-arrest, re-conviction, or return to rehabilitation (National Institute of Justice, n.d.) For alternative schools, recidivism is described as a student returning to an alternative school program after they have already completed time, whether for a short-term discipline infraction or completion of the program. The increase in alternative education and recidivism rates can be attributed to schools' zero-tolerance policies for consequences (VanRensselaer, 2022). VanRensselaer (2022) cites that zero-tolerance policy practices are defined

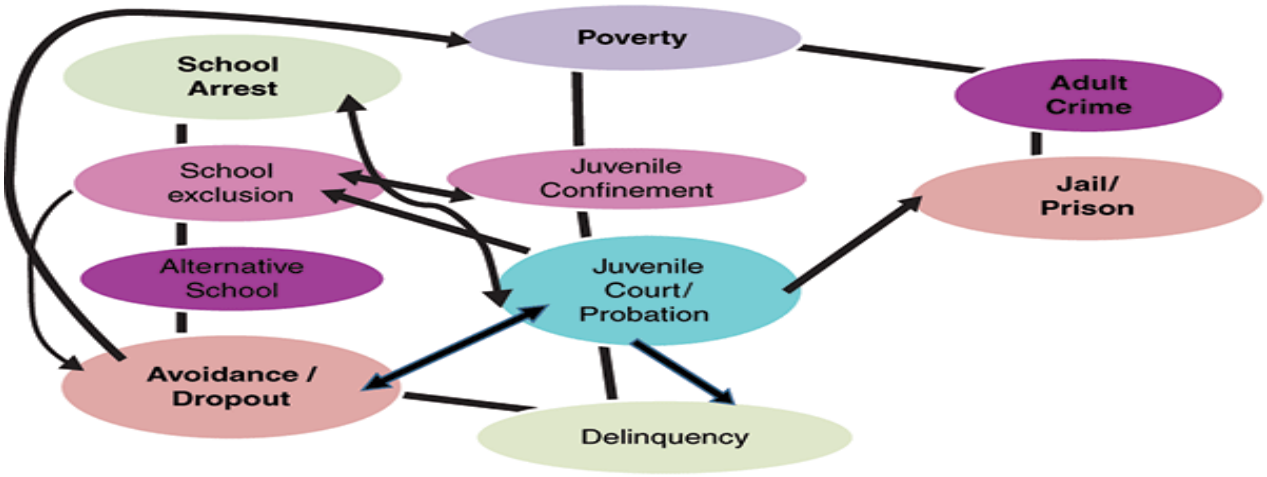
as school punishment that is “strict, uncompromising, automatic punishment to eliminate undesirable behavior” (Wilson, 2013, p. 50).

School discipline and other negative factors can be connected to youth and the criminal justice system. Research indicates that the negative aspects of race, mental health, family dynamics, substance abuse, and social connections contribute to student delinquency (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018). Numerous studies have shown that the possibility of juvenile recidivism is dependent on the suitability of the procedures that are in place, along with the programs and services provided that are dependable when an adolescent is involved with the juvenile court system (VanRensselaer, 2022). Equity also contributes to recidivism when students are not provided with adequate resources.

The goal is to provide adequate resources so students have a pathway out of recidivism. Even though the factors are significant, there needs to be a clear start or end to the process contributing to the juvenile court system. The model in Figure 6 demonstrates multiple experiences that establish a pathway to involvement with the juvenile justice system. Every component display interacts and overlaps with the other components to form a web of pressures that lead to juvenile justice (Krawley & Hirschfield, 2018). The model describes that students could enter and re-enter the system due to different experiences and circumstances, thus causing their recidivism rate to increase.

Figure 6

Problematic school-to-prison pipeline



Note. Figure adapted from "Examining the school-to-prison pipeline metaphor" by K. Crawley and P. Hirschfield. Crawley, K., & Hirschfield, P. (2018).

Graduation Rate

The United States graduation rate for public high schools for 2019-2020 was recorded at 87% (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).This rate is an increase of almost one percent per year from previous years of 79% noted in 2010-2011. Notable facts about graduation rate are as follows (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.):

- Graduation rate for American Indian/ Alaska Native students is 75%, Black students are 81%, and Hispanic students are 83%.

  These students were below the national average of 87%.
- Graduation rate for Asian/ Pacific Islander students is 93%, and for White students, it is 90%.

  These students were above the national average of 87%.
- Graduation rate for students attending alternative programs is 72%.

On the state level, the graduation rate for Alabama's Class of 2022 (the state SPAN is located) dropped from 90.7 percent to 88.2 percent. According to an AL.com article by Powell

Crain, this is the first time the graduation rate has fallen below 90 percent since 2017, increasing the number of students who dropped out (2023, p.1). Powell Crain states, “More than 3,000 students left high school without a diploma; of this number, three-quarters were economically disadvantaged, six of ten were male, and the other half was white” (2023, p.1).

Students contribute to their graduation success by overcoming obstacles in an alternative environment because of the flexibility offered in an environment that utilizes effective strategies and practices. Students completing an alternative education program can increase their chances of graduating high school if they utilize the alternative education supports. Graduation rate is a successful indicator of alternative education as well as traditional schools.

Dropout Prevention

A student's motivation to stay in school is influenced by relationships between family and peers, but a school’s investment in early warning systems is crucial. Recognizing students who have chronic absenteeism early allows school systems to monitor and invest resources for those students. Alternative schools and programs can offer innovative resolutions to support students with chronic absenteeism, repeated disciplinary infractions, and course failures (Flores & Brown, 2019). Students can receive resources to assist in school engagement by providing dropout prevention. Alternative education is considered a dropout prevention program for students who are considered at-risk in the traditional setting. A dropout prevention program within schools could increase attendance and decrease dropouts before those students are referred to alternative schools and programs.

Schools have addressed attendance issues by implementing parties, legislation, and court intervention. These interventions have been deemed impractical by parents and stakeholders. The National Dropout Prevention Center developed a practical guide for *Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance* (Peters et al., 2022). The guide only contains concepts and

understandings, not a program, strategies, or action steps. In trying to develop the guidelines, evidence was found that attendance is not dependent on a program but is dependent on the factors that "strategies must be locally selected and owned by those who will implement them and strategies selected must consider the root cause of truancy and the overarching principles of attendance improvement that are offered herein" (Peters et al., 2022, p. 3). *Guiding Principles* propose that schools apply the guidelines in a three-step process (Peters et al., 2022, p. 3):

- Select a school attendance task force to list current attendance and truancy programs/initiatives and adhere to the next steps.
- Review the current programs/ initiatives while reviewing the guidelines for *Guiding Principles.*
- Modify existing programs/ initiatives to accompany the understanding of *Guiding Principles* and develop new strategies/ action steps to address necessary gaps.

Table 4 lists the *Guiding Principles* and implications for actions the National Dropout Center states are the guidelines for review (Peters et al., 2022, pp. 3-12).

Table 4

Practical Guidelines

Attendance Implications	Practical Guidelines
External events- political and media	Trust and confidence in the school attendance policy
Parents and families control	Strategies target decision-makers
Older children control	Instruction engagement to inspire them to want to attend
Attendance patterns deteriorate as students age	Include support for transition between grade levels
External Barriers	Reduce or remove barriers
Attendance is more than instructional time on task	Engagement with people, activities, and instruction at school
Relationships	Provide structured time for enjoyable peer connections
Culture, climate, and student impact	Analysis and address school climate and culture needs
Community influence	Use public ads, press releases, editorials, presentations, and community leaders to explain the importance
Laws and policy will not solve problems	Identify and utilize strategies beyond law and policy
Teachers essential role	Establish and maintain positive relationships beyond instruction
Policies and practices	Critical thinking to laws, policies, and practices to motivate rather than produce adverse outcomes
Students have different outlooks than adults	Consider how students think and adopt practices to resonate with their thought processes
Absent reasons	Listen and consider reasons to look for root causes and select interventions to address the causes
Recovering and re-engaging dropouts	Provide strong academic, behavioral, and attendance support

Note. Table is adapted from "Guiding principles for improving school attendance: A practice guide" by R. Peters, S. Addis, and T. Hawkins. Peters, R., Addis, S., & Hawkins, T. (2022).

Improving school attendance is the key to dropout prevention. It is the origin of the school dropout rate and must be considered for any dropout prevention program. Schools must develop strategies that are prevalent in their district. Many districts consider alternative education as

dropout prevention. Because of this consideration, they do not provide any other type of dropout prevention, which is not recommended.

Conclusion

This literature review describes the foundational framework for successful alternative education schools and programs. The review focuses on previously researched alternative education topics directly related to alternative education purposes, students attending, and designs. Description of research concepts within alternative education addresses definitions, types, at-risk factors, and behavioral issues. It also outlines evaluations of effective practices, recidivism, graduation, and dropout rates. Finding success within alternative education provides an understanding of the conceptualization for the validity of individual alternative education schools and programs.

Chapter III: Methods

This chapter outlines the research design that was used to examine the purpose, structure, and effectiveness of the Special Programming for Achievement Network (SPAN) of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program. The program evaluation research design and the purpose of the study using research questions are described. Also included in this chapter is a description of the proposed data collection for populations, participants, sample procedures, risks, voluntary participants, confidentiality, and anonymity. Descriptions of the planned instruments, data security, and the study variables for the research design are also provided.

Program Evaluation Research Design

Education evaluation yields essential data that can be utilized to enhance learning objectives and high-quality programs' accountability. With program evaluations, educators can identify the strengths and weaknesses of programs (Ganagalla, 2023). Jimenez et al. (2018, p. 2) reported, "Recent analyses show that without meaningful accountability, traditional school districts may push struggling students into low-quality alternative schools." Evaluation is essential to establish practical measures for the effectiveness of alternative education to equip student success and combat the unmeaningful accountability of schools while forcing and meeting the needs of these categorized struggling students in low-performing alternative schools. Jimenez et al. (2018, p.1) state that accountability measures used to hold alternative education programs have been claimed to be "over-identified failure and under-identified success."

This study applied a program evaluation using a mixed-method design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. A program is an established set of resources and activities to accomplish a mission or common goals, usually guided by a director or team (Wholey et al., 2010). The program in this study evaluated is the Special Programming for Achievement Network of Alabama- Lauderdale County (SPAN). Wholey (2010, p. 5) describe a program evaluation as

"the application of systematic methods to address questions about program operations and results." Research questions stemmed from the effectiveness of SPAN's mission and the services and strategies utilized in the structure of the program. Although there are many types of program evaluations, there are two ways to describe these evaluations: process and outcome evaluations. Process evaluations gauge whether a program was executed as planned, and outcome evaluations formulate whether outcomes can be accredited to the program (Metz, 2007). The research of this program evaluation addressed both process and outcome. There are two ways to assess a program: formative and summative. Formative evaluation is used to improve the program delivery, and summative evaluation measures outcomes and impacts: both evaluations assess program implementation (Wholey et al., 2010). This study used a summative evaluation to gauge the outcomes of the services and strategies aligned with the mission.

A mixed-method approach integrates quantitative and qualitative data using designs involving philosophical assumptions or theoretical frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach entails closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) research questions. Quantitative questions were used to ask more in-depth details of why, how, and what regarding the SPAN Program. Qualitative questions were used to answer the short responses of the positives, negatives, and benefits of the SPAN Program. There are three core mixed-method designs: convergent, explanatory sequential- two phase, and explanatory sequential- three phase. This study used the convergent design because both quantitative and qualitative collections and analysis merged results to interpret an outcome evaluation (Wholey et al., 2010). Quantitative data are typically expressed using numbers or relationships. The most commonly used data sources for a quantitative approach are administrative records and surveys (Wholey et al., 2010). Surveys provide trends, attitudes, and opinions among the population and participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data was collected from surveys to the students and stakeholders to answer

questions about the services provided by the SPAN Program. Qualitative data are typically expressed using words or pictures. The most commonly used sources for data collection are interviews, focus groups, observations, and some document reviews depending the source (Wholey et al., 2010). Interviews provide a better participation rate and work best for open-ended questions than lengthy surveys (Wholey et al., 2010). Observations allow the researcher to see the day-to-day operations of the participants' actions and how staff implements procedures (Wholey et al., 2010). Document reviews are essential in understanding a program's implementation and operations (Wholey et al., 2010). This research used interviews with the program director and staff of the SPAN Program and site observations to gain knowledge of the structure and implementation of the SPAN Program. The researcher also reviewed the SPAN Procedures Manual for document review of specific daily procedures of the program.

Purpose of the Study

This study addressed the effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County, specifically with its mission and structure. The mission and structure of a program define the common goals, tools utilized, and outcomes of a program. Given the rise in alternative education and the accountability need for students to graduate, understanding the operations, services, and strategies is essential for producing effective results toward this mission of the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program. This research was accomplished by evaluating the organization factors and effectiveness of the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County and offering suggestions on improving the structure and use of strategies for student success.

Research Questions

Evaluations are categorized around crucial questions. The following questions were addressed in the program evaluation of the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program:

1. To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission?
2. To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served?

Data Collection Descriptions

Collecting data is acquiring information and analyzing relevant variables in a predetermined method to address research questions, hypotheses, and evaluation outcomes (*Data Collection).* Before analyzing questions and outcomes, researchers must gather the information needed to address the evaluation areas. For this study, data collection was used to answer research questions and convey program effectiveness outcomes. This study section gives descriptions of the setting, population/participants, sampling procedures, risks, voluntary participation, and confidentiality/anonymity.

Setting

SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County is one of seven SPAN of Alabama locations. It is an alternative educational program in Florence, Alabama, serving the Lauderdale County School District and the Florence City School District. The Lauderdale County School System consists of ten public schools with 8,175 total students in rural areas throughout the county. The Florence City School System comprises nine public schools with 4,719 total students in a suburban and rural city setting. However, the focus was on the setting of students from secondary school locations attending SPAN. The program utilizes the Burrell Slater building owned by Florence City Schools, which also houses Florence Learning Center, Northwest Shoals Adult Education, and Shoals Culinary. SPAN has an academic classroom, group counseling room, cafeteria/conference area, counselor office, director office, and gymnasium. The academic classroom and counseling room are the two areas most utilized for student interactions with teachers and counselors.

Participants

The target population for this study consisted of high school students who have attended SPAN. These students came from the seven Lauderdale County secondary schools or the high school from Florence City Schools. The study also included the SPAN staff, which consists of a director, two counselors, and two academic teachers. The stakeholders included in this study were from the school systems and juvenile court staff who referred students to the program.

Sampling Procedures

When collecting data, a sample is a smaller unit taken from the whole population. Considering the sampling, researchers must have representativeness, generalizability, and weighting (*Program et al.*, 2021). Sample procedures allow researchers to gain greater detail and draw conclusions about the larger population (Mwebaze, n.d.). A typical sampling procedure for program evaluations is purposive sampling. Mwebaze (n.d.) says purposive is used when you have a purpose in mind to "study information-rich cases from a given population to make analytical inferences about the population" (Mwebaze, n.d., p. 2). Depending on the research questions, a purposive sample includes three strategies: finding what is happening within, examining effective programs, and being representative or selecting cases that exemplify variations among similar programs (Wholey et al., 2010). Purposive sampling was the procedure used for this study to understand the purpose, structure, and effectiveness of the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program. The researcher chose this procedure since the program has limited participants, but all participants have a purpose connected to the SPAN Program.

Risks

When involving participants in a research study, there can be risks. Broad categories of risks include physical, psychological, social/economic, confidentiality loss, and legal (Research & Innovation, n.d.). There was a minimal chance of potential risk within this study. The surveys and

interviews were voluntary. Permission was obtained for observations and document reviews; thus, legal risks were not a factor. The confidentiality of the participants' identities was addressed with the students, staff, and stakeholders for their input on all surveys, interviews, observations, and document reviews, which limited the risk of confidentiality loss. Participants were assured the confidence of their confidentiality and anonymity for minimal risk of the study. The only possible risk could have been the identity of an IP address used on a participant's computer used to answer survey questions.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Participants, including students, staff, and stakeholders, could deny participation at any time during the study since the right to participate or decline participation was addressed before participating in surveys, interviews, or observations. Informed consent was explained in the interview protocol to staff for the interviews and in the invitation to participate letter prior to the survey. Minors under 18 were required to consent from their parents to participate and then give their assent once permission was obtained. A parental consent form was sent home to the parents with an explanation of the study. After parental permission was granted, the study was explained to the students in order to give or deny assent. During the surveys or interviews, the participants had the option to withdraw from the study or could choose to skip any questions they did not want to answer.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

In this study, complete confidentiality was maintained. The researcher was the only person to review documents within the program, observe and ask questions during interviews, and analyze survey results. Survey responses were returned to the researcher anonymously, with no link to personal information. Participation was identified with labels rather than personal identification—for example, Teacher A, Student A, and Stakeholder A.

Instruments

Research uses instruments to collect data. The most common instruments are surveys, interviews, and observations (Wholey et al., 2010). Research instruments are essential for collecting data. Once research questions are posed, instruments are utilized to gain the information needed to answer questions. This study used the following instruments: document reviews of the SPAN Operations Manual, surveys from SPAN students and SPAN stakeholders, interviews with the SPAN program director and staff, and site observations at the SPAN- Lauderdale County location.

Document Review

Document reviews contribute to verifying and expanding data from interviews and sources that are essential to the program. Different documents for review could include organizational charts, policies and procedures manuals, referral material, descriptions, timelines, curricula, and statistical reports (Wholey et al., 2010). Wholey (2010, p.175) states that documentation reviews can contribute details that fill in the blanks of questions regarding the program and "offer a better overall understanding of the implementation and operational processes at a site." The SPAN Operations Manual was reviewed in this study. The SPAN Operations Manual includes the policies, procedures, and references for the program. Data from the document review will include the referral process, intake and enrollment procedures, program rules, three-week assessments, behavioral systems, academics, and counseling services. After reviewing these areas in the operations manual, the researcher provided detailed descriptions for each area to help the reader understand the daily operations of the SPAN Program.

Surveys

In order to understand the purpose and effectiveness of the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program, the researcher designed surveys for SPAN participants and stakeholders. Before

participating in the survey, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, participation selection, explanation of procedure, discomfort, risks, and benefits to decide whether or not they wanted to participate. The survey instruments allowed the researcher to gather anonymous data and provide an understanding of thoughts and opinions of the SPAN Program. The survey contained both open and closed-ended general questions about SPAN. The survey was incorporated from a Google Form designed to ask questions about student experiences and stakeholder opinions from SPAN. The student surveys were categorized by current and past students. This was done in the Google form by the participants choosing whether they were current students or former students. Pending their answer, the survey asked the following questions: For current students- 1) How long have you been at SPAN? 2) Is this your first time attending SPAN? 3) Will you graduate from the SPAN Program in May? 4) Will you be attending the SPAN Program during the summer? 5) Since attending SPAN, are you passing your courses? 6) While attending SPAN, have you benefited from the SPAN counseling services? 7) While attending SPAN, haye you learned any employment skills to help you with your future? 8) Since attending SPAN, do you feel prepared to return back to the base school? 9) Do you feel that SPAN has had a positive or negative impact on you? 10) Since attending SPAN, which area/areas have helped you the most? 11) Since attending SPAN, which area/areas needs improvement? For past students- 1) How long did you attend SPAN 2) How many times have you attended SPAN? 3) Did you graduate from the SPAN Program 4) What was the outcome of completing SPAN? 5) Was your SPAN experience positive or negative? 6) Which area/areas helped you the most while attending SPAN? 7) Which area/areas do you feel like can be improved with the SPAN Program. The data from the student surveys addressed the positive or negative impact the program had on their experience attending SPAN. The stakeholder surveys were categorized by juvenile court system and school systems. This was done in the Google form by the participants choosing a court system or school system stakeholder. Pending answers, the

following questions were asked: Juvenile Court System- 1) Given the mission statement above, rate the effectiveness of the SPAN Program with its mission. 2) Does the structure of the SPAN Program meet your expectations when referring a youth? 3) What aspect/aspects of the SPAN Program do you find most beneficial? 4) Are there any area/areas of the SPAN Program you feel need improvements? For School Systems- 1) Given the mission statement above, rate the effectiveness of the SPAN Program with its mission. 2) Does the SPAN Program meet expectations of services provided when a student returns to school? 3) What aspect/aspects of the SPAN Program do you find most beneficial? 4) Are there any area/areas of the SPAN Program you feel need improvement? The stakeholders' survey data provided information regarding how well the program ensures the effectiveness of the mission established by the SPAN Program.

Interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County program director and staff to further investigate the program's purpose and structure. Before the interviews, the researcher obtained permission to interview the program director, math teacher, English teacher, and two counselors. The interview participants were given an opportunity for an explanation of the purpose of the study, participation selection, explanation of procedure, discomfort, risks, and benefits to decide whether or not they wanted to participate. The interview questions were open-ended so that participants could comment on the program's day-to-day routines and experiences. Semi-structured interviews lead the researcher through topics needed for data collection (Wholey et al., 2010). All interviews were conducted individually with the program director, teachers, and counselors. Interview questions for the program director about the program's operations were asked. The interview questions for the program director are included in Appendix H. The data from the program director interview allowed the researcher to gain information about the operations of academics, counseling, employment, and transition services.

Also, the data explained the director's time spent with the SPAN Program to gain experiences and view benefits and impacts and necessary program improvements. Teacher interviews were conducted to answer specific questions about academics. Interview questions for the teachers are included in Appendix I. The data from the teacher interviews provided information about the teachers' experience at SPAN while addressing academics. Questions regarding counseling services were asked in the interview of counselors. Interview questions for the counselors are included in Appendix J. The data from the counselor interviews helped the researcher understand the experiences of the counseling services provided to the SPAN students. All the information from all the interviews provided the researcher with evidence to support the overall impacts and improvements of the SPAN Program.

Observation

Researchers can get valuable information during observations at the program site. Wholey (2010) states that observations can provide real-time circumstances and events during daily routines. Wholey (2010) further states that the researcher can see how policies and procedures are executed between staff and students. The researcher completed an observation on the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program site. The researcher examined day-to-day operations, student and staff interactions, and tools and strategies implemented. The information gained from the SPAN operations allowed the researcher to observe the program routines for feedback on the daily implementation of services.

Data Security

"Each mechanism for collecting and storing data and documents poses issues regarding security against unauthorized access and use, prevention of accidental loss or damage, and eventual disposal" (University of Colorado, 2022, p. 1). Data security was maintained throughout the study. Measures were taken to ensure privacy and security were established from the beginning to the end

of the study. Participants' data was secured through confidentiality and anonymity with minimal risks by the researcher and by using labels for their identity. The surveys and other electronic data were stored on the researcher's computer with a password-protected. Analyzed data was input into SPSS software by the researcher with only researcher access to a protected computer.

Variables in the Study

Variables in research are what the research is measuring. The focus of this study was not to form a hypothesis with variables but to answer questions regarding the effectiveness of a program using the research questions: 1) To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission? and 2) To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served? This summative program evaluation was a study of accountability. Therefore, the variables for this study include the SPAN program's mission results, the impact of services implemented, and the experiences of students, staff, and stakeholders involved with the SPAN Program. SPAN's mission statement, "SPAN earnestly seeks to help troubled youth achieve success and become productive adults through education, counseling, and positive influences within their communities," were evaluated by students and stakeholders to address the program's effectiveness (SPAN Alabama, n.d.). The variables of academics by daily teacher routines and success from students, counseling services by daily counselor routines and success from students, employment skills, and transitions were analyzed through surveys, interviews, and observations.

Conclusion

Evaluating an educational program is essential for accountability for students, staff, and stakeholders. This chapter describes the strategies that were employed to investigate the mission, structure, and effectiveness of the Special Programming for Achievement Network

(SPAN) Program in Lauderdale County. The chapter outlines the study's objectives and the program evaluation research design. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of the suggested data-collecting methods for populations, participants, sample processes, risks, willing participants, confidentiality, and anonymity. Additionally, the descriptions of the research design's study variables, data security, and anticipated instruments implemented are described.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this study was to conduct a program evaluation of the Special Programming for Achievement Network (SPAN) of Alabama, an alternative education program in Lauderdale County, to determine the effectiveness of the program's mission and structure. SPAN is an alternative education program in a suburban community in north Alabama. Data was collected by using a mixed-method approach. I collected data utilizing interviews and surveys from three groups (staff, students, and stakeholders). I also conducted a document review of the SPAN Operations Manual and site observations. This chapter focuses on the collection and data analysis procedures and quantitative and qualitative findings.

Data on Site and Participants

The research site selected for this study was an alternative educational program in a suburban northwest Alabama area. The program is in Florence, Alabama, a city in Lauderdale County. The alternative program is one of seven SPAN programs within Alabama. It is located in the Burrell Slater Building, a former school owned by Florence City Schools. The building has an academic classroom, a counseling classroom, a conference room serving as a lunchroom and meeting room, staff offices, and a gymnasium. Other programs are operating out of this building location as well.

SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County program serves a maximum of fifteen secondary school students each semester from one of the two school districts—Lauderdale County and Florence City. SPAN also incorporates a summer program. During this study, only seven students were enrolled for the Spring semester. Five of the seven enrolled and three former students participated in the study. Information on student participation information is listed below in Table 5.

Table 5

Student Participation Information

Student Grade Level		
Current	Lauderdale County	8th
Current	Lauderdale County	9th
Current	Florence City	9th
Current	Florence City	10th
Current	Florence City	GED
Past	Florence City	11th
Past	Lauderdale County	Graduate
Past	Lauderdale County	Graduate

SPAN's full-time staff includes a program director, two teachers, and two counselors. A part-time, as-needed special education teacher is paid through the Lauderdale County School System but was not included in this study. Table 6 lists the staff and years worked.

Table 6

SPAN Staff Information

SPAN Staff	Years Worked
Program Director	17
Teacher	14
Teacher	13.5
Counselor	7
Counselor	2

This study also included stakeholders from the two school districts and the county juvenile probation office. Participants from the school districts included administrators, counselors, and social workers from the secondary schools and central offices. Participants from the county juvenile court system included the juvenile court judge and probation officers. However, because the stakeholder's online survey was emailed with consent to participate by clicking on the survey, no known information could be determined for the stakeholder participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

I collected data using four procedures: 1) document review, 2) semi-structured interviews, 3) site observations, and 4) surveys. For the documentation analysis, I reviewed the SPAN Operations Manual presented by the program director. After reviewing the manual, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the full-time staff members of SPAN to get further information about the program's implementation. After interviewing the staff, I completed two site observations of the SPAN daily operations. Surveys were conducted with two groups: 1) students, current and former, and 2) stakeholders: school systems (Lauderdale County and Florence City) and juvenile court system (Lauderdale County). The data analysis is defined in the following order: 1) document review, 2) semi-structured interviews, 3) site observations, and 4) surveys.

Document Review

Document reviews are crucial in "corroborating and augmenting data" from interviews and observations (Wholey et al., 2010, p. 175). Documents are valuable tools that can be utilized in several stages of research to yield details that may be missing from uncertain questions after interviews and observations. Reviewing policies, procedures, and references can significantly enhance the understanding of operational processes (Wholey et al., 2010). The SPAN Operations Manual was the focus of the document review. The program director presented the manual to me as a PDF printed copy.

I began the review by analyzing the SPAN Program's Operation Manual to understand the program's policies and procedures. I wanted to use the review as a guide to familiarize myself with the program before initiating interviews with the staff and analyzing stakeholder data. During the review, I grouped the data into three categories: 1) enrollment, 2) students and staff, and 3) exit. The grouping provided an understanding of the critical aspects addressed in the interview and survey questions with the staff and stakeholders. The questions addressed the referral process, communication, student interventions/strategies, and student transitions.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are influential in getting insights about the program, especially from those involved in daily activities. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each full-time SPAN-Lauderdale County Program staff member. Before the interview, I contacted them about the face-to-face interview to provide them with the research purpose and responsibilities. This allowed them time to assent to participate and sign the informed consent letter to participate. SPAN employs five full-time employees: a program director, two teachers, and two counselors. Each interview followed the IRB-approved protocol, reviewing the research purpose and summary of the responsibilities of both the researcher and the participant. Once the participant agreed to participate, the interview was conducted face-to-face in a location of their convenience on site of the SPAN Program. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in the classroom, office, or specified area of the staff member. Each interview lasted 10-20 minutes, depending on how long the participant responded. I took notes during the interview and then transcribed them into text on a document using the Taguette program for data analysis of the qualitative data.

After transcribing the interviews, I interpreted them using in vivo coding, a qualitative data analysis source, to assist interpretation of actual wording from participants. The interpretation allowed the codes to reflect the participants' perceptions and actions. I began the coding process by

initially setting codes and then allowing the participants' responses to determine subset codes. The set codes were 1) experience, 2) the four core areas of SPAN- academics, counseling, employment, and transition, 3) benefits, and 4) improvements.

Site Observation

Observations can be a valuable tool in data collection. They provide "the opportunity to see, in a real-time setting, how staff implement policies and procedures" (Wholey et al., 2010, p. 175). Observations give the researcher a more precise perspective of program operations. I performed a causal viewing of program activities on a typical school day and graduation day without using checklists for observation other than seeking the four cores: academics, counseling, employment, and transition. I wanted to view the daily structure of the program as well as the exit event for student completion. For the first observation, I observed procedures for the morning intake, breakfast, the academic classroom, lunch, a session with the program director, the group counseling session, PE, dismissal, and the daily debriefing. The second observation was graduation day for the students completing the program. I observed interactions with the SPAN staff, students, families, and stakeholders. The site observations were critical in connecting the pieces to all the data collected in the document review and interviews.

Surveys

Surveys are one of the most commonly used data collection techniques. They are designed to consider the target respondents and ask questions to gain the participants' perceptions of what is being researched. I designed two different surveys using Google Forms: 1) a student survey-current and past, and 2) a stakeholder survey- school system or court system. The Google Form created charts and Excel sheets with the data collected from the participants. The Excel sheet was then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics Software for data analysis and reports.

The student survey's first question asked whether the participant was a current or former student. Once participants answered, the survey directed them to questions related to categories for current and former students. Only seven students were enrolled in the SPAN Program at the time of the study. Parental consent forms were sent home to each of the seven students, but only five students brought consent forms back to the school. Those five students gave their assent to participate in the survey. Four former students were notified about participating in the survey. Two were minors under the age of 18, and the other two were over the age of 18. One of the minors assented to participate in the survey once parental consent was given. The two former students, over 18, were emailed the online student participation form and survey, and both participated. Therefore, 11 student participants were notified, and eight responded and participated in the survey. Student participation and role results are presented in Figure 7 and Table 7.

Figure 7

Survey Results: Student Participation

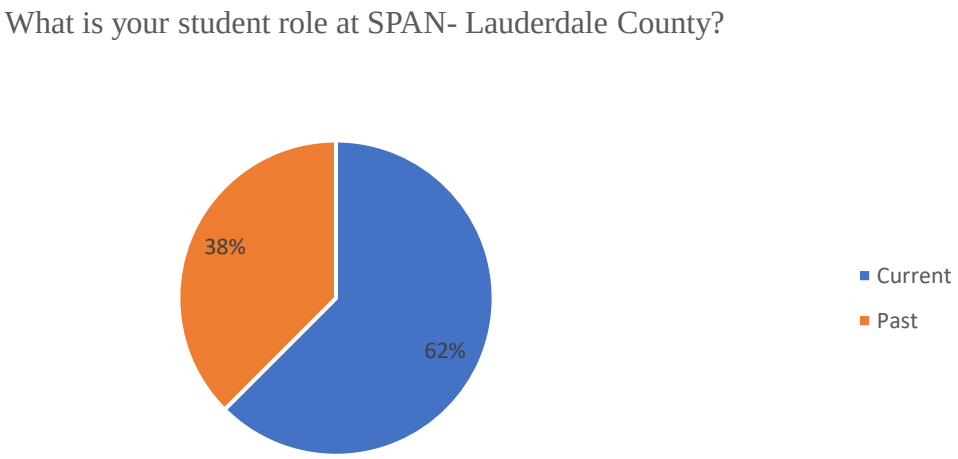


Table 7

Survey Results: Student Role

What is your student role in SPAN- Lauderdale County?		
	N	%
Current Student	5	62.5%
Past Student	3	37.5%

The first question of the stakeholder survey asked whether the participant was a school system or juvenile court system stakeholder. Like the student survey, once participants answered, it directed them to questions pertaining to the appropriate category. Both school and juvenile court system stakeholders were emailed the online stakeholder's participant letter and survey. For the school systems, the email was sent to 40 Lauderdale County and Florence City secondary school administrators, counselors, and social workers. For the juvenile court system, the email was sent to six juvenile court workers- one judge and five probation officers. There were 26 respondents to the survey- 22 school system stakeholders and four juvenile court system stakeholders. Information on stakeholder participation is presented in Figure 8, and stakeholder role results are defined in Table 8 below.

Figure 8

Survey Results: Stakeholder Participation

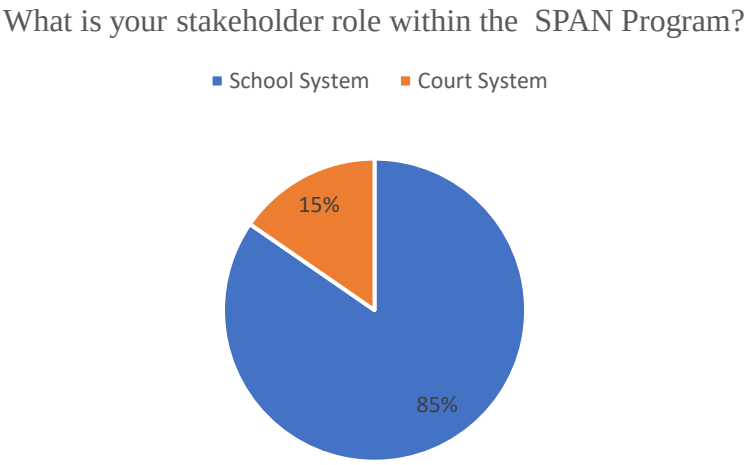


Table 8

Survey Results: Stakeholder Role

What is your stakeholder role within the SPAN Program		
	N	%
Juvenile Court System	4	15.4%
School System	22	84.6%

Validity

Because this program evaluation considered the perceived purpose and mission of the SPAN Program—Lauderdale County, the study data relied on the experiences of the staff, students, and stakeholders. All three groups of participants have clearly defined roles and personal experiences with the program. Since these participants are the only ones who can account for their own SPAN experiences, this creates internal validity for this study. Internal validity occurs from asking whether the effectiveness of a program is "true" (National Center for Educational Evaluation at IES, n.d.). Neither attrition nor selection bias occurred during the study. Therefore, internal validity was not threatened. External validity is also represented in the study since there

was evidence that the students' perspectives correlated same as the staff and stakeholders. This generalizability is referenced as similar perceptions, although different types of participants addressed the effectiveness.

Reliability

There are two core components when pursuing data reliability: 1) validity and 2) completion. The data should be valid in measuring the intended purpose and completeness of the necessary data. Having validity and completion helps to avoid altering others' perceptions and biases. Through interviews and surveys, validity was addressed among the initial instruments using only perceptions of the SPAN students', staff's, and stakeholders' experiences. Since similar questions about effectiveness and structure were asked to different participants in the interviews and surveys, validity resulted in reliable feedback among the different participants having similar views about positive effectiveness. Therefore, internal consistency reliability was determined. Completion of the study was proposed using different methods to gain a clear and consistent understanding of the SPAN Program. The document review of the SPAN Operations Manual and site observations completed this.

Researcher Bias

Minimizing researcher bias is difficult when analyzing qualitative data since the data is interpretation-based. Avoiding bias is easier for the researcher when analyzing qualitative data because the numbers are countable. Because I am an employee of a different alternative education program, I knew my experiences could influence the research. I remained open to researching the program; even though it is similar to my educational environment, it is very different in the daily operations. Since my experiences are as a teacher only, I wanted to be able to pursue other perspectives of participants experiencing alternative education programs. Researching other

perspectives allowed me to understand a different structured alternative education program, searching for effective methods while remaining neutral to my biases.

Research Questions Correspondent

Data analysis was categorized around two crucial questions of the program evaluation. The following questions were addressed in the program evaluation of the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program:

1. To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission?
2. To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served?

Perceived Mission Results

To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission? SPAN's mission is to "earnestly seek to help troubled youth achieve success and become productive adults through education, counseling, and positive influences within their communities" (SPAN of Alabama, n.d.). Both school and court system stakeholders were asked to rate the effectiveness of the SPAN Program in terms of its mission. 92.3% of the stakeholders rated the SPAN results as *effective or very effective.* The total stakeholder results are presented in Table 9.

Most school respondents chose *effective* (13) or *very effective* (10), while two chose *not effective*. Although the highest percentage of respondents chose *effective*, the highest rating for effectiveness, *very effective*, was within three responses. The two respondents that rated the effectiveness as *not effective* both gave suggestions on what necessary improvements must be made. Both chose communication with staff and student transitions back to school/community,

while the second also added the referral process and student interventions and strategies provided as necessary improvements. The percentages for the school system rating are labeled in Figure 9.

The four court system respondents mainly agreed that the SPAN results for the mission's effectiveness were *very effective* (3), while one respondent chose *effective*. The respondent who rated *effective* over *very effective* was complimentary of all the strategies the SPAN Program implements with the student, such as taking field trips and involvement with the community pancake day. However, they commented that the referral process needed improvement. The court system's perception of mission effectiveness results is depicted in Figure 10.

Table 9

Survey Results: Mission Effectiveness of Stakeholders

"SPAN's mission is to prevent incarceration of at-risk youth through counseling, education, and cooperation with local businesses and services, ultimately preparing youth to become productive community citizens".

Rate the effectiveness of the SPAN Program with its mission.

	N	%
Effective	14	53.8%
Not Effective	2	7.7%
Very Effective	10	38.5%

Figure 9

Survey Results: Mission Effectiveness of School System Perspective

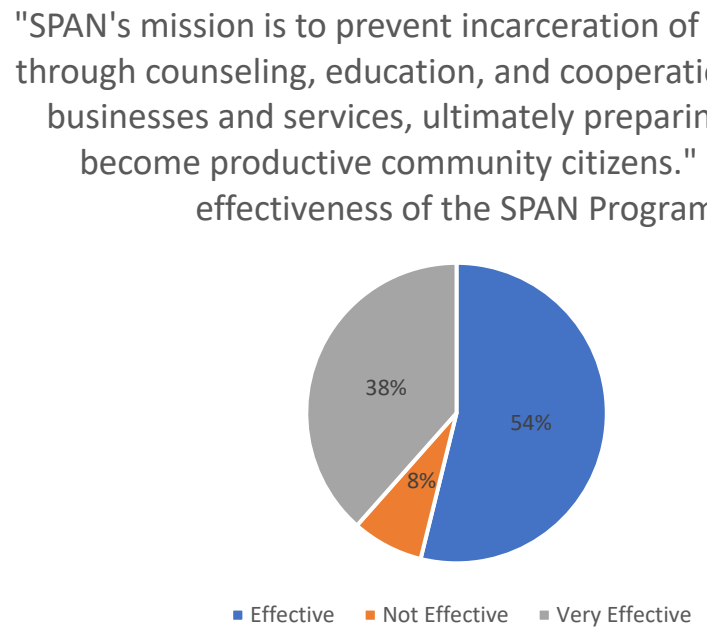
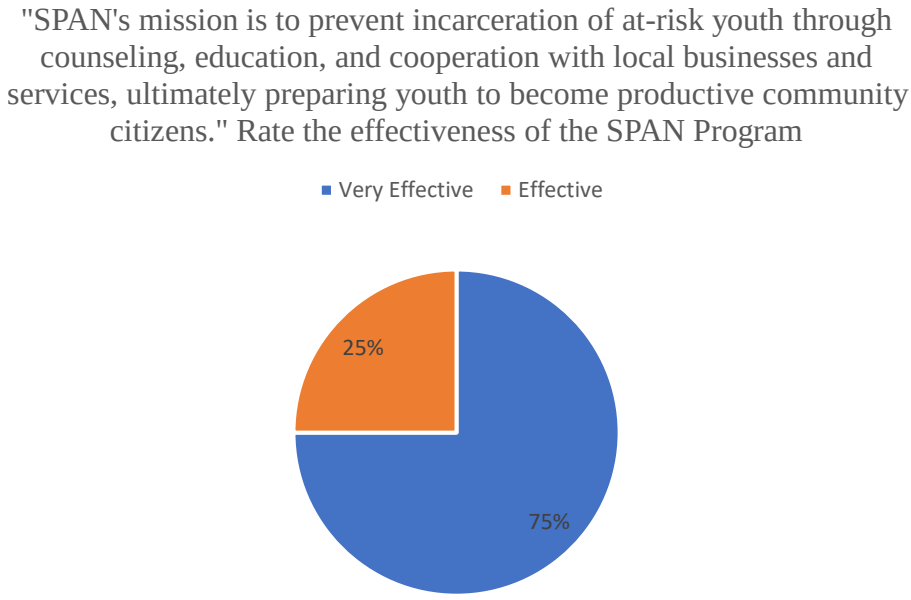


Figure 10

Survey Results: Mission Effectiveness of Court System Perspective



Perceived Structure of Services and Strategies Results

To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served? The student survey asked current and former students to rate the SPAN Program's positive, negative, or neither impact. All eight students responded to the question. Of the eight respondents, six reported that the SPAN Program had a positive impact, while two students reported that the program did not positively or negatively affect them. Both students who answered neither positive nor negative impact did not or had not completed the SPAN Program in its entirety. Student results are specified in Table 10.

Table 10

Survey Results: Positive or Negative Results

Do you feel that your SPAN experience has had a positive or negative impact on you?		
	N	%
Neither Positive nor Negative Impact	1	12.5%
Neither Positive or Negative Impact	1	12.5%
Positive Impact	6	75.0%

Mixed-method Findings

A summative evaluation was conducted for this study to measure the outcomes and impacts of the SPAN Program during ongoing operations. Program implementation was evaluated to determine the effectiveness of the SPAN mission and structure. A mixed-method approach was used to establish both qualitative and quantitative findings. The document review of the SPAN Operations Manual, the semi-structured interviews with the five full-time SPAN staff members, and the two site observations will address qualitative findings; the two sets of surveys from the students and stakeholders will address the quantitative findings.

Qualitative Findings

For the qualitative findings, I first reviewed the SPAN Operations Manual to better understand the policies and procedures established for the SPAN Program and to help identify areas to target during the interviews and observations. Next, following the interview protocol, I conducted five staff interviews. For the final step to gather qualitative findings, I completed two site observations of the SPAN Program.

Document Review Findings

The document review data was grouped into three categories: 1) enrollment, 2) students and staff, and 3) exit. The grouping defines critical aspects addressed in the interview and survey questions with the staff and stakeholders and site observations. Key concepts discovered within the review are noted as the referral process, communication, student interventions and strategies, and student transition.

Enrollment Procedures. Enrollment procedures begin with a referral from the Juvenile Court System, the first step in the program's intake process (referral process). There is a checklist for intake and enrollment. The intake consists of policies for lunch, travel, medical, absenteeism, and rules: three main and program-specific rules. The enrollment process includes a school questionnaire, preliminary enrollment form, PowerSchool records, legal file, and student roster. The enrollment process for referrals will be further addressed in the quantitative findings for stakeholder survey findings from the court system in Table 18.

Student and Staff Procedures. Student and staff procedures were broken into subsets: 1) behavioral, 2) counseling, and 3) academics. Students participate in a behavioral token economy (student interventions/strategies). Students can earn points for academics, behavior, group sessions, and P.E. Students lose points for absences and rule infractions. The three main rules of the program are: 1) no fighting, 2) no drugs, and 3) no weapons. The point system is invalid if a student violates

these three rules. The student will obtain termination of the program and immediate court involvement. The program-specific rules are defined as rules and consequences specified by the particular program created by the staff. Students can lose points for infractions of the program-specific rules. Perceptions of the strategies provided will be addressed in the survey findings.

Next for student and staff procedures is the counseling subset (student intervention/strategies). Counseling within SPAN entails many implications. Students receive counseling through group and individual sessions (student interventions/strategies). Target behaviors are addressed in the sessions. Students are assigned to one of the two counselors to assess and support them throughout the program. Students are monitored with monthly evaluations and must have 14 points to exit with program completion (student transition). A three-week assessment is also included in the applications. The assessment is a step of the student's treatment plan. The assessment evaluation is utilized to create a Success Plan (student interventions/strategies). The three-week assessment includes 1) a home visit, 2) paperwork specifying demographics, environmental deprivation scale, and releases 3) a social summary, and 4) staffing. Stakeholders are invited to the meetings to establish and review the Success Plan (communication). The Success Plan targets individual behaviors and group target behaviors. Perceptions of the counseling services will be further addressed in the findings of the interviews and surveys.

The last subset for students and staff is academics (student interventions/strategies). Academic services are provided daily in the classroom for three hours, working on current and failed courses. There are two teachers available to students while in the classroom. Academics begin with a series of core tests to obtain adequate grade equivalence. The first is the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), which establishes an academic baseline for reading, math, and language. Another is PaceWare, which consists of diagnostics, lessons, practice, and mastery to identify

academic weaknesses. If reading deficits are noted, Failure-Free Reading is engaged to promote success with repetition, syntax, and semantics. There is a procedure for classroom rotation based on the student's individual education plan. The base school system a student attends determines which curriculum is accessed by the student (communication). For the Florence City School students, the students work with the school-provided online curriculum, Apex. For the Lauderdale County School students, the online curriculum provided is Edgenuity. In the case that a student has been court-ordered for the Adult Education GED, they receive academic services provided through the local community college program located on site of the SPAN Program (student interventions/strategies). Perceptions of academics will be further addressed in the findings of interviews and surveys.

Exit Procedures. A positive or negative exit determines exit procedures (student transition). To have a positive exit, students must earn 14 points for exit: 1) being punctual, 2) interacting positively with fellow students, 3) interacting positively with staff, 4) following directions promptly, 5) demonstrating the behavior of being a self-starter, 6) being on task consistently, 7) handling constructive criticism without defensiveness or disrespect, 8) having good grooming habits, 9) meeting academic requirements, 10) using conflict resolutions at home, 11) having a positive support group in the community, 12) obtaining essential employability and job retention skills, 13) having primary and secondary plans for transportation, and 14) meeting financial requirements. The 14 points are a checklist for determining when a student is prepared to exit the program. Exit and student transition will be addressed in interview and survey data.

Additional Information. Other notable insights of the SPAN Program Operation Manual are the staff procedures, which include debriefing and school and court intervention (communication). Each school day, 30 minutes after students are dismissed, the staff meets to debrief the day and address any concerns related to daily events, upcoming events, student reviews,

staffing, exits, and staff concerns. The staff also regularly communicates (communication) with the school and court systems and attends court sessions weekly regarding the students being served.

Semi-structured Interview Findings

The SPAN Operations Manual review provided an understanding of the program's mission and structure, leading to the interviews. During the interviews, staff members clarified how the program's structure (experience and four components—academics, counseling, employment, and transition) aligns with the proposed mission (benefits and improvements). The overall finding from the interviews was that the staff members are mission-minded. Staff A stated, "It is a mission, not work."

Staff Experiences. *Tell me about your experience as [a program director, teacher, or counselor] for the SPAN Program.* Three of the five staff members have completed over ten years with the program, while two have less than ten years. Refer to Table 6 for the staff's years of experience. The program's mission to "earnestly seek to help troubled youth achieve success and become productive adults through education, counseling, and positive influences within their communities" has been the same since the start of their careers with the program, which gives them all similar experiences of providing the services. Each respondent expressed how their experience with the program is to serve, facilitate, and support. Staff member A stated, "My experience has served two purposes: 1) externally, to serve students, families, team, and community, and 2) internally, to motivate and be motivated."

SPAN Services. The four core service factors of the SPAN Program are academics, counseling, employment, and transition. These factors were addressed with the following questions: Academics- *Discuss the academic operations of the SPAN Program/ As a teacher, discuss the normal academic day for the SPAN students; Counseling- Discuss the counseling operations of the SPAN Program/ As a counselor, discuss the routine for individual counseling and*

group counseling services for the SPAN students, Employment- *Discuss the employment service operations of the SPAN Program* and Transition- *Discuss the transition services operations of the SPAN Program.*

Academic Services. Academic operations are defined in the Program Manual and follow the base school system's platform and schedule. Students receive academic services from two highly qualified teachers from 8:30- 12:00. Both teachers stated they "facilitate and support" during academic services. Students work individually on their courses using online platforms (Edgenuity, Apex, and CANVAS) assigned by the base school. All respondents noted that the SPAN academic services incorporate "a partnership" with the school systems. A partnership allows the academic services to run smoothly and assist with student transition back to school. Routines are taught and incorporated during academic time. Teacher A stated. "Students must raise their hands for questions and assistance on courses; they have two times to pass the assignment, quiz, or test, or they are required to review with the teacher before allowing a chance for re-takes." Clear expectations are given to the students to follow in order to teach appropriate classroom behaviors. While at SPAN, students are allowed to advance academically. Teacher B reported that some students come to the program "behind in their coursework" and, while at SPAN, "are kept on track" to complete current courses and then work toward grade recovery of failed courses. The staff reported they had witnessed students' success with academic services because they could focus on current and failed courses. Teacher A stated that the success benefits result from SPAN providing "a structured and small classroom environment with zero distractions."

Counseling Services. Counseling operations are also defined in the Program Manual based on individuals' success plans formulated during intake and enrollment. There are two counselors providing counseling services. Counselor A stated that caseloads are assigned to the counselors, while Counselor B stated that each counselor monitors and observes the students' behaviors. Staff

A called the SPAN counselors “Life Coaches.” Like academics, the counseling services follow routine and structure, meeting daily for group sessions from 12:30-2:00. Both counselors reported they meet individually with their caseload once a week unless further intervention is needed. During individual and group sessions, “tools and strategies” are taught to students to address positive and negative behaviors. Both counselors reported that the skills taught and addressed include life skills, coping skills, anger management, decision-making skills, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and social-emotional development. Counselor B stated, “Sessions are facilitated to teach topics for students to enhance their experience and knowledge of various ways to address life.” The counseling staff reported that the success of the SPAN counseling services is when students become “confident and motivated” while attending SPAN and then see their progress at “jobs and school” during follow-ups once they have completed the program. The counseling services were noted to offer structure, discipline, and accountability. Counselor B stated, “To ensure success, the counselors are always monitoring, being fair and consistent regardless of circumstances, and giving support.” Counselor A reported the success benefits from “getting to influence teens to improve where they are in life and impact them by equipping them to be successful where they want to be in life.” Having a positive relationship with accountability for behaviors and providing support are the two essential concepts deriving from the counseling services provided by the SPAN Program.

Employment Services. Employment skills are utilized throughout the SPAN Program. Staff A noted that the key employment skill program implemented at SPAN is the “Behavior Token Economy.” This system incorporates financial literacy skills while students are working toward their behavioral goals for program completion. It symbolizes having a job (behavior working towards points) while getting paid (points earned) at the end of the week. There is also a store where they can spend their earned points, which teaches financial management of wants,

needs, and budgeting. Staff A stated, “The Behavior Token Economy is equivalent to what they will do in life.” Other employment skills are addressed in the SPAN Program through the community service providers that come in for group sessions to teach the students how to be “employable and job ready,” as well as financial literacy. SPAN incorporates service providers in their weekly group sessions.

Student Transition Services. Transition skills are taught as the goal completion for returning to school, graduation, and being productive members of society. Staff A reported that the key to transitioning back to school is the academic operations of SPAN because “everything is maintained and sustained.” Again, it was noted numerous times in the interview about “having a partnership with the school systems,” especially when it was time for students to transition back to their base school. SPAN utilizes and encourages all counselors and social workers from the numerous secondary schools to come and visit the students while attending SPAN. Having them come is not always the case due to time constraints and schedules for the counselors and workers at their schools. Therefore, the SPAN counselors and teachers stated that they are constantly communicating with the school staff regarding the needs of the students attending SPAN. In preparation for the transition, the teachers and counselors teach and role-play scenarios to prepare the students for what will come once they leave SPAN. After the student transitions, the staff has follow-up sessions with the students, families, school staff, and juvenile probation officers. The follow-ups continue for a minimum of six to eight months after completion of the program. Visits and calls occur once a week, bi-weekly, and monthly to check on the students and ensure a progressive transition.

Site Observations

I completed two observations without a formal checklist. However, I sought the four core factors of the SPAN Program (academics, counseling, employment, and transition) during my

observations to evaluate SPAN's structure and mission. In addition to the core factors, I found additional factors (accountability, relationships, routine, and structure) to apply to the program's strategies.

Observation 1. The first observation was completed during a typical school day. Students arrived at SPAN either on the bus or by a parent. If parents are dropping the student off, they must sign in to the student (accountability). Students are scanned in for safety precautions and to ensure they have nothing with them (routine, structure, and accountability). The Program Director awaits with the students, having a time of discussion and reflection (relationships). Once all students have arrived, they report to the meeting room for breakfast. Routines are set for the meeting room for breakfast and lunch (routine and structure). Students are allowed limited interaction if conversations are appropriate (accountability). The staff monitors students during this time. Academic services begin at 8:30, and the students are escorted to the classroom. Students begin their coursework on their assigned laptops (academics). Students are spaced individually and away from distractions, and the teacher can see all students' laptop screens (accountability). The teachers monitor students while they complete the online curriculum programs (routine and structure). Students were given monitored bathroom breaks as needed. Students were not allowed anywhere in the building without an adult (accountability). Teachers interact with the students upon their requests to raise their hand (routine, structure, and relationships). At noon, students were escorted to the meeting room for lunch. Students met with the Program Director in group intervals in his office while the other students ate lunch (relationships). At 12:30, the group session began in the counseling classroom (counseling). One of the counselors led the group session while the other facilitated it. It was noted that some sessions are led by community leaders pending the topic of discussion (employment). For example, if financial management is being addressed, the group session may be led by one of the SPAN service providers, such as Lister Hill Credit Union. The

group started with an icebreaker to include movement for the students (relationships). Counselors stated that sometimes they play a game, depending on the day's topic. Students were encouraged to participate by sharing their experiences and asking questions (accountability). Students were required to take notes so that at the end, they could discuss take-aways and share what they learned (routine and structure). The group session was an open discussion throughout the period. After the group session at 2:00, students went to the gymnasium for physical activity. All students were required to participate in some activity and interact with the other students (relationships). The counselors and Program Director monitored the gym during this time (routine and structure). Students were dismissed at 2:30, either by bus or parent pick-up. Like the morning procedure, if a parent picks up the student, they must sign out the student (accountability). After students were dismissed, the staff took 30 minutes to prepare for the day's debriefing. At 3:00, the staff met in the meeting room to discuss the day's events and preparation for the next day.

Observation 2. The second site observation was completed on graduation day, the last day for students before the summer program begins (transition). On this day, students would be graduating from the program and returning to school in the Fall, graduating from the program as well as receiving their high school diploma/GED, or coming back for the summer program since they did not meet all requirements for graduation of the program (transition). The students arrived and completed morning procedures as usual (routine and structure). The students came to school in semi-formal attire for the ceremony (employment skills). After the morning duties and since students had completed their coursework, they assisted the staff in setting up the gymnasium for the graduation ceremony (employment skills). Parents, family, friends, service providers, and stakeholders began arriving at the event. Students were assigned roles of lining up, handing out programs, or playing music (employment skills). During the ceremony, the students graduating from the program were presented with their SPAN certificate by the head juvenile probation officer

(transition). Each student gave a speech to the assembly, which caused an emotional response from the students and guests in attendance (counseling). The students who were not graduating from the program attended the ceremony with the staff and then had assignments to serve the food to the guests (employment skills).

Quantitative Findings

The two sets of surveys (student and stakeholder) will address the quantitative findings. The student surveys were categorized as current and past students. Refer to Figure 7 and Table 7 for student participation and role information. The stakeholder surveys were also broken down into two components: the school and court systems. Refer to Figure 8 and Table 8 for stakeholder participation and role information.

Student Survey Findings

For the student surveys, once the participants, either current or past students, responded to their student roles, they were prompted to answer the survey questions. Current- *Is this your first time attending SPAN?/* Past- *How many times have you attended SPAN?* The question was foraging recidivism of the program participants. All five current students reported that this was their first time participating in the SPAN Program. Two of the three former students only participated in the SPAN Program one time. The one former student who did attend the program multiple times reported that the program was very effective in their life and made a positive impact. Results of times participating in the program are depicted in Tables 11 and 12.

Table 11

Survey Results: Current Students- Times Attending SPAN

Is this your first time attending SPAN?		
	N	%
Yes	5	100.0%

Table 122

Survey Results Past Students- Times Attending SPAN

How many times have you attended SPAN?		
	N	%
Multiple Times	1	33.3%
One Time	2	66.7%

Another question asked students to address the program's effectiveness by defining completion. Current- *Will you or* Past- *Did you graduate from the SPAN Program?* Span celebrates program completion with a graduation ceremony. Graduation entails three completions: SPAN graduation and return to school, SPAN and high school graduation, or SPAN graduation and GED completion. Of the eight students, four graduated before or during the research. Three students responded that they were unsure at the time of the study, with the option of making progress before graduation or attending the summer program to graduate. One former student responded that they did not graduate from the program. The results of student graduation are defined in Table 13.

Table 13

Survey Results: Student Graduation

Will you or Did you Graduate from the SPAN Program?		
	N	%
No	3	37.5%
Not sure	1	12.5%
Yes	4	50.0%

The next series of questions asked to the students referenced the four core services of the program's structure. *While attending SPAN, how effective/beneficial/prepared were the academic, counseling, employment, and transition services?* The majority of the students (87.5%) reported that academic services were *effective* (5) or *very effective* (2), while only one student reported *not effective*. That particular student also reported that they did not graduate from the program. For further details about the results of the academic services, refer to Table 14. All eight students stated that counseling services were *very beneficial* (5) or *beneficial* (3) to them. Counseling results are noted in Table 15. Employment services received a lower ranking of all four services. Although 75% rated *very effective* (3) and *effective* (3), two stated employment services were *not effective* for them. The employment skills results are depicted in Table 16. The last question of the four services addresses how well the SPAN Program prepared them to return to school or community if graduating. Transition is vital for students returning to school or being productive citizens in the community. 100% of the students reported they were v*ery prepared* (4) or *somewhat prepared* (4) to transition from the program. None of the students reported not being prepared. Student transition results are defined in Table 17.

Table 14

Survey Results: Student Academic Services

While attending SPAN, how effective were the academic services offered to you?		
	N	%
Effective	5	62.5%
Not Effective	1	12.5%
Very Effective	2	25.0%

Table 15

Survey Results: Student Counseling Services

While attending SPAN, how beneficial were the counseling services offered to you?		
	N	%
Beneficial	3	37.5%
Very Beneficial	5	62.5%

Table 16

Survey Results: Student Employment Services

While attending SPAN, how effective were the employment skills taught to help you with your future?		
	N	%
Effective	3	37.5%
Not Effective	2	25.0%
Very Effective	3	37.5%

Table 17

Survey Results: Student Transition Services

Do you feel SPAN has prepared you to transition back to school and community?		
	N	%
Somewhat Prepared	4	50.0%
Very Prepared	4	50.0%

In addition to questions about the program, students provided insights into what part of the SPAN Program most benefited them and what improvements were needed. Current- *While attending SPAN/* Past- *Since attending SPAN, which area/areas have helped you the most? Moreover, which area/areas need improvement?* This perspective comes from those who received the program's services, which constitutes validity. Community involvement received the highest number of votes (6) for most beneficial. Students can be involved with the community through the SPAN Program. Many community members and service providers come to lead SPAN group sessions with the students. The students can also participate in field trips to explore the community and opportunities. Four other services each received a high ranking of five votes: group counseling, interactions with other students, interactions with SPAN staff, and student transitions. Academics, individual counseling, and employment skills received four votes, each ranking them as the lowest. One respondent noted other, but did not specify any details. Also, one respondent reported they did not benefit from any of the services; this student also reported non-completion of the program on the question asked if they had graduated from the SPAN Program. The areas considered most beneficial are defined in Figure 11 for current students and Figure 12 for former students. As for areas of improvement, respondents ranked *No Improvements Needed* the highest (7). Academics and counseling services each received two responses, and employment received one. The benefits and needs noted correlated with academics, individual counseling, and employment, which were

ranked the lowest and needed improvement. Figures 13 and 14 specify the need areas of the two student groups.

Figure 11

Survey Results: Current Student Beneficial Areas

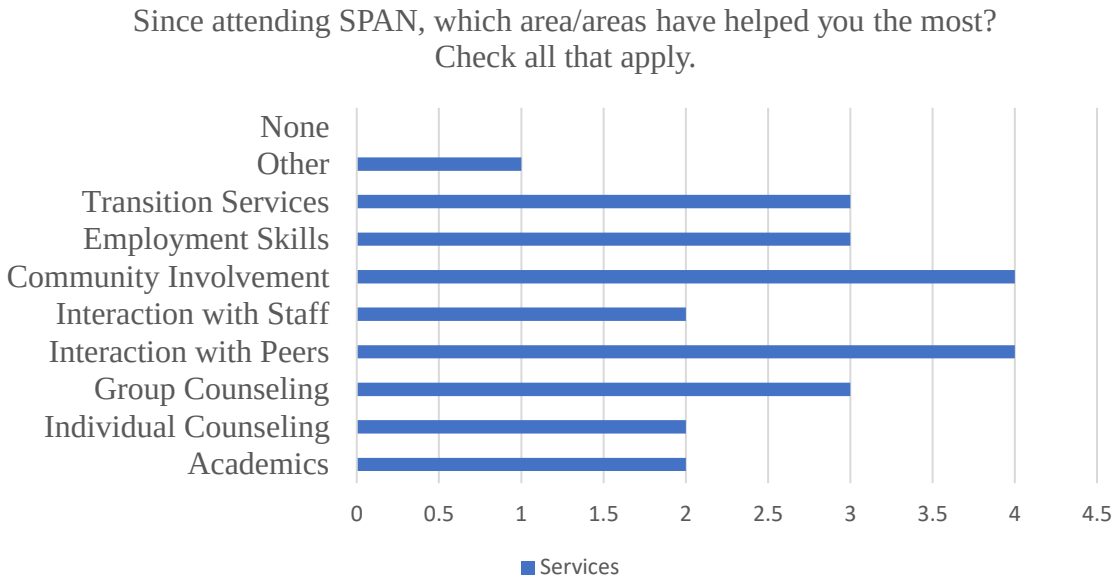


Figure 12

Survey Results: Past Student Beneficial Areas

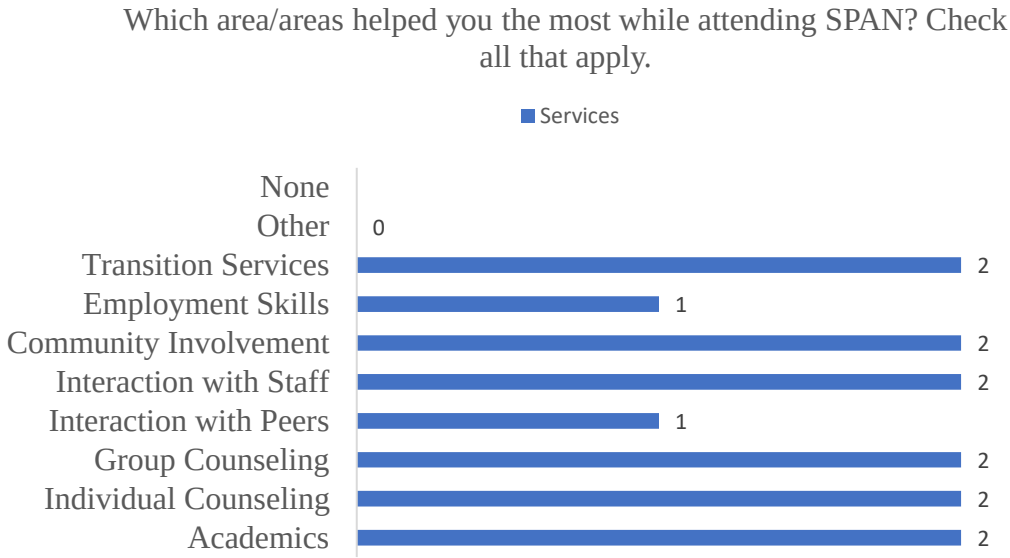


Figure 13

Survey Results: Current Students Improvement Areas

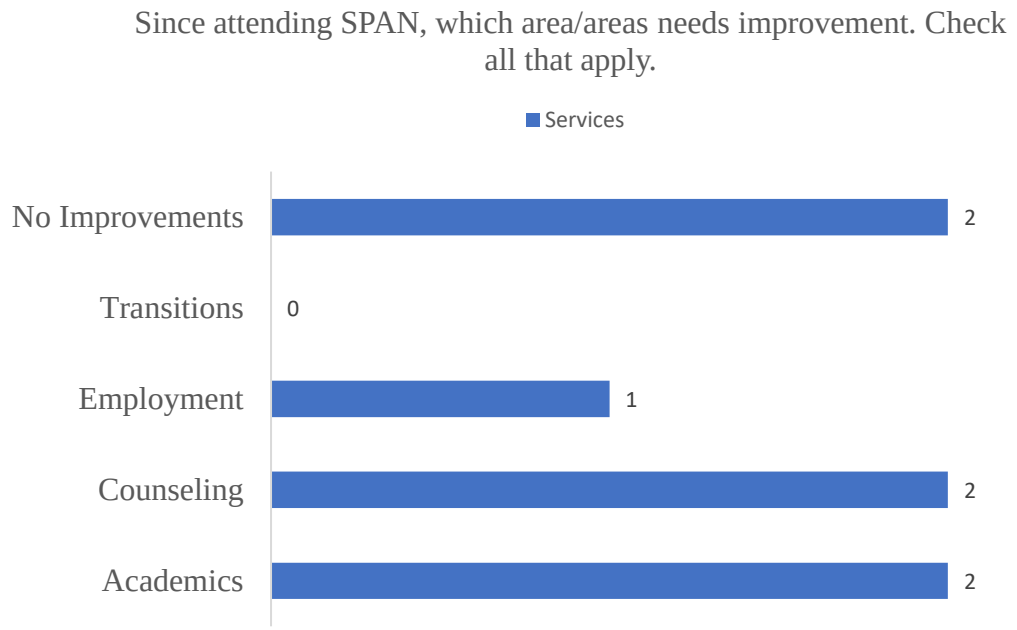
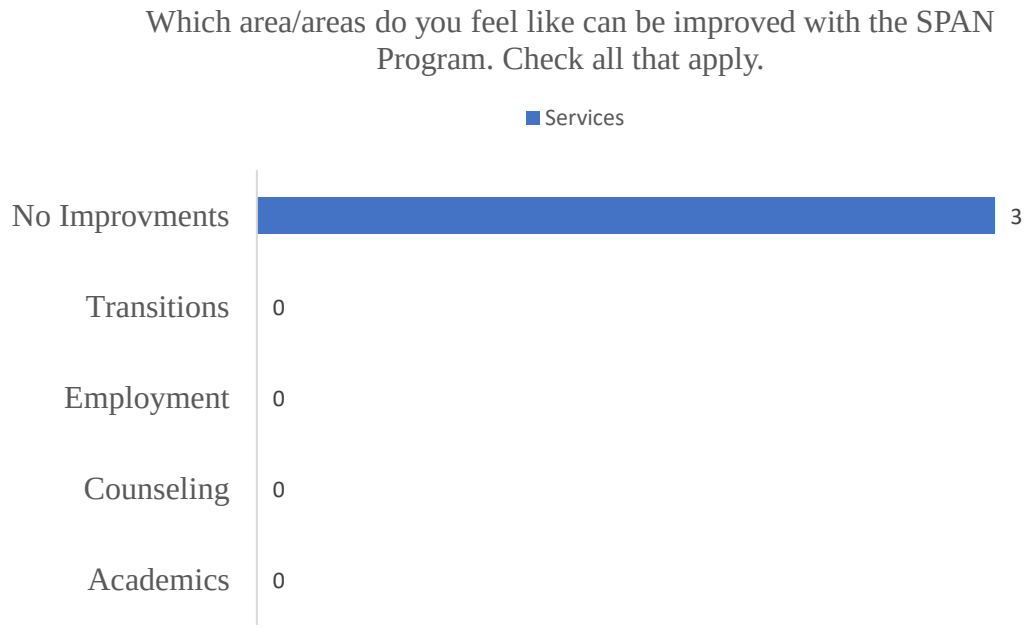


Figure 14

Survey Results: Past Student Improvement Areas



Stakeholder Survey Findings

Once the stakeholder participants responded to their role, school system, or court system for the surveys, they were prompted to answer the survey questions. The first question referred to meeting expectations of the referral (court system) and return (school system). *Does the structure of the SPAN Program meet your expectations when referring a youth or services provided when a student returns to school?* Three of the four court system stakeholders stated that expectations were met for the referral process, while one said they were somewhat met. One respondent did not offer further insights about referral but stated that student transitions need to be improved. Table 18 provides the survey results for the referral process. 86.4% of the school system stakeholders stated that expectations were met (12) or somewhat met (7) for students returning to school expectations. Only three reported that the expectations were not met. Two of the three respondents also reported that the mission's effectiveness was ineffective. The other one noted that the mission was effective but that expectations still needed to be met when students returned to school. Table 19 includes the results of school return expectations by the school system.

Table 18

Survey Results: Court Referral Expectations

Does the structure of the SPAN Program meet your expectations when referring a youth?		
	N	%
	1	20.0%
Somewhat	1	20.0%
Yes	3	60.0%

Table 19

Survey Results: School Student Returns Expectation

Does the SPAN Program meet expectations of services provided when a student returns back to school?		
	N	%
No	3	13.6%
Somewhat	7	31.8%
Yes	12	54.5%

The last survey findings include what the stakeholders find most beneficial and areas of need for improvement of the SPAN Program. *What aspect/aspects of the SPAN Program do you find most beneficial? Are there any area/areas of the SPAN Program you feel need improvements?* Student interventions and strategies provided were ranked highest (19) for most beneficial by the stakeholders. Communication with the staff only received two votes less than being the most beneficial (17). Both referral process (9) and student transition (11) rankings were similar. One respondent chose other and stated that community involvement was a beneficial factor. Figures 15 and 16 describe the school and court systems' beneficial areas. When stakeholders are involved with the referral process and student return, gathering information about what improvements they feel are needed is appropriate. Most stakeholders (50%) stated there were no needed improvements. The other 13 stakeholders defined areas in which they felt needed improvement. Those areas were the referral process (3), communication with the SPAN staff (7), student interventions and strategies (6), and student transitions (10). Two respondents chose other; however, only one provided further information about what needed improvement. The one that did explain stated, “For what I know of SPAN, it is a great program for our at-risk students; however, if the student remains in the same home environment or is moved to an unfamiliar or unsupportive home environment, the interventions and strategies for the student may not be sustainable.”

Beneficial areas noted by the stakeholders can be located in Figures 15 and 16, while improvement areas indicated by the stakeholders can be situated in Figures 17 and 18.

Figure 15

Survey Results: School System Beneficial Areas

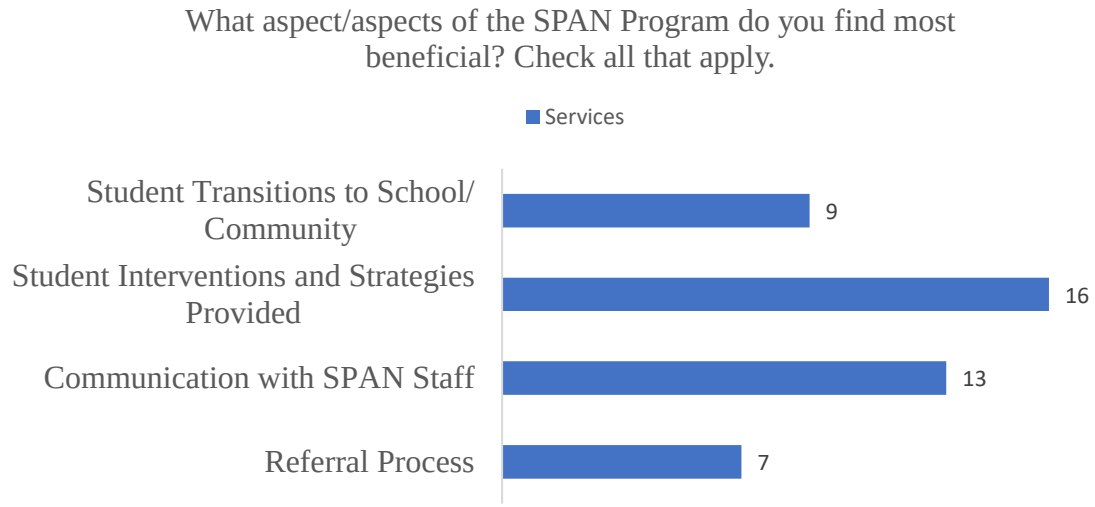


Figure 16

Survey Results: Court System Beneficial Areas

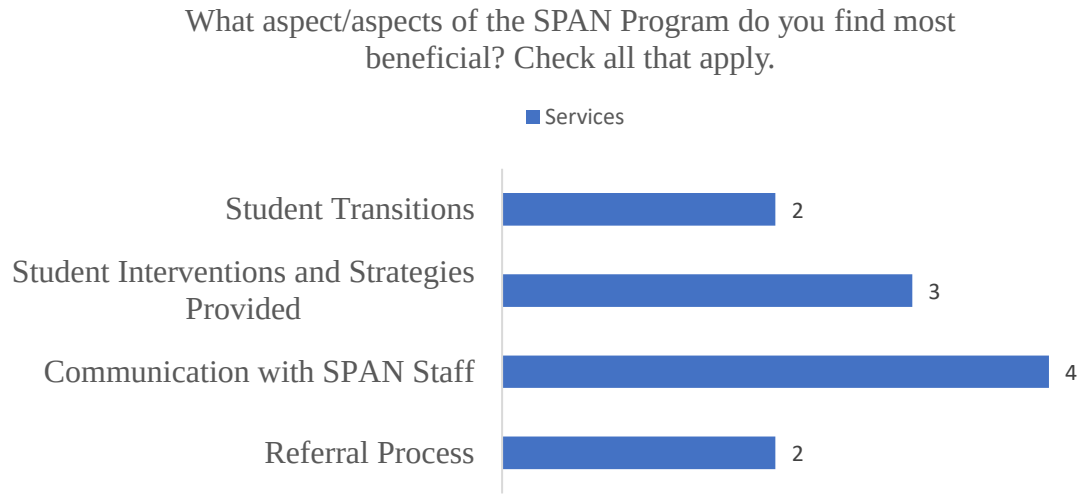


Figure 17

Survey Results: School System Improvement Areas

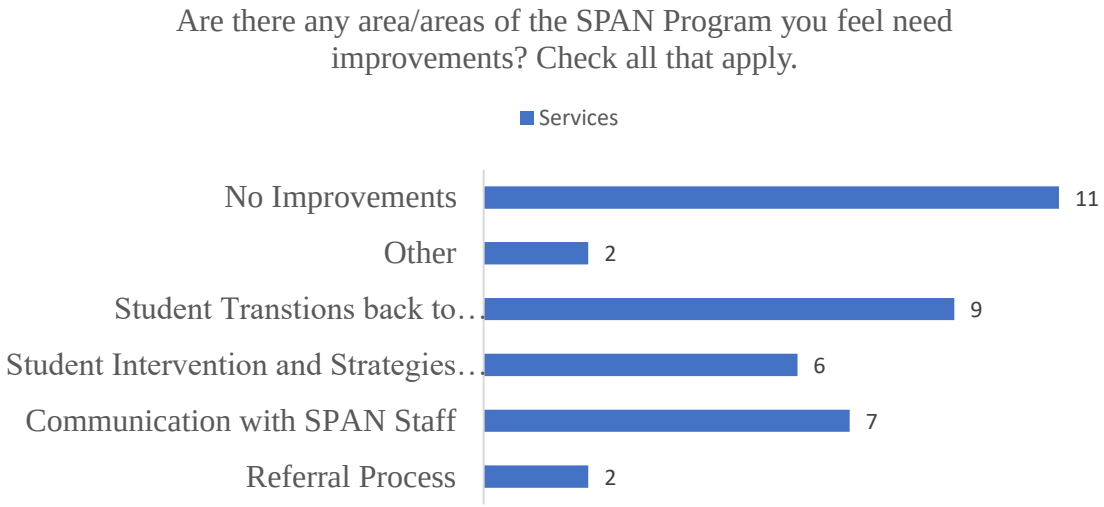
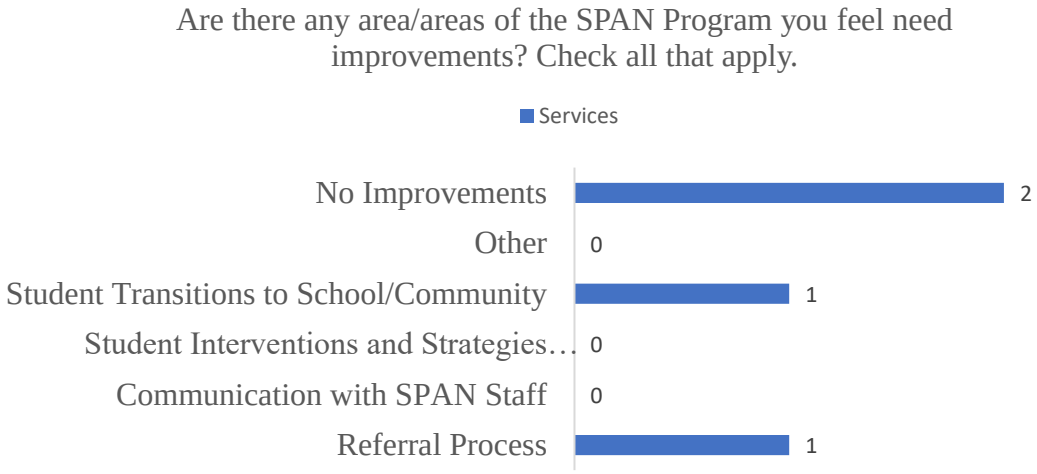


Figure 18

Survey Results: Court System Improvement Areas



Summary of Findings

Utilizing the process and outcome theory of program evaluation, I focused on the three main groups of the SPAN Program: staff, students, and stakeholders. The mixed-method data collected from a document review of the SPAN Operation Manual, semi-structured interviews of the staff, site observations, and surveys from the students and stakeholders revealed the perceptions

of the effectiveness of the SPAN Program concerning the mission and structure. Data showed that the SPAN Program does produce effective and positive results consistent with its mission by utilizing the services and strategies of academics, counseling employment, and transition.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This mixed-method program evaluation addressed the effectiveness of the SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County, specifically its perceived mission and structure of services and strategies utilized within the program. The following questions were used to guide the research:

1. For the perceived mission
    a. To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission?
2. For the perceived structure of services and strategies
    a. To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served?

This chapter will describe the successful services and strategies that make the SPAN alternative education program effective. It will also describe the overall results associated with the study's research questions, research-based suggestions for program improvements, P-20 implications, and recommendations for future research.

Successful Services and Strategies

A summative program evaluation is designed to gauge a program's level of success, thus providing the services and strategies that make the program effective. Addis et al. (2020, p. 6) developed domain and focus areas to identify the "Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement Practice Guide." The five domain subject areas are 1) government, practices, and policies, 2) culture and climate, 3) instruction practices, 4) external factors, and 5) resources. This program evaluation has conveyed some positive concepts that the SPAN Program should be shared. Most importantly, the program staff views their positions as a mission to serve students, families, and the community. It was noted that the most beneficial service for the students in the

SPAN Program is community involvement. The SPAN Program utilizes the Lauderdale Community in so many ways through resources and service providers.

Applying the five domains from the "Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement Practice Guide" also identifies the positives of the SPAN Program. The SPAN Program has clearly defined procedures to establish a structure for success and accountability for the domain of government, practices, and policies. Evidence of these procedures was found in the SPAN Operation Manual and site observations. The domain of culture and climate was noted in the support system the students are offered by the program staff. Staff interviews clarified that all staff members seek opportunities to support their students. All eight students further clarified this statement by stating they feel prepared in some way to transition to school and the community. Having a positive culture and climate is necessary for preparing students for the next step in their lives. The third domain of instructional practices was recognized in the evidence that students are able to receive services to not only assist with their current courses but also have an opportunity to recover failed credits. Having two teachers within a small group classroom setup creates effective learning. The domain for external factors is recognized within the SPAN Program by again recognizing the utilization of community engagement. Not only community engagement but SPAN also involves the families of the students they serve to take part in the partnership. Raising youth really does incorporate a village of support systems. For the final domain, resources, the SPAN Program service is equipped with a qualified staff, adequate facilities, and a very large group of service providers. Also, again noting that community involvement is a huge element of the SPAN Program.

Results of Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study were used to address the perceived effectiveness of the SPAN's mission and structure. SPAN's mission is to "earnestly seek to help troubled youth achieve success and become productive adults through education, counseling, and positive influences within their communities" (SPAN of Alabama, n.d.). The effectiveness of the SPAN mission was noted by both students and stakeholders. Within the study of the eight student participants, only one failed to complete the program, and 23 of the 26 stakeholder participants stated that the SPAN Program met their expectations of providing services to help students achieve success.

To address the first question- *To what extent does the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program produce results consistent with its mission?* 92.3% of the stakeholder respondents stated that the SPAN Program is either effective or very effective in producing results consistent with its mission. The mission was evaluated by the structure of the program, focusing on the referral process, communication, student interventions and strategies, and student transitions. All four of the court system respondents indicated the SPAN Program met their perceived expectations. Furthermore, 19 of the 22 school respondents reported that their perceived expectations were met.

To address the second question- *To what extent have the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program's services and strategies produced positive or negative results for the students served?* 75% of the student respondents stated that the SPAN Program produced a positive impact for them. There were two students who noted neither positive nor negative. One of those students did not complete the program and the other was continuing the summer program for further services. The services and strategies addressed within the program were academics, counseling, employment, and student transitions. Of the four service strategies addressed, only employment

was noted as ineffective by two students. The strategies for academic, counseling, and student transition services were all ranked effective or very effective.

Research-based Suggestions

Despite mission effectiveness and positive impact results, there is always a need for program improvements (Exemplary Practices, 2018; Thomas, 2017). To improve the quality of alternative education, the National Alternative Education Association developed fifteen exemplary practices for schools and programs: 1) vision and mission, 2) leadership, 3) climate and culture, 4) staffing and professional development, 5) curriculum and instruction, 6) student assessment, 7) transition planning and support, 8) family engagement, 9) collaboration, 10) program evaluation, 11) school counseling, 12) school social work, 13) digital and virtual learning, 14) policies and procedures, and 15) personalized education plan (Exemplary Practices, 2018). The SPAN Program is already incorporating many of these exemplary practices, such as vision/mission, climate/culture, student assessment, family engagement, collaboration, counseling, digital/virtual learning, policies/procedures, and personalized education plans. However, there were two areas noted in the study by students and stakeholders for improvements that follow the exemplary practices: employment skills and student transitions. Another area of concern was noted by the staff for academics.

Although SPAN incorporates a Behavior Token Economy to address behaviors while incorporating employment skills, a designed curriculum is not being implemented for teaching employment skills. Research states employment skills include teaching students soft skills. “Soft skills are everyday interpersonal skills that job seekers need to succeed on the job…including communicating clearly and appropriately, remembering work directions, working well with others, and knowing how to solve problems; these are necessary for youth to succeed in education, job training, independent living, community participation, and ultimately, in the workplace” (*Soft Skills*

to Pay the Bills/Youth.gov, n.d., p. 1). The College & Career Readiness & Success Center at American Institutes for Research discusses the need for integrating employment skills. “As students strive to meet the demands of the 21st century, they are increasingly expected to master employability skills in addition to traditional academic skills (*Integrating Employability Skills: A Framework for All Educators/ College and Career Readiness and Success Center*, n.d., p. 1).

Although students stated prepared to transition to school, both stakeholders, school and court systems, indicated an improvement need for student transition. The exemplary practices of transition planning and support justify that alternative education programs need a clear research-based procedure to address student enrollment, transfers, and reintegration back into traditional settings (Exemplary Practices, 2018). The SPAN Program does have a procedure in place to address enrollment but does not have a specified plan for reintegration into the school. There is communication between SPAN staff and the school system, but a precise plan for the students. One recommendation for this transition plan is to train school counselors or transition specialists to address and support student returns (Exemplary Practices, 2018).

Academic services were reported strong for the SPAN Program by students and stakeholders, but SPAN teachers expressed concerns about differences in online curriculum programs. Because there are two different school systems students are referred to SPAN, and all students do not use the same learning platform. Lauderdale County students use Edgenuity, and Florence City students use either Apex or Canvas, depending on the school. Both teachers reported the Edgenuity curriculum as having a more productive learning system. Edgenuity courseware program implements courses that are designed to students' learning styles. Core instruction is provided through videos, practice activities, modules, quizzes, and unit tests. Research data has been collected on the program, and states that Edgenuity “builds effective programs utilizing current research on foundations of effective learning design principles, confirmed instructional

practices, and validated approaches for learning by designing logic models to articulate the interrelationship between program features, implementation activities, and intended student and teacher outcomes" (Imagine Learning LLC, 2024, p. 1). This recommendation falls in the categories of curriculum and instruction, student assessment, and digital and virtual learning of exemplary practices.

Limitations

The limitations of this study including sample size, access to data, and time constraints. The number of students attending the SPAN Program at the time of study was a small number compared to the number of students they can and have served in the past as well as the number of parental consent forms of all students not being returned. This only provided a small number of student participants. Another limitation was access to data from former students. Not having access to the contact information of former students limited the number of past student participants. Having more perspectives of students who have attended the SPAN Program could determine changes in opinions of the effectiveness of the program. The time of study also gave a time constraint limitation. The study was completed during a transitional time of students graduating from the program and or beginning the summer session. The students were only given a two-week time span to participate in the study since graduation from the program was scheduled in the midst of the study.

P-20 Implications

Alternative education schools and programs assist students who are unsuccessful in a traditional school setting in developing their learning skills. Alternative programs give students an equal opportunity to learn skills necessary for being productive citizens. When students are given the opportunity to complete their education, they are able to make connections of their strengths and weaknesses to focus on career paths. Implications for providing adequate strategies and

services for at-risk students provide serviceable education, which is a connection of learning from the secondary level to the workforce of students who have unsuccessful experiences throughout their education upbringing. Providing research for alternative school structures of services and strategies contributes to producing educated, productive citizens. Also, being able to provide adequate services early in their educational career could help all schools limit the need for alternative programs. Being able to utilize the sources and strategies taught within programs early could prevent students from becoming “at-risk”.

Recommendations for Future Research

Alternative education schools and programs are a research topic trending for best practices since alternative programs are on the rise (National Dropout et al., 2022). The growing trend is due to the federal legislation of the ESSA accountability procedures of schools to be accountable for concepts of standards, achievement, and school success using graduation rate as a progress/failure indicator (Alabama’s Accountability System- Technical Guide, 2019). Therefore, more alternative programs are being implemented to address the graduation rate of students who do not succeed in a traditional school. Since so many different alternative education models exist and programs increase, little research has been conducted on alternative programs' inner structures and settings for best practices. Not only are alternative education exemplary practices a need, but also research on why the types of students are the ones most referred to alternative programs, such as males, African Americans, and Hispanics. These students, along with students with disabilities and English learners, were noted to be the majority of students served in alternative programs (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022).

Conclusion

SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County is one of seven programs serving at-risk students in a non-traditional school setting. SPAN’s lack of program assessments to formally understand

purpose and structure was the intention behind this study. Understanding the objective and organization of a program allows effective program implementation for all participants and partners. This evaluation was designed to evaluate the mission and structure of the program. SPAN's mission is to "earnestly seek to help troubled youth achieve success and become productive adults through education, counseling, and positive influences within their communities" (SPAN of Alabama, n.d.). The effectiveness of this mission, with the impact being made on students, was evaluated to discover benefits and improvements. Stakeholders agreed the program is effective and the program has positively impacted students using the structure of strategies and interventions. However, there is always a need for improvement. Although the implementation of employment skills and student transition is set in place with the SPAN Program, there are research-based suggestions for further implementing student success as they transition back to school and community.

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Appendix A

Parental Consent Form

Study Title: A Program Evaluation Of Special Programming For Achievement Networking Of Alabama- Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program
Primary Investigator: Tara Bruce, Murray State University Doctoral Student- College of Education and Human Services under the supervision of Dr. Brian Bourke, MSU Professor/Program Director, Postsecondary Education Administration
Faculty Sponsor Contact: Dr. Brian Bourke, 270-809-3588, bbourke@murraystate.edu

Your child is being invited to participate in an online research study about SPAN of Alabama-Lauderdale County conducted through Murray State University. This document contains information you will need to help you decide whether to give consent for your child to participate. Please read the form carefully and ask questions about anything that is not clear. You will be provided with a copy of this document for your records.

1. **Purpose of Project:** This study addresses the effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County, specifically its mission and structure. It is a program evaluation completed by a student working on a doctoral degree at Murray State University.
2. **Participant Selection:** Your child is being asked to participate because they are a student at the SPAN Program or have been a student at the SPAN Program.
3. **Explanation of Procedures:** The study is for student research purposes about alternative education programs. If you give permission for your child to participate, they will complete a short multiple-choice survey asking general questions about their SPAN experience. The survey will not take your child more than 5 minutes to complete. The researcher will also complete an observation of the daily structure and strategies of the SPAN Program but not of your child's participation or actions.
4. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no anticipated risks and/or discomforts associated with participating in the survey for your child. Although a possible risk could be that someone is able to identify the IP address from their email, the researcher will keep your identity confidential by securing all data with passcodes and security logins.
5. **Benefits:** This study is not designed to directly benefit your child. However, their participation may help increase the effectiveness of the SPAN Program.
6. **Confidentiality:** The researcher will know that your child participated in this study, but the information they provide will be kept confidential. Also, a report will be completed at the end of the research, but your child's name or identity will not be included.
7. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Your child's participation is strictly voluntary, and they are free to stop participating at any time with absolutely no penalty. Your child is also free to skip any questions that they do not prefer to answer.
8. **Contact Information:** If you have any questions about the procedures or conduct of this research, please contact Dr. Brian Bourke at 270-809-3588 or bbourke@murraystate.edu. If you would like to know the results of this study, please contact Dr. Brian Bourke.

Your signature below indicates that this research study has been explained above, that your questions have been answered, and that you give permission for your child to take part in this study.

Your Child's Name (printed): _____

_____ _____
(Parent/Guardian/ Legally Authorized Representative) (Date)

_____ _____
(Signature of Person Obtaining Consent) (Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or msu.irb@murraystate.edu.

Appendix B

Minor Assent Form

Study Title: A Program Evaluation Of Special Programming For Achievement Networking Of Alabama- Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program

Primary Investigator: Tara Bruce, Murray State University Doctoral Student- College of Education and Human Services under the supervision of Dr. Brian Bourke, MSU Professor/Program Director, Postsecondary Education Administration

We are asking you whether you want to be in a research study. Research is a way to test new ideas and learn new things. You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. You can say Yes or No. If you say yes now, you can change your mind later. If you don't want to be in the study or change your mind later, it won't affect your grades or other school activities.

Ask questions if there is something that you do not understand. After all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not.

This study is about the structure and strategies used at the SPAN Program to help students find success.

We are asking you if you want to be in this study because you are a current SPAN student or have been a SPAN student.

If you take part in this study, we will ask you to complete a short multiple-choice survey with general questions about your SPAN experience.

There are no anticipated harmful things to happen if you participate in this study. A possible risk that could happen would be someone being able to identify you through an IP address from your email, but I plan to keep your identity confidential by securing all data with passcodes and security log-ins.

Your participation in the study might find things that will help other children who attend the SPAN Program someday.

We will write a report when the study is over, but we will not use your name in it.

If you want to be in the study, sign your name on the line below.

Participant's Name (printed): _____

_____ _____

(Signature of Participant) (Date)

_____ _____

(Signature of Person Obtaining Assent) (Date)

Appendix C

Student Online Survey Participation Letter

Study Title: A Program Evaluation Of Special Programming For Achievement Networking Of Alabama- Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program
Primary Investigator: Tara Bruce, Murray State University Doctoral Student- College of Education and Human Services under the supervision of Dr. Brian Bourke, MSU Professor/Program Director, Postsecondary Education Administration
Faculty Sponsor Contact: Dr. Brian Bourke, 270-809-3588, bbourke@murraystate.edu

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted through Murray State University. This form contains information you will need to help you decide whether to participate. If you are receiving this letter, your parent/guardian gave permission for you to participate if you want to. Please read the letter carefully and ask questions by emailing bbourke@murraystate.edu about anything that is unclear. You will be given a copy of this letter to keep.

1. **Purpose of Project:** This study addresses the effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County, specifically its mission and structure, through a program evaluation completed by a student working on a doctoral degree at Murray State University.

2. **Participant Selection:** You are being asked to participate based on your past or current student role within the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program.

3. **Explanation of Procedures:** You will be asked to answer multiple choice questions in a survey related to your experience with the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program. You are not required to answer all questions unless you want to contribute to the question. The survey will take no longer than 5 minutes to answer. Your answers will be used to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the SPAN Program.

4. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no anticipated risks and/or discomforts associated with participating in the survey. Although a possible risk could be that someone is able to identify you through an IP address from your email, the researcher will keep your identity confidential by securing all data with passcodes and security logins.

5. **Benefits:** This study is not designed to benefit you directly. However, your participation may help to provide feedback and suggestions for the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program staff.

6. **Confidentiality:** The researcher will know your identity only through your assent to participate. The information you provide on the survey will not be known by the researcher or anyone else.

7. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Your participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to stop answering questions at any time with absolutely no penalty. You are also free to skip any questions that you do not prefer to answer.

8. **Contact Information:** If you have any questions about the procedures or conduct of this research, please contact Dr. Brian Bourke at 270-809-3588 or bbourke@murraystate.edu. If you would like to know the results of this study, please contact Dr. Brian Bourke.

Clicking the link below indicates that you have been explained this study, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in it.

https://forms.gle/pcYkM5xg5ywMcW1N9

The dated approval stamp on this document indicates that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or msu.irb@murraystate.edu.

Appendix D

Student Survey

Link for the survey: https://forms.gle/KdsRB8zr6b2Wc2R2A

The survey will be administered through a Google form sent to student email accounts. Their email addresses will not be collected for privacy, and the reply will be returned to tbrucedissertation@gmail.com

What is your student role in SPAN- Lauderdale County?
Current Student
Past Student
IF THE CURRENT STUDENT WAS ANSWERED:

How long have you been at SPAN?
1 Semester
1 Year

Is this your first time attending SPAN?
Yes
No

Will you graduate from the SPAN Program?
Yes
No
Not sure

Will you be attending the SPAN Program during the summer?
Yes
No
Not sure

Since attending SPAN, are you passing your courses?
Yes
No

Have you benefited from the SPAN counseling services while attending SPAN?
Yes
No

While attending SPAN, have you learned any employment skills to help you with your future?
Yes
No

Since attending SPAN, do you feel prepared to return back to the base school?
Yes
No

Do you feel that SPAN has had a positive or negative impact on you?
Positive
Negative

Since attending SPAN, which area/areas have helped you the most? Check all that apply.
Academics (Grades)
Individual Counseling
Group Counseling
Interaction with other students attending SPAN
Interactions with the SPAN director, teachers, and counselors
Community Involvement (Community people coming each week)
Employment Skills and Opportunities (Preparing for your future)
Transition Services (Helping you get back to school)
Other
None

Since attending SPAN, which area/areas needs improvement? Check all that apply.
Academics
Counseling Services
Employment Skills/ Opportunities
Transition Services
No Improvements Needed

IF PAST STUDENT WAS ANSWERED:

How long did you attend SPAN?
One semester
One Year
Summer Only

How many times have you attended SPAN?
One Time

Multiple Times

Did you graduate from the SPAN Program
Yes
No

What was the outcome of completing SPAN?
Returned to school
High School Diploma
GED

Was your SPAN experience positive or negative?
Positive
Negative

Which area/areas helped you the most while attending SPAN? Check all that apply to you.
Academics (Grades)
Individual Counseling
Group Counseling
Interaction with other students attending SPAN
Interactions with the director, teachers, and counselors
Community Involvement (Community People coming each week)
Employment Opportunities (Preparing for your future)
Transition Services (Helping you get back to school)
Other
None

Which area/areas can be improved with the SPAN Program? Check all that apply.
Academics
Counseling Services
Employment Services
Transition Services
No improvements needed

Appendix E

Stakeholder Online Survey Participation Letter

Study Title: A Program Evaluation Of Special Programming For Achievement Networking Of Alabama- Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program
Primary Investigator: Tara Bruce, Murray State University Doctoral Student- College of Education and Human Services under the supervision of Dr. Brian Bourke, MSU Professor/Program Director, Postsecondary Education Administration
Faculty Sponsor Contact: Dr. Brian Bourke, 270-809-3588, bbourke@murraystate.edu

You are being invited to participate in an online research study conducted through Murray State University. This document contains information you will need to help you decide whether to participate. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. Please read the form carefully and ask the student's mentor questions about anything that is unclear. Feel free to print a copy of this document for your records.

1. **Purpose of Project:** This study addresses the effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County, specifically its mission and structure, through a program evaluation completed by a student working on a doctoral degree at Murray State University.

2. **Participant Selection:** You are being asked to participate because you are a stakeholder in the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program.

3. **Explanation of Procedures:** You will be asked to answer multiple choice questions in a survey related to your partnership with the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program. You are not required to answer all questions unless you want to contribute to the question. The survey will take no longer than 5 minutes to answer. Your answers will be used to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the SPAN Program.

4. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no anticipated risks and/or discomforts associated with participating in the survey. However, a possible risk is that someone could identify you through an IP address from your email. All responses from online participants will be treated confidentially and stored on a secured laptop with passcodes. However, we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on which you choose to enter your responses of being tracked online can be tracked, captured, corrupted, lost, or otherwise misused.

5. **Benefits:** This study is not designed to benefit you directly. However, your participation may help to increase the effectiveness of the SPAN Program.

6. **Confidentiality:** Your participation in this study is anonymous. Neither the researcher nor anyone else will know if you have participated or how you responded.

7. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Your participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to stop answering questions at any time with absolutely no penalty. You are also free to skip any questions that you do not prefer to answer.

8. **Contact Information:** Any questions about the procedures or conduct of this research should be brought to the attention of Dr. Brian Bourke, MSU Professor/Program Director, Postsecondary Education Administration, 270-809-3588, bbourke@murraystate.edu

Your continued participation indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study by clicking the link below:

https://forms.gle/c7hadE5B9fz5yz5u7

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or msu.irb@murraystate.edu.

Appendix F

Stakeholder Survey

Link for the survey: https://forms.gle/7FfFMHnhuKfbB4zs6

The survey will be administered through a Google form sent to stakeholders' email accounts. Their email addresses will not be collected for privacy, and the reply will be returned to tbrucedissertation@gmail.com

What is your stakeholder role within the SPAN Program?
Juvenile Court System
School System

IF COURT SYSTEM WAS ANSWERED:

"SPAN's mission is to prevent incarceration of at-risk youth through counseling, education, and cooperation with local businesses and services, ultimately preparing youth to become productive community citizens."
Rate the effectiveness of the SPAN Program with its mission.
Not Very Effective
Effective
Very Effective

Does the structure of the SPAN Program meet your expectations when referring a youth?
Yes
Somewhat
No

What aspect/aspects of the SPAN program do you find most beneficial? Check all that apply.
Referral Process (Intake and Enrollment)
Communication with SPAN Staff
Student Interventions and Strategies Provided
Student Transitions Back to School/Community
Other:

Are there any areas of the SPAN Program that need improvement? Check all that apply
Referral Process (Intake and Enrollment)
Communication with SPAN Staff
Student Interventions and Strategies Provided
Student Transitions Back to School/Community
Other
No Improvements Needed

If other was chosen for the most beneficial or improvements needed category, please give a description below.

IF A SCHOOL SYSTEM WAS ANSWERED:

"SPAN's mission is to prevent incarceration of at-risk youth through counseling, education, and cooperation with local businesses and services, ultimately preparing youth to become productive community citizens."
Rate the effectiveness of the SPAN Program with its mission.
Not Very Effective
Effective
Very Effective

Does the SPAN Program meet expectations of services provided when a student returns to school?
Yes
Somewhat
No

What aspect/aspects of the SPAN Program do you find most beneficial? Check all that apply.
Referral Process (Intake and Enrollment)
Communication with SPAN Staff
Student Interventions and Strategies Provided
Student Transitions Back to School/Community

Are there any areas of the SPAN Program that need improvement? Check all that apply.
Referral Process (Intake and Enrollment)
Communication with SPAN Staff
Student Interventions and Strategies Provided
Student Transitions Back to School/Community
Other
No Improvements Needed

If other was chosen for the most beneficial or improvements needed category, please give a description below.

Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Date/time_____

My name is Tara Bruce, and I am a doctoral student at Murray State University. I will facilitate this interview. My professor, Dr. Brian Bourke, is mentoring this study. I will provide you with details about the study, and you can decide whether or not you would like to participate in the interview.

1. **Purpose of Project:** This study addresses the effectiveness of SPAN of Alabama—Lauderdale County, specifically its mission and structure, through a program evaluation completed by a student working on a doctoral degree at Murray State University.
2. **Participant Selection:** You are being asked to participate because you are a staff member of the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program.
3. **Explanation of Procedures:** You will be asked to answer questions related to your duties with the SPAN of Alabama- Lauderdale County Program. You are not required to answer all questions unless you want to contribute to the question. The interview will take no longer than 15 minutes. Your answers will be used to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the SPAN Program.
4. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no anticipated risks and/or discomforts associated with participating in the interview. All responses will be treated confidentially and stored on a secured laptop with passcodes.
5. **Benefits:** This study is not designed to benefit you directly. However, your participation may help to increase the effectiveness of the SPAN Program.
6. **Confidentiality**: The researcher will only know the information you provide in this interview and keep your responses confidential. A report will follow the study, but you will only be identified by the identifier of your title, for example, Teacher A or Counselor B.
7. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Your participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to stop answering questions at any time. You are also free to ask the researcher to skip any questions that you do not prefer to answer.
8. **Contact Information:** Any questions about the procedures or conduct of this research should be brought to the attention of Dr. Brian Bourke, MSU Professor/Program Director, Postsecondary Education Administration, 270-809-3588, bbourke@murraystate.edu

Your signature below indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study by

Participant's Name (printed): _____

_____ _____

(Signature of Participant) (Date)

_____ _____

(Signature of Person Obtaining Consent) (Date)

The dated approval stamp on this document indicates that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or msu.irb@murraystate.edu.

Appendix H

Interview Questions for Program Director

1. How long have you worked with the SPAN Program?
2. Tell me about your experience as the SPAN Director.
3. Discuss the academic operations of the SPAN Program.
4. Discuss the counseling service operations of the SPAN Program.
5. Discuss the employment service operations of the SPAN Program.
6. Discuss the transition services operations for the SPAN Program.
7. Discuss the benefits and impacts of the SPAN Program.
8. What do you think are necessary improvements to the SPAN Program?
9. Please provide any additional information you would like to share.

Appendix I

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How long have you worked for the SPAN Program?
2. Tell me about your experience as a teacher for the SPAN Program.
3. Discuss a normal academic day for the SPAN students.
4. Discuss student success with the academic program utilized at SPAN.
5. Are there any issues with the academic program utilized at SPAN?
6. Discuss the overall benefits and impacts of the SPAN Program.
7. What do you think are necessary improvements to the SPAN Program?
8. Please provide any additional information you would like to share.

Appendix J

Interview Questions for Counselors

1. How long have you worked for the SPAN Program?
2. Tell me about your experience as a counselor for the SPAN Program.
3. Discuss the routine for individual student counseling services for the SPAN students.
4. Discuss the routine for group student counseling services for the SPAN students.
5. Describe student successes within the counseling services at SPAN.
6. Discuss the overall benefits and impacts of the SPAN Program.
7. What do you think are necessary improvements to the SPAN Program?
8. Please provide any additional information you would like to share.

Appendix K

IRB Approval Letter

Institutional Review Board
328 Wells Hall
Murray, KY 42071-3318
(270)809-2916
Msu.irb@murraystate.edu

Date: 05/14/2024
Principal Investigator: Tara Bruce
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Brian Bourke
IRB Approver: Justin Brogan
IRB Reference Number: 24-218
The IRB has completed its review of Exempt protocol A Program Evaluation Of Special Programming For Achievement Networking Of Alabama- Lauderdale County Alternative Education Program, After review and consideration, the IRB has determined that the research as described in the protocol form, will be conducted in compliance with Murray State University Guidelines for the Protection of human participants.
The forms and materials approved for use in this research study are attached to the email containing this letter. These are the forms and materials that must be presented to the subjects. Use of any process or forms other than those approved by the IRB will be considered misconduct in research as stated in the MSU IRB procedures and Guidelines section 20.3.
Your stated data collection period is from 05/14/2024-05/14/2025
If data collection extends beyond this period, please submit a continuation to an approved protocol form detailing the new data collection period and the reason for the change.
This Exempt approval is valid until 05/14/2025.
If data collection and analysis extends beyond this date, the research project must be reviewed as a continuation project by the IRB prior to the end of the approval period, 05/14/2024. You must reapply for IRB approval by submitting a Project Update and Closure form (available at murraystate.edu/IRB). You must allow ample time for IRB processing and decision before your expiration date, or your research must stop until IRB approval is received. If the research project is completed by the end of the approval period, a Project Update and Closure form must be submitted for the IRB review so your protocol may be closed. It is your responsibility to submit the appropriate paperwork promptly.
This protocol is approved. You may begin data collection now.