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## A Program Evaluation For The Leadership Academy: A School-Based Program For 12Th Grade Students Who Are At Risk Of Not Graduating High School

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**A Program Evaluation for the Leadership Academy: A School-based Program  
for 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students Who Are at Risk of Not Graduating High School**

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A Dissertation

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The Faculty of the School of Education

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Doctor of Education

By

Jason Willard King

March 2024

**A Program Evaluation for the Leadership Academy: A School-based Program  
for 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students Who Are at Risk of Not Graduating High School**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, my family, and my close friends who support me with their consistent and unwavering love, encouragement, celebrations, and cheerleading. I would not have reached this moment without them.

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## **Abstract**

The Great Mountain High School (GMHS) started a program to help support students at risk for not graduating high school. The focus of this study was to provide a formative program evaluation of the created program that (a) investigated the fidelity of implementation of the activities and processes of the program, (b) gathered an understanding of the success of the program's impact on graduation rates, and (c) provided an understanding of the strengths and areas of growth the Leadership Academy. A mixed methods, context, inputs, process, and product (CIPP) evaluation model, with a pragmatic lens, was used during an analysis of a historic document review, teacher interviews, and student participant surveys. I found that (a) the academic components of the program were being implemented with fidelity and the community, and career components were partially implemented with fidelity when compared to the program's design; (b) there was no statistical difference between student participants of the program and similar student non-participants, and (c) the success of the Leadership Academy occurred in the value added to the student and student's perceptions of their life and life after high school graduation. Evidence suggested that the program should continue to be implemented not because of its graduation success but because of the value added to student participants. Further recommendations from this study called for a greater implementation of community-based and leadership-based lessons to increase the fidelity of implementation and more planning time for teachers of student participants to collaborate on more cohesive initiatives.

**A PROGRAM EVALUATION FOR THE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY:  
A SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM FOR 12<sup>th</sup> GRADE STUDENTS WHO ARE AT RISK  
OF NOT GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL**



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

For educational leaders, there can be no greater goal than helping a student graduate with a high school diploma. For students who do not meet this mark in a traditional timeline, their trajectory in life becomes limited (Buckman, et al., 2021; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021; Zaff et al., 2016). Their career opportunities decrease and their health concerns and possibilities for poverty increase (Rumberger, 2013). Every time a student drops out, failing to complete high school, their risk for poor health increases, their life expectancy decreases, and long-term systemic struggles grow exponentially (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Rumberger, 2013; Zaff et al., 2016). The importance for public officials and educational leaders to address this issue is of indescribable importance.

Kerr and Boyington (2022) reported in *U.S. News and World Report* the high school graduation rate for the 2019-2020 school year varied from 74% to 94% by state. Statistically, this means that in the best performing states approximately six out of every 100 students and in the worst performing states approximately 26 of every 100 students did not graduate from high school on-time. The discrepancy gap not only describes the performance of schools' inability to capture every student, but also predetermines the livelihood of students and the communities in which they live (Chapin, 2019; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). In every state in the United States, students are failing, and their futures are stunted without finishing high school (Zaff et al., 2016).

Every time a student fails to graduate, their future is diminished by margins often too great to comprehend.

The most common reasons students do not graduate from high school stem from behaviors, barriers, and limitations that preclude their full participation in traditional programming, creating disruptions to a student's access to an education or success in education (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; DePaoli et al., 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Behaviors such as absences and school avoidance, barriers such as a low socio-economic status and underrepresentation, and limitations such as school size and resource allocation can disrupt a student's ability to learn and make gains towards earning a high school diploma (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; DePaoli et al., 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Snook, 2020). These disruptions can cause low or failing grades throughout the year, declining grades in one or more grading terms, patterns of failure, and a lack of feeling connected, all of which can impact a student's ability to graduate (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Snook, 2020). Systemic family issues and mental wellness also interfere with a student's abilities to engage in their education (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). Further, students do not progress forward by academics alone; often school stressors and life events come together, detracting from their ability to finish high school (Buckman et al., 2021; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021; Zaff et al., 2016). Most often, public school is the least restrictive environment for students at risk for not graduating, but the juxtaposition of behaviors, barriers, and limitations against their need for more academic support causes a dilemma where more students give up and drop out of school rather than have a path forward (Buckman et al., 2021; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021; Zaff et al., 2016).

Graduating from high school can be the single determining factor in the success of a young person in the United States (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). With an ever-increasing need for students to successfully navigate high school and graduate from high school, finding options within the traditional school setting yields the greatest impact (Zaff et al., 2016). Programs that occur after school or in an alternate school-based location miss the opportunities, connections, and resources that could be readily available within their community school (McCallister, 2021).

### **Program Description**

In this study of a school-based program for 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students, I examined the implementation, provided clarity of the programs' success, and created recommendations for improvement. The findings of this study were used to help refine the program with program staff and school administration establishing a baseline of effectiveness of the program and provided information to the school district for schools who were creating similar programs within their school contexts. In response to a needs assessment completed by school administrators at Great Mountain High School (GMHS; pseudonym), a committee of teachers, counselors, and administrators created a program that seeks to build personal qualities, interpersonal skills, and professional workplace competencies while meeting the necessary course requirements for a high school diploma. The committee at GMHS, under the leadership of the schools' instructional facilitator, designed the program to occur within the context of a regular school day and named the program the Leadership Academy.

## *Context*

GMHS is a suburban school located in a Mid-Atlantic state. GMHS is in a widely diverse, highly educated county. The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) reported that 25% of individuals living in the county report being “Foreign Born,” which includes anyone who was not a U.S. citizen or a U.S. national at birth. This creates a highly multilingual and multicultural environment. Also, the U.S. Census (2019) data itemized the education level of residents with 94% of respondents having a high school diploma and 61.3% having a bachelor’s degree or higher. The school community’s demographics are similar to those of the larger school district. At approximately 2,200 students, GMHS is the largest high school in the district with more than 20 languages and dialects spoken as students’ primary, home language. GMSH students identify as 46% White, 35% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 5% Black, with the remaining 5% designating as Two or More or Other with and 9% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (School Digger, 2021).

GMHS student culture is very high achieving and has a high level of community involvement. Since the schools opening in 2005, GMHS averages a 98% graduation rate according to county demographic records. With this level of graduation success, students who fail to meet regular benchmarks in coursework and graduation requirements often express feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, and a lack of fitting in. Attendance becomes an increasing issue with students who feel unsuccessful at GMHS and other avoidant behaviors, such as skipping class, sleeping during class, disruption of instruction within the classroom, are reported more often by teachers. One student noted that being in the lowest 5% of the graduating class feels humiliating, even if you are still graduating (S. O’Foran, personal communication, September 8, 2022). Students performing in this range at GMHS often need extra supports to

ensure they are meeting graduation requirements as well as workplace readiness skills, thus the creation of the Leadership Academy.

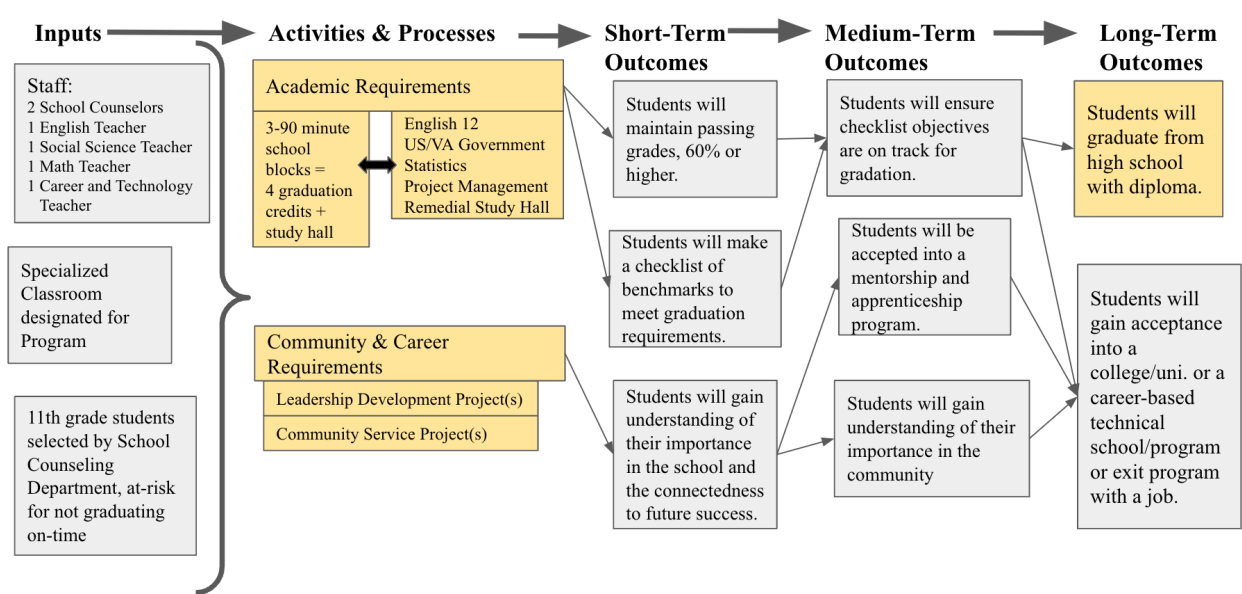
### ***Description of the Program***

Beginning in the fall of the 2019-2020 school year, the Leadership Academy launched, designed to support the lowest performing 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students at GMHS. The Leadership Academy's main goals are (a) graduation with a high school diploma and (b) acceptance to a learning experience, such as a college or technical school, or acceptance of a job offer.

Benchmarks of achievement are built into the Leadership Academy framework. Through direct instruction and consultation, student participants become the creators of their paths and ensure they are meeting benchmarks themselves. Through coordinated efforts with the Leadership Academy Staff, the student participants (a) make checklists of their needs for graduation, (b) work with mentors to develop a list of skills within their interest to further their life progression, and (c) connect to greater community. A logic model for this program (see Figure 1) details these outcomes stemming from the programmatic activities.

**Figure 1**

*Logic Model for the Leadership Academy at GMHS*



*Note.* This model is adapted from the context, input, process, and product evaluation model for pragmatic program evaluation (Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Stufflebeam, 2003). Elements colored yellow are focuses of this study. GMHS = Great Mountain High School; US/VA = United States/Virginia.

Approximately 25 students annually are selected for the Leadership Academy. Eleventh-grade students who are at risk of not graduating high school based on either their school performance or their struggle with transitional high school structure are nominated for selection. A committee of the Director of School Counseling, the Principal, and the lead Leadership Academy Staff examine a list of recommended students from teachers and school counselors. The committee compares their academic and behavior records. A list of selected students is created with a list of alternates created in case a student declines the offer. The current criterion for selection is prioritized by graduation requirements needed and attendance; however, there is no codified rubric for selection. Once a selected student accepts, they are asked to sign a contract

(see Appendix A) for admission as a student participant. If a student declines, an alternate from the original list is contacted for selection. Students who decline participation in the program will become part of the comparison group of this study. Once the class is considered full by the selection committee then the cohort of student participants for the next year is complete. The size of each cohort of students is determined by the selection committee.

The Leadership Academy Staff, both teachers and counselors, work with students in a comprehensive model to focus on meeting both academic requirements and community and career requirements. These activities tie directly to the two long-term goals of the program, completing steps for successful graduation and preparing them for the next phase of their life. There are four licensed teachers and two licensed school counselors assigned to educate and guide the student participants. Each staff member works cooperatively with one another, meeting weekly to discuss alignment of educational programming and student updates. Consistent communication between program staff is essential to develop consistent programming for the student participants.

The Leadership Academy structure is inspired by a special education self-contained model. The student participants fulfill their academic requirements by taking four courses for graduation over three course blocks of time in a designated program room. The teachers and counselors come to the program room for delivery of programmatic elements. The four courses are English 12, U.S. Government, Statistics and Probability, and Project Management. The time also includes a remedial study hall to support the work completion of the work with teacher assistance. These courses are preselected because they are either graduation requirements or workplace skill development weaknesses of students at GMHS.

To align with the graduation requirements of the school district, the Leadership Academy also has a community service and career component. Through community service activities and a mentorship program with community members, student participants engage with the outside world to see their importance as member of a larger society. To earn a standard high school diploma from GMHS, students must complete a Career and Technical Education (CTE) credential. Tied together in practice, the work within the community and CTE assessment meets the graduation requirement. The vision and outcomes of the Leadership Academy center around the student participants finding success in school, finding importance in being a member of the community, and ultimately, graduating from high school.

### **Overview of the Evaluation Approach**

To evaluate the Leadership Academy authentically and effectively, collecting information from the voices of the student participants and the program staff most closely identified the strengths and limitations to improve the program and plan for program's future. Stufflebeam (2003) noted that the Context, Input, Program, Product (CIPP) Evaluation Model allows for this type of evaluation, especially for relational based programs. Because the interdependence of the student participants and the program staff to maximize the student participant success, this evaluation model seems most fitting.

### ***Program Evaluation Model***

Using not only my own experiences, but also using documents from the program's creation in 2019 (see Appendix B) and student participant contractual agreement to participate (see Appendix A), a conceptual model was developed for the Leadership Academy at GMHS (see Figure 1). The model followed a CIPP model progression of pragmatic thinking where the inputs, processes, and products exist in a particular context to be evaluated (Mertens & Wilson,



2019; Stufflebeam, 2003). In this process, there was a need for individuals as inputs to participate in activities and for processes of the program to occur to generate short-term, medium-term, and long-term outputs within the context of the school year (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). A mixed methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative data was collected to allow for a triangulation of analytics to discuss the successes and areas of growth for the program (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). As the evaluator, I used a pragmatic lens to allow for the utility standards to be emphasized in the evaluation process and a prioritization of using the findings from the result to aid in the refinement of practice and forward progression of the Leadership Academy at GMHS (Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Yarbrough et al., 2011).

### ***Purpose of the Evaluation***

The purpose of this formative program evaluation was (a) to determine the impact on the graduation rate of student participants as compared with other students, (b) to provide feedback to key stakeholders about the most impactful elements of the program, and (c) to consider recommendations that might improve the program overtime. This formative evaluation provided both a process evaluation, establishing assurance in the fidelity of implementation of the program, and a long-term outcome evaluation. The intent was to examine if the program makes a difference in the graduation rates as compared to students similar to the student participants in the Leadership Academy as well as compared to GMHS as a whole (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). I sought the perceptions of impact of the program and garnered recommendations for improvement from student participants in the program and Leadership Academy Teachers. The results of this evaluation were given to the GMHS administration and to the school district Director of High School Instruction to give data about the impact of the program, to discuss

refinements to the program's implementation, and to give information about the programs value to be replicated at other schools in the district.

### ***Focus of the Evaluation***

The focus of this program evaluation was (a) to collect data and feedback as to the effectiveness and usefulness of the program, (b) to disclose data transparently on the programmatic effectiveness, and (c) to elicit perceptions of impact of the program and gain recommendations for the improvement of the program. This three-tiered process sought to promote the longevity of this program within school and potentially the school district.

### ***Evaluation Questions***

This was the first program evaluation to be conducted of the Leadership Academy at GMHS. To achieve the purpose of this evaluation and create an initial baseline of performance, the following evaluation questions were developed:

1. Is the Leadership Academy implemented with fidelity when implementation practices are compared with the approved design of the program?
2. Was there a change in graduation rates for students at risk of graduating prior to the enactment of the Leadership Academy when compared with participating students after the enactment of the Leadership Academy?
3. Do graduation rates differ between student participants in the Leadership Academy and non-participating students who are at risk for not graduating in the 2020 to 2023 school years?
4. What program activities do the teachers in the Leadership Academy perceive as having a positive impact on success of student participants and what changes for improvement do they recommend?

5. What program activities do the student participants perceive as having a positive impact on their success and what changes for improvement do they recommend?

### **Definitions of Terms**

Career exploration – An activity directed on the examination and evaluation of various careers of interest.

Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) – teachers grouped by subject, content, or discipline to focus on practices for helping professional practice

Confidence – measured by speaking in whole class discussion or in small group discussion

Cohort – a student participant group designated by academic year in the Leadership Academy

Critical thinking – displaying the ability to either synthesis, evaluate, or create during conversation or on class assignment

Creation – The crafting of something new from nothing or from previously created items.

Innovation – The demonstration of thinking about new uses for previously created items.

Non-participating Student – a student recommended for the Leadership Academy program and not selected by the committee and students who declined participation in the Leadership Academy program

Problem solving – showing the logical steps of thinking from beginning of the question or prompt to the end or solution

Productivity – measured by evidence of forward progress on a project or assignment

Self-direction – demonstrating the ability to follow directions without prompting from teacher

Student participants – the selected students to be in and who select to be a part of the  
Leadership Academy

Teamwork – The ability to work and communicate as a group of students cohesively to  
arrive at a solution.

Work ethic – displaying engagement in activity with minimal to no distraction

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

As the importance of graduating high school has grown, so has the impetus of a school's assurance that each student successfully graduates from high school (Irwin et al., 2023; Torpey, 2020). Consequently, the importance of a school district's ability to find paths to help each student achieve a high school diploma also has increased. Understanding the progression of importance, factors that facilitate necessary benchmarks to successful completion of high school, and the outcomes of various alternative solutions to finishing high school is important to the success of limiting the number of students who are unable to graduate with their graduation cohort.

This literature review discusses the history and importance of high school graduation, along with the facilitating factors that culminate in a student's successful learning. The literature review then discusses systemic barriers to a high school diploma and solutions that can be systemically taken to ameliorate those barriers. This review concludes with research regarding student disruptive behaviors on their path to graduating on-time and potential solutions to enhance graduation access and opportunities when student behaviors negatively impact high school graduation.

#### **History and Importance of High School Graduation**

Secondary education in the United States is a unique system. Most school systems established around the globe organize their schooling structure where there are paths that do not necessarily lead to the completion of high school as we know it in the U.S. (U.S. Department of

Education, 2019). Historically, various communities and groups within the U.S. valued education in different ways. Some families valued the need to work, rather than education, as more important to facilitate growth in agrarian or manufacturing endeavors (Goldin, 1998). Families of higher educational backgrounds and families with greater economic status valued additional education more directly. Families who did not or could not access a secondary education level were able to opt their child out of completing high school, usually at the end of eighth grade. This trend in U.S. education dominated practices until the end of World War II when there was not only a huge boom in population, but also an increase in perception and reality of the value of education (Goldin, 1998; Kraft, 2018).

In the decades following WWII, the need and desire for higher education in roles that traditionally did not need or require a degree higher than high school rose (Goldin, 1998). This culminated in the establishment of the *Higher Education Act of 1965* (Kraft, 2018). In an address to Congress, President Lyndon B. Johnson (1965) stated that education is “no longer a luxury, but a necessity” (“Higher Education” section). The *Higher Education Act of 1965* sought to strengthen and fortify higher education institutions and allow greater access of students to attend with financial aid, work-study, and scholarship opportunities provided by the federal government. As the federal government established a greater value on learning and education, an understanding of the impact of poverty on access to educational opportunities came into deeper focus. To respond to this realization, Congress also passed the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, which provided money directly to schools where socio-economic status was low and the schools were underperforming (Kraft, 2018). These two acts increased the desire for students to finish high school and the opportunity to attend a college or university.

Thus, this movement towards understanding the needs of learners and learning increased the value of a high school diploma.

A next turning point in the importance of education and the emphasis that education was available to everyone occurred in the 1975 legislation, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), adopted by Congress. IDEA (1975) assured each student with a disability a free and appropriate public education. A uniquely American idea to have the same standards of public education, this legislation began to put into place benchmarks to assure accountability measures in educating everyone (Kraft, 2018). This decision increased school attendance and school completion not only because it was of greater value but also because it was mandatory (Goldin, 1998). Graduation or exiting high school at the highest level available based on a student's capacity to learn became the new standard. The decade that followed saw the national graduation rate reach its highest in history to that date (Goldin, 1998). Today, most jobs that pay a living wage require a minimum educational level of a high school degree (Irwin et al., 2023; Torpey, 2020). Barriers to earning a high school diploma limit the upward mobility, not only of individuals, but also of groups of students with similar needs and common factors of learning (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Brock, 2010; Saar et al., 2014). Those needs and factors will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

### **Facilitating Factors Related to a High School Diploma**

Each student has a unique mix of needs to thrive in an educational setting. The individuality of each learner can create unique journey to success; however, research has grouped the factors that facilitate educational access into three areas: situational, dispositional, and institutional (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Brock, 2010; Saar et al., 2014). Most research about these categories has been established in adult education models, and

learning in the secondary school system is a parallel process. These areas have multiple dimensions, and any one of many factors could cause a disruption to the successful completion of high school; however, the confluence of many needs or factors often derails an individual's path to a diploma, not one isolated item (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Zaff et al, 2016). The situational, dispositional, and institutional factors that impact learning are discussed here.

### ***Situational Needs for High School Success***

Situational needs center around the individual student home life and physical setting which may lead to disruptive behavioral patterns in their educational journey. Situational factors are often out of the control of the secondary aged student. These situational elements come from their birth and their family demographics. Situational factors focus on the number of resources available to the learner (Flynn et al., 2011). Financial resources are one situational need that drives many subfactors (Bowles & Brindle, 2017). Economic status determines a learner's geographic location and neighborhood, type of dwelling, and access to food, clean water, and even transportation. Household income can also affect feelings of safety and comfort within the community or the household. Access to these foundational elements can cause a greater disruption to their learning because they are basic to the hierarchical needs where their presence must be met in order for higher level needs to be achieved (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Brock, 2010; Saar et al., 2014).

Situational factors include the personal facility of a student, including, but not limited to, physical ability level, mental wellness, and cognitive function (Bowles & Brock, 2017; Flynn et al., 2011). The needs of a student with an identified or unidentified ability concern needs to be addressed for the learner to access the desired education. For instance, students can be granted



services under IDEA (1975), accounting for the ability to access instruction. For students identified with physical disabilities, access can be physically observed with entry to buildings and classrooms being an initial priority, and then adaptable seating, classroom space, restroom accommodations, and other facility needs being of next, but equal importance. Students with mental wellness concerns or cognitive functioning concerns may not have observable needs, but their needs are similarly important and impactful to accessing instruction. Accommodations to access instruction, differentiated to their educational level, must be considered for each unique learner. Because these factual elements are outside of the control of the individual, more effort and ownership must come from the school (Saar et al., 2014).

Interpersonal family life affects situational factors as well. Different family demographic measures, including family size play a role in a learner's ability to access varying viewpoints play a role in the success of the learner (Bowles & Brock, 2017; Flynn et al., 2011). Some research suggests that smaller nuclear and extended families have smaller scopes of experience and, therefore, the learner is more impacted by a more similarly minded family dynamic (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brock, 2017). A smaller family limits the communication base and family resources a learner accesses. Interpersonal family life includes the type of parenting style the learner experiences which affects the learners' human development. Interestingly, parenting styles of both a more controlling nature and of a more hands-off approach have similar impacts on the learner (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Yurt, 2022). Although outside of their control, these situational factors affect the educational journey of the student.

### ***Dispositional Needs for High School Success***

Dispositional factors focus on the internal emotional needs of the individual student, which may lead to disruptive behavior patterns in their educational journey. Demographics of the

nuclear family system, such as parents who did not complete high school, parental marital status, and home language, are facilitating factors related to earning a high school diploma. Without a precedent of finishing high school, students of parents who did not receive a high school diploma are more likely to not finish with a diploma (Hahn et al., 2015). Similarly, students in households with a single parent have a greater chance of not finishing high school. This tends to come from the learner's internal feeling of obligation to support the single parent, either by financial support or by household tasks, including helping younger siblings with their development, disrupt the learner's path to finishing high school (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2019; Wilson & Tanner-Smith, 2013). Unfortunately, this desire to help and prioritize families can cause disruptions to the student's education.

Dispositional factors also include personality traits of the learner. A student's self-motivation, self-efficacy, and time-management skills directly affect a learner's progression towards successful graduation (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Yurt, 2022). Structurally, external plans can be established to help facilitate the best possible environment for learning, the learner must have some desire or drive to be present and to complete their journeys. External locus of control only reaches so far; the learner must take some amount of ownership to finish their path to graduation (Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2019).

Finally, the personal lifestyle habits of a learner, such as substance use or access to birth control, can directly affect their abilities and success. Humans make choices and choices have consequences. Within adolescent years there is an amount of experimentation which can lead to unwanted desires or plans (Hahn et al., 2015; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021). Decisions surrounding choices to use cognitive altering substances can also impede a student's path to graduation. Another choice could lead to pregnancy where 50% of pregnant adolescents do not finish their

path to a diploma (Perper et al., 2010). Dispositional factors are affected heavily by a moral code or obligation and, therefore, can be swayed positively and negative by peer influence during adolescence. The need to feel included and belonging are of greater importance to adolescents (Hahn et al., 2015; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021). Dispositional factors are influenced through nurtured human development and have direct impacts on the educational journey of the student.

### ***Institutional Needs for High School Success***

Institutional needs focus on the school environmental factors, including school culture, which could lead to disruptive behavioral patterns (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brindle, 2017). Characteristics of institutions and institutional practices of a school, school district, and classroom teacher are important to the success of students to graduation. Inclusion, acceptance, and tolerance are all evident in policy which impact the students enrolled (Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021). Thus, the implementation of policies directly connects to the school culture and social climate. These policies directly affect the curriculum taught in a school district which reciprocally affects school culture and climate (McDermott et al., 2018).

The availability of support services varies by school, school district, and classroom based on the location of the school (e.g., region, state, neighborhood, etc.) and allocation of resources the school, school district, and classroom instructor put into the educational process. The size of the school can also play a role in student success. School size and school district size often dictate the level of support given to lower performing students and where larger schools spend less per pupil as well (McFarland et al., 2020). Larger schools and school districts often have a discrepancy of funding and resources given to populations in need of support (McFarland et al., 2020). School priorities also direct the allocation of resources which includes offering professional development to staff. The offering of transition services between school levels and

after exiting high school can affect a learner's impressions of school and their trajectory based on experience. Other resources include counseling and testing services. The availability of effective and knowledgeable school counseling staff at school makes a difference in students ability access support (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). Testing services, including access to regularly accountably measures for meeting graduation requirements, can affect a student's path towards completion (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2019).

Finally, the teachers themselves play a role in the learner's ability to complete high school. The ability to teach effectively, differentiating for the individual can have one of the greatest influences on a student in the classroom as well as mitigate other institutional factors that might be inhibiting successful completion of high school (Blazar & Kraft, 2016). The connection that is forged between instructional staff and their students fosters a unique opportunity to build student trust, allowing for growth in other areas of their education. Hattie (2018) stated that the effect that a teacher can have in their relationship with students and their job, more than other factors, can make the difference in a student's ability to succeed. Teachers' willingness to participate in professional development that extends their expertise as a professional can greatly impact a student in the classroom. Hattie's (2018) research also noted that the greatest effect size comes from collective teacher efficacy ( $ES = 1.57$ ), where  $ES \geq .4$  is considered a large effect size (Hattie, 2018). Even a teacher's establishment of clear expectations has an effect size of .43 (Hattie, 2018). To make a positive, genuine, and authentic change, Stronge (2018) echoed that there must be this element of caring to make the connection. Teachers and the relationship they have to their profession, each other, and the student shows the greatest impact on student success. Because of the unique nature of each student, institutional practices can result in a negative effect if not differentiated to meet the needs of the individual.

## **Systemic Barriers Related to a High School Diploma**

Beyond the scope of the facilitating factors to a high school diploma, there are systemic barriers, limitations in the construct and governance of the organization, to completing high school. Systemic barriers make access to the opportunity to graduate high school on-time more difficult, creating further frustration for continuing to meet the end goal of attaining a high school diploma. Consequently, it is vital to address any systemic barriers that may interfere with a learner's equal opportunity for high school achievement (Chapin, 2019; DePaoli et al., 2015; McFarland et al., 2020). Barriers can be classified into two types: direct and indirect. Each type is explored, in turn.

### ***Direct Barriers as Disruptors to On-Time Graduation***

Direct barriers to graduation include laws, policies, institutional culture, and instructional practices that limit or preclude access to a high school degree. Being excluded, marginalized, or underrepresented creates feelings of distress, discomfort, and isolation negatively affects school participation (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019; McFarland et al., 2020). Lack of participation in school discourages forward progress and suppresses the desire to continue with their education (DePaoli et al., 2015). Historical narratives and biases propagate limitations on various students and subgroups of students based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and more. Laws, policies, and school culture can intentionally create more difficulty for students at risk of not graduating high school, a majority who are members of marginalized groups, to attain a high school diploma.

Students who are at risk of not graduating high school are more likely to be members of historically marginalized groups (Flynn et al., 2011; Irwin et al., 2023). Even while the national graduation rate has risen to 87%, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native

graduation rates fall below the targeted mark (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019; Irwin et al., 2023; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021). Students who identify as LGBTQ+ are similarly marginalized and affected, playing a role in having a lower graduation rate (Baricevic & Kashubeck-West, 2018; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021). Laws create systemic racism when certain groups or narratives are suppressed or underrepresented. Recent Florida law provides an example of contemporary targeting of students within the learning environment. Two pieces of legislation were passed in 2022—one bill that limited discussion of the identification of being LGBTQ+ and another that changed the narrative of African American history as a curricular topic (Individual Freedom Act, 2022; Parental Rights Education Act, 2022). These two laws created situations where the student can become the target, creating a climate of exclusion in the learning environment (Baricevic & Kashubeck-West, 2018; Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019). The system itself creates a limitation to students needs which could lead to their marginalization and could change their trajectory of completion high school. Consequently, laws, policies, and practices that directly opposes the situational and dispositional needs of a learner are harmful to that learner.

Similar to laws, institutional policies and practices can have the same effect in limiting student involvement and participation (McDermott et al., 2018; McFarland et al., 2020). Conversations and policies about what type of restrooms are appropriate for students based on how they identify are an example of modern policies that can target students. Structurally, schools are created on a binary gender system which, if enforced, creates a system where some students feel excluded based on their differing gender designation (Baricevic & Kashubeck-West, 2018; Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019). However, when a non-binary approach to gender is implemented, there can be unintended consequences, abuses of the system, and other students feeling discomfort (Baricevic & Kashubeck-West, 2018). Policies in place directly affect the

meeting of needs for the students, and the misalignment of needs and policies creates a space where students are excluded (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; McFarland et al., 2020). This misalignment can lead to marginalization and could change the trajectory of the student's participation in school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Yurt, 2022).

Less obvious but equally impactful are the continued practices of institutional culture that are exclusionary in nature. For example, the proliferation of microaggressions and the allowance of derogatory language limits students' feelings of acceptance and belonging (Baricevic & Kashubeck-West, 2018; Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). For students at risk of not graduating, these negative cultural norms are influential, leading to absenteeism or a lack of engagement (McDermott et al., 2018; McFarland et al., 2020). Without leadership to address these concerns directly, bullying and hostility will follow, increasing student discomfort (Nguyen et al., 2022; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). This institutional culture creates a circumstance outside of the control of the student where their access to education is being impeded and, if not addressed, would lead to a greater chance of the student(s) dropping out of school before successful completion (Blazar & Kraft 2016; Buckman et al., 2021; Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019).

### ***Indirect Barriers as Disruptors to On-time Graduation***

Other systemic barriers to education are indirect, meaning they are based on circumstances and situations that arise without warning or foresight. These include issues such as school funding and infrastructure which create an inequality in the success of schools (McFarland et al., 2020). Teacher shortage, lack of learning materials, negative school climate, and diversity of courses of study are systems that create a similar discouraging impact on students (McFarland et al., 2020). Negative social dynamics of school are detrimental to the

success of the students in the building (Chapin, 2019; DePaoli et al., 2015; Gray-Nicolas & Miranda 2019; McFarland et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic globally altered physical interactions, shaped the way in which people learned, and created unintentional barriers to educational needs of students, especially with students who are at risk of not graduating high school.

Students who are at risk for not graduating high school are more susceptible to circumstantial situations surrounding the educational environment (Gore et al., 2023; Rumberger, 2013). For example, the national ongoing teacher shortage gives rise to a lack of experienced educators. For most learners, an inexperienced teacher can mean that they may have to work more independently or learn in a different way they are not accustomed to learning, but this is a greater issue for students who are at risk for not graduating (Podolsky et al., 2019). These students need experienced faculty to address all facets of their educational needs (Gore et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2019; Sawchuk, 2015). Because of teacher shortages, students who are at risk of not graduating find themselves enrolled where teachers may have the least experience, either by district limitations or because they are the less desired courses to teach (Gore et al., 2023; Podolsky et al., 2019). The cycle creates a less desirable educational environment for these students. This creates a more complex way for at-risk students to achieve success.

In addition to teacher shortages, students at risk of graduating typically have a lack of learning materials including access to technology (McCallister, 2021; Yurt, 2022). When students are in situations where they do not have access to computers, calculators, or even writing implements, this can create an inequity of design that plays a significant role in creating a negative school climate (Blazar & Kraft, 2016; Rumberger, 2013; Zaff et al., 2016). This type of negative school climate can create a situation where students do not feel valued, causing their



lack of participation in classes and can lead to not finishing their educational responsibilities (Chapin, 2019; Snook, 2020). Social dynamics are not a choice in public school. Often there is one high school within a community or school boundary or district which eliminates options of changing schools within the public sector (McCallister, 2021). Therefore, situational circumstances outside of the control of the student can play a larger role in the success of a student who is at risk for not graduating high school.

### ***Solutions to Mitigate the Effects of Systemic Barriers***

Systemic barriers to opportunities in education and the successful completion of high school may never be fully extinguished. The historical and circumstantial nature of education lingers in the social commentary and politics. However, purposeful and thoughtful planning by school leadership is of paramount importance to combat systemic issues (Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Northouse, 2019). Systems that are preventing success must first be identified before action steps can be taken to dismantle the negative construct. Thus, taking deliberate steps within a created plan to remove the barrier is necessary. From class distributions to hiring choices, having a student-centered planning process keeps the focus of on the most important component in schools—the students (Buckman et al., 2021). The responsibility of diminishing and removing systemic barriers in education is the responsibility of all stakeholders, including creating laws and policies that protect the interests of all students (Zheng et al., 2023).

Strategies to combat these barriers involve communication and connectedness to the community (McCallister, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). Being open to and encouraging of parental involvement helps make connections allowing for a more welcoming environment to students (Chapin, 2019; McCallister, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). Focusing professional development on identifying and understanding marginalized groups continues to be a strong measure affecting

student comfort and success (McCallister, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). Creating affinity groups for underrepresented populations, providing meals and clothes for student in need, and counseling services occurring within school are steps that can help with helping diminish feelings of discomfort and isolation (Chapin, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022; Zaff et al., 2016). Creating supportive school structures invites positive school culture to combat systemic issues (Buckman et al., 2021; Zaff et al., 2016).

Systemic change occurs when the needs of the students are the focus in the creation of school policy and at the implementation of plans for student development (Nguyen et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Laws and policies can be established through the elevation of community concerns and expectations for all students to be successful (McCallister, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Elections become increasingly important as school boards are community members that govern the priorities within the school district. Zheng et al. (2023) wrote that more resources need to be available to systemic underserved students, added via policy and community involvement. Historically, eliminating laws that prevent or exclude participation are the best path to end systemic problems in schools.

### **Student Disruptive Behaviors Related to High School Graduation**

Students experience secondary education based on their situational, dispositional, and instructional factors. Additionally, students respond to strengths and deficits in these factors via behavioral responses and actions. Strengths in facilitating factors lead to positive behaviors and interactions within the school setting. Deficits in facilitating factors can lead to disruptive behaviors within the school setting that can culminate in students' inability to meet graduation requirements. Specifically, student behaviors that prevent graduation often center around two

main themes: physical absence from class and lack of engagement in the instructional setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Zaff et al., 2016).

### ***Physical Absence From Class***

Physical absence from class, such as skipping class or avoiding school, creates distance from the learning environment, preventing students from building and demonstrating their academic skills. Truancy, the legal pursuit of attendance compliance, creates additional amount of stress to families, but is not imminently effective in the student returning to school (Allen et al., 2018; Dupéré et al., 2015; Yurt, 2022). For students at risk for not graduating, physical absence disrupts the awarding of credit in courses. Districts award credit based on instructional time and, a student typically fails because of their inability to meet graduation requirements (Allen et al., 2018). While reasons for physical absence can stem from situational or dispositional factors, the resulting behavior is the same.

Physical absence from school creates a greater loss than just a loss of instruction (Pyne et al., 2021). Pyne et al. (2021) contended that significant physical absence should signal more concerns about a student's life outside of school and create cause for other interventive measures instead of the focus of returning to school for instruction only. This does not, however, necessarily prioritize graduating high school. Chronic illness, serious illness, academic challenges, bullying, social pressures, and mental wellness concerns are all situational and dispositional reasons leading to physical absence which may need to be addressed as a priority issue (Allen et al., 2018; Dupéré et al., 2015; Pyne et al., 2021).

### ***Lack of Engagement***

A lack of engagement can be just as disruptive to graduation as being absent. Being mentally distant from learning brings about the same impact, a lack of demonstration of ability

(Dupéré et al., 2015; McDermott et al., 2019; Yurt, 2022). When there is a significant loss of engagement over time, then there is a decrease in the student's ability to graduate from high school (Dupéré et al., 2015; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021; Yurt, 2022). When a student is not engaged in the school environment, a disconnect between instruction and performance is created. Without remediation of the disconnection, the student falls behind, sometimes to a detrimental level.

A lack of engagement within the school context can stem from situational, dispositional, and institutional factors and the resources needed to combat each factor is unique. Problems such as unidentified special education needs, mental and physical exhaustion, executive function issues including procrastination, boredom, and general dislike of the required content can interfere with student learning (Dupéré et al., 2015; McDermott et al., 2019; Yurt, 2022).

Mendoza and King (2021) contended that the social context of learning can cause disengagement easily in high school. Peer work habits and avoidance can influence the success of others and, unfortunately, students who are more at risk for not graduating high school tend to follow these patterns (Mendoza & King, 2021; Zheng et al., 2023).

### **Potential Solutions to Enhance School Graduation for Students With Disruptive Behaviors**

Maralani (2011) discussed how early intervention(s) help students, wherein the earlier an intervention occurs in a student's academic pursuits, the more likely the student is to graduate. Even to start at the beginning of the year with a focused plan is more influential in the change in trajectory of a student (Maralani, 2011). Many options exist for both parents and schools to enhance and expand opportunities for students to graduate. These systems are designed to reach an alternate path to graduate from high school and can be purposefully designed to mitigate or extinguish disruptive behavioral patterns of either physical absence or a lack of engagement.

These fall into two categories of approach, alternate school options or programmatic interventions.

### ***Alternate School Options***

Families who choose an alternate school tend to find public school programs focus on basic necessities and access to materials to uniformly create positive culture (Virginia Department of Education, 2022b). Some families feel that while basic necessities and access to materials are important to student needs, student progress may be short sighted in the needs and desires for some students, especially if they have difficulty with attending or engaging with public school. Alternate school options, discussed in this section, provide students an education outside of the public arena.

**Private and Independent Schools.** Private and independent schools are a popular option for students with consistent disruptive school behaviors (Hahn et al., 2015). Often, the class size is lower than their public-school counterparts and the curriculum can be geared to student interest (Franklin et al., 2018; Hahn et al., 2015; Pierce, 2021; Wilkerson et al., 2015). The lack of mandatory state testing is also an incentive for students and families who find these assessments as barriers to graduation (Franklin et al., 2018). Because of a privatized environment, allocation of funds can be distributed to best suit student needs and can be personalized to student need. Because of these differences from public school, there is a trend to have greater success for students who are unsuccessful in public schools (Franklin et al., 2018; Pierce, 2021; Wilkerson et al., 2015).

Privatized systems can introduce other barriers and limitation to student participating fully in their education, including funding sources. This system is not geared towards students at risk for not graduating. Most private and independent schools have a mission to help find ways

for students to excel; however, these schools are not necessarily aimed at helping ameliorate disruptive behaviors (Pierce, 2021; Pianta & Ansari, 2018; Wilkerson et al., 2015). In addition, private school data are not necessarily public domain, and therefore statistics and data reporting methods can be unreliable. These types of schools may report they have a higher graduation rate, but for students at risk for graduating high school, there is little evidence that a private or independent school is more successful with absenteeism and lack of engagement in school (Pierce, 2021; Pianta & Ansari, 2018; Wilson & Tanner-Smith, 2013). Finally, the barrier of tuition and costs of attendance precludes students and parents who desire this option. Since private schools do not fall under federal programming regulations, there are few financial supports to help students at risk of graduating attend a private school.

**Independent Study or Home School.** Some families whose students display disruptive behaviors choose to have individualized instruction or community-based instruction via homeschool (Hahn et al., 2015; Heinrich & Darling-Aduana, 2021; Franklin et al., 2018). This educational interventive option focuses on the individual needs and the curriculum can be the choice to meet educational requirements as long as approved by either the school district or the state (Franklin et al., 2018). Some students who display disruptive behaviors find a comfort of being home and having a more self-paced academic routine (Heinrich & Darling-Aduana, 2021; Franklin et al., 2018).

For students who are at risk for not graduating high school, there has been research to indicate that independent study or home school is effective for some. Other research points out that this system often leaves students with a smaller network of friends and grouping with like-minded peers (Wilkerson et al., 2015). This can create a lack of diverse interaction and create more disruptive patterns from the situational factors. The discrepancy between public school and

homeschool occurs mostly in the delivery of instruction. Typically, parents' lack of expertise and lack of time commitment in educating students or evaluating curriculum to be delivered can exacerbate issues with students who are at risk of not graduating high school (Franklin et al., 2018; Wilkerson et al., 2015). Not all programs are unsuccessful; research finds that students who just want to finish high school without being attached to the school find success (Heinrich & Darling-Aduana, 2021; Wilson & Tanner-Smith, 2013). These programs, however, are unique and cannot account for all variation in situational, dispositional, and institutional needs for each student at risk (Wilson & Tanner-Smith, 2013).

**Boarding or Residential Schools.** The most restrictive environment for students who display disruptive patterns would be a boarding school or residential facility (Hahn et al., 2015). These options typically provide smaller and more inclusive classes with a curriculum determined by the school to meet the needs of the student (Franklin et al., 2018; Wilkerson et al., 2015). As with all privatized options, there is no state testing requirements and often accreditation comes from an outside agency. This option creates a new and separate place from a student's homelife. A boarding school offers autonomy from parents/guardians and a time for the student to create their own network with peers in a similar living situation. Privatized residential programs offer wrap around services for students of all abilities who deal struggle to find success in the normal school environment (Green Chimneys, 2022; Grove School, 2022; Hahn et al., 2015). Most research about the achievements of boarding schools is completed, creating some concerns with validity, credibility, reliability, and dependability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hahn et al., 2015). This inconsistency calls into question the true effectiveness of these programs. Additionally, like private schools, the barrier of tuition and costs of attendance precludes students and parents who desire this option.

### ***Programmatic Interventions***

Understanding the behaviors, reducing barriers and limitations to high school graduation help to combat the reasons that student's dropout. Dropout rates fluctuate; however, interventive measures can be used to mitigate a rate increase. Various programs have been attempted around the school day and during the school day to help find ways to scaffold student success and ensure that graduation is a reality for each student.

**Afterschool Programs.** There is an increase in after-school programs that offer academic remediation and therapeutic supports to have students feel better and confident about their abilities (Hahn et al, 2015; Kremer et al., 2014). Most often, after school programs take place at the school, so there is no transition between locations, creating a greater opportunity to attend. Being in the same location affords the opportunity or possibility of collaboration with school personnel. Communication about what is best for the student and communication about benchmarks toward graduation are important to the success of the student needing support.

After school is not necessarily ideal because it overlaps with other commitments of greater social or economic priority. Social commitments, such as clubs or athletics, have been proven to be equally important in the development of students. Additionally, many students who have economic disadvantages have part-time or full-time jobs and work after school. These students typically find the economic benefit to be more appealing and, therefore, prioritize work. These opportunities typically occur at the same time of day so participation in afterschool academic time is less appealing. Often, students with disruptive behavior patterns display the same physical absence and lack of engagement, so these programs are not as effective as they are prolific (Kremer et al., 2014).



For students at risk for not graduating high school, the programs show some success. Bundshuh et al. (2021) found that creating a place for students to feel comfortable to access their education in school, but with a different group at a different time of day is helpful. Zheng et al. (2023) added that often there is a non-threatening aspect to after school programming and success is more attainable because of that atmosphere. Because the method of the program itself varies by staffing, school, and programmatic philosophy, there is a great amount of variation in success among programs (Bundshuh et al. 2021; Kremer et al., 2014). Also, after school programs are limited in their success, bound by the ability to reach the students and the students' willingness to attend. For most students who are at risk for not graduating high school, the lack of attendance is still a prohibitive measure.

**Credit Recovery.** A new trend in helping students on their path to graduation is credit recovery. This process helps to ameliorate failing grades in courses that are required for graduation as the student is taking the course (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Each failing grade has the opportunity to have work regraded through the resubmission of work. In this model, a student earns the lowest passing grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Once the student receives a full grade above failing, then the credit recovery plan stops. Credit recovery can be reinstated if the grade falls below failing again.

Credit recovery plans have similar limitations to afterschool programs if held after school, but some schools are offering it during the school day by either eliminating a non-graduation required class or creating a study hall block (Kremer et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This is also more economically advantageous for school districts since recovery occurs during contracted school hours (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The U.S. Department of Education (2018) does not report on the effectiveness of credit recovery as an increased graduation measure; however, it is a tool used by high-poverty, low-graduation-rate schools regularly to support coursework completion. One report found that students who complete credit recovery instead of repeating the course were more likely to earn credit for the course. However, this did not necessarily change their graduation trajectory (Heinrich & Cheng, 2022).

**Summer School.** An older model for student remediation and repairing of failing grades in graduation required classes, summer school takes an entire course and reteaches the course during a certain number of weeks during the summer when school is in session (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In this model, students repeat the entire course, so their grade is replaced by a new score. Also, if they are remediation of a class from their 12<sup>th</sup>-grade year, then they would have missed the mark of on-time graduation. Summer school programs have been widely seen as unsuccessful for students who are at risk for graduation high school for similar reason as afterschool programs, credit recovery programs, and traditional programming, attendance, and engagement (Kremer et. al, 2015; McCallister, 2021; McDermott et al., 2018). Another barrier for school districts is funding, which can eliminate the availability of summer school if there is a lack of funds at the end of the regular school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

**School-Based Interventions.** There are a number of school-based interventions that are implemented to help students with identified needs gain access to student support services. Schools seek to intervene on these behaviors through a variety of initiatives that encourage attendance and engagement (Buckman et. al, 2021).

**Whole School Interventions.** A significant factor in shifting attendance and engagement is the ability to build positive, meaningful connections and relationships with students and the

community (Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021; McCallister, 2021; Stronge, 2018). Making positive connections has shown an upward trend in making student feel valued, encouraging them to attend school and be engaged in school, creating a supportive classroom and school culture (McDermott et al., 2019; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). Positive school climate and culture fosters student-to-student relationships and gives them a group of students to build peer connections (McDermott et al., 2019; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). Collective teacher efficacy has the largest effect size on student learning which connects to creating an environment where all teachers and staff are focusing on student success within the school environment (Hattie, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2022; Stronge, 2018).

Other interventions include Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a nationally supported program that creates and encourages school-based reward systems for positive behaviors, including but not limited to attendance and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), a nationally supported program that establishes layers of interventive strategies to target achievement using data and a strengths-based proactive perspective (American Institutes for Research, 2023; Center on PBIS, 2019; Estrapala et al., 2020). Effort has a large effect size on student learning, meaning encouraging students' efforts can create positive trends for their success (Center on PBIS, 2019; Hattie, 2018). Although some argue that accolades and support often go to the high-achieving, well-behaved students, limiting support for bottom performers of the class (McFarland et al., 2020; Tyre & Feuerborn, 2021). Lower performing students are given fewer resources and lesser trained staff exacerbating an inequality in their education (DePaoli et al., 2015; McFarland et al., 2020; Zaff et al., 2016). PBIS programs in a high school environment is less effective at shifting student behaviors for lower performing students because of implementation inconsistencies and social dynamics (Estrapala et al., 2020; Tyre &

Feuerborn, 2021). MTSS programs in secondary schools focus on performance and creating proactive and preventative frameworks for success of students (American Institutes for Research, 2023), and are intended to provide the value of proactive identification and using support systems early. MTSS strategies can be used to make individualized plans, but research finds that MTSS is limited by grouping areas, and in practice it is difficult in meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Gonzalez et al., 2022). MTSS plans are not designed to be reactive to behaviors, so engagement can be limited to a more average group of students than those at risk of graduating (American Institutes for Research, 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2022).

***School Within a School Interventions.*** A growing trend in schools is the creation of small, non-academic groups, like affinity and advisory groups, that meet regularly to make schools feel smaller and more connected (Buckman et al, 2021; Zaff et al., 2016). These systems reduce the number of students for one period to eliminate the effect of size and allows for the building of positive meaningful relationships within the school (Buckman et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). Lowder et al. (2022) found that grouping ninth-grade students with attendance concerns by literacy and learning interventions had a greater success with student retention and graduation rates than students who did not participate in this grouping but had similar traits. As mentioned, the effect of feeling connected, a positive school culture, and having meaningful relationships within the school setting positively influences student success and performance (Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021; Lowder et al., 2022; McCallister, 2021; Stronge, 2018). The community effort to focus on the students yields the largest effect on student success (Chapin, 2019; Kalkan & Dağlı, 2021; Lowder et al., 2022; McCallister, 2021).

Including parents in the process can increase engagement; as parents' value of the school increases, the student value of the school also increases (Chapin, 2019; Fall & Roberts, 2012).

Ultimately, allowing students to be connected, rewarded, and celebrated as members of the community help to have students attend and engage (Heppen et al., 2017; Toms et al., 2018). Some public schools have responded by reworking and restructuring their school program and philosophy to have a more inclusive setting while giving more responsibility to the student (Lowder et al., 2022; McCallister, 2021). Other public schools are offering more college course earlier which has shown an increase in student involvement (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2019). Programs increase relationships and strengthen connections to school; however, the impact on graduation does not always follow to a significant level (Heppen et al., 2017; Toms et al., 2018). Despite limitations, results are inconsistent based on school programs and philosophies. Some schools and programs find paths that enable student growth, support, and successful completion of high school while others continue to try new strategies.

***Targeted Student Group Interventions.*** In some schools, the response to a specific, small, targeted group of students to effect change is to create a program designed to instruct that particular group of students. The job descriptions of school principals give them the responsibility to provide programmatic and instructional practices that meet the goals of the school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Secondary school principals should create, establish, and ensure curricular standards fulfill the necessary requirements for graduation as well as meet the individual needs of the learner (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). To meet these needs, secondary school principals can use the teachers and staff within the school to create unique environments to help mitigate situational and dispositional needs of students. This institutional change in programming creates school-based interventions without the need to disrupt the student by having them attend an alternate school.

These curricular school-based programs are unique to the situation and school. For example, in Bristol, Virginia, the school district saw a need for students with high at-risk factors to have more counseling supports for approximately 24 students called the Crossroads Alternative Program (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a). Counseling included both individual and group sessions as well as discussions of transition from high school. There was no change to the students' school settings, just the addition of programmatic elements for support in addition to the regular high school curriculum (Virginia Department of Education, 2022a). In another example, Jackson Hole High School in Jackson, Wyoming, a strong need to have bilingual education led to the development of a Dual Language Immersion program (Jackson Hole High School, 2017). Classes at all grade levels for selected students are delivered in English; however, the class make up is 50% native English-speakers and 50% native Spanish-speakers (Teton County Schools, n.d.). The program sought to ameliorate the language barrier within the school setting and social dynamics created in all levels of learning. The students do not change groups but stay together to create trust and confidence in their ability to learn (Teton County Schools, n.d.). Another example is in Pomperaug Regional School District 15 (2018) in Connecticut where students are given a separate space within the school to learn. This program has two teachers and a paraprofessional who deliver instruction and provide an optimal environment for students' learning needs; their focus is to help with maturity and social skills while helping students meet graduation requirements (Pomperaug Regional School District 15, 2018).

Programs like the ones mentioned above are nuanced for each learning community. They fill a need in the school and school district that is absent. However, formative or summative evaluations of these programs are difficult to find. Principals create programs to help students,

but seemingly there is no evaluation completed to assess the success and viability of the school-based program interventions. Programs, like the school-based curricular program at GMHS in this study need to be evaluated to not only improve the program's effectiveness, but also to support other schools in their pursuit of helping students specific to their learning environment.

### **Summary**

Physical absence and a lack of engagement create barriers that impact the ability to achieve a high school degree. Whether the inhibiting causes stem from situational, dispositional, or institutional factors, the outcome is still the same, and the student needs support to graduate on-time. Limiting the impact or eliminating the behaviors can help to ameliorate and shift a student's trajectory in the positive direction. The Leadership Academy, as an institutional factor, shifts to a student-centered model. This model focuses teacher perspectives on each student within the program, allowing for a greater consistency of background knowledge and educational cohesion to address individual student needs. Through research, there will continue to be the examination of behaviors and the understanding of further barriers and limitations.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this program evaluation was to examine the implementation of processes and to determine the level of success of the graduation rates as outcomes of the Leadership Academy at GMHS. The Leadership Academy is a targeted intervention measure that shifts from a traditional model of education to a student-centered, self-contained programmatic structure. Similar to curricular-based interventions, the Leadership Academy delivers the necessary courses for graduation in one seamless structure that includes community service and leadership-based elements. This program was created as a response to inconsistencies in student graduation. To conduct this formative program evaluation, a mixed methods approach was used, and data came from both quantitative and qualitative sources (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). To analyze the activity elements and graduation rates of the Leadership Academy, the evaluation used data gathered from historical records, teacher interviews, and student participant surveys. Each data point collected was used to evaluate the program with the overall goal to provide feedback that determines the value of the program and recommendations to refine elements of the program. The findings of this evaluation were given to the principal of GMHS for recommendations for further progress of the program and to other district leadership for consideration of implementation of a similar program at other district high schools.

The program evaluation standards (Propriety, Utility, Feasibility, and Accuracy) provided a further framework to the fidelity and reliability of this program evaluation and in the



communication of the findings of the evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2011). Using the evaluation questions created in Chapter 1, the program evaluation approach, participants, data sources, data collection methods, and data analysis needed to answer these questions were included in this chapter. This chapter also discusses the delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and ethical considerations involved in conducting this program evaluation.

### **Evaluation Questions**

1. Is the Leadership Academy implemented with fidelity when implementation practices are compared with the approved design of the program?
2. Was there a change in graduation rates for students at risk of graduating prior to the enactment of the Leadership Academy when compared with participating students after the enactment of the Leadership Academy?
3. Do graduation rates differ between student participants in the Leadership Academy and non-participating students who are at risk for not graduating in the 2020 to 2023 school years?
4. What program activities do the teachers in the Leadership Academy perceive as having a positive impact on success of student participants and what changes for improvement do they recommend?
5. What program activities do the student participants perceive as having a positive impact on their success and what changes for improvement do they recommend?

### **Program Evaluation Approach**

Using Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model as the basis for the logic model and analysis of the Leadership Academy at GMHS, this program evaluation evaluated the processes and products (i.e., outcomes) of the program to gain insight into the functioning of the program and

assessed to what extent the program is affecting graduation rates at GMHS. The Leadership Academy at GMHS has been implemented since the 2019-2020 school year. Through the examination of historical records and responses from both teachers and student participants in the Leadership Academy at GMHS, evidence was collected to justify components that are effective, consider altering components that are less effective, and guide future component implementation at GMHS. Open-ended questions to both teachers and student participants also provided opportunities for authentic strengths and recommendations to be espoused.

### ***Description of the Program Evaluation***

For this formative program evaluation, there were two focuses. One focus was the collection of historical records and extant data that were used for evaluation questions one, two, three, and five. The document review of records included a variety of sources, including graduation records from GMHS, past survey data from prior cohorts of student participants, lesson plans of teachers within the Leadership Academy program, and CLT meeting and planning notes. Surveys were used as a practice of reflection within the Leadership Academy regularly for both student reflection and feedback on instruction (Stronge, 2018). This extant data helped to capture themes and trends over time. This records review gave both quantitative and qualitative data as evidence to answer the evaluation questions. This historical perspective was important to establishing a baseline of programmatic implementation and programmatic success over its first implemented years.

The second focus of the program evaluation was on the current cohort of student participants and teachers. Interviews with current teachers and survey data from current student participants were collected to add additional information to the historical narrative developed from the qualitative analysis. This process gave real-time recommendations from the active

participants of programmatic functioning. The experiences of the student participants were vital to ensure the vision of the program was being actualized and had direct feedback about the impacts of programmatic elements. The teachers within the program were additionally important because they outline and implement the day-to-day activities of the program. Teachers also observed different successes and strengths than students. Occurring over the first semester of 2023, the current student participants and teachers responded to questions that requested their opinions about what they perceived as beneficial. These questions focused on the processes of the Leadership Academy, specifically the implementation of activities and their effects.

### ***Role of the Researcher***

Currently, I am a math teacher at GMHS, and this will be my first year as the math teacher in the Leadership Academy. I have been an educator for 20 years and a teacher at GMHS for 9 years, holding various teaching positions. During my first 4 years at GMHS, I worked in self-contained settings for instructional delivery and specialized emotional support to help students with both their mathematics education and their social-emotional interactions. While being a teacher within the context of a program could confound data in other evaluations, being the program evaluator in this study allowed me to have a greater, nuanced understanding and detail the impact in the reporting of the results accurately and with credibility (Mertens & Wilson, 2019).

Because much of the data collected comes from qualitative sources, biases could have been unintentionally introduced during the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Because I am a member of the teacher group within the Leadership Academy, further biases could have been introduced through my own perspectives or prioritized elements (e.g., I teach math therefore I might have found more evidence of the teaching of math content). As the evaluator, I made sure

to scan the documents many times, to capture each theme accurately. I also had interview transcripts and survey responses by both teachers and student participants reviewed to ensure their accuracy. This review allowed the contributor to validate their submitted responses and protected against misinterpretation by the evaluator. To help further mitigate unintentional biases from the evaluator, a second researcher reviewed the documents to see if any additional codes or data occurs that was not accounted for in the initial evaluations data set. This multilayered approach sought to minimize biases in the coding process (Saldaña, 2016).

## **Participants**

The two primary participant groups in this evaluation were the student participants and the teachers within the Leadership Academy at GMHS.

### ***Student Participants***

The number of students in each cohort of student participants within the Leadership Academy at GMHS varied from year to year. Students were recommended based on their academic, social-emotional, and mental wellness struggle(s) in their first 3 years of high school. During their 3rd year of high school, school counselors, school administrators, and teachers recommend students for selection into the Leadership Academy for their final year. During the selection process, students had the ability to decline the opportunity to participate. The number of students in each cohort varied based on the needs of the group. If there were more significant needs within the group of students, such as special education services, behavioral services, or past disciplinary instances, then there were fewer students accepted. Table 1 details the number of students recommended for the program, the number of students accepted to each cohort, and the number of students who completed a full year within their cohort. The table also includes the number of students who either (a) did not accept their offer to be in the program, (b) were not

allowed to continue in the program, or (c) were not offered a spot in the program. These students were the basis for comparison in evaluation question two since they were the group of students most similar to the student participants within the Leadership Academy each year by recommendation qualities.

**Table 1**

*Leadership Academy Cohort Data by Academic Year*

Year	No. of Students			
	Recommended	Selected for Cohort	Completing Full Year	Non-Participating
2019 – 2020	30	20	20	10
2020 – 2021	32	17	17	15
2021 – 2022	28	17	12	16
2022 – 2023	44	24	24	20

*Note.* The completion of a full year of the program does not mean they graduate, but rather that they were enrolled within the program for the full year.

All former student participants’ graduation data were used in this program evaluation. These data were used in Evaluation Questions 2 and 3 to determine and compare graduation rates to students not members of the program and graduation rates over time. A committee of school counselors and school administrators chose student participants. Each student who was selected for the 2023-2024 Leadership Academy cohort and who chose to participate in the program was asked to participate in the program evaluation. Because many of the students were under the age of 18, parental consent and student consent were required.

### ***Teachers in the Leadership Academy***

The teachers in the Leadership Academy were selected by the GMHS Principal. Teachers do have the ability to continue teaching in the program or taking other academic pursuits after each year. For the 2023-2024 school year, each of the four teachers in the program had taught at least 1 year prior, and two of the four teachers had taught in the program for 2 or more years. This continuity of work gave an assumed better familiarity with the workings of the program and types of student participants in the program, gave an assumed better understanding of the mission and vision of the program, and gave an assumed more thorough recommendations for programmatic refinement. Given this profile of teachers and because I am one of them, I invited the three remaining teachers to participate in the study.

### **Data Sources**

#### ***Program Artifacts***

The first measure used the data from a review of documents and artifacts (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Data gathered for this measure came from historical records archived after each cohort of student participants. CLT notes, lesson plans, and previous survey responses was used to capture evidence of the implementation of programmatic activities over each year of Leadership Academy. The student participants contract (Appendix A) and the initial proposal document (Appendix B) were used as anchors for creating a priori codes. Predetermined codes such as *Career Exploration, Confidence, Teamwork, Innovation/Creation/Productivity, Communication (Listening and Speaking), Leadership, Community Service, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Professionalism, Respect for Diversity, Continuous Learning and Adaptability, Work Ethic, Self-direction, Mathematics, English, U.S. Government, and Project Management* were used as initial validation of programmatic alignment. Data were compiled and

triangulated to ensure processes were being implemented across all perspectives, giving evidence to the fidelity of implementation.

### ***Student Graduation Records***

The second measure was an examination of student graduation records. Graduation data from the school counseling office at GMHS was collected and categorized into two areas: the graduation rate of student participants in the Leadership Academy at GMHS and the graduation rate of student non-participants with similar at-risk graduation factors as the student participants at GMHS. This data was used to determine if there is a difference in the expected graduation outcomes between the two groups as part of Evaluation Question 2. Graduation records from years prior to the implementation of the Leadership Academy program were collected and used to determine to what extent the graduation rate has changed over time. Starting in 2015 and collected through 2023, the graduation rates for the entire school were compared to see if there was a change in 2020 and thereafter since that was the year the Leadership Academy began.

### ***Teacher Interviews***

The third measure of data focused on the components of the program and recommendations for further improvement through the lens of the Leadership Academy Teachers. Because the number of participants was expected to be three, one-on-one interviews with each teacher gave more direct and trusted feedback. Appendix C details the full interview protocol to be used. The method included consent to participate and to be recorded, anonymity of responses, and communication of the findings of the evaluation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using open-ended questions sought to gather authentic responses in a reflective teaching practice to think about what elements were successful and what were areas of growth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stronge, 2018). The following questions were asked during the interview:

1. What have you observed as having the greatest positive impact on student participants in the Leadership Academy?
2. What methods of instruction have helped student participants most in the Leadership Academy? What instructional methods have not been as beneficial?
3. How has the community service component of the Leadership Academy benefited student participants? How has the community service component not been beneficial?
4. How has the leadership component of the Leadership Academy benefited student participants? How has the leadership component not been beneficial?
5. What aspects of the Leadership Academy have you observed to have the least valuable impact on student participants in? How can these aspects of the Academy be improved?
6. What advantageous and disadvantageous activities or attributes of the Leadership Academy you would tell others about who are considering this program in the future?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a Leadership Academy Teacher? If yes, please share your thoughts at this time.

This open-ended forum sought to elicit authentic and direct responses without guiding or leading to a specific, predetermined responses (Saldaña, 2016). Interviews were conducted by the evaluator in a conference room removed from distractions for consistency. Audio recording and notetaking was used during each interview to ensure the exactness in the collection of impressions reported by the teachers. A pilot interview took place prior to the first interview to practice the protocol and refine methods. The goal of this data collection method was to hear the words of teachers' authentic impressions.



### ***Student Survey: Perceptions of Impact and Recommendations***

The final piece of data collection occurred from the remaining sections of the student participant survey (Appendix D), gathering the perceptions and recommendations through the lens of student participants. The first part of the survey was an extant instrument which used a Likert scale and close-ended items to solicit student perspectives. This instrument was given to student cohorts over the years of implementation. The following nine questions were asked of students on a scale *Not At All*, where 0 meant there was no evidence of occurrence based on student perception, to *Yes, definitely*, where a 5 meant there was a great amount of evidence based on student perceptions. The following questions were asked in the Likert scale portion:

1. Leadership Academy is helping me get ready to take the next steps in my life after high school.
2. Leadership Academy is helping me be on track for graduation.
3. Leadership Academy connects me with professionals who helped me explore career options.
4. The teachers in Leadership Academy helped me grow.
5. Leadership Academy has helped me build confidence in my academic abilities.
6. Leadership Academy has helped me establish or improve my work ethic.
7. I would recommend Leadership Academy to other students.
8. The school district should offer more programs like this one at other schools.
9. My experience in this program is better than I had expected.

The second part of the survey used open ended questions to elicit the direct responses from student participants without predeterminations or language used by the evaluator, teachers, or administrators of the school (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). To ensure answers were aligned with

the purpose of the study, a survey protocol (Appendix E) was used to give students the reasoning behind the survey elements. This protocol was used both times the second section is administered to students. The following questions were asked in the open-ended part of the survey:

1. What has been your best experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy?
2. What methods of instruction have helped you most student participant in the Leadership Academy?
3. How has the community service component of the Leadership Academy benefited your experience as a student participant?
4. How has the leadership component of the Leadership Academy benefited your experience as a student participant?
5. What advantageous activities or attributes of the Leadership Academy you would tell others about who are considering this program in the future?
6. What has been your least valuable experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy?
7. What methods of instruction have not been as beneficial in your experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy?
8. How has the community service component of the Leadership Academy been a drawback to your experience as a student participant?
9. How has the leadership component of the Leadership Academy been a drawback to your experience as a student participant?

10. What disadvantageous activities or attributes of the Leadership Academy you would tell others about who are considering this program in the future?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a student participant in the Leadership Academy? If yes, please share your thoughts here.

This open-ended form sought to elicit authentic and direct responses without guiding or leading to a specific, predetermined responses (Saldaña, 2016). This survey was given digitally for ease of storage and consistency in dissemination. A pilot survey protocol took place prior to the first survey of students to practice the protocol and refine methods. The goal of this data collection method was to hear the words of students’ authentic impressions. This data was combined with the review of historic records from previous student surveys to see if any themes were consistent over time. Table 2 shows the alignment of data that was collected from the student survey to evaluation questions asked in this study.

**Table 2**

*Alignment of the Evaluation Questions to the Student Participant Survey Questions*

Evaluation Question	Survey	
	Close-ended	Open-Ended
1: Is the Leadership Academy implemented with fidelity when implementation practices are compared with the approved design of the program?	1, 2, 3, 5, 6	2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9
5: What program activities do the student participants perceive as having a positive impact on their success and what changes for improvement do they recommend?	4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in four forms: document review, graduation records, teacher interviews, and current student participant surveys. To ensure consistency of information, qualitative data from the student participant survey and the teacher interviews was taken twice,

once at the end of the first quarter and again at the end of the second quarter. The student participant survey used devoted class time over 2 days for students to answer the questions. The close-ended first part was given on the first day and the open-ended second section was given on the second day. Front loading data collection ensured the implementation of programmatic elements. The document review and the majority of graduation records data collection occurred during the summer prior to the start of the school year. There was one final data collection for the 2023-2024 student participant cohort's graduation rate in February 2024. The projected graduation rate could be determined at this point for the currently enrolled student participants. Table 3 identifies the timeline for each of the data collection points and their connection to the evaluation questions.

**Table 3**

*Method, Time, Person Responsible, and Evaluation Question Alignment for Data Collection.*

Method	Time	Person(s) Responsible	Evaluation Questions
Document Review	Summer 2023	Evaluator	1, 5
Student Survey	End of Quarter 1 End of Quarter 2	Current Student Participants	1, 5
Teacher Interviews	End of Quarter 1 End of Quarter 2	Leadership Academy Teachers	1, 4
Graduation Rates, GMHS School Records	Summer 2023 & February 2024	Evaluator	2, 3

*Note.* GHMS = Great Mountain High School

### **Data Analysis**

To give a more robust analysis of data, a pragmatic lens highlighted the need for both quantitative and qualitative data (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Quantitative data gave numerical understanding of graduation benefit of the Leadership Academy and qualitative data gave

verbally articulated value of the program (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). The following subsections describe the type of analysis used for coding the qualitative data and numerically calculating the quantitative data.

### ***Qualitative Data: Fidelity of Programmatic Implementation***

To answer Evaluation Question 1, three pieces of data identified processes of the Leadership Academy program were being implemented with fidelity. CLT notes, lesson plans, and previous student surveys were examined to see (a) which programmatic elements were being implemented, (b) how often each element was observed or reported to being implemented, and (c) if a discrepancy in programmatic elements was reported by the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). The connection of programmatic elements was examined through this tabulation of artifacts. After each completed document review, a table of evidentiary findings was created for each source (see Tables 5, 6, and 7). Evidence by only one source would not provide enough information for any one specific element being implemented unless the evidence of implementation was objectively substantive. Evidence in two out of the three sources would validate that the programmatic element is being implemented. Evidence in three out of the three sources would demonstrate a high level of implementation. With an evaluation goal of implementation, the triangulation across sources gave evidence to the fidelity of implementation.

### ***Quantitative Data: Graduation Data***

To answer Evaluation Question 2, a chi-square test of independence was used to see if there was a discrepancy between the Leadership Academy student participants' graduation rate and the students at risk for not graduating graduation rate but not in the Leadership Academy from 2020-2023 (Starnes & Tabor, 2019). This test allowed for the variation of randomness to be ruled out. If there was no difference between the groups, then a student could be in either group

and have the same outcome. If the groups are different, however, then there was a statistical advantage to being a part of one of the groups. Then, based on the raw data, a determination of which group would be more advantageous could be determined. This chi-square test of independence was completed by gathering historical data from the graduation records at GMHS. To set up the chi-square test, I identified the  $H_0$  as there was no difference, or no association, in observed and expected graduation rates in the groups over time. I identified the  $H_A$  as there was an association between the grouping and the outcome, meaning they are associated or connected. Once a chi-square test statistic was determined, the test statistic was compared to an expected outcome of than 5%. If the test statistic provides a  $p$ -value that was greater than 5%, then there was no association or independence in the data groups. If the test statistic provides a  $p$ -value that was less than 5%, then the data sets were independent.

### ***Quantitative Data: Differences of Graduation Rates Over Time***

For Evaluation Question 3, a time-series analysis was conducted to include prior years' graduation rates before the initiation of the Leadership Academy and to include the subsequent years since its operation (Kirchgassner et al., 2014). Historical data were gathered from the graduation records at GMHS for the years 2017 to 2023. Starting in the year 2015 includes five graduation rates prior to the first year of graduates from the Leadership Academy in 2020, an account of sequential years was taken. Using a time-series analysis identified if there has been a change in graduation rate at GMHS since the program's implementation. This type of sequential analysis gave a perspective of change over time based on programmatic implementation (Kirchgassner et al., 2014).

### ***Qualitative Data: Teacher Perceptions of Impact and Recommendations***

To answer Evaluation Question 4, an open coding method was used to develop themes from the teacher interview responses (Saldaña, 2016). The responses from the teacher interviews were used to develop themes from the response from Leadership Academy Teachers (Saldaña, 2016). The a priori codes, such as *leadership, faculty, community service, self-directed learning,* and *academics,* were used aligning with the elements of the program. This was important in the recommendations section of the program evaluation. The use of open thematic coding method did not limit responses to a priori codes but opened the opportunity to finding new themes and emergent codes from teacher responses (Saldaña, 2016). These codes were then analyzed to determine which programmatic features were most impactful to student success through the lens of their teachers and gave recommendations to improve the program for greater student success in the future (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016).

### ***Qualitative Data: Student Participant Perceptions of Impact and Recommendations***

Similar to the analysis of data from the teachers, evaluation question five was answered through an open coding method to develop themes from the response from student participants (Saldaña, 2016). Some similar a priori codes, such as *leadership, faculty, community service, self-directed learning,* and *academics,* were used, aligning with the elements of the program; however, the open thematic coding method did limit responses to a priori codes (Saldaña, 2016). These codes were analyzed in conjunction with historically recorded data collected from previous student participants from prior surveys to determine which programmatic features were most impactful to student success and what recommendations improved the program for greater success in the future (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Items that are listed in both

student responses and teacher responses were of greater importance for the purpose of unifying strengths and recommendations of the program.

Table 4 itemizes the evaluation questions with the corresponding data source, data collection method, and the analytical method used to report the findings.

**Table 4**

*Data Analysis Methods for Evaluation Questions*

Evaluation Question	Sources	Collection	Analysis
1. Is the Leadership Academy implemented with fidelity when implementation practices are compared with the approved design of the program?	Previous Teachers within the Leadership Academy	Historical Record Review: CLT notes, lesson plans, previous survey responses	Qualitative Analysis: Open Coding Method
2. Was there a change in graduation rates for students at risk of graduating prior to the enactment of the Leadership Academy when compared with participating students after the enactment of the Leadership Academy?	Previous GMHS Student Records	Historical Record Review: Graduation Records	Time Series Analysis
3. Do graduation rates differ between student participants in the Leadership Academy and non-participating students who are at risk for not graduating in the 2020 to 2023 school years?	Previous GMHS Student Records	Historical Record Review: Graduation Records	Chi-square Test of Independence
4. What program activities do the teachers in the Leadership Academy perceive as having a positive impact on success of student participants and what changes for improvement do they recommend?	Teachers in the Leadership Academy	Teacher Interviews	Qualitative Analysis: Open Coding Method
5. What program activities do the student participants perceive as having a positive impact on their success and what changes for improvement do they recommend?	Previous and current student participants in the Leadership Academy	Historical Record Review: Extant Data from previous student participants Student Survey	Qualitative Analysis: Open Coding Method

*Note.* CLT = Collaborative Learning Team; GMHS = Great Mountain High School.



## **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

### ***Delimitations***

Delimitations are the decisions made by the evaluator affecting the boundaries and the scope of the evaluations. This study only focused on the outcomes about graduation and earning a high school diploma. This study did not use evidence from other evaluative benchmarks, such as academic grades, test scores, or ancillary programs in which students used to reach graduation. Also, this study did not examine the impact of other school remediation programs' success on graduation rates. The school factors in this study were confined to the implementation of the program and its impact on student graduation success.

The focus of this study was on student participants in the program. Students who are selected by the selection committee were chosen without an exact protocol or rubric. That selection method could have affected the success of the student participants; however, the process was outside the scope of this study. Also, data on students who decline participation were collected as data points for graduation rate comparison as they are students like the group of student participants. Data collection about the reasons they declined to participate in the program was not a part of this study.

### ***Limitations***

Limitations in this program evaluation were confined to the accurate responses by student participants and faculty. Because of the greatly qualitative nature of this program evaluation, the accuracy, reliability, and precision of my findings relied on the reporting of others (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Therefore, the findings of my program evaluation were based on the perceptions which could stem from a biased perspective. Questions, format, and structure of forms and surveys were created to reduce the impact and account for extreme biases as well as reduce the

response bias that came from interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). To mitigate biases an additional researcher to check documents for additional codes was used. Because the first portion of the student survey was a preexisting program survey instrument, the questions and results of the survey were not a perfect fit to the evaluation questions. The data collected, however, revealed information desired for the scope of the study.

### ***Assumptions***

Assumptions of the evaluation surrounded the workings of regular school programming, trustworthy reporting from students and staff, and technology access. The assumption was made that there will be regular school programming days where the Leadership Academy functioned with regular facility use and operation. Schools being open and no faculty shortages were also assumed as part of regular operation standards. Next, the assumption was made that all faculty and students responding to forms and surveys responded honestly and truthfully to promote the betterment of the program and to provide an authentic perspective to the process of the evaluation. A final assumption was made that technology access was readily available to complete forms and surveys, and that the technology did not hinder the gathering of accurate and precise data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards for this program evaluation ensured the propriety, utility, feasibility, and accuracy of process are met with validity, credibility, reliability, and dependability (Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Yarbrough et al., 2011). To ensure propriety and feasibility, informed consent was obtained from student participants, students participants' parents, teachers, and administration before gathering information and data. Appendix F provides a sample of the consent form given to both parents and students to for permission to participate. Because of the

small number of student participants in the Leadership Academy and the recent implementation of the program, precautions were taken to protect the identity of students. The school was named as a pseudonym and the location of the school was only known by geography. Identifying characteristics or identifying remarks were not published within the results of this study, and the names of student participants, teachers, and staff within the program were not used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yarbrough et al., 2011).

To ensure accuracy and utility of the program evaluation, evaluation questions were only about their opinions and perspectives of student participants within the program. Students were not subjected to evaluation or testing of any kind that would disrupt or discourage their education or inhibited their further development or learning. At no time were student participants considered test subjects during the program evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2011).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to provide a formative evaluation of the Leadership Academy at Great Mountain High School (GMHS). The method developed for use in the evaluation sought to examine the implementation of processes and to determine the level of success of the graduation rates as outcomes of the Leadership Academy at GMHS as well as understand the successes and needs for improvements as discussed by teachers and student participants of the Leadership Academy. To analyze the activity elements and graduation rates of the Leadership Academy, evaluation data was gathered from historical records, teacher interviews, and student participant surveys. The study was approved for evaluation purposes by both the dissertation committee and the school district. The findings from this study are presented in this chapter. The evaluation questions anchor each set of data present in the findings of the process. All synthesized responses and analyzed data are presented in the narrative analysis, along with associated tables and figures.

#### **Evaluation Question 1: Is the Leadership Academy implemented with fidelity when implementation practices are compared with the approved design of the program?**

The aim of this question in the program evaluation process was to ensure that elements of the program were implemented as they were designed in the program's beginning. A document review of pertinent program records was chosen as the best method to find evidence of the work being done within the Leadership Academy. Using the founding documents (Appendices A and B), a priori themes were gleaned and used to find elements within three historical documents of

the Leadership Academy. Lesson plans, Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) notes, and past student survey responses were chosen as the historical documents to analyze and find these attributes. The a priori codes determined to be of value in the initial design of the program were *Career Exploration, Confidence, Teamwork, Innovation/Creation/Productivity, Communication (Listening and Speaking), Leadership, Community Service, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Work Ethic, Self-direction, Mathematics, English, U.S. Government, Project Management, and Study Hall* (Appendices A and B). For further review and analysis, these codes were divided into the two major activities of the Leadership Academy—*Academic* and *Community Service and Career*—based on the code alignment to each of program requirements.

Each set of documents, from the program’s founding in the fall of 2019 to the present term in 2024, was analyzed for evidence of implementation using the a priori codes. Each evidence set was coded into one of three determinations: a 0 was assigned to codes that showed no evidence during the document review, a / was assigned to codes that showed at least one piece of evidence during the document review or the examples of evidence were not sufficient in capturing the precise code, and a + was assigned to codes that showed more than one piece of evidence during the document review. In the subsections below, each document review contains a table with the assigned symbols that detail the findings followed by a narrative associated with the document review. After an analysis of each historical set of documents, the information was compared to each other to determine the comprehensiveness and level of consistency in the implementation of the Leadership Academy Program. This triangulation process across sources was used to substantiate evidence, documenting the fidelity of implementation.

### ***Record Review of Lesson Plans***

Each of the four teachers in the Leadership Academy were given access to a shared drive where lessons, including linked projects and assessment, copies of student work, surveys, and survey responses are stored as a historical record of the program. This file is an accumulation of 14 teachers' work and documentation since the fall of 2019. The first records review I conducted examined the lesson plans from 2019 to 2024 to ascertain evidence aligning with the predetermined codes and themes aligned with the program development. This included assessments and projects that were embedded into lesson plans. (Note: As a teacher in the program, I have access to files in the shared drive.) Table 5 details the evidence found in the lessons, projects, and assessments within the shared file.

**Table 5***Evidence Found in Lesson Plans From 2019–2024*

Code	Evidence	Graduation Year				
		2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Academic Themes</b>						
Mathematics	<i>statistics, word problems, real world projects</i>	+	+	+	+	+
English	<i>writing response, scholarship essay, common application essay, English instructional benchmarks, reading short stories</i>	+	+	+	+	+
U.S. Government	<i>voter registration, branches of government, current events</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Project Management	<i>real-life simulation</i>	/	/	/	/	/
Study Hall		0	0	0	0	0
Innovation/Creativity/Productivity	<i>students create product, student driven goals, own plan for presentation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	<i>projects, lesson objective, student creates product</i>	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Community &amp; Career Themes</b>						
Career Exploration	<i>real-world problems, guest speakers from the field</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Confidence		0	0	0	0	0
Teamwork	<i>collaboration, group work, group projects</i>	/	/	/	/	/
Listening	<i>responses, reflections</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Speaking	<i>presentations</i>	/	/	/	/	/
Leadership	<i>chosen project leader</i>	/	/	/	/	/
Community Service		0	0	0	0	0
Professionalism	<i>audience, job skills</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Respect for Diversity		0	0	0	0	0
Continuous Learning and Adaptability		0	0	0	0	0
Work Ethic		0	0	0	0	0
Self-direction	<i>projects</i>	/	/	/	/	/

*Note.* In this table, a 0 means there was no evidence found, a / means at least one piece of evidence was found, and a + means that multiple (more than one) piece of evidence was found during the review of lesson plans.

**Academic Themes.** Through the lesson plans, including projects and assessments, many items related to the academic components of the Leadership Academy. Each of the four content courses—mathematics, English, U.S. Government, and project management—all had items placed in the shared drive for each of the years. The digital catalogue of lesson plans, assessments, and projects contained replicated content for each discipline from year to year of programmatic implementation.

In mathematics, I found evidence related to content in *statistics* as well as *word problems* and *real world projects*. Statistical analysis of data sets was used each year to understand the relationships of numbers and central tendency measures. They were transferred into real-world situations of the student choice. Other mathematical-based problems centered around analyzing word problems with real world implications. An entire unit on taxation and understanding how words and numbers work together was a focus as well. This particular project was used over each of the years of implementation.

The English course over the 5 years in the study had evidence of *writing responses*, *scholarship essays*, the *common application essay*, *English instructional benchmarks*, and *reading short stories*. Each year, students spent time hearing about and researching current events. As a practice, students spent time writing their response and citing evidence from the event. Other evidence of writing was found when students wrote an essay response to scholarships sponsored by the school's Parent Teacher and Student Association (PTSA) and the essay response requirement to the Common Application as student participants apply to higher education opportunities. These layered writing responses showed many steps in planning, drafting, editing, and submitting their work. Other English benchmarks of reading diagnostics and coursework were also found each year. Finally, there was a short story unit that was added over the years which gave students the opportunity to choose a reading activity of interest and give a presentation on their chosen reading assignment.

Reading and writing activities were prevalent throughout the U.S. Government resources. Many of the documents focused on *current events* which also seemed to align with the topics being covered in the English course. Topics in *voter registration* occurred annually with students of the age to vote. Understanding the *branches of government* and the understanding of both the



U.S. Government and how that compared with the state government was a large part of the curricular work and projects found.

Only one project was found as evidence of Project Management. A *real life simulation* activity where students learn about their roles and life circumstances based on their decisions was an annual task. While this was only one task of evidence, upon investigating the components of the simulation, the project itself was extensive. Covering the whole year, a student chooses a career and a place to rent. Using researched income and rent prices, students then are given a salary to be responsible for which must be used to pay for rent and other simulated expenses that are incurred over the course of the year. This simulation is the crux of the course and gives students a simulation of their role in a local and global society, helping students to understand the relationship between net income and day-to-day living expenses in their chosen career interest.

Within these core content there were many examples that gave evidence of *Innovation/Creation/Productivity* as well as *Critical Thinking* and *Problem Solving*. Projects and assessments required students to create their own presentation and response to a particular task or event. Specific lessons gave a required objective to create an outcome or plan where the product requires thought and higher order thinking skills. Presentations, specifically in the U.S. Government course and real-life simulation, required students to have student-created ideas and outcomes that would be delivered to the class.

No substantive evidence was found in lesson plans for *Study Hall*. Although an inference might have been made about its inclusion in lessons or projects, Study Hall was not found to be purposefully included as a direct lesson or project goal.

**Community and Career Themes.** Throughout the lessons, projects, and assessments, many items related to the community and career components of the Leadership Academy. The most prolific examples over the years were activities and lessons involving *Career Exploration*. Assignments in all coursework seemed to connect to *real-world problems* and *events*. From real-world scenarios to guest speakers in the field, students were regularly met with tasks that involved their career interests and examining their future life decisions of college, the work force, and beyond.

Using the definition of teamwork as working together to find a solution, *teamwork* was also evident throughout many of the projects included in the shared drive. Having students collaborate and turn in a synthesized product was often an outcome of the projects given to students. Evidence was found in English and U.S. Government projects where students had to create a final product together for grade. Group work and group projects seemed to be used often in class with the thought that the group response is stronger than the individual. Teamwork, as evidenced by collaboration and group work, was used in lessons for both the process to encourage work completion and the product of assignments and assessments. Teamwork was not found in evidence of community-based activities or lessons.

Communication was also evident throughout the projects by means of both listening and sharing ideas. Because projects and presentations were varied in structure, the amount of time students spent responding to other group's work and presenting about their groupwork also varied. Student written reflections were also ingrained in the process of many assignments, so *listening* became elevated in order to accurately respond to the lessons being presented. *Speaking* and the sharing of individual's ideas were not as explicitly defined elements in projects and community-based evidence.

*Leadership* and *Professionalism* were found in lesson and group work structures. When looking for a group to work together, a leader of the group was required as part of the task. While this was the only moment mentioned as a direct leadership connection, its occurrence was pervasive through all course projects. This played into the observance of how groups worked together professionally. *Audience* and *job skills* were connected to group work as well. When working together, the recipient of the presentation or product was evaluated as a part of the outcomes. Job skills were also infused into lessons purposefully through projects and lessons about careers of interest.

I found no substantive evidence in lesson plans of *Confidence*, *Community Service*, *Respect for Diversity*, *Continuous Learning* and *Adaptability*, *Work Ethic*, or *Self-direction*. Although an inference might have been made about their implied inclusion in lessons or projects, they were not found to be purposefully included as a direct lesson or project goal.

### ***Record Review of CLT Notes***

During the school years, staff who work with the Leadership Academy meet to discuss collaboration of lessons and projects, student successes, student concerns, and goals for the students and the program on a weekly basis. Notes are taken and used to discuss what works effectively and what does not work effectively with students and with the program in general. Each student is discussed on a rotating basis to talk about their successes and concerns of performance. The goal of this discussion seeks to ensure that each student is given an opportunity to thrive and succeed. Finally, the goal of this meeting is to make plans about other components and outcome measures of the program, including but not limited to fieldtrips, community service activities, guest speakers, mentorships, and end-of-the-program celebrations. This meeting functions as its own CLT within GMHS. The notes of these meetings over the

years are stored in the shared drive with other historical documents. These notes are used as a continual reflective resource to increase the awareness of program successes and improvements to be made in the coming year. Table 6 details the evidence found in the CLT Notes within the shared file. Because of the cumulative and reflective nature of the notes taken, more evidence of programmatic activities was found.

**Table 6***Evidence Found in CLT Notes From 2019–2024*

Code	Evidence	Graduation Year				
		2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Academic Themes</b>						
Mathematics	<i>lessons, statistics, math test prep</i>	+	+	+	+	+
English	<i>writing essays, English instructional benchmarks, reading short stories</i>	+	+	+	+	+
U.S. Government	<i>voter registration, branches of government, current events</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Project Management	<i>business plans, CTE credentials, real-life simulation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Study Hall	<i>plans for time, targeted testing remediation, targeted assignment remediation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Innovation/Creativity/ Productivity	<i>students create product, student driven goals, own plan for presentation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	<i>projects, lesson objective, student creates product</i>	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Community &amp; Career Themes</b>						
Career Exploration	<i>job skills inventory, work site field trips, future planning, college visits, college field trips</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Confidence	<i>notice confidence building</i>	/	/	/	/	/
Teamwork	<i>ice breakers, group work, project-based outcomes</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Listening	<i>reflections, responding to discussion, seminar, interview skills</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Speaking	<i>presentations, interview skills</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Leadership	<i>group roles, lessons</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Community Service	<i>painting, campus beautification, elementary school, food bank, homeless youth support</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Professionalism	<i>mock interview, job skill training</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Respect for Diversity	<i>lessons, perspective taking, community service</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Continuous Learning and Adaptability	<i>interest-based learning, college, trade school, gap year education</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Work Ethic	<i>notice work ethic developing</i>	/	/	/	/	/
Self-direction	<i>project outcomes, lesson structures</i>	+	+	+	+	+

*Note.* In this table, a 0 means there was no evidence found, a / means at least one piece of evidence was found, and an + means that multiple (more than one) piece of evidence was found during the review of CLT notes. CLT = Collaborative Learning Team; CTE = Career and Technical Education.

**Academic Themes.** Throughout the CLT notes, many items connected to the academic components of the Leadership Academy. Each of the courses and descriptive codes relevant to these courses held many discussion points over the years the Leadership Academy Program has been a part of GMHS. For example, math teachers over the years used the CLT meetings to

discuss their math lessons, including but not limited to *statistics* work and *math test prep*. One graduation credential needed by students at GMHS is to pass a state standardized math test. Because many students over the years have not earned that credential in a year prior to their 12<sup>th</sup>-grade year, a portion of their math coursework is spent working toward that goal. Math lessons involving statistics and student success or need for continued practice of content was also pervasive over the years of mathematical instruction.

English teachers over the years discussed *writing essays* of various types. Scholarship essays and the common application essay were evident each year as well as other curricular benchmarks of research and *resume writing*. Each year, a *short story lesson* was evident where students choose their own short story to read and present. The discussion also included how essays and presentations were scaffolded for success of various students and their reading comprehension level. Using formative assessments for brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and editing seemed to be an important part of discussion topics by English teachers over the years.

U.S. Government teachers over the years focused on the importance of governing structure and *civic responsibility*. The *three branches of government* were heavy agenda items woven into conversations about *current events*. Both *written responses* and *presentations* about these events were often the topic of conversation in the CLT meetings.

During the Project Management teacher discussions, a large focus was on the inclusion of the *real-life simulation* project was being implemented that week and could be infused into other coursework. Because of the weight given to that particular project throughout the year, this conversation came up often and with a variety of implementation events. Project Management conversations also included *business plans*, where students needed to create their own business and work with a group of students to manage that business from various vantage points,

marketing, retail space, and so forth. *Career and Technical Education (CTE) credentials* was also a common conversation topic over the years because all students at GMHS must have some type of *CTE credential* to graduate high school. Similar to the mathematics test, most students in the Leadership Academy have not passed that benchmark up and to that point in their education. Class time is devoted to that task for students who need that graduation requirement.

The use and discussion of Study Hall was an agenda item of the conversation each week. Because of the unique structure of the Leadership Academy program, one teacher with a special education license or an additional special education teacher helped to support Study Hall. This teacher worked with students to ensure students were getting *specialized instructional support* as well as *remedial time* as needed. This time was used to break down assignments into smaller units for students to access and to complete work with other teachers present. This time was documented weekly, focusing on the course or courses that needed more support that week depending on the projects, assignments, and assessments in each of the courses. Study Hall provided an opportunity for school counselor meetings, leadership workshops, and guest speakers to join the class so as not to interrupt other instructional time.

Within the discussion of content course and students, there were many examples that gave evidence of *Innovation/Creation/Productivity* and *Critical Thinking and Problem Solving*. Often the discussion of each teacher conveyed the student-created product that was being created as well as a discussion of the product's alignment with other course lessons. When project products could overlap, discussions about how to use the work in a cross curricular model occurred. Allowing a student the ability to create their own plan for presentation of end products was a common theme of conversations, pushing students to create an end-product of their design and not predetermined. All these tasks involve lessons objectives and projects where the student

creates the product. Often in groups, both predetermined or student chosen, the student created outcome was reiterated during many conversations to allow the students a more critical thinking and problem-solving mindset.

**Community and Career Themes.** Throughout the CLT Notes many items connected to the community and career components of the Leadership Academy. Some of the evidence found in aligning with these themes comes for the reflection of teacher discussion of what they noticed in class. Both Confidence and Work Ethic were evident in the reflections of teachers about the growth students were making within the course. As students worked on a particular project or within a certain material, teachers made comment of struggles, but also reflected on how students were gaining confidence with their work as well as improving their work ethic towards a particular goal or product.

During many of the CLT meetings, conversations and planning with a focus the student participant's future occurred. Career Exploration was pervasive through conversations pertaining to *job skill inventory*, *work site field trips*, *college visits*, and *college fielding trips*. Each year, a job skill inventory was given to give students a better idea of their skills which could be continued into looking for a job. Many field trips to explore work sites and understanding the college admission process were available to students, in addition to the guest speakers and other opportunities to all students at GMHS. Overall, a focus of *future planning*, including but not limited to graduation, appeared consistently in the CLT notes.

Some of the elements of Teamwork were previous mentioned, such as group work and project-based outcomes. *Ice breakers* came up in CLT notes as practice items for elements of Community Service. One of the community service projects centers around supporting an elementary school, where student participants in the Leadership Academy deliver lessons and



projects to elementary students. The development and implementation of ice breakers as a way for student participants to get to know each other, as well as get to know their elementary school students was evident over the years of CLT notes. Community service took the form of many activities over the years beyond working with elementary students. “Campus beautification” in the form of gardening, constructing picnic tables, staining picnic tables, and painting classroom walls were projects that were found over the years that helped to improve the facility environment. Outside of the classroom, students worked on projects and initiatives to support a local food bank and a local homeless youth initiative. The CLT notes focused on how to get students involved, the components that student participants needed to complete to participate, and the roles that student participants would fill during the activities. These elements also intertwined with the theme of self-direction. *Project outcomes* and *lesson structure* provided an opportunity for student participants to be more independent and find the value in outcome without support. Having self-direction within a team or community service tasks helped teachers to become reliant on the students working together and independent of teacher feedback, as recorded in CLT conversations.

Evidence of student communication via both listening and speaking were evident throughout the CLT notes. The CLT notes were explicit in the types of listening needed to support student learning. Because of the structure of the program, students needed to listen in order to respond to various teacher led presentations and inquiry-based conversations. One teacher even spoke about how using a seminar-type structure where students had to focus on listening to know how to respond to someone else’s point proved productive in building stronger communication between students. *Interview skills* connected both the listening and speaking components of communication, where students engaged with mock interviews and were given

questions about their employability. Being able to understand the questions being asked, as well as how to appropriately respond to those questions, was a central topic over the years with that lesson. Of course, *presentations*, with an emphasis of public speaking, were present as in previously mentioned evidence.

Leadership in the Leadership Academy was evident in the CLT notes as teachers discussed specific lessons from a local business that occurred monthly since the program started. This business minded leadership lessons extended into group roles and classroom roles. “Job skill training” was implicit in these actives which falls under the theme of Professionalism. The leadership lessons provided an opportunity to think about and discuss how to connect job skill development to other aspects of the program. The aforementioned “mock interview” process helped to further build professional ideals, especially how to dress and present as a highly employable staff member.

Respect for Diversity was a discussion that occurred between teachers. Helping students understand and empathize with different vantage points were topics of discussion. Teachers talked about using projects with varied demographic information or data presented could help to spark these conversations with students. Teachers also talked about how to get students to have *perspective taking* exercises, especially when having community service actives or leadership conversations. Community service specifically became an avenue where teachers attempted to infuse respect for diversity conversations, reporting to think more globally about others and others’ circumstances. These conversations were not translated into evidence in the created lesson plans.

Continuous Learning and Adaptability conversations occurred in the CLT notes as teachers thought about how to help students with life beyond the walls of GMHS. *Interest based*

*learning, college, trade school, and gap year education* were all topics of discussion between staff during CLT meetings. Often when reflecting about student of concern, these conversational topics arose to consider ideas and options for the student after they graduate. Helping student participants have options was a reoccurring theme between staff with a focus of transition to life after Leadership Academy and GMHS.

### ***Record Review of Student Participant Surveys***

In the first year of the program, the teachers thought it was important to seek the responses of students participating in the program. The survey responses over the years are kept in the shared drive with other historical documents. These student reflections are used as a resource to increase the awareness of program successes and improvements to be made in the coming year. Although some questions have been added or subtracted over time, certain questions have remained to provide consistency over the cohorts of students. Only specific questions and their responses that are relevant to this evaluation question regarding the fidelity of implementation are reflected in this review. For the close-ended questions, the responses to Questions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 were evaluated. The median value was found for each question. For the open-ended questions, the responses to Questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 were examined. To looking for evidence within the response, an open coding method was used to capture the initial intent of implemented activity. In a second round of analysis, the coded responses were aligned to the predetermined codes of the program. Table 7 details the median scores of responses found in the closed-ended questions from student participant survey responses within the shared file. Table 8 details the evidence found that aligns with the programmatic codes from the open-ended questions from student participant survey responses within the shared file.

**Table 7***Median Scores for Close-Ended Questions on Student Participant Survey From 2019–2024*

No.	Question	Mdn
1	Leadership Academy is helping me get ready to take the next steps in my life after high school.	4
2	Leadership Academy is helping me be on track for graduation.	4
3	Leadership Academy connects me with professionals who helped me explore career options.	4
5	Leadership Academy has helped me build confidence in my academic abilities.	3
6	Leadership Academy has helped me establish or improve my work ethic.	4

*Note.* The rating scale for student responses ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated student perception of the statement was low and a 5 indicated student perception of the statement was high. Because the data was extracted from a rating scale, the median is used as a better estimator of the central tendency measure to be resilient against outliers and clarity of meaning,  $n = 101$ .

**Table 8***Evidence Found in Open-Ended Questions on Student Participant Survey From 2019–2024*

Code	Evidence	Graduation Year				
		2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Academic Themes</b>						
Mathematics	<i>math, statistics, word problems</i>	+	+	+	+	+
English	<i>writing papers, structured responses</i>	+	+	+	+	+
U.S. Government	<i>elections, voting policies, three governing branches</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Project Management	<i>housing project, project board, real-life simulation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Study Hall	<i>supportive learning, help directly from teacher</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Innovation/Creativity/Productivity		0	0	0	0	0
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	<i>real-world projects, difficult instructional tasks, real-life simulation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Community &amp; Career Themes</b>						
Career Exploration	<i>career exploration, future planning, college connection to careers</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Confidence	<i>feedback from teachers, graduation</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Teamwork	<i>collaboration, group work, planning</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Listening		0	0	0	0	0
Speaking		0	0	0	0	0
Leadership	<i>leader role in projects, lessons</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Community Service	<i>community service, painting, gardening, elementary lessons</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Professionalism	<i>mock interview, job skill training</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Respect for Diversity		0	0	0	0	0
Continuous Learning and Adaptability	<i>college speakers, college presentations</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Work Ethic		0	0	0	0	0
Self-direction		0	0	0	0	0

*Note.* In this table, a 0 means there was no evidence found, a / means at least one piece of evidence was found, and a + means that multiple (more than one) piece of evidence was found during the review of student participant surveys.

**Academic Themes.** Examination of the student participant survey responses gave evidence of the academic components of the Leadership Academy. Evidence for the four core courses came in the form of programmatic elements that they thought were positives of the program or in need of improvement. Both positive or improvement driven information is important in giving evidence of implementation to the program activity or process. More

evidence was found in the comments where students indicated a programmatic element needs improvement.

Coursework evidence to align with the four courses was found over each of the years (Table 8). Using the open-ended questions from student responses, each content had elements relevant to implementation. For math, *statistics*, *word problems*, or *math* was coded as evidence each year. Similarly, students spoke about their work in English with content structured around *writing essays* and *structured responses* to current events. U.S. Government evidence came across each year in the form of *elections*, *voting policies*, and *branches of government*. For the course in project management, codes for *housing project*, *project board*, and *real-life simulation* came up each year as evidence. Evidence of study hall came across each year as *supportive learning* and *help directly from teacher* information.

No substantive evidence was found in lesson plans about *Innovation/Creation/Productivity*. While an inference might have been made about an implied inclusion in student participant survey responses, it was not found to be explicitly stated or within another coded theme.

When looking at the evidence present in the close-ended responses, the students submitted an above-neutral level of agreement. When looking at the topics of the question themselves for student rating, Questions 2, 5, and 6 align with the academic requirements of the Leadership Academy. For Questions 2 and 6, there was a median rating score of 4, showing that there is a greater value and success of those elements within the students' perception about both the program and them. Question 5 had a median rating of 3, which shows neither a positive nor negative median impact with student perception.

**Community and Career Themes.** Examination of the student participant survey responses gave evidence of the community and career components of the Leadership Academy. Both positive and improvement driven codes were used as evidence; however, more evidence was found in the positively aligned responses.

Student responses that were in the areas of community and career aspects of the program were prevalent, especially regarding community service and career exploration (Table 8). Various community service driven codes, including *painting*, *gardening*, and *elementary lessons*, were evident each year. Also found each year in the student responses was student's referencing *future planning* and *college connection to careers*, specifically the value in helping connect the purpose of education to the jobs a student might be interested in pursuing. This was echoed in responses about *college speakers* and *college presentations* that students spoke about as well in students' need to have *Continuous Learning* after high school.

Other evidence of the community and career requirements came through *Teamwork*, *Leadership*, *Confidence*, and *Professionalism*. Students reported that there was a focus of *collaboration* and *group work* during coursework and community planning. Students recorded about the importance of "graduation" and students felt like they were going to make that goal. This was echoed in their close-ended responses as well (Table 7). Students reported activities like a *mock interview* and a *job skill training*. Students also spoke about leadership *lessons* that occurred each year and their impact in helping or not helping their leadership outside of those lessons.

No substantive evidence was found in lesson plans regarding *Listening*, *Speaking*, *Respect for Diversity*, *Work Ethic*, and *Self-direction*. Although an inference might have been

made about their implied in student participant survey responses, they were not found to be explicitly stated or within another coded theme.

When looking at the evidence present in the close-ended responses, the students submitted an above-neutral level of agreement. When looking at the topics of the questions themselves for student rating, questions one and three align with the career and community requirements of the Leadership Academy. For both of these questions, the student median score was a four, showing that there is a greater value and success of those elements within the students' perception about both the program and them.

### ***Summary of the Record Review of Historical Documents and Analysis***

To determine fidelity of implementation, triangulation of information was needed between sources. Multiple pieces of evidence of the program activities and processes within all three historical document sources was considered highly substantive and, thus, lead to the conclusion that the program was being implemented with full fidelity as the program was designed. Multiple pieces of evidence of the program activities and processes found in two or one evidential source demonstrates that there was evidence of the program elements during implementation. Because evidence was not present in at least one source, the lack of evidence led to the conclusion the program is being implemented with partial fidelity as the program was designed. Partial implementation fidelity based on evidence did not diminish the value of the evidence found in the source(s) where multiple pieces of evidence were found, but rather signaled for more evidence to consider full programmatic implementation. A lack of multiple pieces of evidence through the evidential sources of the program activities and processes meant there a concern about the implementation fidelity. Table 9 details the conclusions of the evidence of fidelity of implementation using the numbers 3, 2, 1, and 0 to designate the number of



evidential sources which contain multiple pieces of evidence found during this review of historical documents. Using the information from Table 5, Table 6, and Table 8 as evidence, the a priori codes were divided to align with associated programmatic elements. The academic themes were directedly aligned with their content specific code. The codes *Leadership, Listening, Speaking, Professionalism, Work Ethic, and Self-direction* were used as evidence for the Leadership Development Project(s) components of the program. The codes *Community Service, Career Exploration, Confidence, Teamwork, Continuous Learning and Adaptability* were used as evidence for the Community Service Project(s) components of the program.

**Table 9**

*Evidence of Fidelity of Implementation Based on Historical Document Sources*

Program Activity & Process	Sources	Graduation Year				
		2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Academic Requirements</b>						
English 12	Lesson Plans, CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	3	3	3	3	3
U.S. Government	Lesson Plans, CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	3	3	3	3	3
Mathematics	Lesson Plans, CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	3	3	3	3	3
Project Management	Lesson Plans, CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	2	2	2	2	2
Remedial Study Hall	CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	2	2	2	2	2
<b>Community &amp; Career Requirements</b>						
Leadership Development Project(s)	Lesson Plans, CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	1	1	1	1	1
Community Service Project(s)	Lesson, Plans CLT Notes, Student Participant Survey Responses	2	2	2	2	2

*Note.* The numbers 3, 2, 1, and 0 indicate the number of evidential sources that had multiple pieces of evidence found during the review of historical documents., where a 3 means all evidential sources and a 0 means no evidential sources. CLT = Collaborative Team Notes.

Looking at the lesson plans, CLT notes, and student participant survey responses, there is full fidelity of implementation where there was evidence found across all three document sources in three of the five Academic Requirements of the Leadership Academy. Project Management and Study hall are the exception, being partially implemented with fidelity. The evidence presented within the CLT notes and student survey responses provided objectively substantive value of these programmatic elements to the implementation of the program.

When looking at the Community and Career Requirements, there were some concerns with the fidelity of implementation. There was a lack of consistent evidence found through examination of the codes aligned with the Leadership Development Project(s). Substantive evidence was not found in lessons plans or student response surveys. Evidence of this programmatic element only substantively existed in the CLT notes. While an important record of teacher collaborative planning and meetings, the evidence in only one sources led to a conclusion of partial implementation fidelity with concerns about implementation. Community Service Project(s) had a greater amount of implementation fidelity, with substantive evidence occurring in two evidential sources. Having evidence in the CLT notes and in the student participant survey responses still led to a partial fidelity of implementation outcome but had more corroboration of occurrence than the leadership-based codes.

When looking across the years of implementation, the evidence for the academic components of the Leadership Academy was consistent in implementation. Each historical document source gave evidence of *Mathematics*, *U.S. Government*, and *English 12*, and supported of the viability of those components. Partial implementation fidelity continues with *Project Management* and *Study Hall* components; however, there was evidence of implementation over the years of substance. When looking across the years of implantation, the

evidence of the community and career requirements of the Leadership Academy similar concerns occurred over the years of implementation. Evidence varied for the community and careers requirements with the leadership-based codes occurring less than the community service-based codes. Both components only occurred multiple times in one or two evidentiary sources.

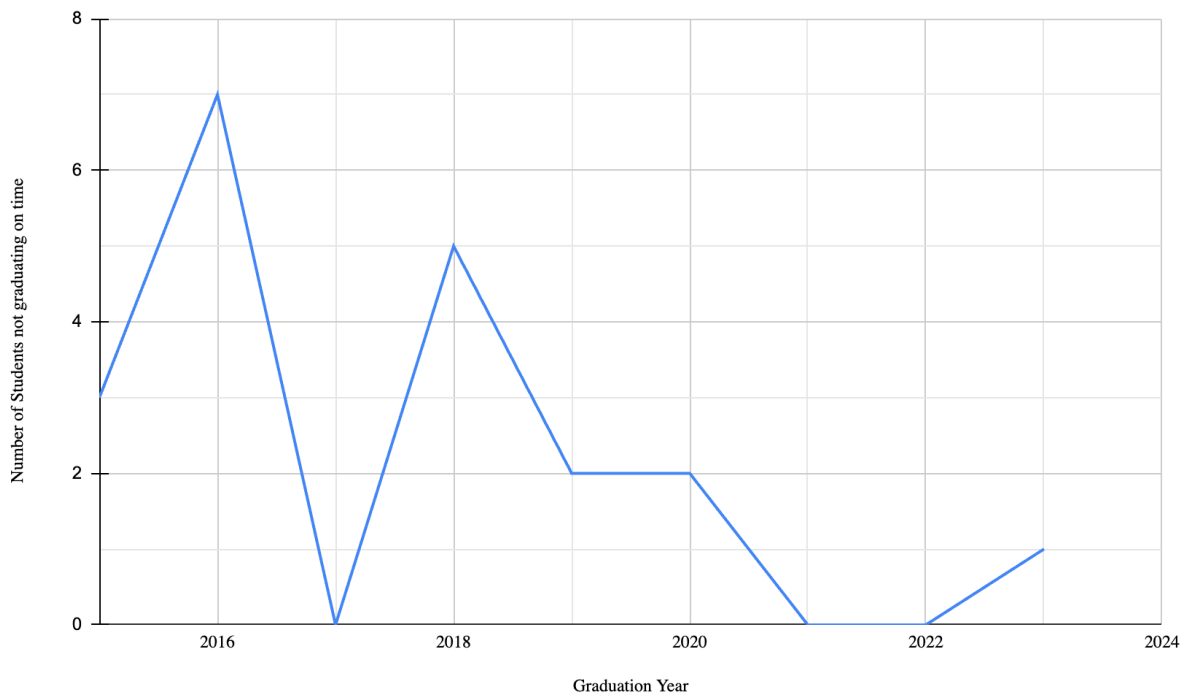
**Evaluation Question 2: Was there a change in graduation rates for students at risk of graduating prior to the enactment of the Leadership Academy when compared with participating students after the enactment of the Leadership Academy?**

A records request was made to the Director of School Counseling at GMHS for all students who graduated from 2015 to 2023, inclusively, and was received on December 15, 2023. In the records provided, the names of students and their graduation status was provided. Also documented in the records were itemized reasons as to why each student did not graduate. Data from students who did not meet their graduation or exiting high school criteria were counted in the data analysis for this question. When students who transfer out of GMHS without giving the district or the state a location of their new school of record, they were included on district and state documents as students who did not meet graduation criteria. Because these students were unenrolled from GMHS prior to their senior year and could not viably be selected for or participate in the Leadership Academy, they were not included in the data for this question analysis. These students are included on the non-graduate list; however, they were not necessarily students at risk of not graduating. Because the graduation rate is high at GMHS, historically 98%, the rate as a percent showed little change from 2015 to 2023. The lowest was in 2016 with a 98.7% graduation rate and the highest was in years 2017, 2021, and 2022 with a 100% graduation rate. Examining the individual student, similar to the selection process for the

Leadership Academy, showed a dynamic trend in data. Figure 2 shows the data of individual students not graduating on-time from 2015 to 2023.

**Figure 2**

*The Number of Students Not Graduating On Time From 2015 to 2023*



The first year the Leadership Academy was implemented at GMHS was 2020. Using the 8-year trend line provided in Figure 2, these data provide evidence that showed a shift in graduation rates from inconsistent to more consistent began at the same time the Leadership Academy program was initiated. This pattern demonstrated that the number of students who did not achieve on-time graduation from 2020 through 2023 was low.

**Evaluation Question 3: Do graduation rates differ between student participants in the Leadership Academy and non-participating students who are at risk for not graduating in the 2020 to 2023 school years?**

The aim of evaluation Question 3 was to determine to what extent, if any, there is a discrepancy between student participants in the Leadership Academy Program and non-participating students with similar circumstances in their 12<sup>th</sup>-grade year of high school. Using the same records request from the Director of School Counseling, the graduation status of students from graduation years 2020 to 2023 were captured. Students were grouped into two categories: One category was the Leadership Academy student participants and the other category included students who were (a) recommended but not selected for participation, (b) selected but did not choose to participate, and (c) selected and did not complete the full year of the program. For the purposes of the data analysis, these students will be referred to as “student non-participants.” This assignment of students and the number of those students who graduated on-time is shown in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Leadership Academy Cohort Data With Graduation Data by Academic Year*

Year	Student Participants		Student Non-Participants	
	<i>n</i>	Graduated	<i>n</i>	Graduated
2019 – 2020	20	20	10	8
2020 – 2021	27	27	15	15
2021 – 2022	12	12	16	16
2022 – 2023	24	24	20	19
2023 – 2024	18	18*	39	37*

\* anticipated graduation rate based on current grades and meeting graduation criteria.

To determine the relationship between these groups, a chi-square test of independence using the number of students who graduated each academic year was implemented. The goal of the chi-square test was to determine if a statistically significant difference or association between the groups observed and expected values occurred. The  $H_0$  was that there was no significant association in observed and expected graduation groupings. The  $H_A$  was that there was evidence of an association between the groupings. For a chi-square test of independence, having an outcome supporting the  $H_0$  meant that if students were randomly selected from either group or placed into either group, the graduation outcome would statistically be the same. Having an outcome that supported the  $H_A$  meant that grouping does matter, and the outcome of a randomly selected student's graduation success depended upon the group to which they were designated. For this test, a significance level of .05 was implemented. Table 11 shows the number of graduated students by year with totals. These data were used to calculate the expected graduation numbers based on the total number of students in each group and academic year.

**Table 11**

*Graduation Data by Academic Year With Total Number of Students*

Year	Number Graduated		
	Participants	Non-Participants	Total
2019 – 2020	20	8	28
2020 – 2021	27	15	42
2021 – 2022	12	16	28
2022 – 2023	24	19	43
2023 – 2024	18*	37*	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>N = 196</b>

\* the anticipated graduation rate based on current grades and meeting graduation criteria.

Table 12 shows the expected value of graduates under the premise that there is no difference between the two groups. These calculations were based on the total students who have graduated from 2020 to the anticipated graduation numbers of 2024. The expected value is calculated by dividing the total number of students in each category by the total students graduated ( $N$ ), then multiplying that outcome by the total students graduated by year. This calculation is computed for each category and each year.

**Table 12**

*Expected Value of Graduation Numbers*

Year	Number Expected To Graduate		Total
	Participants	Non-Participants	
2019 – 2020	14.43	13.57	28
2020 – 2021	21.64	20.36	42
2021 – 2022	14.43	13.57	28
2022 – 2023	22.16	20.84	43
2023 – 2024	28.34	26.66	55
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>95</b>	<b><math>N = 196</math></b>

*Note.* The 2023 – 2024 expected data was calculated based on anticipated graduation data from graduation criteria provided during the student record extraction.

To provide a direct comparison, Table 13 shows the observed and expected values in one table for a chi-square test.

**Table 13***Observed and Expected Graduation Data by Academic Year*

Year	Participants		Non-Participants	
	Observed	Expected	Observed	Expected
2019 – 2020	20	14.43	8	13.57
2020 – 2021	27	21.64	15	20.36
2021 – 2022	12	14.43	16	13.57
2022 – 2023	24	22.16	19	20.84
2023 – 2024	18*	28.34	37*	26.66

\* Anticipated graduation rate is based on current grades and meeting graduation criteria. The 2023 – 2024 expected data were calculated based on anticipated graduation data from graduation criteria provided during the student record extraction.

The chi-square test statistic was found by taking the square of the observed data minus the expected data, and then divided by the expected value for each academic year. Once each was calculated, the sum of those collective calculations provides the chi-square test statistic. It should be noted that no expected outcome was less than five for validity of using the chi-square test. Using the crosstabulation of successful graduation outcomes by student group and academic year, the chi-square,  $\chi^2 (9, N = 196) = 16.118, p = .064$ . The calculated  $p$ -value of .064 was greater than the significance level of .05. The data fails to reject the  $H_0$  and did not give statistical significance in support of the  $H_A$ . Therefore, no statistical significance was found between the graduation groupings.



**Evaluation Question 4: What program activities do the teachers in the Leadership Academy perceive as having a positive impact on success of student participants and what changes for improvement do they recommend?**

To answer Evaluation Question 4, interviews were conducted with the three other teachers of the Leadership Academy. To capture the important details and information, interviews were held twice. In the analysis of data, the process was not to compare the response change over time, but rather to capture a holistic view of the teachers' experience within the program. Different elements and experiences might be elevated at different times of year, and, therefore, each teacher response was seen as one connected response with the themes coded over each interview. To make each interview as similar as possible and reduce bias in the process of conducting the interviews, an interview protocol (Appendix C) was developed prior to beginning the program evaluation. To further reduce bias in both the interview protocol, a pilot interview was conducted with a non-participating colleague. The full protocol was practiced and seen as effective and understandable in practice.

Individual interviews were held in November 2023 and January 2024 with each teacher. Each participant agreed to being a part of the process and gave both written and verbal consent to their participation in the program evaluation. Each interview was recorded with permission as well and then transcribed. To ensure the transcription was correct and there were no discrepancies, the work was reviewed by each teacher who gave the interview. Once the transcripts were verified, the transcripts were coded by question and category. An open coding method was used to gather themes and then those themes were used to compare with each of the responses. Because of the small sample of teachers within the program, the frequency of responses was no greater than three; therefore, in the reporting of data, the narrative connections

were seen more valuable than frequency counts. The findings here detail the responses and connections and, if all three responses were identical or similar in coded themes, then that was viewed as providing greater confidence in a specific finding. To keep anonymity of the teachers' responses and GMHS, the teachers are referred to as Teacher X, Teacher, Y, and Teacher Z.

### ***Teacher Perceptions of Positive Impact of the Program***

**What are the Greatest Impacts of the Program?** When asked in the interviews, the three participating teachers identified three specific areas of greatest impact. Because the number of interviewees is limited to three and because there was no intent with this question to coalesce around a single theme, these findings are presented as identified by the teachers and are not intended to be considered fully supported themes that emerged from the interview question.

***Student Relations.*** Teacher X and Teacher Z discussed the theme of “relationships”, particularly the connection between teachers and students, as the greatest impactful element of the Leadership Academy. Teacher X highlighted how they were able to understand each student within the program more because of the amount of time and collegial collaboration that occurs to help support each student participant. Teacher Z echoed similar sentiments. Teacher Z followed up their comments about relationships by adding that “the connection with students” allows for a more real-world connection to form between school, content, and the individual. Teacher Z’s comments ended with highlighting that “the Leadership Academy gives students a resource of connection beyond their years of high school.” They recalled receiving several emails from former students that echoed the importance of participating in the program and the connection made as learners.

***Student Skill Identification and Community Service.*** Teacher Y’s themes in their responses focused on “skill identification” and “community service” as the greatest impactful

elements of the Leadership Academy. Teacher Y noted that over their years of working with the Leadership Academy, they became increasingly aware of the students' lack awareness of the skills they possessed as learners. Teacher Y attributed this to a trend with lower performing students who, Teacher Y states, can be pushed through education instead of being engaged with the process or learning. Teacher Y connected this idea to community service. Teacher Y reported that student participants previously did not engage in community service, but when they do, students begin to learn and grow from the novelty of these experiences. Through these novel events, students found skills they never knew they possessed. Students found that they are good at public speaking, working with different groups, working with their hands, and adapting to changes in plans for the first time in their education because they were given the purposeful opportunities to experience these activities.

**Instruction.** All three teachers stated two similar and consistent themes in their responses to this question. They highlighted that the most successful lessons and engaging moments involved both “collaboration between students” and “projects involving multiple or all disciplines”. Teacher X stated that “many of these students [student participants] have not been in classes all together and bringing them together is a change for them”, creating new moments where they see the benefit in collaboration and value in the input from new peers. Teacher X also noted that they see more growth, conversation, and focus on group work as opposed to other courses where they teach similar content. Teacher Y noted that working with each other establishes a more goal-oriented task and the collaboration element holds each other accountable to task for completion. All three teachers emphasized that when these group projects crossing disciplines, there was an increased awareness of the project's importance. Where they were working in groups or not for these learning activities, the impact of having English, math, U.S.

Government, and project management elements present created a more cohesive approach for students.

**Community Service.** While each teacher found a different benefit in the community service elements, all three valued community service as a key component to the Leadership Academy. Teacher X spoke about the theme of “growing up” where community service seemed to alert the students awareness of becoming an adult and taking ownerships of the community in which they live and participate. Two service activities Teacher X noted were working on a project at a local elementary school and a campus beautification project. Teacher X explained “when you see students work with younger students [at the elementary schools], they behave completely differently in both their actions and words.” Teacher X explained further that students showed an ability to role model behavioral expectations and practice patience with developing learners. Teacher X then spoke about how campus beautification projects, where students were working in the campus garden by mulching, weeding, and cleaning up the space, gave students a greater awareness of how impactful students can be to their school. Teacher X explained how they overheard students talking about how their peers in the school were so disrespectful for not taking care of their school. As students cleaned, they enumerated and discussed the amount of trash that was thrown in the area. Teacher X described being in awe of the awareness that was coming from taking part in the activity and the shift of responsibility that seemed to emerge.

Teacher Y discussed how community service brought “comradery” and a sense of “belonging” to the student participants. Teacher Y mentioned that the teachers became aware that some students did not like the community service activities and found some complaining. A specific painting project and a campus beautification project were mentioned. Teacher Y noted

that their negativity about the project gave them a unifying vantage point and allowed them to align in group work later in the year. Because of a shared experience, whether positive or negative, the students created a shared memory which connected them to each other and created a sense of belonging. Teacher Y explained how this seemed to be a first experience for the students to feel and connect based on their observations.

Teacher Z's interview response centered around the theme of creating "personal importance" and value added by student participation through community service. Teacher Z's response focused on the trips to work with elementary students. Teacher Z recalled an incident where student participants became reluctant to return to the elementary school after going on a first trip. Teacher Z recalled the student participants felt like their work was not helping the students. However, Teacher Z then explained how when the student participants returned, the elementary students ran to them. Some elementary students gave hugs and others gave high-fives. After this interaction, the student participants felt a sense of purpose, personal importance, and value to other students. Teacher Z noticed that student participants shifted their perspective and spoke about how beneficial the experience had been after going and their entire outlook on planning for future trips to the elementary school became more focused on what they could do for the younger students.

**Leadership.** All three teachers responded similarly to this question. Each noted that the naming of leadership in the name, Leadership Academy, was a bit of a misnomer. There were elements of leadership instruction, such as character development and skills they need to connect, collaborate, and organize responses as a group, but the teachers discussed that leadership components were nuanced and circumstantial. Students were chosen as leaders of group projects and learn leadership skills; however, each teacher spoke more about the individual

leadership of student participants than whole group lessons. Teacher X mentioned the lessons from an infused program by a local business which provides lessons on leadership in the community. Teacher Z mentioned the structure of leadership models and connected that to the fact that many of the student participants held jobs in the community. “This,” Teacher Z exclaimed, “gives them more leadership than we could ever teach them directly.” Each teacher noted individual moments of leadership success for students but seemed to struggle to identify leadership at a whole group level.

**What Additional Advantageous Attributes Are Provided in the Program?** Each teacher identified something different in response to what are the advantageous attributes to tell others considering a program like this in their school. While these perceived attributes may be present and valued in the program, they did not rise to the level of an identified theme in the analysis.

Teacher X focused on the importance of “collaborative practices” between teachers to create coursework that is real-world and meaningful to students across all disciplines. When working with the other teachers in the Leadership Academy, Teacher X noted that “lessons work best when we are all contributing to the process” and “everyone is student focused.”

Teacher Y focused on the theme of creating a physical space for a positive “learning environment”. Prioritizing a space within the school and the school schedule for the Leadership Academy program to thrive is important. Teacher Y recalled moments when the schedule was different to accommodate a department instead of prioritizing the students. Teacher Y stated that “creating a space that is student owned creates a better sense of belonging” and purpose for them. Teacher Y also noted how having both a physical and emotional “learning environment” established allowed for greater risk taking by both teachers and students. Teacher Y commented

how they were able to create more lessons that were not conventional, but trying something new to connect students to real-life experiences was a focus. They felt, as a teacher, they were able to take a calculated risk and that the lesson could get authentic feedback from students about its impact and success. Teacher Y reported that students similarly seem to thrive in a place where they can have the same risk of attempting something new.

Teacher Z was brief in their response, noting that keeping students' goals focused is important. Teacher Z highlighted the value added to the students by participating in the mentorship component, an outcome measure within the program, and how that goal of having a real-world mentor to process their learning path strengthened the skills and positive perceptions of student participants' life after graduation. The goal orientation of the program, with the ultimate goal of the program being graduation from high school, was the most important aspect reported by Teacher Z.

**Additional Comments From Interviews.** Only Teacher Y and Teacher Z offered additional comments regarding positive impacts. Teacher Y discussed how working with the students in this program allowed them to grow and stretch as a professional. Teacher Y expressed their desire for all teachers at GMHS to know the value of the work they do, but sometimes that comes from teaching a different population of students. Teacher Y expressed a great amount of gratitude for having this experience and they describe being a better teacher and community member because of working with the student participants.

Teacher Z made a point of saying that student participants are far more capable than they know and more capable than students in other courses Teacher Z instructs. Teacher Z commented on their comparison between project outcomes from other classes versus Leadership Academy. Teacher Z explained how much more thoughtful, inventive, and purposeful the project

outcomes were with the Leadership Academy than other courses. Teacher Z attributed this success to life experience, ability to take risks, and the positive relationships built with student participants.

### ***Teacher Perspectives for Improvements of the Program***

**Least Impactful Elements.** Two of the three teachers (Teacher X and Teacher Z) discussed similar themes of needing (a) a “greater amount of collaboration,” (b) a “greater amount of time to collaborate,” and (c) a more “concerted effort on interdisciplinary projects.” These themes speak to the amount of time given to teachers working with the program to effectively plan lessons, plan projects and link topics together. Additional time is then needed to effectively execute lessons, and process data collectively to start planning for future lessons and projects. Teacher X directed more attention in their discussion saying that some lessons are disjointed and disconnected because they are not always fully developed. Teacher X then discussed the frustration created between colleagues and between teacher-student rapport when topics do not connect cohesively as they could with more time and purposeful energy. In their explanation, Teacher Z directed more attention to the need for value at the administrative level. Teacher Z commented that there seems to be a disconnect between wanting to have a successful program for students and the time needed to make the success a reality.

Teacher Y commented on the need to have a greater amount of “flexibility with school district grading policy” as a theme that creates the least impactful moment to students. Again, falling outside of the program itself, this theme speaks to the desire to have a greater autonomy and meaning outside of the regular classroom and district conformity. Teacher Y focused on the portion of the grading policy about the requirement of accepting late work and flexible deadlines within the writing of the policy. Teacher Y elevated concerns that these line items in the district



grading policy hinder the growth of student participants to grasp deadlines in the real world. Teacher Y further stated that there should be a more transactional connection for students, similar to a job or career field interest for student participants. The example was given by Teacher Y of contractual work where if an element was not turned into the client on-time, payment (analogized to a grade in this scenario) would be denied. The inability for students to understand that the real world will not be as forgiving as high school connected to the grading policy was the crux of Teacher Y's response.

**Instruction.** All three teachers responded with a similar theme of "needing more time." They noted that the constraints of time shifted how purposeful activities, projects, and lessons could become. Teacher X and Teacher Z echoed their responses from the previous question, citing there is not enough time to plan and execute lessons. Teacher Z went further, stating that the expansion of the class instructional block time itself should be considered for student participants to process information with teachers present. Teacher X continued their thoughts by discussing the impact of less time led to less time for independent thought and reflection for student participants and teachers. Teacher Y's comments joined the other two teachers' voices in the need for time for teachers to effectively plan and process together; there was a need for more time during the school day for conversation and collegial collaboration to occur.

**Community Service.** All three teachers identified similar themes in this category, focusing on the need for these activities to "occur more often" and to have a "more diverse offering" of community service activities. The teachers spoke about how if the activities could occur more often, then community service could start to become more habitual and be elevated as a core value of not only the program but also of how student participants view of their community. Teachers also spoke about how the diversity of offerings could also help to make

this point and not limit the scope of what community service looks like. Teachers X, Y, and Z expressed a need for the diversity of community service projects to spread out more physically demanding tasks. The teachers reported that student participants tend to need more encouragement and teacher driven energy to participate fully on physically demanding service projects. Having a greater diversity of offerings could spread out this energy requirement. Teacher Y added that having student choice in future community activities could also incentivize engagement; however, time constraints prevented student selection, so the activities had to be predetermined by staff.

**Leadership.** Similar to their responses from the positive perceptions of “leadership” within the Leadership Academy, all three teachers spoke about the greater need for this element to “elevate leadership within the programmatic activities.” Teacher X spoke about the lack of connection of any leadership component to the student participants. Because leadership-based activities are fewer in number, they seem not to be connected or able to be connected to other topics of instruction or class activities. Teacher Y spoke about the need to have more purposefully directed moments for student participants to have leadership roles and collaborate with colleagues about how to give each student an active leadership role in the classroom or school. Teacher Y continued by adding that students could have classroom jobs or tasks to manage as a component of their grade or just a responsibility or they could be assigned a group or committee at the school level to either be a representative of the class or an added contributor to the greater school community. Teacher Z spoke about how the leaders in the class are not celebrated and given more roles of responsibility to help shape and hone their craft as classroom and community leaders. Teacher Z echoed their response from instruction, stating that student participants show more ingenuity and holistic thought with projects and conversations than their

mainstreamed peers and those skills should be elevated beyond the walls of the classroom.

Teacher Z noted that, “celebrating students that are typically disregarded in a general education classroom could be very impactful” for the student participant, but these opportunities are missed because of time and lack of connection in the classroom.

**Other Disadvantageous Characteristics.** Each teacher seemed to take a more personal reflective moment to respond to the disadvantages to the program, citing “energy,” “student dynamics,” and “time” as themes. Teacher X focused on the amount of personal and professional energy it takes to come into a room with a group of students who have not found success in class before and teach. Teacher X reported that they found students’ negative history in education is difficult to overcome with academic-based tasks. Teacher X noted that “confidence in reading, writing, and critical thinking are hard to build when there is a pervasive experience with failure” in those arenas. Teacher Y echoed similar thoughts in their interview response with a continued focus on the large amount of energy needed coupled with the “student dynamics” created from having an entire class of students with a history of not being successful. Teacher Y noted that a more considered effort on students chosen to participate should be examined to find a good balance of academic strengths and weaknesses. Teacher Y noted that it could increase collaboration between peers and give more leadership opportunities if there were some students that had targeted academic successes. Teacher Z continued to reiterate that working with this population of students requires not only “energy” but also “time.” Teacher Z explained how a greater amount of planning and reflection time could help to target more of the weaknesses students display in class. This time could be of high value to maximize the benefits of the student participants.

**Evaluation Question 5: What program activities do the student participants perceive as having a positive impact on their success and what changes for improvement do they recommend?**

To answer evaluation question five, surveys were conducted with the current student participants in the Leadership Academy. To capture the important details and information, survey response sessions were held twice. In the analysis of data, the process was not to compare the response change over time, but to capture a holistic view of the student experiences within the current iteration of the Leadership Academy program. Different elements and experiences might be elevated at different times of year, and, therefore, each response is seen as one individual response with the themes coded over each survey response.

To improve student engagement and reduce bias in the process of conducting the survey, a student survey protocol (Appendix E) was developed prior to beginning the program evaluation. To further reduce bias in the use of the survey protocol, a pilot was conducted with a non-participating class. The full protocol was practiced with a class of students not involved with the Leadership Academy and determined to be effective and understandable in practice by a student group. The survey questions in the pilot were determined to be effective in eliciting the desired type of response that was being asked in each of the questions.

Student participant survey sessions were held in November 2023 and January 2024. During the November 2023 session, 14 student responses were submitted. During the January 2024 session, 17 student responses were submitted. A total of 31 surveys were used in an open coding method to gather themes. Table 14 and 15 detail the collected responses. To keep anonymity of the student participants and GMHS, no identifying information was used in the

analysis. Table 14 displays the median score for close-ended question responses of the current cohort of students in the Leadership Academy.

**Table 14**

*Median Scores for Close-Ended Question Responses on Student Participant Survey*

No.	Question	<i>Mdn</i>
4	The teachers in Leadership Academy helped me grow.	4
5	Leadership Academy has helped me build confidence in my academic abilities.	3
6	Leadership Academy has helped me establish or improve my work ethic.	4

*Note.* Because the data were extracted from a rating scale, the median is used as a better estimator of the central tendency measure to be resilient against outliers and clarity of meaning.  $n = 31$ .

***Student Perceptions of Positive Impact of the Program***

All 31 surveys were used to extract positive impacts of the program using the responses of Open-Ended Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. A first round of codes relevant to the program was used to then group responses into relevant themes. In a second round of analysis, coded themes were developed and used to group topics together to capture the frequency of occurrence. Codes that did not align with a theme were kept as isolated points of data for analysis and included in the discussion. Table 15 gives a summary of positive coded themes from the open-ended survey questions given to student participants in November 2023 and January 2024.

**Table 15***Summary of Positive Coded Themes From Open-Ended Student Participant Survey Questions*

Theme	Survey Question	<i>f</i>
“future exploration”	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	25
“positive personal benefit”	3, 4, 5	22
“relationships”	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	20
“supportive learning”	2, 5	17
“program structure”	1, 2, 5	9
“collaboration”	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	8
“community service”	1	8
“graduation”	5	4
“coursework”	1	2
“interesting content”	2	2
“real world connections”	2	2
“fun”	3	2
“mentorship”	5	1
none, no response	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	22

*Note.* The total number of responses over two surveys was 31.

**What are the Greatest Impacts of the Program?** For the students who are in the current cohort of student participants in the Leadership Academy, “future exploration,” “positive personal benefit,” “relationships,” and “supportive learning” were the most important ideas developed from survey responses.

***Future Exploration.*** “Future exploration” includes examining and participating in career and college exploration activities. A total of 25 student participants responded throughout the survey questions that understanding the options after high school, meeting with college representatives during instructional time, and taking fieldtrips to worksites in the fields of individual student interest were all important defining features of their programmatic experience.

***Positive Personal Benefit.*** Additionally, 22 student responses highlighted personal achievement or success. The Leadership Academy gave the student some “positive personal benefit” from being a member of the program. One student wrote “my grades have never been better” while another student highlighted “I feel more comfortable learning.” Another student reported “I have never felt more self-confident about myself”. Other student responses highlighted how their grades had improved from previous high school years while others noted a gaining of confidence and higher self-esteem from being a member of the program.

***Relationships.*** Another theme that emerged from the survey response analysis was the impact of “relationships.” A total of 20 students’ responses affirmed the connections made to others directly impacted their experience in a positive way. Because of the structure of the program, the students are in all program courses together, allowing for a building of shared experiences. Students highlighted that this sense of belonging, and connectedness allowed for a greater bond to grow. One student even mentioned this was their first time in classes with any of other student participants and they have a “new appreciation for meeting new people” and what they can learn from their peers. These positive, meaningful connections were not only identified as student-to-student connections, but many identified the student-to-teacher connection as significantly impactful. Students mentioned the meaningful connection to their teachers and knowing that their teachers care about their success being a vital part of the programmatic

experience. Evidence of this can also be seen in Table 14 where the median score for “The teachers in the Leadership Academy helped me grow” was a four. This score shows a more positive perception for students in their growth as an individual.

***Supportive Learning.*** The final element that seems most impactful to the current cohort of students is the amount of supportive learning occurring during instruction. 17 student responses mentioned instructional strategies, like “breaking down assignments,” “increased class discussion time,” and general “understanding of individual learning styles,” made a better experience for students. Students reported feeling more supported in their learning process by being a member of the Leadership Academy than in previous years of instruction.

***Instruction.*** Student participants gave some important feedback in the methods that supported their instruction. In addition to the previous themes mentioned, “program structure” and “collaboration” were also elevated in this survey topic. Nine student responses reported that the structure of the program, with courses together with the same instructors and same group of students, gives a more supportive educational experience. Students reported that there is a greater ability to get extra help directly from their teachers in class because all the teachers know them. Because they are all in the same classes, students feel more willing to participate with one another and collaborate on what might be the best together, working together. Students reported that group work and group projects are a better form of learning because of the collaborative nature established by being together in their classes. These positive attributes are also conveyed in the close-ended responses where “Leadership Academy has helped me build my confidence in my academics” had a median response of a three and where “Leadership Academy has helped me establish or improve my work ethic” had a median response of four (Table 14). Both of these indicate positive self-perception with regards to the instruction students were receiving.



Two responses gave explicit evidence of “interesting content” and another two responses gave evidence of “real world connections.” These pieces of evidence are important because they speak to the value of instructional elements and to the mission of the program. The Leadership Academy strives to help students further their path with elements they find important and realistic to their future endeavors. These two codes speak to those values, giving support to values of the program.

**Community Service.** Of the established programmatic requirements and activities, community service is a point of emphasis among the students. Eight respondents mentioned that this singular focus of the Leadership Academy was the most important element. Other students echoed this by citing that during community service there is “future exploration,” “positive personal benefit,” “relationships,” and “collaboration” which are beneficial as well. The value of helping others, working with others, and helping the community became values that student participants became more aware of in their time in the program. Students focused on the gardening activity and the work with a local elementary school as the two projects of meaning and value. Of important note, community service is the only place that “fun” was coded, mentioned by two survey respondents.

**Leadership.** The positive aspects of the leadership component trend with the same aspects of positive impact and value. “Future exploration,” “positive personal benefit,” “relationships,” and “collaboration” are all mentioned as positives within this response. Notably, this section has the most “positive personal benefit” responses with 13 of the 22 counted. Students shared positives like “the program has helped me have better grades” and “the program has helped given me an opportunity to lead a project”. Students discussed understand their role in

assignments better. One student noted that the leadership component has helped them approach their job outside of school differently, and they are having more success in working with others.

**Other Advantageous Characteristics.** Student responses echoed the value of the program from the previous questions. One new theme that emerged in response to advantageous attributes was found in four students who mentioned “graduation,” specifically the feeling that graduation was, in one student’s words, “attainable” and had become a realistic opportunity. In their responses, students attributed the feeling of growing accomplishment to their current teachers’ hard work, the “future exploration” experiences that gave them purpose, and the “supportive learning” occurring that meets the student’s individual learning needs. With the primary mission of the Leadership Academy helping meet the end goal of graduation, this theme emerging is important. Additionally, one student mentioned the “mentorship” meetings as important. Having a mentor continued to support the student through their learning process and growth towards their future interest.

**Additional Comments From Surveys.** When given the opportunity to respond with any additional comments, there were many who left the response blank, responded “no” or “n/a”. A few students, however, took the opportunity to either state positives or reinforce positives from their prior responses. Two individuals responded with the coded theme of “teachers.” These students noted how teachers within the Leadership Academy have supported their learning, one even ending their thoughts with, “I know these teachers are the best teachers I’ve ever had since I was in pre-k.” Another student mentioned that the overall positive “relationship” aspect was of high value, having teachers and peers around for support in all courses. Other students continue the theme of having “only positive impact” on their education. They mentioned that they knew other students who are not having the same positive experience their 12<sup>th</sup>-grade year and the

gratitude they were able to participate in “future explorations” unlike other 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students. A final positive note, one student mentioned in their response that the Leadership Academy is “better than expected.” While the student did not make any prior comment about their expectation being negative or positive, the mention of it being better than expected should be of important note. The value of graduation and post-graduation life has an added benefit through their words by participating in this program.

### ***Student Perspectives for Improvements of the Program***

All 31 surveys were used to extract programmatic improvements that could better support the current students and future students using the responses of Open-Ended Questions 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. A first round of codes relevant to the program was used to then group responses into relevant themes. In a second round of analysis, coded themes were developed and used to group topics together to capture the frequency of occurrence. Codes that did not align with a theme were kept as isolated points of data for analysis and included in the discussion. Table 16 gives a summary of positive coded themes from the open-ended survey questions given to student participants in November 2023 and January 2024.

**Table 16***Summary of Improvement Coded Themes From Open-Ended Student Participant Survey**Questions*

Theme	Survey Question	<i>f</i>
“only positive impact”	8, 9, 10	38
“program structure”	6, 7, 10	14
“held accountable for actions”	6, 7, 9, 10	10
“difficult instructional tasks”	6, 7, 10	10
“inconsistent workload”	7, 10	6
“presentation of instruction”	7	6
“miss instructional time”	8, 9	4
“projects”	7	3
“math”	6, 7	3
“negative peer interactions”	6, 9	3
“assessments”	6	2
“more options needed”	8	2
“does not connect to future”	9	2
“more future exploration”	10	2
“do not see benefit”	8	1
“do not do enough”	8	1
“do not participate”	8	1
“no opportunity to lead”	9	1
“instructional methods”	9	1
“too supportive”	10	1
“none”, no response	6, 7, 8, 9, 10	29

**Least Impactful Elements.** For the students who are in the current cohort of student participants in the Leadership Academy, the program having an “only positive impact” rose clearly to the top of responses across the question set involving improvements to the program with 38 student responses, continuing to highlight the positive impacts of the program on their development and education. Other items that were of importance to note were the “program structure”, being “held accountable for actions”, and “difficult instructional tasks” were mentioned, as well as “math” and “assessments” specifically two times.

**Program Structure.** The theme of “program structure” in 14 student responses centered around the number of courses which took away various other viable interests during the school day. One student mentioned that they were “unable to take an elective course” because it conflicted with the Leadership Academy courses and another student noted they were “unable to take an early release” option to leave school early because of the Leadership Academy school day structure. Another student desired to only have Leadership Academy on one day instead of everyday. These are important considerations when thinking about the students selected and do impact the reasons why a student may not want to participate in the program if selected.

**Held Accountable for Actions.** The theme of a few students being “held accountable for actions” also arose in ten student responses who stated their disapproval of having consequences for their behaviors within the school setting. One student noted that they were not able to participate in a community service trip to the elementary school because of their behavior in class and they felt that was an unfair consequence. Some other responses mentioned that students had to change their seating arrangement when they did not want to change; one of those students mentioned in their response that it was “because [they] were talking too much”. Another student mentioned that they did not like that they had to be walked to the bathroom. These consequences

for students are within the typical range of consequences of GMHS for not reporting to class on time or for an issue requiring administrative response. These instances of discipline seemed to be in response to a behavior and seemed to be isolated to a specific incident and not a pervasive issue in the program.

***Difficult Instructional Tasks.*** A total of 10 student responses indicated a final theme of “difficult instructional tasks” where three student responses that pointed to “math” and two student responses that discussed “assessments” specifically as difficult. Some student responses focused on a lack of student choice in their learning. Student mentioned they are given tasks or projects without the ability to decline. Another response highlighted the difficulty of editing and refining their work multiple times. The student mentioned that they wanted “to turn something in once and be done” instead of continuously resubmitting their work. Two student responses mentioned that during projects “they were not given as many directions as they would like” which made the task much more difficult for them to complete. Three responses mentioned the course of “math” being “too difficult.” Two responses mentioned “assessments” alone as the more difficult tasks for them, with both responses saying there should “be fewer assessments.” These would fall under the global theme of “difficult instructional tasks”; however, they seemed more targeted and direct in having the least value.

**Instruction.** Aside from the themes already discussed present, other student responses highlighted “inconsistent workload,” “presentation of instruction,” and “projects” as instructional elements that could use improvement. Six responses focused around an “inconsistent workload” that is given throughout the Leadership Academy courses. Two survey responses highlighted they are given many assignments from all the teachers on the same day and then no assignments on other days. Another response mentioned that they felt like many assignments did not connect

to what they were doing in class or discussing in other classes. The final responses mentioned that instructions for assignments were scattered and not understood.

The final comment about instructions being misunderstood were the statements of improvement from three responses. They noted that projects were the toughest part of the program, and the thing that made them the most difficult was their lack of clarity about either what the point of the project was or what task or tasks were for a grade. One student reported that this ambiguity made the project more difficult and harder to complete.

**Community Service.** Community service feedback from the survey was heavy in the “only positive impact” theme, accounting for 18 of the 38 responses. Other themes and commentary that were elicited from the responses seemed more nuanced. Some of the responses focused on “miss instructional time” where students would have preferred to be in class instruction than completing community service. One student noted that they felt the time could have been better as community service was planned near another class assessment. Two other students noted that “more options needed” to meet the interests of the students or so that they could choose which to complete instead of having a required activity.

Three other student responses were unique in nature. One student noted that the Leadership Academy “does not do enough community service” and “more should be added” to the program. Another student reported they “do not participate” in the community service, citing they were not allowed to participate based on behaviors that prevented their attendance to one community service event. One last student wrote that this element of the Leadership Academy “should be removed because [they] do not see benefit” in the community service activities.

**Leadership.** Student responses as to improvements to the leadership component of the Leadership Academy echoed similar themes of having “only positive impact”, being “held

accountable for actions”, and “miss instructional time”. Two other elements were noted in this section that could be improved programmatically. One set of student responses focused on “negative peer interactions.” The three comments highlighted that peers are not only beneficial but can be distractions to learning. One of the comments focused on that element, that some peer behavior distracted them from their learning. Two other comments focused on negative experiences during group work. These comments mentioned the upset they had while working with others who do not take assignment as seriously or with the same degree of seriousness, but students must complete certain assignments as a group. The frustration in working with peers in those situations was expressed. Another student mentioned that the leadership component “does not connect to future”. They said that all the activities regarding leadership did not pertain to their future without other explanation.

**Other Disadvantageous Characteristics.** Aside from the other theme mentioned, two further unique responses came from asking about disadvantageous attributes. One theme from two responses centered around having “more future explorations,” stating that this part of the program is of such high value that there should be more opportunities and a more diverse set of opportunities for students. Another student’s response to this survey question responded simply with “too supportive.” Without further conjecture, the student seemed to imply that the program is too supportive in some ways; however, there is no other information in the response.

**Additional Comments from Surveys.** Similar to the positive perceptions for the program, students were able to share any further thoughts about the program. Two responses were found to be improvement oriented. One student response noted that there needs to be “a singular focus” for the instruction of the coursework. The student reported feeling like there were many things being asked to be completed simultaneously. A lack of focus in the assignment tasks



created stress and confusion. The student suggested that having one focus could help reduce that feeling. Another student responded that “others need to be held accountable” for their actions. The student advocated for “more discipline from the teachers when students misbehave” in their response.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 provides a detailed breakdown of the data from each of the data sources, including historical documents (lesson plans, CLT notes, and student participant surveys), historical graduation records, teacher interviews, and current student participant survey responses, as they relate to the five research questions. These data were used to provide evidence to the five evaluation questions of the formative program evaluation. Chapter 5 discusses these findings, including the implications of success and challenges of the Leadership Academy within GMHS. Additionally, Chapter 5 includes the details discussed in this chapter and their connection to the review of literature presented in Chapter 2.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The focus of this study was to provide a formative program evaluation of the Leadership Academy at Great Mountain High School (GMHS) that (a) investigated the fidelity of implementation of the activities and processes of the program, (b) gathered an understanding of the success of the programs impact on graduation, and (c) provided an understanding of the strengths and areas of growth the program experienced over the first years of implementation. The Leadership Academy Program at GMHS has a goal to help students who are not on track for a successful graduation and to elevate the needs of the student participants to gain a successful completion of high school with a diploma. Through activities and processes which include grade-level academic content, community service, and leadership-based initiatives, student participants are exposed to a new style of programmatic elements that are unfamiliar to them based on a traditional high school program of studies. Initiated at GMHS beginning in the fall of 2019, the Leadership Academy was in the fifth cycle of student participants during this evaluation. This was the first program evaluation of the Leadership Academy, and the results of this program evaluation provided a baseline of function and performance.

In this final chapter, a summary of the evidence presented in Chapter 4, using the evaluation questions as a structure, are detailed. This chapter also includes a discussion of the findings as they relate to the literature review from Chapter 2. Additionally, there is a section in which the connections to and implications for policy and practice are discussed. The chapter

concludes with a set of recommendations based on these implications and a series of recommendations for further research based on the findings of this study.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Data from a review of historical documents, a review of school records, teacher interview responses, and student participant survey responses were gathered and analyzed. Organized by evaluation question, the following is a summary of significant findings.

#### ***Evaluation Question #1: Is the Leadership Academy implemented with fidelity when implementation practices are compared with the approved design of the program?***

Fidelity of programmatic implementation means that a program is working and functioning as intended and developed (Yarbrough et al., 2011). The degree or level of fidelity can vary based on the amount of evidence found to substantiate a programmatic element, activity, or process (Yarbrough et al., 2011). The lesson plans, Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) notes, and student participant survey responses were the three documents used to gather data that was analyzed for this evaluation question.

When examining the findings from the data from the review of the Leadership Academy's historical documents, there were varying degrees of fidelity of programmatic implementation (see Figure 3). There was evidence of full fidelity of implementation of most of the academic components of the program. All data sources provided at least one substantive piece of evidence in English 12, U.S. Government, and Mathematics from 2019 to 2024 that support this conclusion. The Project Management had multiple pieces of evidence in two of the three evidential sources, lacking some evidence in the lesson plan review. While there was only one single piece of evidence, that one lesson plan provided a comprehensive, year-long plan to integrate real-life components into the classroom. I did not find Study Hall in the historical

document review of the lesson plans of the Leadership Academy. Although not an instructional component, Study Hall was an essential part of the academic support services teachers provided directly to students in the program. Study Hall connected the teachers and the students academically and built academic-based skills through remediation time integrated directly into the program. Evidence existed in both the CLT notes and the student participant survey responses, leading to a determination of being implemented with partial fidelity. With full fidelity in three of the five academic requirements and partial level of fidelity found in two academic components, there is a high amount of confidence that the academic program is being implemented with full fidelity.

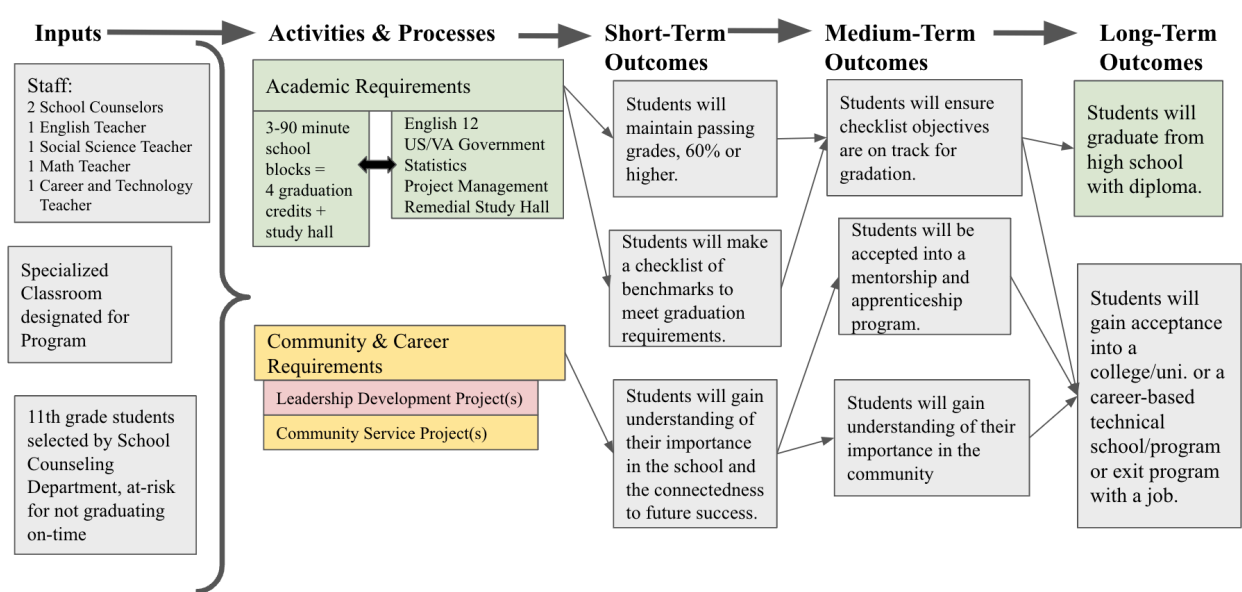
When examining the findings related to the review of the Leadership Academy's implementation of the community and career components of the program, there was a greater amount of inconsistency and concern of fidelity of implementation. Teachers' lesson plans were not as evidentiary for this programmatic requirement with only substantive findings relevant to academic themes. Leadership-based components only occurred consistently and in multiplicity in the CLT notes. While a valuable evidential source, having a lack of validation across multiple sources raised concerns about fidelity of implementation but was evidence of implementation. Community service-based components were found in two evidential sources across the years of implementation but were found with inconsistency. The community service-based elements of the Leadership Academy were determined to be implemented with partial fidelity over the years of implementation, from 2019 to 2024.

When examining data across the years of implementation, the data provided evidence that the activities and processes of implementation have not changed since the first year of implementation. The lack of evidence in the connection between the community-based and

leadership-based elements began in the first year continued through each year of implementation. Patterns of strengths and weaknesses continued over each year. Documentation of lesson plans that map the alignment of programmatic design and programmatic implementation seemed to not be revisited since the program’s inception. This lack of attention to documented planning could have contributed to the lower reporting of relevance of these program elements in student participant response surveys.

**Figure 3**

*Logic Model for the Leadership Academy at GMHS With Degree of Fidelity of Implementation*



*Note.* The colors included in this model align with the evidence, where green indicates evidence of full fidelity of implementation, yellow indicates evidence of partial fidelity of implementation, and red indicates evidence of concerns regarding partial fidelity of implementation. GMHS = Great Mountain High School; US/VA = United States/Virginia.

***Evaluation Question #2: Was there a change in graduation rates for students at risk of graduating prior to the enactment of the Leadership Academy when compared with participating students after the enactment of the Leadership Academy?***

Graduation rates were based on the successful completion of requirements annually by the cohort of students who have enrolled at an institution (Irwin et al., 2023; Torpey, 2020). These rates can vary from year to year based on the students access to education and navigation of barriers that can interfere with a successful completion of high school requirements (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2019). At GMHS, the success of graduating from high school is historically high, with approximately 98% of students graduating on-time. The Leadership Academy started in the fall of 2019 with the first graduating cohort of students occurring in the spring of 2020. In analyzing the pertinent data (Figure 2), the number of students who did not graduate oscillated and seemed unpredictable. When the program was implemented, the number of students who did not graduate high school seemed to stabilize and was reduced from previous years. Note: A further investigation into the success of the Leadership Academy with graduation rates as well as other important factors is included in the analysis of Evaluation Question 3.

***Evaluation Question #3: Do graduation rates differ between student participants in the Leadership Academy and non-participating students who are at risk for not graduating in the 2020 to 2023 school years?***

Students can be at-risk for not graduating high school for many reasons, including systemic barriers to education and disruptive behaviors that impede the learning process (Chapin, 2019; DePaoli et al., 2015; McFarland et al., 2020). At GMHS, the Leadership Academy was developed to significantly reduce barriers and behaviors disrupting the path for students to reach the goal of graduation. Students are nominated and selected for participation in the Leadership

Academy. To determine if there is an association between the graduation success between student participants in the Leadership Academy and students who are at-risk of not graduating but are student non-participants, a chi-square test of association was conducted. The chi-square test analysis determined that the  $p$ -value of .06 is greater than the significance level of .05. This ultimately means that there is no statistical difference between the graduation success of students in the Leadership Academy and the student non-participants who attend GMHS classes.

Looking at the evidence from Evaluation Question 2, there was a clear shift in graduation numbers following the initiation of the Leadership Academy. Upon further research after analysis of the data, two significant events were discovered and illuminated confounding variables that also occurred at the same time as the beginning of Leadership Academy: a new district grading policy and the COVID-19 pandemic.

**New District Grading Policy.** In the spring of 2019, the governing school district that includes GMHS adopted a new grading policy. This grading policy included two items that shifted grades for the entire district. The first item was a mandatory opportunity to retake policy where all students who score below an 80% on a major summative assessment must receive an opportunity to retake of the assessment up to an 80%. Although students do not have to take advantage of this opportunity, the opportunity must be given to all qualifying students. The second item was a mandatory floor grade, where all students who show a reasonable effort must receive a minimum grade of 50%. This item in the grading policy restricted a single test reducing a student's average for the entire year. (Note: The new grading policy, being 5 years old, is currently undergoing a program evaluation to determine implementation impact.)

**COVID-19 Pandemic.** On March 12, 2020, GMHS, in accordance with a school district directive, closed due to an outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. This global pandemic immediately affected educational institutions at the national, state, and local district level. In response to school closures, federal and state requirements for graduation became augmented to accommodate and modify for lack of in-person schooling and accountability measures. The state in which GMHS is located shifted state testing requirements during the pandemic, lowering the minimum score needed to pass state assessments or excusing testing sessions to support students' lack of ability to take a test in-person. The impact of the COVID-19 virus and the associated responses to the global pandemic on school learning measures is under investigation and analysis.

I contend that the confluence of the initiation of the Leadership Academy, the new grading policy, and the change in regulations because of the COVID-19 pandemic occurring all in the same year of time directly contributed to the change and improvement in graduation rates. However, more research needs to be conducted to find substantive evidence of the specific influence of the Leadership Academy on student graduation.

***Evaluation Question #4: What program activities do the teachers in the Leadership Academy perceive as having a positive impact on success of student participants and what changes for improvement do they recommend?***

Despite there being no difference in the graduation success between student participants and students similar to student participants, there is evidence to support the importance of the Leadership Academy through the lens of the student participants' teachers. Teachers work with and plan for the student participants in Leadership Academy and give direct evidence of



programmatic strengths and areas of growth. Because of the nuances of this program, teachers were interviewed to gain a better understating of their perspectives in their own words.

**Summary of Positive Impacts.** Teachers of the student participants expressed relationships and student skill identification coupled with community service as having the most positive impacts on the students. All the teachers in the Leadership Academy noted both peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher connections held the highest importance in the ability to have students make gains in their academic and life pursuits. Teachers also noted that helping students find their positive skill sets through atypical school activities, such as community service, is invaluable for students' learning about themselves and finding new pursuits and interests in the world. These connections help build confidence and importance in student participants. Therefore, the success of the program is not in graduation rate. The benefits of this program are found in the value added from these connections with peers and adults, skill identification, and community service.

**Summary of Improvement Measures.** Teachers in the Leadership Academy highlighted the need for more time and greater collaboration as key elements that could be improved to support teachers' positive impact on students. The teachers noted that working with this particular student population is rewarding but requires an increased amount of cohesive and unifying work to establish consistent messages for students. Routines, curriculum, and individual student needs need to be consistently discussed and reflected upon to meet student needs. The lack of time either (a) prevents some needs being met, which affects students directly, or (b) requires that teachers work extra hours to create effective measures, which affects the energy of the teachers and, by extension, the classroom environment. Time and collaboration are connected. Having more time during the workday would allow for a greater amount of time for

collaboration on curricular projects and curricular strand alignment for student projects and meeting coursework requirements. This could positively affect student perceptions of program elements as well.

***Evaluation Question #5: What program activities do the student participants perceive as having a positive impact on their success and what changes for improvement do they recommend?***

The perspectives of students were invaluable to the understanding of how they find success and where programmatic elements might help or hinder advancement. This is especially important after finding that there is no difference in the graduation successes of student participants and student non-participants who are similar. Because of the design of this program, student participants have direct information about the innerworkings of the program that affect their life.

**Summary of Positive Impacts.** The top student responses were in the themes of future exploration, positive personal benefit, relationships, and supportive learning. Students expressed appreciation and a feeling of a greater amount of success with the integration of both college and career elements into their classroom environment. Their value of these elements extended into the relationships that students commented on building with other students and teachers. Making new peer connections and all having the same faculty adds to the benefit of being in the Leadership Academy.

Students mentioned individual positive, personal benefits from being a student participant in the Leadership Academy. From having higher grades to gaining more confidence, student participants expressed a high level of appreciation for feeling better about themselves through the activities and processes of the Leadership Academy. The final positive benefit that was

evident in the findings was having a “supportive learning” environment. Students reported that they were able to succeed academically because of the amount of support and individualized, personalized learning within the Leadership Academy.

In review of these positive affirming characteristics of the Leadership Academy, it became clearer that the benefits of this program are not in graduation success, but rather in the student participants’ personal growth and development. Students were able to invest in themselves through a new educational structure that elevated and supported their education despite their past mistakes. Student participants justified their growth through discussion of their future, building positive relationships, and identifying personal benefits of growth. Students expressed being able to thrive and feel successful, which affects their ability to look forward to a positive life after graduating high school.

**Summary of Improvement Measures.** Foremost, when students were surveyed about improvements to the Leadership Academy Program, the most responses from the survey indicated that there were “only positive impacts” to be considered. The next three elements that rose to the top of student responses centered around a closed “program structure,” being “held accountable for actions,” and having “difficult instructional tasks.” Programmatic structure suggestions focused on the inability to have scheduling flexibility, including the inability of taking elective courses and not having early release from school. Comments related to accountability for actions included (a) student participants feeling like they were not allowed to participate in program experiences because of consequences of their actions, or (b) student participants feeling like consequences were too restrictive. Student participants commented on the difficulty with instruction. However, these comments were not descriptive other than five additional comments mentioning mathematics or assessments as being difficult. Because the

survey responses were anonymous, individual follow-up questions could not be asked for elaboration.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The intent of the Leadership Academy at GMHS is to support students who are at risk of not graduating high school. Through programmatic activities and processes, 83 of these at-risk students have successfully graduated high school from 2019 to 2023 and another 18 are anticipated to graduate in the spring of 2024 with a new perspective of themselves and their future. When considering the extant literature, the Leadership Academy coalesced around guiding features of similar programs: reducing barriers to education; overcoming situational, dispositional, and institutional needs; and reducing disruptive behaviors for students at-risk of not graduating high school.

#### ***Programmatic Success in Reducing Barriers to Learning***

Elements of the Leadership Academy opens doors to students who have been struggling with school and struggling with finding successful paths to graduation. There are both direct and indirect barriers to education and the Leadership Academy's implementation mitigates both types of barriers.

**Direct Barriers.** Direct barriers consist of legal requirements, policies, and programs that inhibit participation or pathways to success (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda; 2019; McFarland et al., 2020). The creation of the Leadership Academy is a direct response to these barriers, allowing students who typically find school difficult and are floundering academically, to find a place of success. The provision of resources for 5 consecutive years demonstrates a commitment to support lower performing students by GMHS. The program, itself, serves as a mitigating action to support students in their path to graduation.

**Indirect Barriers.** Indirect barriers consist of circumstances and situations that arise, preventing access to effective education (Gore et al., 2023). These can include school-related barriers, such as teacher shortages, funding, or access to effective technology (McFarland et al., 2020; Podolsky et al., 2019; Yurt, 2022; Zaff et al., 2016). The Leadership Academy purposefully allocates staffing and resources to student participants. Having the resources to be successful helps students and teachers feel supported in their learning and creates a more successful situation for student participants to graduate (Chapin, 2019; McCallister 2021).

### ***Overcoming Situational, Dispositional, and Institutional Needs***

Student participants within the Leadership Academy have many needs outside of the scope of education. Their situational, dispositional, and institutional needs can be more effective than for other students, creating a situation that puts them at-risk for not graduating (Bergman et al., 2014; Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Brock, 2010; Saar et al., 2014). The Leadership Academy shifts the institutional paradigms of a typical high school program in an effort to alleviate these stressors. Direct support services are provided within the school program and an increase in communication occurs between teachers and other school staff because of their involvement in the program, creating an environment conducive to students' individual learning needs (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). Additionally, the school structure is streamlined, only providing instruction on coursework needed for graduation. This eliminates extraneous stressors for students, such as feeling burdened by extra work (Blazar & Kraft, 2016). Within this organizational structure, the teachers were able to play a greater role in academic interventions through positive, meaningful relationships (Hattie, 2018).

### ***Focus on Diminishing Disruptive Behaviors***

Elevated levels of school absences and lack of student engagement are leading to disruptive behaviors by students that lead to not meeting graduation requirements (Pyne et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Zaff et al., 2016). The Leadership Academy combats this directly by (a) building positive connections between peers and student-to-teacher connections, (b) eliminating unnecessary work, (c) adding activities that are community based, and (d) connecting lessons to real-world practices. These strategies focus on increasing engagement in the learning process to ameliorating issues with school absence. Mendoza and King (2021) discussed how positive connections can improve work habits for students who need a strong social context of learning. This is echoed from the work of Hattie (2018) who noted that the effect size of both peer and teacher relationships are important academic success factors. Having active, community-based, real-world lessons seeks to avoid boredom and stagnant routines which can interfere with engaging in learning (McDermott et al., 2019; Yurt, 2022). Overall, the activities and processes of the Leadership Academy attempt to increase engagement to create an environment that supports learning and the goal of graduation.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this study found that the Leadership Academy at GMHS is being implemented with varying degrees of fidelity. Additional findings indicate that there is no difference in the graduation success of student participants in the Leadership Academy and students who are similarly at risk of graduation but are non-participants. Through the analysis of Evaluation Question 4 and Evaluation Question 5, evidence for the continuation of the Leadership Academy exists. It comes not from the success in graduation rate, but rather from the value added to the student participant holistic growth and development of well-rounded life

skills. Students gained a knowledge base that broadens the scope of their life after high school and their potential for success. The program teachers and GMHS administration should consider recommendations to continue the program, increase planning and collaboration time for teachers, and improve the fidelity of community and career programmatic elements. Table 17 links the findings of this study to selected recommended actions for GMHS and the program’s teachers.

**Table 17**

*Recommendations for Leadership Academy*

Finding	Related Recommendation	Supporting Literature
83 students have not only graduated high school but also gained an awareness of their positive skills and an increase in their positive awareness of their future potential.	Continue the Leadership Academy	U.S. Department of Education (2015); Zaff et al. (2016); Zheng et al. (2023)
Teachers reported a need for more time to collaborate on curriculum alignment, unifying projects, and individual student needs to support students.	Increase planning time and collaboration time during the school day for teachers	Saar et al. (2014)
A lack of evidence was found in lesson plans regarding community service or leadership.	Integrate lesson plans with community service-based and leadership-based components	Kuh & O’Donnell (2013); McCallister et al. (2021); Nguyen et al. (2022); Resch & Schritteser (2021)

***Recommendation 1: Continue the Leadership Academy***

Achieving a high school diploma and meeting the requirements for graduation affords a student a greater chance of success after high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Zaff et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2023). The Leadership Academy serves about 4–5% of the graduating class each year. Since these students are at risk for not graduating, the intensive focus and effort

is needed to ensure they are meeting state and district requirements for graduation. It is clear through statistical analysis that there is no difference between the graduation success in student participants and similar at-risk students who are non-participants. Although the Leadership Academy did not show a significant result in the graduation numbers, a significant value was discovered through this study in the experiences described by the students and reported by their teachers. For the 83 students who have successfully completed the program and graduated high school, their perceptions of opportunities for life after high school have positively changed. Through students' responses to survey questions, they gained a better understanding of their life-skills and gained an appreciation for helping those around them. Student participants reported having more confidence and improve their work ethic. Teachers of the student participants reported similar evidence through their interviews and through findings in their CLT notes. Teachers noticed students gaining confidence as academics and as community members. For each of these success stories, having the ability to graduate was just a starting point, and the Leadership Academy has given them the perception of a greater potential in their life after high school. Zheng et al. (2022) states that the responsibility of student success falls to the school to continue to make success options for students.

While the focus of this study was not on the benefits of student participants' life beyond graduation, evidence suggests that the Leadership Academy offers an educational experience that is different from the traditional high school experience for students who are at risk of not graduating high school. Evidence from this study suggests that the Leadership Academy would be beneficial for future GMHS students to have this experience and gain positive perspectives of their future and prepare them for life after high school. Looking beyond the program, the value added aspects of the program for student development could positively alter the education of



more students. If we presume that everyone in high school graduates, what are the other tangible skills and attributes that are important for students to exit high school? The data in this study suggest that students feel more supported, more academically successful, and more aware of their future options than in a traditional education model. Students also report that they gain a better awareness of the importance of relationships in their growth and educational process. This study opens the door for further discussion about what elements of instruction are most important to student learning and how the classroom system can change to engage students authentically.

***Recommendation 2: Increase Planning and Collaboration Time During the School Day for Teachers in the Leadership Academy***

Working with student participants in the Leadership Academy is unlike a typical teaching assignment at GMHS. Currently, weekly planning and collaboration time must occur before school or after school because each teacher's planning block aligns with their department of content. Often, this means that time used for planning occurs in isolation. In this study, teachers and student participants reported that class time is more functional and cohesive when all of the teachers are on the same page and working towards end goals. Teacher planning and collaboration time is essential to student success. Having time to create lessons, create content, reflect on lessons, refine instructional strategies, and understand individual student needs are functionally essential to having the best impact on student performance (Saar et al., 2014).

Teachers in the Leadership Academy would better serve the student participants if they were afforded the opportunity of time to work together more often during their scheduled work hours (Saar et al., 2014). GMHS administration should examine how to allocate time to teachers in the Leadership Academy during the school day. This will mean that consideration of removing items from these teachers' workload also should be considered as a method to allocate this time.

In reality, more time can never be created as time is a finite construct; time must be an allocation of responsibility with reasonable expectations for teachers to effectively work with their students. In the case of the Leadership Academy, prioritizing teaching and collaboration should be elevated above other school responsibilities.

### ***Recommendation 3: Integrate Lesson Plans With Community Service and Leadership***

#### ***Components***

One factor that increases engagement for students is the connection of real-life or real-world events, simulations, or circumstances to curricular instructional objectives (McCallister et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). When examining the lesson plans from 2019 to 2024, there was a lack of evidence of community-service- and leadership-based lessons or elements. When students can see how instructional components come together to create other work for the community or build skills within themselves, there is a greater sense of understanding (Nguyen et al., 2022). Teachers should work together to integrate components of community service projects and leadership lessons into their coursework more deliberately.

To create a more effective and complete instructional shift, community service and leadership activities could be a major focus of teaching components during a planned unit of study. The impact of service-learning initiatives gives authentic, intentional, impactful, and applicable engagement in the learning process (Resch & Schrittester, 2021). These qualities also are echoed in high-impact practices where student leadership is a key component in learning and practice (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Each teacher crafting lessons that revolves around a central community service project or leadership theme would elevate the experience for the student (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Resch & Schrittester, 2021). Instructional expectations that would give further quality to instructional practices in the Leadership Academy should include

performance expectations, time and effort, interaction and collaboration, experiences with diversity, feedback, reflection, and sharing student learning with others (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Adding these elements to instructional practices not only would increase student understanding and connection to a particular project or task, but also increase the fidelity of implementation of the program.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As reported by teacher and student participants during this study, the Leadership Academy at GMHS is valuable to the student participants and to the growth of the teachers who teach in the program. For the Leadership Academy to continue to improve and to succeed, there are some areas that have come to light that need further targeted research and evaluation.

First, GMHS should continue to monitor graduation rates. Over the next few years, grading policies may change, and COVID-19 pandemic modifications are being lifted. The school district that governs GMHS is currently evaluating the grading policy through their own program evaluation with an update expected for the 2025-2026 school year. The 2024-2025 school year will be the first school year since the COVID-19 pandemic that will have no modifications to standardized testing requirements for students in high school. In the coming years, GMHS students will face similar school structures and grading practices that are more similar to the time when the Leadership Academy was conceived and installed. Because of these changes, the statistical significance of the graduation rate for students in the leadership academy should be reexamined to determine the extent of the effectiveness of the Leadership Academy.

Next, the Leadership Academy could benefit from a program evaluation of other components of the program. While the purpose of this program evaluation focused on one of the long-term outcome measures and activities and processes of Leadership Academy, two sections

that should be examined next are the long-term goal of students of gaining acceptance into a higher education institution, technical education, or a job. Evaluating the other long-term measure would give further evidentiary success of the program and highlight the specific future exploration elements that were seen as the most valuable process element to student participants.

A further study could investigate input elements involving the student participant selection process. While there is a recommendation and selection process in place for the Leadership Academy, there seems to be a lack of a codified process in how students are selected from the recommended list. In investigating components of the Leadership Academy, anecdotal evidence of looking at graduation requirements of need, failed state testing requirements, parent involvement, and school attendance were given as key factors in selection. Are these the important elements that predict success in the Leadership Academy? If they are, how do they work together to differentiate between a student who is chosen to be a participant and a student who is not selected? While evidence was not needed for this study, further investigation and creation of a consistent method could be important in the future success of the program.

As a final recommendation, it could be beneficial to investigate why students who are selected for the program do not accept participation. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that students are accepted to other programs within the school district that prevents their ability to commit to a full participation in the program. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that students do not want to participate for reasons involving other students in the program or stigma by association of being in the Leadership Academy. Although these are stories relayed in conversations without qualitative evidence from the source, the anecdotes do lead to the question, why are students saying “no” to the Leadership Academy?

Continued investigation of graduation rates, program evaluation of other long-term outcomes, program evaluation of the inputs, and researching why students do not accept participation into the Leadership Academy are the next steps in helping to continue the successes of helping student who are at risk of not graduating high school successfully graduate from GMHS.

### **Summary**

One of the long-term goals of the Leadership Academy program is that students will graduate high school. The successes of the Leadership Academy can be found in the words of the student participants and the teachers who teach within the program. Students feel successful and they “feel that graduation is attainable for the first time” in their high school career. Because of the thoughtfully woven programmatic parts into the program, students experience success and are graduating high school.

In conclusion, the Leadership Academy has helped students graduate on-time successfully since installed at GMHS in the fall of 2019. The focus of this study was on the implementation, success, and perceptions of student participants and teachers with the program. When looking at implementation, teachers within the Leadership Academy noted both highlights of success and areas where real changes in the structure of the program could yield more gains in student and programmatic success. Through evidence and research from this program evaluation, I recommend that the program continue with some recommendations to increase student engagement, to increase teacher support, and to increase the fidelity of programmatic implementation. My hope is that through further evaluation and monitoring, the program will have more success and consider recommended changes that could maintain and increase the successful components of the program.

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## Appendix A

### Leadership Academy Student Participant Contract



#### High School Leadership Academy Opportunity and Engagement Expectations

The High School Leadership Academy was created in 2019 as a creative experience for students to complete their high school graduation requirements as well have intentional support and mentoring in the transition to post-graduation plans of college or the workforce. Student enrollment in the program is a result of a nomination process by staff, a student interview, and a parent-student agreement to participate in the program.

The success of the program is dependent on Leadership Academy staff and students collaborating to create a positive learning environment. Workplace Readiness Skills to be developed and demonstrated in the Leadership Academy setting include the following student learning objectives:

#### Personal Qualities and Abilities

- *Initiative and self-direction:* Independently finds ways to improve the classroom and accomplish tasks.
- *Work Ethic:* Consistently works to the best of one's ability and is diligent, dependable, and accountable for one's actions.
- *Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:* Uses sound reasoning to analyze problems, evaluate potential solutions, and implement effective courses of action

#### Interpersonal Skills

- *Listening and Speaking:* Listens attentively and asks questions to clarify meaning, articulates ideas clearly in a manner appropriate for the setting and audience
- *Respect for Diversity:* Values individual differences and works collaboratively with people of diverse backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences
- *Teamwork:* Shares responsibility for collaborative work and respects the thoughts, opinions, and contributions of other team members

#### Professional Competencies

- *Efficiency and Productivity:* Plans, prioritizes, and adapts work goals to manage time and resources effectively.
- *Professionalism:* Meets classroom expectations regarding work schedule, behavior, appearance, and communication.
- *Mathematics:* Applies mathematical skills to complete tasks as necessary
- *Reading and Writing/Information Literacy:* Reads and interprets classroom documents and writes effectively; locates information efficiently, evaluates the credibility and relevance of sources and facts, and uses information effectively to accomplish work-related tasks
- *Career and Life Management:* Plans, implements, and manages personal and professional development goals related to education, career, finances, and health
- *Continuous Learning and Adaptability:* Accepts constructive feedback well and is open to new ideas and ways of doing things.

By signing below, the [redacted] High School Leadership Academy student commits to be an active member of the classroom community in taking ownership for their present learning and pursuit of planning future goals.

\_\_\_\_\_ Attend each scheduled class and arrive on time. If a student needs to be absent for any portion of the day, the parent communicates that day with the [redacted] Attendance Office the reason for the absence and the student communicates with the Leadership Academy Staff that they will be absent and a plan for completing missed work.

\_\_\_\_\_ Active engagement in learning. Students will participate in classroom discussions by actively listening to the input from others and contributing their own ideas.

\_\_\_\_\_ Students will complete work by the assigned deadline (be it that class or future due date) and communicate with the Leadership Academy Staff in advance if extended time will be needed.

\_\_\_\_\_ Students will demonstrate respect as they collaborate with others in completing individual or group work. This includes valuing individual differences and contributions of others. Students will share responsibility for the task or work assigned.

\_\_\_\_\_ Students will partner with Leadership Academy Staff and guest contributors to develop individual plans related to education and career opportunities after graduation from [redacted] High School.

Participation in the Leadership Academy is an opportunity for a non-traditional learning opportunity. Any student who is not upholding the principles of Leadership Academy as established in this document and by [redacted] High School Staff will be re-assigned to the traditional classroom setting to complete the required and scheduled coursework for graduation. Evaluation of student progress and continuation in the Leadership Academy will be conducted at the conclusion of the first semester and at other times, if deemed necessary.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Leadership Academy Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Leadership Academy Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_  
School Counselor

\_\_\_\_\_  
School Administrator

## Appendix B

### Leadership Academy Vision and Proposal

#### 2019-2020 School Year Proposal: Pilot Program for 24 Students

##### Vision Statement:

██████████ High School's Leadership Academy provides academic support and career readiness to seniors unsure of their plans following formal education and at risk for not graduating high school. This program prepares students to complete personally meaningful and marketable degrees at four- or two-year colleges, enter the military, or move directly into the workforce. Students thrive in hands-on environments, earning senior credits in English and Government, as well as Math and Personal Finance/Economics through shadowing/internships, project-based learning, and personalized learning. They also learn the value of community service through our partnership with Chick-Fil-A's Leader Academy. Students will graduate with local business contacts, workplace certifications/competencies, and shadowing/internship experiences.

**GOAL: All students will explore their chosen career fields through career surveys, guest speaker visits and field trip opportunities. This will help them decide which shadowing and internship experiences to pursue.**

##### 1st Semester:

- Career Interest Surveys
- 4 Career Visits
- 12 Field Trip Opportunities
- 1 Job Shadowing Experience

##### 2nd Semester:

- 1 Internship (Paid or Unpaid)

**GOAL: All students will develop a sense of confidence in, and relevance for, their leadership skills through the Chick-Fil-A Leader Academy program. In learning the principles of servant leadership, they will gain experience in teamwork, communication, and innovation. Ultimately, they will make an impact through action in the local community.**

##### 1st Semester:

- Kickoff luncheon with local representatives from Chick-Fil-A.
- 2 Community Service Projects
- Monthly Leadership Curriculum provided by Chick-Fil-A.

##### 2nd Semester:

- 1 Large Community Service Project
- Monthly Leadership Curriculum provided by Chick-Fil-A.

**GOAL: All students will develop academic skills and resources to obtain a meaningful job in their chosen career field. This will include graduating from high school on time and an application to a four-year university, two-year community college, or technical training program.**

## Appendix C

### Teacher Interview Protocol

Project: A Program Evaluation of the Leadership Academy at GMHS, gathering perceptions of successful elements of the program

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place: Conference Room A

Interviewer: Jason W. King

Interviewee:

Subject Taught:

Opening Evaluator Script: [Teacher's name], thank you for taking the time to speak with me about the Leadership Academy at our school. You were selected to participate because you directly work with the students throughout the year and are a teacher in the program. This is important because I want to gain your insights and perceptions about the impact of the program. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Please feel free to share your point of view, even if it may not be complementary to the program in some way. Your responses will become part of my doctoral research on programmatic successes and recommendations for our school. The findings will also be shared with district leadership for other similar programs support and creation. Our conversation today should take no more than 30 minutes. I am audio-recording our session for transcription and analysis and will provide a transcription to you to verify accuracy. Please note that all of your responses will remain confidential, and identifying information will be redacted from the transcript. You may withdraw from this interview at any time without penalty. [Confirm that I have received the consent form ahead of the interview.] [Turn on the digital recorder and test it.] Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. What have you observed as having the greatest positive impact on student participants in the Leadership Academy?
2. What methods of instruction have helped student participants most in the Leadership Academy? What instructional methods have not been as beneficial?
3. How has the community service component of the Leadership Academy benefited student participants? How has the community service component not been beneficial?

4. How has the leadership component of the Leadership Academy benefited student participants? How has the leadership component not been beneficial?
5. What aspects of the Leadership Academy have you observed to have the least valuable impact on student participants? How can these aspects of the Academy be improved?
6. What advantageous and disadvantageous activities or attributes of the Leadership Academy you would tell others about who are considering this program in the future?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a Leadership Academy Teacher? If yes, please share your thoughts at this time.

Closing Evaluator Script: [Teacher's name] thank you for your conversation, cooperation, and participation in this interview. I assure you that I will provide a transcript of the interview to review before I finalize my dissertation and a copy of the final research product. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at any time.

# Appendix D

## Student Participant Survey

### Survey from Student Participants in the Leadership Academy

Please complete this form in an honest response and reflection of your time in Leadership Academy. This data will be used to evaluate the fidelity of the program and to evaluate the continuation of programmatic activities. Responses to this survey will be anonymous and used only for intentions listed.

1. Email \*

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Rating Scale

Using the the rating scale where a score of 1 means "Not at all" and a 5 means "Yes, definitely", please provide your evaluation as the statement aligns to your experience in the Leadership Academy. Where applicable, a score of 0 (zero) means there is no evidence of this within your participation in the Leadership Academy.

2. Leadership Academy is helping me get ready to take the next steps in my life after high school.

Mark only one oval.

0 1 2 3 4 5  
No Evidence       Yes, definitely

3. Leadership Academy is helping me be on track for graduation.

Mark only one oval.

0 1 2 3 4 5  
No Evidence       Yes, definitely

4. Leadership Academy connects me with professionals who helped me explore career options.

Mark only one oval.

0 1 2 3 4 5  
No Evidence       Yes, definitely

5. The teachers in Leadership Academy helped me grow.

Mark only one oval.

0 1 2 3 4 5  
No Evidence       Yes, definitely

6. Leadership Academy has helped me build confidence in my academic abilities.

Mark only one oval.

0 1 2 3 4 5  
No Evidence       Yes, definitely

7. Leadership Academy has helped me establish or improve my work ethic.

Mark only one oval.

0    1    2    3    4    5

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No Evidence       Yes, definitely

8. I would recommend Leadership Academy to other students.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5

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Not at all      Yes, definitely

9. The school district should offer more programs like this one at other schools.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5

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Not at all      Yes, definitely

10. My experience in this program is better than I had expected.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5

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Not at all      Yes, definitely

14. How has the leadership component of the Leadership Academy benefited your experience as a student participant?

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15. What advantageous activities or attributes of the Leadership Academy you would tell others about who are considering this program in the future?

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Areas for Growth

Written feedback: Please take a few moments to use your own words to answer the following questions about your experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy.

16. What has been your least valuable experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy?

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Strengths

Written feedback: Please take a few moments to use your own words to answer the following questions about your experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy.

11. What has been your best experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy?

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12. What methods of instruction have helped you most student participant in the Leadership Academy?

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13. How has the community service component of the Leadership Academy benefited your experience as a student participant?

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17. What methods of instruction have not been as beneficial in your experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy?

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18. How has the community service component of the Leadership Academy been a drawback to your experience as a student participant?

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19. How has the leadership component of the Leadership Academy been a drawback to your experience as a student participant?

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20. What disadvantageous activities or attributes of the Leadership Academy you would tell others about who are considering this program in the future?

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Final  
Thoughts

Written feedback: Please take a few moments to use your own words to answer the following questions about your experience as a student participant in the Leadership Academy.

21. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a student participant in the Leadership Academy? If yes, please share your thoughts here.

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## **Appendix E**

### **Student Survey Protocol**

Project: A Program Evaluation of the Leadership Academy at GMHS, gathering perceptions of successful elements of the program

Time of Survey:

Date:

Place: Leadership Academy Classroom

Survey Proctor: Jason W. King

Students in Attendance:

Opening Evaluator Script: Students, thank you for taking the time to speak with me about the Leadership Academy at our school. As our current cohort of students, you are selected to participate to give direct perspectives about the program. This is important because I want to gain your insights and perceptions about the impact of the program. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Please feel free to share your point of view, even if it may not be complementary to the program in some way. Your responses will become part of my doctoral research on programmatic successes and recommendations for our school. The findings will also be shared with district leadership for other similar programs support and creation. You will be filling out a survey with open-ended questions today which should take no more than 30 minutes. The survey is digital, so can accurately gain a transcript for analysis using your words and perspectives. Please note that all of your responses will remain confidential, and identifying information will be redacted from the transcript. You may withdraw from this survey at any time without penalty. [Confirm that I have received the consent form ahead of the survey.] Do you have any questions before we begin?

The survey is linked in your classroom folder online. Please take the next 30 minutes to complete the 11 questions.

[Give 30 minutes]

Closing Evaluator Script: Thank you for your time, cooperation, and participation in this survey. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at any time.

## Appendix F

### CONSENT FORM

#### Evaluation of the Leadership Academy Great Mountain High School

This research study concerns evaluation of the processes and products of the Leadership Academy at Great Mountain High School.

Presentations and manuscripts may result from the analysis of these data. Information gathered through this study may benefit and inform others on the Leadership Academy. There are no anticipated risks or benefits to participating other than those encountered in daily life. The researcher is conducting this study as part his doctoral dissertation at the College of William and Mary.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact the principal investigator, [Jason.King@wm.edu](mailto:Jason.King@wm.edu), my faculty advisor, Dr. James Stronge, 757-221-2339, [jhstro@wm.edu](mailto:jhstro@wm.edu); or Dr. Thomas Ward, chair of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC), 757-221-2358, [tjward@wm.edu](mailto:tjward@wm.edu).

**Please read the following statements and indicate your permissions below.**

I understand that my student's involvement in this study is purposeful in that permissions and consent will be obtained only for those included in the narrative. I understand that I may be asked for additional permissions regarding the use of text communications, such as email correspondence.

I understand that by signing this form, my students may be asked to voluntarily respond to surveys that are associated with my involvement in the researcher's experience as they are composed. Additionally, I may be asked to offer feedback on the written representation using specific guidelines prepared by the researcher.

I further understand that the researcher will hold my student's information in strict confidence and that no comments will be attributed to me by name without my specific permission. I have the option to provide a pseudonym of my choice, but I also recognize there is a possibility of identification given the nature of the study.

I recognize that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation in this study at any time or decline to give permission in a particular instance. Any artifacts provided or created during the course of the study may become part of the permanent research files unless otherwise requested.

By signing below, I give consent that my student's involvement and interactions may be included in the study.

Parental Consent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

To the student participant, I recognize that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation in this study at any time or decline to give permission in a particular instance. Any artifacts provided or created during the course of the study may become part of the permanent research files unless otherwise requested.

By signing below, I give consent that my involvement and interactions may be included in the study.

Student Consent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

**Author's Name:** Jason Willard King

### **Educational Background**

**School Testing Coordinator**, Loudoun County Public Schools, Loudoun County, VA,  
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**Math Teacher**, Loudoun County Public Schools, Loudoun County, VA, 2018 - 2023

**Special Education Teacher** (Math Concentration), Loudoun County Public Schools, Loudoun  
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**Special Education Teacher** (ED Specialist), Loudoun County Public Schools, Loudoun  
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**Director and Teacher**, Grove School, Madison, CT, 2010 - 2014

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