UNDERSTANDING HOW THE STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGY HAS DEVELOPED AND CONTRIBUTED TO STUDENT OUTCOMES IN ONE ONTARIO DISTRICT

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctorate in Education
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Doctor of Education 2016
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
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Abstract

In 2003 the Ontario Ministry of Education launched the Student Success Strategy, a game changing initiative of whole system reform. Since that time Ontario’s graduation rate has risen from 68% to 85.5% by 2015, but surprisingly few studies have examined the strategy. The purpose of this study was to better understand how the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes in one school district. A qualitative research approach was used for the study, which was also complemented by administrative data. Schools which would be considered were identified using a purposeful sampling technique. Qualitative data was derived from interviewing educators who were members of their schools’ Student Success Team. Interview questions were focused on four key pillars of the strategy: efforts at connecting with students, providing programs that enable achievement, improving teaching and learning, and connecting with the community. Administrative data originated from Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office test scores, as well as district and Ministry reports.

Six key findings from the study emerged. The first revealed that fostering positive connections with secondary students takes time, requiring a multi-tiered differentiated approach involving layers of interventions and support. The second finding demonstrated that improving the range of programs, notably the Specialist High Skills Major, led to an enrolment surge and improved academic performances. The third main finding confirmed on-going efforts at improving teaching and learning, and the critical role administrators play as instructional leaders.
driving improvements. The fourth finding noted mixed results in connecting with the community, with no gains in engaging parents, however gains were made in accessing community supports for students as well as through dual-credit opportunities with positive post-secondary outcomes. The fifth finding revealed strong commonalities on how the Student Success Strategy had developed over time. The sixth key finding exposed the challenges connected to the strategy, notably replacing key staff, and the desire to retain greater school autonomy. What clearly was unquestionable was the impact policy, programs, and people – both within the school and community - could have in connecting with students, meeting their varied and individual needs, including pathways for their future success.
Acknowledgments

Any success we have in life is due in part to those who support us and our dreams, and make that success possible. Their guidance, and wisdom from my thesis proposal to this stage has been invaluable. I first would like to gratefully acknowledge my thesis supervisor Dr. Jim Ryan for his encouragement and support, professional advice and direction, including the untold hours dedicated in providing feedback on my work. To my thesis committee members, Dr. Joe Flessa and Dr. Carol Campbell, I am sincerely thankful that they have chosen to be on this journey with me, challenging my thinking, providing their expertise and constructive feedback.

I would also like to thank the participants who willing gave of their time from their busy schedule to take part in this study. I was truly inspired by their candid insights, stories, and their devotion to their profession.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Rebekah Brochu and my children Taylor-Lee, Alexis and Mackenzie. It has been a long journey. Thank you for your love and support throughout.

You make my life meaningful.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Experience is one of the greatest teachers in life. Who has not heard and come to better appreciate with time that idiom “walk a mile in my shoes”? Throughout my educational journey I have had the opportunity to be a teacher and an administrator, and come to appreciate the impact one can have within a classroom or a school to help improve student success. Having begun my career in a tight job market, I went north to a new secondary school in a First Nation’s community, welcoming a new experience and context that opened my eyes more than any other prior experience had to that time. As the secondary school I was at was a new addition to the community, I welcomed this unique opportunity to make a profound difference. Prior to this students who had wanted to complete their secondary education had no choice but to leave loved ones and their community to do so, presenting a tremendous challenge which resulted in few graduates. Midway through my second year the position of vice-principal became open, which I was accepted for, and I began the process of establishing the many policies, programs, resources and supports which are critical for any school, regardless of size. Knowing that I could easily be moved back to a teaching position for the following year, I sought the collective voice of our board, staff, students and community members of the changes they would wish to see, and set about making these a reality. These included organizational, curriculum, and program changes, as well as building in additional supports for students. They ranged from staff and student scheduling changes, developing relevant locally based curriculum, creating a bilingual report card (Cree-English), and chairing a committee for our school behavior policy, to successfully applying for a variety of funding grants, overseeing the establishment of learning resource as well as the cooperative education program, coordinating two school extensions, and launching and supervising a popular evening adult education program that ran five nights a week. Nothing was more satisfying than seeing the transformation over time of our collective
efforts – how the investment of so much time and energy was paying off, as the number of graduates within the community – which previously had never had a secondary school – steadily increased, including students who had begun the journey with me in Grade 9 when I began! The school had gone from serving 35 students in the opening weeks with a staff of two, to over 300 students and adults and a staff of 15 only five years later. After this extraordinary experience, I opted to enroll full-time in a Master of Education program in Educational Administration. In 1998 I completed my Master’s thesis research on the topic of exploring The Challenges and Successful Strategies of Secondary School Administrators (Brochu, 1998). My initial goal in pursuing a post-graduate degree was to better understand transformational leadership.

For years I had viewed transformational leaders as outstanding administrators who could single-handedly transform even the most challenging school into a collegial, inspiring, high achieving, and safe environment for students and staff. I read numerous turnaround stories that indicated that these administrators appeared to share the common characteristics of an inherent depth of experience, energy, knowledge and contacts that made successful transformations possible in even the most trying situations. Yet as much as I idolized and sought to learn from such individuals, I began to realize that far more could be gained by understanding how sustainable transformative whole system reform could be achieved via effective policy decisions. In the span of my career I had already witnessed the impact governments could have – the NDP under the leadership of Bob Rae from 1990 – 1995, and the onset of the Progressive Conservatives under Mike Harris from 1995 on. The NDP’s Royal Commission on Learning was responsible for abolishing the fifth year of secondary school, implementing mandatory community service and standardized testing – including a literacy test for secondary graduation, standardized report cards, the creation of the College of Teachers, and more (Anderson & Jaafar, 2006). The Harris years which followed were dark times for many educators, with
divisive politics that sought to tarnish the reputation of those in the profession, leading to turmoil in education and challenges for administrators, which my Master’s thesis highlighted. Education funding was dramatically slashed, school districts were amalgamated, and Bill 160 led to my first – and thankfully only – labour walkout in my career (Anderson & Jaafar, 2006). Bill 74 followed three years later in 2000, increasing the workload for secondary teachers, and attempting to mandate teacher participation in extracurricular activities. Other acts followed along the same vein, including mandating teacher testing.

Having experienced the negative effects of policy decisions during the turmoil of the Mike Harris Conservative years in Ontario, I became equally impressed by the turn around which occurred on the whole system with the Liberals under the leadership of Dalton McGuinty beginning in 2003. The Liberals ushered in a shift in education partly based on a 2003 position paper published out of OISE/UT entitled The Schools We Need: Recent Education Policy in Ontario and Recommendations for Moving Forward. Co-authored by Kenneth Leithwood, Michael Fullan and Nancy Watson, the paper offered suggestions centred on increasing policy coherence, reducing micro-management, and improving the capacity and results of public education (Anderson & Jaafar, 2006). Within a short time it became clear to me how powerfully policies could serve to exacerbate conditions and prove to be the source of many of the challenges at the micro level, or serve to lighten the load, and foster a collaborative “esprit de corps” for educational improvement that produces significant results (Fullan, 2010).

The recent decade has witnessed a profound transformation within Ontario’s educational system. In late 2003, while education reforms and cuts still lingered and test scores and graduation rates had stagnated, the Ministry of Education (MOE) now under Liberal control launched the first of many initiatives that would become known as the Student Success (SS) strategy - a game changing initiative of whole system reform. Dr. Michael Fullan, an
internationally renowned expert in educational change and large scale reform, was brought on as the Special Advisor on Education to the Premier and Ministry of Education (Anderson & Jaafar, 2006). A new positive energy began to emanate within education, as the government promised to listen to educators, to substantially improve funding and achievement outcomes for students. By setting provincial goals for student performance in literacy and numeracy, and high school completion – 85% graduation rate by 2010/11 – the government in essence was making itself accountable to Ontarians to provide the means and support to make these happen. The Student Success Strategy would factor in as a major component of this change process at the secondary level, with Ontario gaining international headlines by 2010 with its rapid transformational change leading to dramatically improved student outcomes (Fullan, 2010; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012). The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) released its 2009 *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) test results that year, with Canada now ranking sixth overall in the world, and the highest English-speaking and French-speaking nation. Breaking it down to the provincial level, Ontario placed in the top three results in literacy, mathematics and science nationwide (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012).

This transformation in so short a time period begs the question of how? How was the province able to do this? What was it about the strategy that worked? The following thesis will examine the Student Success Strategy in detail. It begins by presenting the research problem, the purpose of the study and research questions. The significance the study holds is presented next.

**The Research Problem**

The education system within Ontario is provincially driven, meaning that whole system educational reforms – at the scale of a province or state – often last only as long as the party in power. During the 1990s Ontario sustained some major reforms in its educational system at the
hands of the New Democratic Party, and particularly the Progressive Conservative Party including the implementation of provincial educational testing, the amalgamation of school districts, and a thoroughly revised curriculum. The Conservative agenda was primarily driven by cost-cutting measures which removed over one billion dollars of funding from education, while at the same time souring relations with teachers who were portrayed to the public as overpaid, underworked, and in need of government intervention to improve education standards (Britto, 2011; Levin, 2007; Levin, 2008b). At the recommendation of the Royal Commission on Learning, the Educational Quality and Accountability Office was established in 1996, to oversee educational testing in elementary and secondary schools (EQAO, 2010). Despite the Conservatives’ two terms in office, by 2003 Ontario’s literacy, numeracy, and graduation rates had flat lined, showing no improvement in their final five years (Fullan, 2011).

That year the Liberals, under the leadership of Dalton McGuinty, swept into power on an ambitious platform that centred upon renewing public confidence in the education system. A series of objectives were set that would have a profound impact. These included: establishing labour peace with the teacher unions; setting an ambitious target of 75 percent of all students meeting or exceeding the provincial standard on province-wide testing; expanding services to special education, and improving the graduation rate (Government that works for you, 2003). To reassure teacher unions of the new direction and reduce distracters, the Liberals not only negotiated a province wide four-year collective agreement that was well received, they also solicited the input of educators for new changes, establishing a new collaborative partnership with student improvement as the central objective (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2008). Leading educational researchers were seconded to further refine and launch the education policies. In December 2005, the new government’s centre piece policy - the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy (SS/L18) – was established to improve results at the elementary and secondary level.
This was the first of three phases over two years, which provided critical supports and funding to make the government’s goals attainable. Some of the supports provided included funding for new courses and programs, limiting class sizes for struggling students, for textbooks and additional resources, as well as professional development for teachers and administrators (The Student Success Strategy, 2005). By 2005 the government investment in Student Success initiatives topped over $800 million, including $89 million for hiring 1,300 new high school teachers across the province whose primary duty would be to support students in-risk – otherwise referred to as “at-risk” – of dropping out (Anderson & Jaafar, 2006).

As part of Student Success, a Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery trial program that had been launched was expanded province wide. Additionally, a Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program was launched in 2005 to engage learners with interest related skills based courses, which would provide them with valuable work experience. The government invested heavily in the SS/L18 Strategy, and has realized some impressive gains in literacy, numeracy and graduation rates across the province. By 2014, the success rate for fully participating students on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) had risen by 6 percentage points, and graduation rates had climbed from 68% to 85.5% (EQAO, 2004; EQAO, 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b). In other words, about 190,000 more graduates have been added to Ontario since 2003-2004. As remarkable as these results were, surprisingly few studies have examined the direct impact that these changes have had.

This study focused on the large-scale educational change initiative of the Student Success Strategy, and primarily on its evolution over time and impact on secondary school graduation rates. To make this study manageable, I examined how the Student Success Strategy developed within one school district, and which program elements were important at which time and which places.
Purpose and Research Questions

Whereas the Ontario policy was implemented to improve success rates across all grade levels province wide and in particular to boost graduation rates at the secondary panel, this study was intended to be more limited and focused in its examination. The research question was this: How has the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district? The sub-questions include: (1) What program elements did the four schools emphasize? (2) How did the program develop over time? (3) What were the program outcomes? (4) What challenges did the schools encounter?

Significance of this Study

The findings from this research on the Student Success Strategy are of importance for several reasons. First, to date there has been little research conducted on the Student Success Strategy within Ontario. The findings of this study provide valuable empirical data to reflect upon, with educators and leaders within one district sharing their authentic lived experiences and insights. Their voices need to be heard, as they are in the frontlines of implementation. No one else, aside from students themselves, is more involved in this initiative and can attest to the elements of the program and the strategies that are engaging students, the overall impact Student Success is having, and the perceived barriers or challenges that exist. Second, the study will provide some valuable insight into the effects each of the separate strategies is having on students. Third, given that educational researchers and leaders have long sought that panacea of reengaging learners, the study provides a means to examine the overall impact the strategy has had on students’ academic success, as defined by marks, credit accumulation and graduation. Lastly, the study can also serve to inform the approaches taken in Ontario’s educational system by furthering the conversation on how as educators and policy makers we can better meet the
needs of all who are involved – students, staff, and our communities. As the current provincial
government now faces some difficult programming choices due to fiscal restraints, a study that
examines the merits of the Student Success Strategy comes at an opportune time.

In terms of organization, the subsequent chapter – Chapter Two – serves as a literature
review. It situates the study topic within the context of current literature, and presents the
theoretical underpinnings of the study in the conceptual framework. Chapter Three explains the
methodology, including an overview of the district and participants, the design methods and
data analysis, as well as ethical considerations and limitations. Chapter Four describes the
findings, for the district as a whole, as well as for each of the four schools involved within the
study. Chapter Five discusses the results of the study. Chapter Six provides concluding
comments and recommendations for potential future research, as well as final remarks.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the literature on the research topic of improving student success, which can be situated in two key fields of study: student engagement and educational policy particular to secondary schools. Research has shown time and again the direct correlation between student engagement in learning and positive outcomes for student success (Anderson & Macri, 2009; Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, & Mooney, 2011; Jerald, 2006). Research has also found the alternate to be true, in that student disengagement leads to negative outcomes – most often reflected in students dropping out, and resultant long-term effects upon society as a whole (Barton, 2005; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger, 2011; The National Academies, 2003). To mitigate the impact of negative outcomes, an area of concern internationally for educational researchers, leaders, and policy makers, a myriad of strategies and approaches to improve student success rates have been proposed and implemented (Anderson & Jaafar, 2006; Barton, 2005; European Commission, 2013; Fullan, 2009; Pinkus, 2008). In order to address the research questions in this study, the following foci were therefore considered relevant to an understanding of the scholarly research on student success: exploring student engagement, factors leading to disengagement, the effects of disengagement, solutions for student success, and the Student Success Strategy within Ontario. The chapter concludes with the conceptual framework of the study.

Student Engagement

For decades educational researchers and practitioners have examined the issue of student engagement at the secondary level, and to no surprise have affirmed time and again the critical
role it plays in the overall success of students (Anderson & Macri, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2011). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) analyzed and summarized the wide field of research on the issue, and proposed that student engagement has three key interrelated dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioural engagement for students is reflected in positive conduct and respect for school rules, sustained effort in learning, and finally participation in school activities. Emotional engagement can be conceptualized as one’s identification with others and with the school - the sense of belonging a student feels (The National Academies, 2003). Lastly, cognitive engagement is defined as a love of challenges and the degree of investment the student has in mastering difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004). These should not be thought of as three separate dimensions, but rather as being interconnected in individuals, affecting overall motivation. The National Academies findings of 2003, entitled Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students’ Motivation to Learn, reached a similar conclusion, citing student engagement as including behavioural, social and academic components. Russell Rumberger’s (2004) review of research on student engagement and school dropouts led him to conclude that although there were many factors that contribute to dropping out, there were two common dimensions of engagement: academic and social. Hence, student engagement, particularly cognitive/academic and emotional/social, is critical in retaining their interest and connection to learning. As the dimensions of student engagement have become clear through decades of research, the factors contributing to students eventually dropping out have also become better understood.

Despite the progress made in reducing dropout rates in Canada in recent years, research continues to demonstrate that a large portion of the student population is still disengaged (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). Student engagement in school often begins to wane by the intermediate years, becoming an increasing issue of concern as they progress through secondary
school (Campbell, Faulkner, & Pridham, 2010; Fredricks et al., 2011; Pittman & Irby, 2007). Roughly 25% of secondary students in over 30 of the world’s most developed nations reported being unhappy with their educational experience (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Cote, & Roth-Edney, 2005). Although this may not be startling for some, other studies have shown that up to 60% of today’s youth may be disengaged from the classroom (Fredricks et al., 2011; Pittman & Irby, 2007; The National Academies, 2003). In Ontario, a 2008 study entitled Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy, 27.3% of students stated that “school is a waste of time often, most of the time, or always” (Ungerleider, 2008, p. 47). Clearly, concern is warranted when it comes to the connection between student engagement and student success.

In order to make progress with respect to improving student success, not only is it imperative to have a sound understanding of the dimensions of engagement, but also the factors leading to disengagement, the effects, and possible solutions, particularly with the Student Success Strategy here within Ontario. Each of these is addressed in the section that follows.

**Factors Leading to Disengagement**

For the most part young people who drop out of schools readily accept responsibility for and express regret about that decision (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Research has shown that this decision is not simply made at the spur of the moment, but rather it is often complex, involving interrelated factors, and/or the unique circumstances in their life at that time that have led from a slow disengagement to dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Lyche, 2010). Empirical research from a number of social science disciplines has identified two types of factors as primary causes leading to it: individual factors and contextual factors (Lysche, 2010; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Rumberger, 2011).
Individual Factors.

Individual factors are those that are most directly connected to students themselves. In *Beyond the Indicators: An Integrated, School-Level Approach to Dropout Prevention*, Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) refer to the ABCs of disengagement at the individual level. These are absenteeism, behaviour problems, and course failure – three strong and often interrelated predictors of dropping out. To demonstrate the connections, chronic absenteeism for example has been shown to be a strong predictor of course failure, and course failure inevitably affects student motivation and behaviour, creating a cycle that without some form of intervention more often ends with a student dropping out. As researchers have known for years, students begin to disengage from learning by the middle-school years (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Ferguson et al., 2005; Jerald, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Rumberger, 2004). Many of the early studies analyzing student disengagement from the 1980s often focused on individual in-risk factors, which proved overall to be poor predictors of students dropping out, identifying less than a third of dropouts (Gleason & Dynarski, 1998). Bearing this in mind, from 1996 to 2004, Robert Balfanz, Liza Herzog, and Douglas Mac Iver (2007) conducted longitudinal analyses, tracking nearly 13,000 students, and found that poor attendance, course failure, and misbehaviour in the sixth grade can accurately identify upwards of 60% of the students who eventually drop out. For those students who missed over 20% of the school year in Grade 6, only 13% went on to successfully complete high school on time. Moreover, it was found that students who had multiple indicators had extremely poor graduation outcomes (Hauser & Koenig, 2011).

Behaviour is also a factor in student retention. Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) found an unsatisfactory behaviour grade in any subject area in the sixth grade, attributable to mild misbehaviour, and a single significant misbehaviour resulting in suspension were both
highly predictive in reducing the odds that students will graduate. Only 29% of those who received an unsatisfactory behaviour grade, and 20% of those who were suspended, actually graduated within one year of their expected graduation date. The odds were even further reduced for those who had two or more suspensions. At the secondary level, Bridgeland et al. (2006) also found that a lack of enforcement was cited as a major factor in students leaving school, as 38% of adolescents in this study stated they believed they had “too much freedom and not enough rules” in their life (p. 8). These findings align with numerous other research studies that confirm the direct correlation between behaviour and eventual school completion (Balfanz et al., 2007; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger, 2004). With respect to the Ontario context, the 2005 study conducted by Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, and Rummens entitled Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School illustrates the strong correlation between attendance, suspension, and course failure. Due to their familial situation, some of the youth in the study were faced with responsibilities beyond the years of their peers, such as looking after a sick parent, or a younger sibling, or having to work to help pay bills, only to have it lead to suspensions for missed attendance and eventual course failure. Clearly this creates only a greater challenge for these students to achieve success. Parents who were interviewed noted the irony that missing school should lead to the punitive measure of a suspension, and suggested that schools pursue alternative measures.

In the Bridgeland et al. (2006) study conducted among 467 ethnically and racially diverse young people who left high school without graduating, most believe they could have graduated if they tried harder. Although there can be complex reasons why students eventually leave school, 47% said they were bored with school as one of the prime factors, while nearly 70% stated that they were simply not motivated to work hard. Another 43% said they had missed too many days and felt they could not catch up. Although the sixth grade does begin to
provide accurate and clear indicators of students who are at risk of dropping out, the ninth grade is a critical year for those students. Those who fail one or more courses begin to fall off the rails towards graduation early, and without some form of intervention it can be extremely difficult to bring them back on track (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). One of the main reasons for this is the negative effect that failure has upon student motivation. Once a student begins failing, whether it be attributable to a lack of attendance, lack of motivation or skills, it becomes increasingly difficult to reengage them with a sense of hope, especially if they have failed a grade or more leading to a growing age gap between themselves and their peers (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ferguson et al., 2005; Lyche, 2010). As Balfanz et al. (2007) found in their American study, “course failure is something that dramatically dampens a young adolescent’s perceived control and engagement” (p. 224).

**Contextual Factors.**

Contextual factors are primarily the various settings children live in on a day-to-day basis, including family, schools, and community (Rumberger, 2011). These all play a tremendous part in shaping students’ perception of school, and affect their effort, behaviours, and overall experiences. Studies have shown time and again that parental education, expectations, and family income are strong predictors of a student’s own perception in how they value education and achieve within school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Lyche, 2010; Raymond, 2008; Rumberger, 2011). Parents with post-secondary education influence their child’s aspirations, often providing critical support over the years. Family income can directly influence the schools and/or additional programs a child may attend and the resources children will have at their disposal, such as computers. At the same time, educators must bear in mind that the lived reality for each student is different, and many face contextual factors that hinder their success. These can range, as noted earlier, from missing school to look after a younger
sibling or a family member with a disability, having to complete tasks at home, to working to raise money, or dealing with a pregnancy. Others students, on the other hand, find themselves distracted by the streets, which “call them”, offering greater excitement than the classroom offers (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Even though nearly half of students stated boredom as a primary factor for dropping out, when researchers explored this further, students elaborated with much greater detail. Not only was it that they found the classes uninteresting, they longed for more “one-on-one instruction from teachers who knew their names and what their interests actually were”, and cared more about them (The National Academies, 2003; Levin, 2012). Many felt frustrated by labels that had been placed on them, such as behavioural, lazy, or struggling, and longed for teachers to believe in them and their ability to achieve (Bridgeland et al., 2010). Most stated that had teachers demanded more and supported them, they would have worked harder and risen to the challenge (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992; Cushman, 2003; Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Lehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005; The National Academies, 2003). In another recent study, conducted by Campbell, Faulkner, and Pridham (2010), many students reported that they would have stayed in school if it had been more of an adult learning environment where they could get workplace experience. This finding aligns with a prior 2005 Ontario study (Ferguson et al., 2005). Along these same lines, other scholars found that students grew disenchanted because they could no longer see the connection between learning in the classroom and their own lives, stating they found “the world outside of school far more interesting and engaging than the world within” (Bridgeland et al., 2010, p. 11; Howard & Ill, 2004). Analyzing context can certainly raise a host of other potential areas of related study, such as ethnicity, colour, gender, and socio-economic status. Research has shown time and again that youth with disabilities, and/or who come from minority groups face greater socio-economic challenges, including the risk of
poverty, health issues, being subjected to violence, as well as higher rates of early school leaving, which only serves to exacerbate and perpetuate the problems (Aud et al., 2011; Barton, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2005; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007; McMurty & Curling, 2008; Stillwell, Sable, & Plotts, 2011). In Ontario many of these are particularly apparent among Aboriginal, and Black youth. In schools, these students also face a greater risk of prejudice, higher rates of detention/suspension, streaming or being “forced out”, cultural ignorance, and non-relevant curriculum – individual and contextual factors which place them at a greater risk of being disengaged and/or dropping out. However, all research requires some limitations in its scope, and I found it impractical to consider expanding the study to analyze these contextual factors in any manner to do them proper justice.

The Effects

Dropping out of school can have profound and lasting effects, not only for those individuals, but also for society as a whole. The topic has gained increasing attention internationally as well as within Canada, particularly in the past decades, and although it is still under-researched, the relationships between education, income, and long-term social costs have led to efforts by provincial governments that have helped reduce dropout rate (European Commission, 2013; Hankivsky, 2008). Nationally, the percentage of Canadians aged 20 to 24 who were not attending school and had not graduated from high school, or equivalent, steadily decreased from 16.6% in 1991, to 7.8% in 2011-12 (Learning – School Drop-outs, 2012). Despite the remarkable gains, the impact of dropping out is still profound. Not only does it lead to limited employment opportunities, and an increased risk of poverty, youth who drop out of school also cost society in the form of lost tax revenue and a greater need for social assistance (Barton, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2005; Lehr et al., 2005). Poverty is also a contributing factor
towards crime, leading to additional costs for a community in the form of policing and the judicial system, that all compound to weaken the civic fabric. Over the long term, those affected by poverty are also more at risk to suffer social and health effects, yet it does not stop there. Studies have shown that once begun, the cycle of poverty is difficult to break out of for subsequent generations (Fredricks et al., 2011; Rumberger, 2004). Hence, left unchecked, high dropout rates place an enormous burden upon society as a whole that over time can jeopardize a nation’s global competitiveness (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Ferguson et al., 2005). In a report commissioned by the Canadian Council of Learning, the estimated tangible costs of high school non-completion over a “lifetime” of 35 years were estimated at nearly one trillion dollars (Hankivsky, 2008). These estimates do not even include the intangible costs upon society, as high school dropouts are less engaged in terms of voting, volunteering, charitable giving, let alone the positive links found between one’s own schooling and/or health, and that of one’s children.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and The World Bank have worked hard at raising awareness about this issue, by promoting a human capital analysis of education, equating educational investments as directly linked to a nation’s economic growth (Lickteig, 2003; Spring, 1998). Hence, for some economists improving a nation’s educational attainment goes beyond altruistic motivations because of the association with cost-savings from social programs, and the competitive edge it provides a nation to compete in today’s global economy (Barton, 2005). To achieve such gains, governments, policy makers, and educators must work together to find solutions so that all students are being well served by an education system that is engaging and meaningful.
Solutions for Student Success

Considerable research has been conducted on the issues of improving student engagement success, and reducing dropouts over the past few decades, resulting in extensive government, foundation, and private-sector turnaround efforts. In *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About It*, Rumberger (2011) identifies three basic approaches: targeted, comprehensive, and systemic. Targeted approaches range from providing additional services/programs to students within existing schools, to providing a separate alternative program. Comprehensive approaches are more far reaching, from adopting a reform model, reconstituting a school by replacing the staff, or creating a new school entirely, to fostering collaborative relationships with government and community agencies to better meet local needs. Needless to say, each of these efforts can be quite time consuming and challenging. Finally, systemic approaches primarily operate at the governmental level, and include raising the compulsory schooling age, changing the graduation requirements and creating alternative pathways, to allowing the private sector to play a larger role in educational reform (Rumberger, 2011). Although each approach may prove effective in bringing about some degree of transformation, it must be borne in mind that “achieving higher rates of completion involves complex solutions to a complex problem” (Lyche, 2010, p. 36). In the U.S. the “dropout crisis” has sparked lively debates, resulting in heavy investments in turnaround efforts, from federal funding of over $300 million since 1988, to $1 billion from the Annenberg Foundation and $2 billion from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Rumberger, 2011). Although most initiatives initially met with lackluster results and failed to find a definitive approach – a testimony of how complex the problems are – research on these efforts identified several key common solutions that have achieved the greatest gains. These solutions, or pillars for success are identified in varying degrees in the numerous works affiliated with leading researchers cited throughout this
thesis, in particular those of Robert Balfanz, John Bridgeland, Michael Fullan, Russell Rumberger, and Ben Levin. The pillars, which are summed up succinctly in Levin’s work (2012), are focused on connecting with every student, curriculum and graduation requirements, improving teaching and learning, and connecting with the community.

**Connecting with Every Student.**

As previously noted, students have cited “too much freedom and not enough rules” as well as a lack of one-on-one instruction from educators, as two of the contributing factors to eventual disengagement (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 8). Conversely intervention in the form of a caring, supportive and judicious educator has been shown to pay rewards (Fredericks et al., 2004; Levin, 2008a). Knowing the status and progress of every students and intervening at the earliest signs of difficulties is one of the key pillars of improving high school outcomes (Levin, 2012). In a comprehensive U.S. study, Ruth Neild, Robert Balfanz, and Liza Herzog (2007) found that sixth grade students with a final grade of F in mathematics or English, attendance below 80% for the year, or an unsatisfactory behaviour mark in at least one class, were at a 75% risk of dropping out. Such findings have led some researchers and school systems to begin investing a great deal of time and effort into establishing Early Warning Systems (EWS) that will raise red flags of serious concerns for in-risk students in order to provide interventions as early as possible (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008; Lyche, 2010; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Neild et al., 2007; Pinkus, 2008;). In-risk factors used in these systems range from educational performance, delinquent behaviour, lack of motivation, and absenteeism, to English language learning status, special education status, and demographic categories. These early warning systems have grown in popularity and are now being proposed across Europe (European Commission, 2013).
In contrast to the one classroom experience in elementary school, secondary school can easily become a disconnecting and depersonalizing experience for students who shuffle from class to class with different teachers, becoming lost in the larger crowds. Research conducted among those who drop out found that many felt teachers did not care about their success, and/or that they were streamed into programs with lower expectations and options later in life that they did not consent to or fully understand the implications of, leading to frustration and resentment (Bowles & Gintis 1976; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Love, Stiles, Mundry, & DiRanna 2008; Thompson, G., 2008). To prevent this, Levin recommends the establishment of Student Success Teams within every secondary school – a concept that he helped put into place in Ontario under the Student Success Strategy, while serving as the Deputy-Minister of Education from 2004-2009. This initiative is examined in greater detail in the next section of the literature review. Under this program in-risk students are quickly identified, provided with a caring adult, and appropriate interventions to enable their success (Balfanz et al., 2007; Barton, 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Fullan, 2010). Another key piece in the connection with students is encouraging and empowering them to share their concerns and have a voice as a critical stakeholder in their own education, and recognizing that what they think and feel is valued and can influence positive change (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2005; Joseph, Reigeluth, n.d. Levin, 2012).

**Curriculum and Graduation Requirements.**

The second pillar is in revisiting curriculum and graduation requirements to ensure they enable the success of all students. This includes re-examining those courses that are designated as requirements to graduate from those that are optional, as well as determining how the diverse abilities, skills and intellects of our students are served by the programs we offer (Levin, 2012; Thompson, 2008). As Levin (2012) alludes to, we are often confronted in education with the
paradox of promoting a common curriculum that allows all students equal opportunity for success in life so as not to perpetuate and entrench socio-economic divides, while at the same time providing diverse programs that recognize and meet the individual interests, needs, abilities, and intellects of these same students. Hence a balance must be reached that allows a measure of both, optimally allowing students to feel that they are in the driver’s seat of their own school and career path, able to see the connection from one to the other. Yet, regardless of which courses or programs students may chose, research has shown that the key to sustaining engagement and the prevention of student dropouts is in raising demands, and ensuring that curriculum expectations are sufficiently challenging (Armstead, Bessell, Sembiante, & Plaza, 2010; Curtis et al., 1992; Cushman, 2003; Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Fullan, 2010; Lehr et al., 2005; Levin, Glaze, & Fullan, 2008; The National Academies, 2003; Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2012). Furthermore, for some students the engagement piece comes when they are able to see the connection between their education and the work world. This requires providing pathways that lead to such experiences with credentials/qualifications that are recognized in the market place is all the enticement they need to sustain them as they near their graduation (Ferguson et al., 2005; Lamb, 2008; Levin, 2012). Other considerations in the area of curriculum and graduation requirements include greater thought to organizational factors such as timetabling and scheduling of experienced staff for higher needs students, greater efforts to keep students from failing, as well as alternative programs that do not turn into “dumping grounds” of last resort for unsuccessful students (Levin, 2012). The latter - alternative programs - are used in school systems around the world, with great diversity, and those that yield the highest results in preventing dropouts have the hallmark features of rigorous standards and meaningful pathways to the workforce (Lamb, 2008).
Improving Teaching and Learning.

In a 2009 address to State Governors, United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan highlighted improving teacher quality as one of four key pillars required for turning education around in the nation. At the September 2010 Building Blocks for Education conference in Ontario – of which I was in attendance – Premier Dalton McGuinty highlighted several key pillars that were responsible for the positive transformation of Ontario’s system in recent years, including the critical role of improving teaching and learning for all educators. In this age of lifelong learning, it is difficult to engage learners in this concept - in the value of education as a whole - if educators and frontline workers do not exemplify the concept within their own practice. If educators are not challenging themselves and enthusiastic in what they teach, it makes if far more difficult to engage and challenge students in new learning. One of the surest means of effecting this change is in the pursuit of collective learning, otherwise known as capacity building (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2012; Mourshed, Chijioke, Barber, 2010). Through collective learning, the classroom walls that often separate begin to melt away, with educators sharing common experiences, strategies, ideas and resources that can take teaching practices to a higher level, by working together to solve larger school-wide issues that confront them. Establishing an effective collaborative learning culture (CLC) involves deliberate planning, well trained facilitators, scheduling as well as funding early on (Boone, Hartzman, & Mero, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b; Smith, Wilson, & Corbett, 2009). In order to foster significant change and deep learning, full day sessions are ideal, when educators are not distracted by lesson preparations or fatigued by having taught all day. To maintain a positive productive tone, clear expectations must be laid out of honouring the time, where “bird-walking” – straying from the topic – is not allowed, and where the emphasis is placed on moving from talk to action (Smith et al., 2009).
This collective learning can easily transcend school walls, leading to learning networks district wide and beyond (Cooper & Levin, 2010; McCullen, 2006). In these CLCs attention should also be given to using data, improving assessment practices, focusing on higher-order skills, establishing clearer and more consistent criteria, with ongoing assessments that more accurately reflect student progress (Fullan, 2010; Fullan & Levin, 2009; Levin, 2012). As Lorna Earl and Steven Katz (2006) state in their book *Leading Schools in a Data-Rich World: Harnessing Data for School Improvement*, when “policy makers and school personnel either ignore data or rely upon inadequate data, they run the risk of making poor decisions” (p. 6). Data analysis can provide a powerful means of creating a culture of inquiry in schools, by going beyond simple intuition in identifying areas that require improvement, to helping articulate and establish targets, and providing a means to monitor progress (Boone et al., 2006; Fullan, 2010). By engaging teachers and allowing a large degree of self-direction in this process, it reinforces professionalism and provides a means of refuting those critics who believe “that education is far too important to be left to the control of educators” (Ingersoll, 2003, p.40). Other examples of improving learning and engagement within the classroom, as well as promoting higher-order skills is through having lessons with a clear direction and connection to students’ lives, as well as a greater use of independent learning activities – where students are indeed in the driver’s seat, having teachers work alongside to facilitate their learning process (Levin, 2012). Through this process of improving teaching and learning, a win-win scenario can be fostered with educators benefiting from the exchange with renewed passion and ideas/strategies, and students winning through more engaging lessons (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

**Connecting with the Community.**

The fourth pillar in this turnaround process for reengaging learners and reducing dropouts is in schools connecting with the local community. These partnerships “can be defined
as the connections between schools and individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to directly or indirectly promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (Sanders, 2007, p. 39). Unfortunately today’s fast-paced world often leaves little time for parents, educators, and community members to openly discuss how they can work collaboratively to better support the success of students. Yet this is a conversation that must take place and an effort that cannot be neglected on the part of secondary schools, given the fact that these are critical years in the lives of students, and their well-being and success is at stake. As leading researcher and writer Joyce Epstein (2007) states, “when schools, families, and communities foster protective factors, they are putting risk-reducing mechanisms in place” (p. 220). Often though, parental involvement wanes in the secondary years, despite numerous studies that have demonstrated repeatedly that one of the single greatest influences upon student success and sense of well-being is parental involvement in their education (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Epstein et al., 2009; Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996; Sanders, 2009). Parents who play an active role not only help reinforce the value of education to their child, but also instill a greater sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, which enables them to focus better in school, believe in themselves, and set their aspirations higher (Epstein, 2007). In order to foster that engagement on the part of parents, schools must be responsive to local and cultural differences, and attuned to the needs of the students and community. This may involve holding well-organized Grade 8 information nights that clearly articulate secondary graduation requirements and the diverse programs the school and/or district may provide. It may also include providing valuable resources or sessions on homework, drugs or mental health issues, college/university admissions, post-secondary financial aid and assistance, or more (Levin, 2012).

Not surprisingly, there is a positive correlation between parental involvement and students having a positive regard for school, completing their homework, and realizing
academic success (Freytag, 2001). Anne Henderson and Nancy Berlay, two of the leading researchers on the impact of parental involvement, confirmed these findings in their review of more than 85 studies, and further found that when parents of disadvantaged students become involved they can achieve some of the greatest gains, attaining levels that are standard for middle-class children (‘Building Successful Partnerships’, 2000). Conversely, parents who are not involved have greater odds of having a child who will fall behind, become disengaged from learning, exhibit behavior problems, and become more susceptible to dropping out of school.

Aside from parental involvement, community contacts can provide important supports to address student needs, whether they are addressing mental health issues as mentioned above, to helping coordinate social or sports events students can participate in that are positive outlets of their time and energy. Schools can also serve as a critical link between parents and community programs that relate to immigration and language, social programs, volunteer work, and career development, including hosting guest speakers and/or cooperative work experiences student can partake in, as well as fostering valuable business contacts that can enrich the learning experience. These activities are intended to draw upon the expertise and resources of the community, encouraging the cooperation of all stakeholders (Boone et al, 2006; Epstein et al., 2009). The goal is to foster a symbiotic relationship where the school, family and community work together, with not only the caring best interest of the students in mind, but also where students themselves can see the valuable connections between one and the other (Zegarac & Franz, 2007). These partnerships may involve businesses, such as finding a wider range of Cooperative Education placements for students, but can also include post-secondary educational institutions, government and military agencies, cultural/recreational institutions, faith-based organizations, social service agencies, and as mentioned before – health care organizations (Levin, 2012; Sanders, 2007).
As educators can often be largely insulated from market forces, having community members come in and share their expertise with students is extremely valuable (Wallenborn & Heyneman, 2009). The Ferguson et al. (2005) study suggested an expansion of trade-based programs in order to provide experiential learning, including courses that teach practical life skills. Furthermore they recommended “school-work transition program pathways” that would “offer students the chance to finish secondary school, meet the entry-level requirement of a specific industry, develop employability and industry specific skills, and obtain experience in the workplace” (p. 83). This concept of preparing students for work or career programs is not new, as the merits of it were promoted a century ago by John Dewey who stated “education through occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method” (Dewey as cited in The National Academies, 2003, p. 169).

Similar recommendations were being made for expanding transition programs within Ontario at the time of the new Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty. In 2003 the Ministry of Education and Training released its Building Pathways to Success: The Report of the Program Pathways for Students at Risk Work Group. Highlighting the fact that nearly 50% of secondary school students did not go on to post-secondary education, the report strongly recommended changes to better meet the needs of the remainder of students who enter the workforce with or without an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), a recommendation that had been expressed to little effect for decades. In 2005 Alan King released the fourth phase of a double-cohort longitudinal study that highlighted low graduation rates in the province, and identified credit accumulation in Grade 9 and 10 as a key factor in predicting graduation rates. This research also served as the impetus in developing more specific programs to help all students graduate (Ungerleider, 2008). Admirably, the Liberal government wasted little time when they took power to begin a major improvement of the education system that would better meet the
needs of all learners and improve student success, beginning with major new policy decisions that initiated the process and helped foster some of these critical contacts between stakeholders (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2008b). Yet schools themselves must recognize and play the lead role in pursuing these partnerships. Those that do will be rewarded with more support from families and greater respect from within the community, helping to create important allies for public education (‘Building Successful Partnerships’, 2000; Corner, 2005).

**Student Success**

In 2003 Ontario’s graduation rate stood at a less than stellar 68%. To promote greater student engagement and overall success – and thereby reduce the number of dropouts – the newly elected Liberal government launched the first of three phases in its *Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy* (SS/L 18 Strategy). The key goals of the strategy were to provide students with an effective elementary to secondary transition, increase the graduation rate and decrease the drop-out rate, to support positive outcomes for students, to build on their strengths and interests, and to provide innovative learning opportunities (Ungerleider, 2008). Transition initiatives were launched early on, to help establish orientation programs, strategies and interventions that would be all aimed at assisting new students to adjust to secondary school life, providing individual support and programming as needed. The premise was to engage students early on – emotionally, behaviourally, and cognitively – at the secondary level. This also included a greater emphasis on differentiated instruction for students beginning in the middle school years (Ungerleider, 2008). The government’s commitment to whole-system reform for this initiative was clear from the outset, as it included policy and legislative changes, funding at the district and school level, as well as resources and training. A vertical support
system was established aligning the Ministry, districts, and schools with the same priority – Student Success.

A provincial Student Success branch was established in 2003, which included a $114 million investment for curricula reforms and the establishment of a Student Success Leader (SSL) in each district (Ungerleider, 2008). Early curricula reforms were primarily focused on improving outcomes in literacy and mathematics. This was followed by a $158 million investment in the second phase that was announced in May 2005, leading to a Student Success Teacher (SST) in every secondary school in the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). The SSTs became the front-line workers in this effort, communicating with staff, parents, and working with students who are struggling. In these early years district supervisory officers arranged meetings for the SSTs to collaborate and share their successes, learn from one another, fostering partnerships and “collaborative competition”. Furthermore, the MOE organized both regional and once per year province-wide conferences that allowed SSTs to dialogue, sharing both issues and ideas to sustain and build upon the initiative (Fullan, 2010).

To provide a broader base of support for all students, the Ministry also charged all secondary schools in the province to establish Student Success Teams comprised of the Principal or designate, the Student Success Teacher, the Head of Student Services, along with appropriate other staff, such as Credit Recovery Teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006a). Through this collective capacity effort, teams are charged with gathering and using data proactively for identifying and tracking students who were falling behind, to provide appropriate supports and interventions, an approach lauded in today’s research (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2012; Moursheed, Chijioke, Barber, 2010).

The primary responsibility of SSTs was to oversee Credit Rescue. In Credit Rescue, Student Success Teachers began tracking in-risk students to provide interventions to assist them
as much as possible to attain credit(s) they were in jeopardy of failing. At the same time the Ministry also expanded funding for teaching lines at each secondary school for a new Credit Recovery program, which would allow students who had failed a credit with 40-49 percent to have an opportunity to attain it by repeating only the material in the course they were not successful in, rather than repeating the entire course. Both these initiatives – Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery – have had an impact on teaching and learning.

The third phase of the strategy rolled out shortly thereafter in December 2005 with funding to sustain existing programs including transitions, and for the development of a Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program (Ungerleider, 2008). The SHSM program began with five areas of study, providing the opportunity for students to focus on a career path that aligned with their interest and skills. A centre piece to the Student Success Strategy, the SHSM program has since expanded to 19 areas of study with sectors of interest ranging from agriculture, aviation/aerospace, health and wellness, to information technology, manufacturing, and transportation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). Distributed leadership has played a critical part in the expansion of SHSMs, by exploring knowing what students want and allowing interested teachers and principals at the local level to play an active role in establishing a SHSM program for their school, while allowing districts to coordinate a diverse offering district wide to better meet the needs of all learners (Armstead et al., 2010; Seashore, 2009). Through the SHSM students are required to complete a package of 8 - 10 courses tailored to a career path, including a Cooperative Education work placement (Fullan, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b).

Along with the Grade 8-9 Transitions, Student Success Teams, and the Specialist High Skills Major Program, three other strategies the government launched were Lighthouse Pilot Projects, Dual Credits, and the expansion of Co-operative Education (Figure 1). Launched in
2004-05, Lighthouse Pilot Projects provided funding for a wide range of plans developed by individual boards to better meet the unique challenges students faced, as well as engage and support in-risk students. By 2006-07 $36 million in funding had been provided for 130 Lighthouse Projects (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006b). In 2005-06 The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities partnered in launching Dual Credits, a program which initially saw 361 students enrolled in earning credits at the secondary level that would also qualify towards apprenticeship training certifications or college courses. By the following year the number of students enrolled soared to 2,300. At the same time the government expanded Co-operative Education opportunities for students, by allowing up to two credits earned after September 2005 to count towards a student’s 18 compulsory credits for graduation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006b). Co-operative workplace experiences are also a component to the larger SHSM program, while a student interested in an Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) can pursue this option as part of Co-op, or within a SHSM, hence providing a variety of pathways to experiential learning opportunities.

Figure 1: Student Success (2006)

From these early years, the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy has evolved and expanded to its present format of six (Figure 2) overall initiatives identified by the Ministry (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016c). Notable changes to transitions have included the
expansion to Grades 7, 8, and 9, and the passage of the 2013 policy document *Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a). This involves the implementation of a comprehensive Kindergarten to Grade 12 career/life planning program to guide students in becoming competent, successful, and contributing members of society. It includes the establishment of an Individual Pathway Plan from Grade 7 onwards, providing students the opportunity through *Career Cruising* to explore who they are, their values, skills, their personal goals, and plan their path to a career. As well, Lighthouse Pilot Projects have been replaced as a main branch of Student Success with Student Engagement initiatives. These initiatives solicit student involvement in Ontario’s education system through *Speakup* projects, *Students as Researchers* in student-teacher collaborative inquiries, and by serving in the *Minister’s Student Advisory Council*.

With respect to the SHSM programs, they have become wildly popular since their inception nearly 10 years earlier, and now serve as a critical piece to the overall Student Success Strategy which has helped Ontario’s graduation rate to rise to 85.5% by June 30, 2015 – a notable 17 percentage points since 2003 (Levin 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education 2016). In a 2008 final report led by Charles Ungerleider entitled *Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of*

Figure 2: Student Success (2016)
*Education’s Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy*, thousands of students, teachers and administrators expressed overwhelmingly that this strategy was improving student engagement and success. The results were promising in terms of the impact, both of Student Success as a whole as well as the SHSMs. However, one must consider that both were still in their infancy, and have changed and expanded greatly since. At the time of the release of that report, SHSM programs had just been in existence three years, having grown to 14 areas, with approximately 14,000 students across 338 schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). Each year the government has invested more in its expansion, leading to 1760 SHSM programs in total by 2015-16 serving 46,000 students, with 22,4000 of these enrolled in Dual Credit programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016c). Clearly the government has committed itself heavily to SHSMs as a key pillar of the Student Success initiative. Exploiting effectively what works is lauded by organizational theorist James March (1991), who valued such commitments above exploration or new approaches, which can squander time and resources when one strategy has already proven rewarding. At the same time, March also stresses that what may work well for one part of an organization may not be good for another – contexts are fluid with differing needs. The SHSM program is showing rewards across the province and is unusual in the sense that it allows school communities to choose their area of focus, better meeting the needs of their own students.

The six facets which now comprise the Student Success Strategy are part of the overall Ministry’s *Grants for Student Needs*, otherwise known as the funding formula, which includes program funding, some of which have a long history and others that are more recent (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). These would include the previously mentioned Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Programs, Special Education grants, Language grants, Urban and Priority High Schools, Learning Opportunities Grants, the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Education
Supplement, and the Safe and Accepting Schools Supplement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Student Success certainly complements a myriad of other grants and programs, but what makes it distinct – despite some overlaps at times – is its interconnected efforts at fostering the engagement and positive outcomes of all students involved, which include expanded and innovative learning opportunities.

**Other Reform Efforts**

Needless to say much has been written on the topic of how to engage students in learning, with strategies that range from school-based reform to system-wide reform, encompassing an educational district or even a province or state. However, decades of reform initiatives have left frontline educators sceptical, often leery to invest substantial time and energy on new visions that are in constant change (Fawcett, 2004; Fullan, 2009; Fullan, 2010; Goddard & Bohac-Clarke, 2007; Levin, 2008b; Levin, 2012). Despite vast sums that have been spent on improving academic success in the United States with new and dazzling approaches, international test scores continue to haunt the education system, as students continue to lag further behind (Fullan, 2010). One of the key problems that Levin (2012) identifies is that schools are often running several competing initiatives at one time, each having no connection to the other, creating a sense of ephemerality and confusion for staff and students. As student engagement and success are of critical concern for all schools, I chose to narrow my focus to system-wide reform proposals, several of which are featured below.

In his report entitled *One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*, Paul Barton (2005) provided several examples of efforts that have had success in retaining students until graduation, including: alternative schools, The Talent Development (TD) High School, Communities In Schools, Maryland’s Tomorrow, and The Quantum Opportunities
Program. Alternative schools have been in existence since the 1960s, and currently there are approximately 11,000 such schools across the United States, with 90% of districts having at least one such school or program in high schools for students who were not successful in the traditional system. The TD model of educational reform was established by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAER), and used a “school-within-a-school” approach. They focused their first implementation on one of Maryland’s lowest performing schools, initially focusing on the ninth grade. By establishing small learning communities, with interdisciplinary teams of teachers who had longer periods to work, and with an employer advisory board to help design programs with internship opportunities, the promotion rate of ninth grade students rose from 47% to 69%, while teachers reported a dramatically improved perception of the school.

Barton (2005) reported that the Quantum Opportunities Program also targeted in-risk ninth graders using a comprehensive program that followed them throughout their four years of secondary school. By its conclusion it reduced the dropout rate to 23% compared to 50% for the control group, and had 42% of participants went on to postsecondary education, compared to 16% for the control group. The cost of the program was approximately $10,000/student, and hence did not continue beyond the four years. Barton also found that the Communities In Schools also made a positive impact upon students, as did Maryland’s Tomorrow, the latter being a large-scale state-wide dropout prevention program. Maryland’s Tomorrow began with 100 students and is now operating in over 75 schools with over 7,000 students. It includes counselling with greater support, intensive academic instruction throughout the year, and career exploration. Although the programs showed higher graduation rates and improved test scores, the grade point averages of 11th and 12th graders did not improve. Although there are some
commonalities in these diverse approaches, a more comprehensive whole-system reform model was what I was looking for.

Two other renowned reform efforts are the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). Having begun with one teacher in one classroom in 1980, AVID today serves 425,000 students in more than 4,800 schools in 48 states, and 16 countries/territories (Nelson, 2011). Students with the desire and potential for college, but who may be lacking the necessary skills, apply for the program which features demanding classes. Through it they learn how to take Cornell Notes, to serve as peer tutors, attend Socratic seminars, and develop confidence in expressing their own views (Nelson, 2007). Of the 89 percent of students who applied to four-year colleges in 2010-11, 74 percent were accepted, far above the national averages for all respective ethnic groups (Nelson, 2011). In KIPP, students spend up to 60 percent more time in school than regular public school students do, engaged in experiences that often only upper-middle-class children share, such as museums, and theatres, or attending art, music or photography lessons (Nisbett, 2010). One of the greatest gains from the program was the marked increase in self-confidence that low-performing black students experienced. By the eighth Grade, 62 percent of KIPP students outperform their national peers in math scores, and 57 percent do likewise in reading. These gains come at a higher cost though, including teacher turnover year by year (KIPP, 2011).

Educational researchers Roberto Joseph and Charles Reigeluth (n.d.) present another initiative for systemic change based upon a review of the existing educational literature, and their own experiences. They promote six major aspects that they believed were important for any large-scale change process to succeed: broad stakeholder ownership; systems view of education; evolving mindsets about education; understanding the systemic change process; systems design; and the learning community. They emphasized the “fundamental bedrock”
broad stakeholder ownership had in this system, including parents, teachers, students, and civil servants, democratically working and being part of the decision-making process. Yet it is ironic that in their design of this effort, this critical piece of stakeholder ownership is illustrated as being equal to, or even less important than the other aspects. I concur with the authors that a systems view is necessary to avoid, as they state, “piecemeal methods” that have little correlation with one another, and leave educators cynical to commit time and energy on another new program. Piecemeal methods are often the result of educational initiatives launched at a political level, whether it is system wide or even by principals at their own school site, to demonstrate actions to improve education to the public, often leading to programs that have little alignment to one another. A systems view can provide an opportunity for leadership with purpose, and the Student Success Strategy which flows vertically from the Ministry to the school level features the critical direction, supports and funding to sustain the program while engaging leaders and educators in one common cause. There are doubtlessly many other reform models that could be examined. However, to better serve the interest of this study I chose to focus on educational researchers whose work was based in North America, and in particular familiar with the context of Ontario.

**Conceptual Framework**

Both Michael Fullan and Ben Levin played influential roles in education provincially within Ontario during the launch of the Student Success Strategy and in the years following. As noted earlier, Michael Fullan served as the Special Advisor on Education to the Premier, guiding the change process provincially, and offers a few approaches to whole-system reform, one of which is presented in his work *The New Meaning of Educational Change, 4th edition* (Fullan, 2007). Nine factors that affect policy implementation are presented: need, clarity, complexity,
quality/practicality, district, community, principal, teacher, and government and other agencies. In his work *The Moral Imperative Realized*, Fullan (2011), however, presents another framework for such reform, a slight refinement from his work in *All Systems Go* (Fullan, 2010), which includes a small number of ambitious goals; a guiding coalition at the top; high standards and expectations; investment in leadership and capacity building related to instruction; mobilizing data and effective practices as a strategy for improvement; intervention in a nonpunitive manner; being vigilant about distractors; and being transparent, relentless, and increasingly challenging. Each of these approaches had merit as a framework for my study.

Educational researcher Ben Levin served as Ontario’s Deputy Minister of Education from 2004 to 2007, and briefly from 2008 to 2009, and presents four core strategies for whole-system reform in his work *More High School Graduates* (Levin, 2012). The four core strategies are a synopsis of 16 detailed components that were originally presented in his 2008 book entitled *How to Change 5000 Schools*, and are an invaluable guide in providing a step-by-step approach to whole-system reform, but by the same token are too lengthy to be easily recalled. These four core strategies include knowing the status and progress of every student, and intervening as soon as there are signs of difficulties; providing a program that enables all students to achieve a good outcome; improving daily teaching and learning to achieve better high school outcomes; and connecting schools deeply to their local and broader community. A chapter is dedicated to clarifying each of these strategies in *More High School Graduates* (Levin, 2012), and the final chapter on implementation helps set the course for such transformation to occur.

Levin’s (2012) first core strategy is founded on the premise of building strong personal connections between schools and students. As some secondary schools can accommodate upwards of 2,000 students – the population of a town all in one building – it can be easily
understood how an impersonal atmosphere can develop as students shuffle from class to class through their secondary years. Levin contends that interventions should go beyond establishing a structure or promoting a caring attitude. It involves establishing “a set of systems and attitudes that have to be built and sustained across an entire school and system” (p. 46), which first begins with a student success leadership team at each school. Meeting regularly, and analyzing school data, including feedback from teachers, they will be better able to identify students who are struggling and at risk of failing a credit, and plan effective and appropriate intervention measures that will meet the needs of the student. In 2005 the Ministry agreed to provide funding for a Student Success Teacher (SST) for each secondary school in the province. They often gather information about the situation of each student who is struggling, serving as conduit between students and staff. Furthermore, to promote engagement, Levin encourages schools and school districts to provide opportunities for students to voice their views and have input on their own education.

According to Levin (2012), the second core strategy is founded on secondary schools providing a program that enables all students to achieve a good outcome. Levin does not call for an extensive overhaul of the current system, but rather by promoting “program differentiation” in shaping and organizing programs that will better meet student needs. This includes ensuring high expectations, providing open futures and self-direction which allows choice for students, offering a chance for recovery after wrong choices, promoting partnerships within the community, and real credentials that are recognized, as well as consideration for whole school programming. Levin promotes greater consideration be given to organizing teaching and assigning staff, co-curriculum and alternative programs, but also for helping to reduce failure rates – primarily by Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery to help foster student success.
The third core strategy described by Levin (2012) is improving daily teaching and learning to achieve better high school outcomes. This involves breaking out of mundane repetitive work to improving instruction that provides appropriate challenges for students, allows greater opportunities for independent learning, and for improving assessment practices. Educators who are passionate about what they teach are more apt to engage students in the subject matter, and establishing learning communities, or even opportunities for truly sharing knowledge and best practices among educators helps facilitate this. Having instructed many additional qualification courses for teachers over the years, time and again I have had teachers state how they have been reignited in their passion for teaching by working collectively with colleagues in extending their knowledge. Along with opening lines of communication with educators, Levin encourages the same between educators and students, by giving students a voice in teaching and learning strategies in consideration of what is effective and what is not. The same goes for assessment strategies, by allowing student input in articulating the expectations and providing clear criteria, and for staff to work collaboratively with students, as well as with colleagues, in designing and evaluating student work.

The fourth and final core strategy is connecting schools deeply to their local and broader community. Levin (2012) readily acknowledges the research that has shown how socioeconomic status (SES), followed next by ethnicity and language, are strong predictors of education and life outcomes. The impact of community is also a powerful predictor of such outcomes – an impact that could be either positive or negative. Schools have the opportunity to help shape this, particularly by building good trusting relationships, and a variety of strategies are suggested to achieve this outcome. Another step in the right direction is schools doing an inventory of community organizations that they can partner with to better meet individual student needs and promote their success (Levin, 2012; Sanders, 2007). This could involve language-learning
opportunities to benefit new immigrants, social and health services, or volunteer or cooperative education work opportunities. With respect to the latter, Specialist High Skills Major programs are highly reliant on strong school-community partnerships. This can also include working with postsecondary institutions in establishing dual credit learning opportunities, where students can earn some secondary credits that are also recognized at the post-secondary level (Levin, 2012). Even the opportunity to share facilities, and allow students to use a studio or pool, or even to just be in the mix of the postsecondary experience can be inspiring for teens as they see modelled collaborative partnerships working for their best interest.

As Fullan and Levin were both instrumental in revitalizing and redirecting education to improve student success within Ontario, naturally there are commonalities in the two approaches. However it must be borne in mind that these approaches exist not only in the theoretical realm, but they have been tried and successfully tested. In the end I chose the conceptual framework (see Figure 3) of the four core strategies of whole-system reform by Ben Levin – albeit modified – as I have also taken part in and witnessed its impact at improving student success. The modification I believe was justified to properly address the sub-questions of the research, notably how the Student Success Strategy developed over time, what the program outcomes were, and the challenges schools encountered. The cyclical format of this is intended to convey the evolving nature of the Strategy over time, and hence the impact this would have on the responses from the participants with respect to the outcomes and challenges encountered.
Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

- **Student Success**
  - Tracking students and having interventions
  - Programs that enable achievement
  - Connecting with the community
  - Improving teaching and learning

The diagram illustrates the flow of processes and outcomes related to student success.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The preceding section reviewed the literature surrounding student engagement and student success in schools. In this section I present the methodological approach I took in conducting this study, which explored large-scale educational change in the form of the Student Success Strategy both at the district and school level. It involved both an analysis of the interview data from participants at the four select schools, as well as available data on student success. This section begins by describing the research design method used for the study. This is followed by a description of the research sample – the school district and the participants – including the sampling method that was used for participants. The data processing and analysis strategies used follow next, along with the ethical considerations, and finally the limitations of the study.

Design Methods

The research methodology employed in the study was a qualitative approach. The use of this approach allowed me to more fully understand from the view of participants how the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes by interviewing those directly connected with the program. Qualitative research allows one to explore how individuals see their reality, and give meaning to the events that occur, realizing that multiple realities exist (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Qualitative methodology also allows the researcher to employ open-ended questions, to explore and understand “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). There are several different designs connected to qualitative research, including a basic interpretive study, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographic, narrative analysis, critical and postmodern research, and the case study approach.
In the end I selected a comparative case study approach to examine the development of the Student Success Strategy among the four participating schools for several reasons. According to Creswell (2009), case studies offer “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p. 13), collecting information using a variety of data collection procedures. To add to the rich data gleaned from the interviews of the participants, I also explored public papers, meeting minutes, and numerous reports to further shed light on the outcomes of the Student Success Strategy for the district as a whole, and the four schools.

To complement my qualitative methodology, administrative data were obtained from multiple sources. Annual Committee of the Whole Student Achievement and Student Engagement Reports were obtained and analyzed, which provided a summary of district data from the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS), Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) data from Grade 9 Mathematics Test and the Grade 10 OSSLT, graduation rates, and local data. I was also able to drill down further and obtain individual school data from these sources, including Taking Stock Reports provided by the Student Success Leads. According to scholars and academics, this use of triangulation procedures from multiple sources serves to strengthen the validity and reliability of a study (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

**The District and Participants**

The school district in which the study was conducted was located in southern Ontario. The secondary schools located within this district were all in an urban locale, most being very multicultural, serving a large number of students in a variety of socio-economic settings. To begin the study, contact was made with the Director of Education to inform him of the nature
and purpose of the study. Once ethics approval was secured from the district, I met with senior administration to determine a number of possible schools that would meet the two criteria of the study: a graduation rate below 70%, and operating a SHSM program since 2009. I intentionally wanted to avoid schools that had a long history of high student success rates to better understand the impact of the Student Success Strategy. Hence, a purposeful sampling approach was intentionally used in determining which schools would be considered for the study. As Patton (1990) states, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). Due to reasons of manageability and practicality, four school sites were selected for this comparative case study. The aim was to obtain a ‘snapshot’, not an extensive overview, of the participants and the study topic. The eligible schools were shortlisted, and school administrators were contacted to inform them of the purpose of the study, and the research activities. If interest was shown, they were forwarded further information, including the questions to be discussed in the interview. Attempts were made to select schools in markedly different socio-economic contexts to try to obtain as broad a perspective as possible with respect to the district’s student population. Once school administrative approval had been obtained, contact via email and/or phone was made with the other members of the Student Success Team, including the Student Success lead teacher, the Specialist High Skills Major lead teacher, and a guidance counsellor and/or a special education teacher. Participants were informed about the nature of the study with the assurance that they could withdraw at any time or not answer any question they were not comfortable with (Appendix A and Appendix B). A letter explaining the nature of the study as well as the interview questions was forwarded to those participants who expressed interest (Appendix C).
To ensure that credible data were obtained from the interview process, pilot interviews were conducted to try out my questions to ensure they were clear and yielded useful data, as well as to ask respondents what other relevant questions should have been included (Merriam, 2009). In total 15 educators from the four participating secondary schools took part in the study. Table 1 provides further information on the volunteer participants and their respective schools. In order to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were provided for the school district, the schools involved, all participants, and local landmarks mentioned, notably post-secondary institutions and business. Of the 15 participants who took part, nine were female and six were male. The participants ranged from their mid-30s to mid-50s, with an average of 17 years’ experience in education. All were members of their school’s Student Success Team, ranging from just a few months to dating back to the start of the Student Success Strategy. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study, and provided the questions ahead of time to allow for thoughtful reflection.

The time and location of the interviews were arranged to suit the convenience and comfort of the participants to ensure that they were at ease throughout the interview. The interviews ranged in time from approximately 30 – 60 minutes. In order to make the interviews manageable, the original questions for the study were reduced from 52 down to 21. The views of the participants were intended to be elicited on the development of the Student Success Strategy within their respective school according to the conceptual framework of the study: connecting with every student; programs that enable achievement; improving teaching and learning; and connecting with the community (Appendix C). Time was allowed for participants to expand their answers, to share issues or challenges the program has generated, and to provide suggestions for changes to better meet the needs of the students in their school. All of the information was recorded and transcribed shortly afterwards to ensure the information was fresh
and easily recalled, thereby maximizing what could be learned from it by beginning the data analysis early on, and making it on-going (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 2009). As well, any personal observations were also recorded shortly after the interviews to retain their importance. Once the interview transcripts had been completed, participants were given the option to review their transcript to remove any information they did not wish included in the research.

Table 1: Participants and School Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (approx.)</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>School Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brock</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid 50s</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Oakridge</td>
<td>• 1136 students&lt;br&gt;• Low SES&lt;br&gt;• High ESL/immigrant and population&lt;br&gt;• High Aboriginal population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>Student Success Lead</td>
<td>Oakridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>26 years</td>
<td>Head of Student Services</td>
<td>Oakridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>SHSM Lead</td>
<td>Oakridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>SS Lead</td>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>• 912 students&lt;br&gt;• Low to middle SES&lt;br&gt;• High racial diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicki</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>SHSM Lead</td>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>SHSM Lead &amp; Head of Student Services</td>
<td>Bayview</td>
<td>• 668 students&lt;br&gt;• Low SES&lt;br&gt;• High racial diversity&lt;br&gt;• High transience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>SS Lead</td>
<td>Bayview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Learning Resource Teacher</td>
<td>Bayview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>Vice-Principal</td>
<td>Bayview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>SS Lead</td>
<td>Eastdale</td>
<td>• 808 students&lt;br&gt;• Low to middle SES&lt;br&gt;• High racial diversity&lt;br&gt;• High transience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Head of Student Services</td>
<td>Eastdale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>SHSM Lead</td>
<td>Eastdale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Eastdale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To further inform myself about the impact the Student Success Strategy had within each of the four participating schools and on the district as a whole, a great deal of time was spent reviewing district meeting minutes, documents, and reports. OnSIS and local data were also requested and obtained on the strategy. The aim was to have data on four years of student achievement (e.g., grade point averages, credits earned) in order to analyze and compare the data across the years to determine if student achievement has increased or decreased as a result of the strategy. I was able to obtain a limited amount of data specific to each school, as most of the data provided was for the district as a whole. Each of the schools responded favourably in providing some of their past data from the Taking Stock report. These data are required by the Ontario Ministry of Education for the district as a whole, and are collected by the site Student Success Lead. This report identifies the number of students who are in risk situations or at risk of not graduating and interventions that are put in place, including being connected to a caring adult, an individualized timetable, the development of a strength and needs-based student profile, and education and career pathway planning supports. The data were examined year over year to see if there had been increases or decreases in these supports, and if there was any resultant correlations (increases/decreases) with overall credits earned, and the average school EQAO Grade 10 Literacy test scores. Similar data provided pertaining to students enrolled within the SHSM program were also analyzed, from September 2011 to June 2013, to coincide with the years in which Grade 9 students from 2009 would have been within the program. Although I had hoped that perhaps local data would have been kept and obtained pertaining to Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery, this was not feasible. Schools are not required to track these efforts, and hence they could not provide me with any reliable data on outcomes. The ongoing efforts to support students in being successful are multifaceted, and it became clear through the interviews that there are trade-offs when it comes to data collection and student support.
Additional collection of data takes time and energy from staff that could be better spent in connecting and supporting students on a daily basis.

**Data Processing and Analysis**

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and combined with the field notes and reports generated a substantial volume of data. Every effort was made to thoroughly consider all of the data collected. Following the suggestions of Ely, Anzul, Freidman, Garner, and Steinmetz (1994), I studied the raw data to develop a detailed, intimate knowledge of the information. This involved listening to the audio-recordings several times to get the “feel and tone” of each participant’s words and of the study as a whole. After this, I listened to the recordings again, with the transcripts in hand, to jot down initial codes or categories that came to mind. Thereafter, I reviewed the transcripts several times without the recordings. Although a framework had been devised from an earlier review of the literature, this intensive review of the data yielded new codes.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out, data are the constructions of the various sources involved in research, and data analysis “leads to reconstructions of those constructions” (p. 332). For the inductive analysis process to be successful, it meant allowing the categories and patterns to emerge from the raw data, rather than being imposed prior to collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). As I read through all the transcripts, key words, phrases, or events were given a code. These codes were then used as categories to sort the data. A list was drawn up of all the categories, and a great deal of time was spent comparing the categories for any duplication or overlap of meanings, leading to an organizational framework (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). From this process, three key categories emerged as dominant themes. After the categorization process was completed, I used a cut-and-file technique, placing each of the units
of data in files specifically marked for each coding category. Where there were sentences with more than one unit of data, copies of these were made with each unit of data highlighted for the specific category. These units of data were then organized into patterns, creating sub-categories to be further analyzed. To obtain the highest validity and reliability in the data analysis process possible by ensuring that key data was not overlooked, each of the interview transcripts was also analyzed using NVivo 10, a qualitative data analysis software program. The findings from both the cut-and-file technique and NVivo 10 analysis were compared and contrasted to arrive at and confirm the final coding categories. This organization of data provided the framework for the actual writing process that evolved.

Ethics

The following section details how the study adhered to the strict requirements of consent and confidentiality. My research protocol was forwarded to the Office of Research Ethics of the University of Toronto for approval prior to the commencement of the study. On May 3, 2013 the Research Ethics Board approved the study for a one-year period, which was renewed the following year, expiring on May 2, 2015. My research proposal was also submitted to the school district and vetted through senior administration as well as through the district’s ethics review process for approval, which was granted on September 30, 2013. I met with senior administration once again to further discuss the study, and identify schools which met the study criteria. Thereafter, participants were contacted to participate in the study, beginning first with the principals of the identified schools, prior to contact being made with the remainder of the participants which comprised the Student Success Team. This included an introductory letter that explained the study and provided contact information, as well as a consent form which assured participants that they could refuse to answer any question they wished in the interview,
and also stated that they could withdraw from the study at any time for whatever reason they wished knowing that any information gathered could/would be destroyed if they so desired (Appendix A and Appendix B). They were also assured that pseudonyms would be given for the school district, schools, participants and local identifiers to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The content of the introductory letter and consent form were reviewed with participants prior to the start of each interview, and they were also reassured that no value judgments would be placed upon their responses. The research was conducted in accordance to the policies and guidelines stipulated by both the University of Toronto and the district. There were no known possible physical, psychological/emotional, social, and/or legal risks associated with participation within the study. All raw data and documents connected to the study are protected and stored in accordance to the protocols outlined in the ethics review, and will be destroyed no later than five years after the completion of the study.

Limitations of the Study

Although attempts were made to ensure that the findings from this study on the Student Success Strategy within Ontario were as rich and meaningful as possible, this study is only a snapshot in time and location of what is occurring. Originally I hoped to interview the district lead(s) responsible for the Student Success Strategy in order to obtain as comprehensive a view as possible of the system wide strategy. Unfortunately they declined or did not respond. Despite this, the school interviews have provided valuable insights as to what is occurring in the front lines. However, it must be borne in mind that the participants within the study still represent only a segment of those in the district who are in a leadership position in the Student Success Strategy. Perhaps one of the greatest limitations in this study will be the absence of the student voice. It would be advantageous to say the least to obtain the student perspective on the Student
Success initiative; however due to the difficulty involved in gaining ethical approval from school districts this would not have been easily feasible. For this reason the OnSIS and/or local data were used to shed additional light on trends within the strategy.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this study on how has the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district? This includes the findings of the sub-questions, which ask about the program elements the schools emphasized, how the programs developed over time, what the program outcomes were, and what challenges each of the schools encountered. It begins with a brief description of the school district and the participants involved, an introduction to the results, and findings from the district as a whole. The findings from the study that emerged from the school interviews are presented next in accordance to the four pillars of the conceptual framework: efforts at connecting with every student, providing programs that enable achievement, improving teaching and learning, and connecting with the community. As the 15 interviews generated a significant volume of data, the findings within each of these four areas have a number of sub-categories as well, which emerged based on the responses of the participants to the interview questions. As the responses varied for each interviewee and school, the sub-categories for each varied to a degree as well. The findings from each school also include four other sections, including district support, how student outcomes at the school have changed over time, challenges which interviewees identified, as well as changes they would suggest to improve the Student Success Strategy.

The findings from the study are presented in two parts. These include the district results, which were obtained from district and EQAO reports and then the school results, which include both qualitative data garnered from the interviews, as well as relevant administrative data. The 15 participants in the study each took part in an interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. The data gathered from these are found within the field notes and transcribed texts. The results include supportive quotations that were taken directly from these transcripts. Within each
of these categories are the sub-categories which emerged based upon the responses from the participants to the interview questions (Appendix C).

**The District**

The district established its strategic direction with a focus on three key pillars – achievement, engagement, and equity – each supported by a policy directive to guide implementation. Throughout each year, reports have helped inform and guide policy and practice, providing both leading and lagging indicators. Leading indicators are short-term outcomes, which offer early and limited – yet practical – data on trends to provide further guidance in achieving long-term goals. Lagging indicators in essence are measures that reflect the long-term outcomes of policy and practice, such as provincial achievement results in literacy or mathematics. The following section provides a summary of outcomes connected to the district’s Student Success Strategy. It provides an analysis of lagging indicators for the most part, reflecting the outcome data of the district’s efforts in achieving its strategic direction at the secondary level. It will begin by examining trends connected to discipline/suspensions, EQAO achievement results, Taking Stock survey results, experiential programs, and finally graduation rates.

**Discipline and Suspensions.**

Recent years have witnessed a notable decline in student suspensions over time within the school district, which may reflect the outcome of efforts to improve school climate. Between the five-year period of 2009-2010 and 2013-2014, the district witnessed its secondary student enrolment decline by 10.5 percentage points, while the total secondary suspensions declined by 32.5 percentage points (Table 2).
Table 2: Student Suspensions - District (2009-14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Secondary Students</th>
<th>Total Suspensions</th>
<th>Percentage of Students Suspended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>17,618</td>
<td>2,305</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>17,277</td>
<td>2,128</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>16,821</td>
<td>2,284</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>16,418</td>
<td>1,842</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>15,783</td>
<td>1,556</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EQAO District Achievement Results.**

With respect to student achievement, the mathematics and literacy testing results within the district have been mixed. In Ontario, all Grade 9 students are required to complete EQAO testing in mathematics. In Grade 10, students are required to pass the EQAO OSSLT as part of their diploma requirements. Over the past five years the percentage of students from within the district taking academic mathematics who performed at or above the established provincial standard has increased by 7 percentage points, from 74% in 2008-09, to 82% in 2014-15 (Figure 4). Unfortunately due to exceptional circumstances, in the form of labour disruptions in the province, provincial data were unavailable for 2014-15. Regardless, it is clear that a growing gap in achievement outcomes in mathematics had taken place in recent years as the provincial results steadily improved, although this gap narrowed significantly by 2013-14. With respect to Grade 9 applied mathematics, the success rate for students from within the district achieving at or above the provincial standard has been highly variable in comparison to a steady improvement in the provincial results (Figure 5). Where the district results were actually 2 percentage points above the province in 2009-10, they declined to an -11 percentage point gap in 2012-13, but in the following year narrowed to -7 percentage points. Although the gap is
narrowing between the district and provincial results, a deeper analysis of the Grade 6 to Grade 9 results have also shown improvement. At the academic level, 17% rose to the standard (Figure 6). At the applied level, 30% of students who had not met the standard in Grade 6 met the standard in Grade 9 in 2014-15 (Figure 7). Conversely, 6% of academic level students who had met the standard in Grade 6 did not meet the standard in Grade 9, while 3% of applied students experienced a similar drop.
To improve numeracy results, in 2013-14 the district developed a focused Numeracy Strategy K-12, with the support of an outside researcher, which was collaboratively sponsored by the Ministry of Education. Part of this initiative includes targeted efforts in key curriculum expectations, as well as the use of a web-based gaming approach that focuses on 21st century learning strategies.
With respect to district achievement results on the Grade 10 OSSLT, over the past five years the percentage of first-time eligible students from within the district who were successful has dropped from 83% in 2008-09 to 76% in 2014-15 (Figure 8). With respect to gender, female students experienced a 6 percentage point decline, whereas males experienced a 9 percentage point decline.

Figure 8: OSSLT Results – District

Also notable during this time has been the decline for Special Education students and English Language Learners (ELL) within the district over the past seven years, resulting in a growing gap in comparison to the provincial averages (Tables 3 and 4). While ELL outcomes have declined by 31 percentage points over the years, the provincial results have improved by seven percentage points, accounting for the current -36 percentage point gap between the district and province.

Credit Completion Results.

The Ministry of Education for Ontario has funded a Student Success Lead (SSL) for each secondary school within the province whose primary goal is to provide supports that enable in-risk students to achieve. The funding provided is for six lines or periods for the year, three per
Table 3: OSSLT - Successful Special Needs Students – District*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Comparison to Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>-11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fully Participating First-Time Eligible Students (excluding gifted)

Table 4: OSSLT - Successful English Language Learner Students – District*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Comparison to Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>-21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>-25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>-36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fully Participating First-Time Eligible Students

semester, which equates to the same as any full-time teacher. This initiative has been a key factor in improving the overall provincial graduation rates since 2003. All SSLs are required to complete a Taking Stock survey report three times per year, which provides on-going data to the district and province on credit completions, and the range of supports that have been used. These supports include the intervention of a caring adult, an individualized timetable, a strength and needs based student profile, and education and career pathway planning.
A key indicator of student success for Grades 9 and 10 students is the completion of eight credits per year. Efforts at improving credit completion serve to not only sustain student engagement in their education, but also improve the odds of students graduating on time in order to successfully pursue the pathway of their choice thereafter. Over the course of the past five years, the district results have steadily increased, as shown in the Table 5 below. Unfortunately no data after the 2012-13 school year were accessible for Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Grade 9 Credit Completion Rates - District (2008-13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>&gt;=8 Credits</th>
<th>7 Credits</th>
<th>6 Credits</th>
<th>&lt;6 Credits*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>73.04%</td>
<td>9.01%</td>
<td>4.47%</td>
<td>13.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>79.97%</td>
<td>7.05%</td>
<td>4.03%</td>
<td>8.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>78.75%</td>
<td>6.86%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
<td>10.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*the <6 credits category includes some identified students who are not taking a full schedule of 8 credits, but were success in earning their attempted credits.

For a number of years one of the means that have helped the district improve their credit completion rate for Grade 9 students has been their Reach Ahead program. The summer program is available for all Grade 8 students who are transitioning to secondary school in the fall. By attending four full weeks of classes, students have the opportunity to gain one full secondary course. Since it was launched in 2009-10, credit completion rates had soared from 164.5 district wide, to 547 full credits, and 122 half credits in 2012-13. Changes made to the program however reduced the number of full credits granted to just 147 during 2014-15. By the end of Grade 10 students are expected to have completed 16 credits, in order to stay on track for their graduation. From 2007-08, the district has experienced a 5 percentage improvement for Grade 10 students (Table 6). Data for the senior grades were unavailable, although their credit completions are reflected in the graduation rates.
With the objective of fostering student engagement, one of the priorities of the district has been in providing eLearning – otherwise known as online learning courses. In 2011-12, a total of 1036.5 courses were earned via eLearning, followed by 770.5 in 2012-13. In 2013-14, a total of 793 credits were earned using this platform.

Table 6: Grade 10 Credit Completion Rate - District (2007-13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>&gt;=16 Credits</th>
<th>15 Credits</th>
<th>14 Credits</th>
<th>&lt;14 Credits**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>61.35%</td>
<td>9.55%</td>
<td>5.08%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>66.89%</td>
<td>9.75%</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
<td>18.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>65.31%</td>
<td>8.26%</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
<td>22.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*the <14 credits category includes some identified students who are not taking a full schedule of 8 credits, but were success in earning their attempted credits.

The district also has an Alternative Education program specifically designed for disengaged students who are generally within a year of graduating. Teachers within this program “cold call” students and invite them back to return via this specialized program, which links them to a teacher who serves as a “life coach” and who helps craft an individualized learning plan based on the student’s unique needs, interests, and goals. During 2010-11 there were 205 students engaged in this system program, earning 636 credits.

In 2011-12 the district relocated one of its major system Alternative Education programs to Erie College. This partnership had many advantages, including providing a near seamless transition for students interested in pursuing a post-secondary program once they had graduated. In the first year the district had 153 students in the program with 70 graduates, with 34 of these that went on, or planned to go on to post-secondary and/or an apprenticeship. The following year, 2012-13, there were 217 students, 68 of which graduated.
Experiential Programs.

Experiential programs are designed to provide students an opportunity to explore the world of work, particularly those on a pathway directly into the work force or into apprenticeships after their graduation. In 2012-13, the last year I was able to obtain district data on this, 3,292 students took part in Cooperative Education programming, representing 20% of the entire student population, a notable increase from 15.8% five years earlier. Over 800 different employers from within the community provided these placements, ranging from the trades, to elementary schools, accounting, and healthcare. The total number of Co-op credits earned was 5193.5, an 87.3% completion rate. Furthermore, 965 students took part in the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), with 204 signing on to apprenticeships at the end of their experience.

OYAP provides students the unique opportunity to earn dual credits – credits that count not only towards their secondary graduation, but also for their post-secondary program. This was another outcome of the Students Success strategy launched by the Ministry. The Dual Credits Program within the district provides disengaged and underachieving students with the potential to succeed, the opportunity to attend a college or apprenticeship and earn both secondary school credits and college/apprenticeship credits. During the 2011-12 Year, the dual credit program between the district and Erie College, known as “Erie Bridge” had 84 students, 24 of whom were return learners. In all 168 credits were attempted, with 120 achieved, a 71% success rate. Through the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), 97 students were involved, with 8 of these being return students. In total 170.5 credits were attempted, with 153 achieved, an 89.7% success rate. These were the only two dual credit programs that year. The number of students involved in dual-credit programs in 2012-13 increased by 25 percent, as 253 students took part, including 149 who were “at risk” and/or out of school and returned to
participate (Table 7). Of the 436.5 credits attempted, 342.5 were achieved, for a success rate of 78.5%.

Perhaps no other initiative exemplifies experiential learning more than the Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program launched by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Over the years the Ministry has heavily invested in expanding the SHSM options for students, resulting in surging enrolment within the programs (see Figure 9). The Specialist High Skills Major program provides students the unique opportunity to customize their learning experience in their senior

Table 7: Dual Credit Program - District (2012-13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dual Credit Program</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th># of students who were at risk and/or out of school &amp; returned to participate</th>
<th># of Credits Attempted</th>
<th># of Credits Achieved</th>
<th>Success Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erie (College) Bridge</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualized Math</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades, Engineering &amp; Design</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OYAP Apprenticeship Level One Dual Credits</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>155.5</td>
<td>141.5</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>436.5</td>
<td>342.5</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

years by focusing on a career path they are interested in (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). In 2016, SHSM programs have 19 areas of study, which include key economic sectors of interest from agriculture, aviation/aerospace, business, construction, and energy, to information technology, non-profit, transportation and more. Through the SHSMs students are required to
complete a package of 8-10 courses specifically tailored to a career path, including a Cooperative Education work placement (Fullan, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). Students not only benefit by refining their career goals and gaining sector-recognized certifications and work experience in a career field of interest, they can also earn credits recognized by postsecondary educational institutions.

The district launched SHSM programming in 2007-08 with seven programs in three sectors within seven schools. By the 2014-2015 school year, the district had 25 programs in thirteen sectors within 14 schools. Student enrolment within the SHSM programs surged as well with the expansion of the programs (see Figure 10). More rigorous and accurate reporting methods were put into place by the Ministry from 2012-14, which impacted the district’s numbers – notably in 2013-14 – bouncing back again in 2014-15. With respect to the number of students who actually fulfill all of the requirements for the program and earn a Red Seal designation upon their diploma indicating so, the district held a 57% completion rate in 2013-14, 10 percentage points above the provincial average.
In regards to credit completion, the earned versus attempted credit completion provides additional interesting information. In the district, 88% of SHSM students earned their credit, compared to an 84% rate for non-SHSM students. In comparison, at the provincial level, 95% of SHSM students earned their credit, compared to 93% for non-SHSM students. Although the success rates were high for those credits attempted at the University and University/College level courses, what was clearly more impressive was the success rate for credits within the Open, College and Workplace courses. The impact a SHSM based course credit can have in inspiring credit completions among students can be clearly seen when analyzing the rates when compared to non-SHSM students within the same course levels (Figure 11). The school district strongly believes in the positive impact the SHSM program is having, and in September 2014 launched an additional six new programs, including Non-Profit, Business, Hospitality and Tourism, Manufacturing, Arts and Culture, and Justice, Community Safety and Emergency Services.
**Graduation Rate.**

As the Ministry has made significant gains from the 68% provincial graduation rate in 2003-04, the district as well has made gains in its graduation rates over the years (Table 8). The percentage only includes those who graduate within four or five years. In 2012 the Ministry of Education defined more clearly what was meant by a “cohort” graduation rate, which aligned the district results with their neighbouring boards. Thus, the 2011 rate represents the number of students in a cohort who began the Grade 9 year and remained with the district until they graduated in year 4 or 5. Students who either leave or register from another district are therefore not included in this cohort.

The sections which follow will present the research findings on the Student Success Strategy for each of the four schools based on the interviews conducted.
Table 8: Graduation Rate - District (2010-15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Comparison to Province</th>
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* Data reflects the Ministry of Education clarification on the calculation of graduation rates based on a five-year cohort.
OAKRIDGE

Oakridge Secondary School is located closest to the central business district within the inner city and had an enrolment of nearly 1150 students. Located in one of the lowest socioeconomic areas within the country, the school is unique in the district by having the largest English as a Second Language (ESL) student population, originating from approximately 80 different countries, and speaking more than 50 different languages. The school also had the largest Aboriginal student population within the district. Four participants from Oakridge took part in the study, with each – as stated earlier – provided a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The participants included the Principal ‘Brock’, the Student Success Lead ‘Sofia’, the Head of Student Services ‘Roger’, and the SHSM Lead ‘Olivia’.

Connecting with Every Student

The first of four pillars in the Student Success initiative is connecting with every student. Years of research indicate that fostering strong personal connections between the school and students not only helps promote a positive school climate, but improves student success (Balfanz et al., 2014; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ferguson et al., 2005). There are five key parts to this process, which includes monitoring student progress, assigning responsibility for following students, paying attention to specific groups, efforts at improving attendance, discipline and reducing suspensions, and finally ensuring student voice is included.

At Oakridge Secondary School, the effort to foster connections with students over the past four years has included a variety of strategies. Two of the interviewees identified the use of mentoring educational assistants, which was launched five years prior. As Sofia, the SSL described, their role is “to attach that caring adult piece to some of our kids and provide extra support.” Brock, the principal of Oakridge for the past five years, highlighted that Urban and
Priority High Schools Funding had allowed for three mentoring EAs, as well as a full-time Social Worker “to help support students in-risk or at-risk, whatever term we’re using these days. So that’s also been helpful in trying to create connections.” One of the interviewees also identified the Transitions program, which has included staff working together to promote the success of students as they move from elementary Grade 8 to secondary Grade 9. Roger shared a little about the networking that had taken place in the past:

We’ve invited some of the Gr. 7 & 8 teachers to collaborate with our Gr. 9 teachers, so that when the Grade 8s are coming into Grade 9, the Grade 7 and 8 teachers know this is the material, from a curriculum point of view will help, if its covered in Gr. 7 & 8, in order for the students to be successful in Grade 9.

Monitoring Student Progress.

Monitoring student progress can be the role of one, or many, and undoubtedly many stand a far better chance of making a profound impact and change in the lives of students. At Oakridge a team approach is used. As Roger, the Head of Student Serves stated, it includes the SSL, “our counsellors, admin, learning resource, our EAs.” The work of the team begins early on with the transition of Grade 8 students to their respective school in Grade 9, and continues in providing supports to students throughout their secondary life. Aside from transitions, the team meets monthly to review data and provide targeted interventions for secondary students. The data are then used “to flag students that are in-risk earlier so therefore when we go through these lists we are targeting our Gr. 9s and 10s, we pull the whole team together” (who said this?) in order to ensure that all at-risk students are connected with a caring adult, resulting in “fewer kids falling through the cracks” (Roger).

As part of monitoring student progress, the Student Success Leadership Team is tasked with the responsibility of analyzing report card data at critical points throughout the year in
order to plan and provide timely interventions to enable students to succeed. The process for this begins early at the preliminary reports when students who are failing are flagged as a concern, and especially by the midterm reports, when early interventions can still turn the situation around for students. Along with the monthly on-site meetings at Oakridge, the Student Success Teachers have monthly meetings with the district Student Success Lead. As Brock stated, this allows “a chance for sharing best practices, which is always a good thing between schools. You know what’s working with you, within your school. What’s your approach? So good ideas come out of that.” Through the hard work of the team, there have been noticeable improvements in Student Success over the years.

**Assigning Responsibility for Following Students.**

Assigning responsibility for following students has become a critical component to the Student Success initiative generating positive results. Within each of the schools this included not only the Student Success Lead (SSL) funded through the Ministry as the frontline worker, communicating with and working for the best interest of in-risk students, but especially, to a varying degree, the larger Student Success Team (SST). Under the Ontario Ministry of Education Student Success Initiative, each secondary school has been provided with six lines for Student Success – the equivalent of one full time teacher. The SSL is responsible for working directly with and advocating for in-risk students, including coordinating Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery, as well as completing the Ministry required data reports, including Taking Stock throughout the year. Since its inception, the role and expectations of the SSL has changed and become more clearly defined over time.

Oakridge has launched several notable efforts in particular to foster greater connections in working with students. Upon his arrival five years ago as Principal, Brock found one of his “biggest challenge(s) here for us when I got here was there was all these organizations in the
school working with students.” Unfortunately there was little coordination of these services at the time. He described the biggest concern he faced:

That we didn’t have three different people or organizations with one student, and somebody not working with another. One thing our Student Success has done is created a database of students. And it’s very hard to keep up with it, because it’s so fluid and always changing, so that was our biggest challenge. How do we make sure every student in need has somebody attached to them, but not necessarily two or three people attached to them.

Since the inception of the Student Success Strategy, the role and expectations have changed. As Roger stated:

When it was first rolled out, nobody knew exactly the role of the Student Success Lead, and what Student Success was. There was a lot of duplication, things that guidance traditionally did. All of a sudden Student Success was taking on these things. There was confusion of who was doing what. And why they were doing this. There’s been a lot of turnover in the Student Success site lead role. A teacher would get into it, and after a year go “I don’t want to do this anymore. This is too much. What do you want me to do?” The role was constantly changing. Constantly evolving. But in the last few years the district’s made an effort to try and get some consistency with the way Student Success is looking at each school.

Aside from the support that the SSL and Student Services staff provided to in-risk students, Oakridge “hired mentoring EAs to attach that caring adult piece to some of our kids and provide extra support” (Sofia). Funding for these Educational Assistants was provided through the Student Success envelope at the district level. To ensure these in-risk students were being
regularly monitored, encouraged and supported, Oakridge’s administration clarified the expectations and provided additional supports:

We set up a schedule so that our Student Success Teacher meets with the mentoring EAs every two weeks. Reviews their list of students that they are responsible for, which is about 20 – 25 each. I guess we formalized some processes which is what we’ve done. To make sure we’re not missing any students. It used to be a little more haphazard, informal. So we formalized things a little bit, so that we’re getting all the students. I mentioned that we did start a Student Success room which we didn’t have before. (Brock)

**Paying Attention to Specific Groups.**

Another critical component of connecting with students in school is paying attention to specific groups. This ranges from establishing a well-designed transitions program for Grade 9 students entering secondary school, to providing supports, independent learning options, and even leadership opportunities for senior students. Research has shown how critical the first year of secondary school is with respect to fostering a student’s integration and sense of academic optimism leading to graduation (Kennelly et al., 2007; Balfanz et al., 2014). Having worked in education for over twenty-years, I can attest that transition programs have long been established between elementary feeder schools and secondary schools to ease the anxiety and help familiarize students with not only the change to a larger school, but especially with the change in courses, routines and extracurricular opportunities. Most feeder schools conduct site visits at the end of Grade 8, or host guidance personnel and/or an administrator to discuss the transition of their students. Since the inception of Student Success, however, these efforts have included additional measures such as orientation days prior to the start of the school year, a host of fun
activities to foster a sense of community in the Grade 9 welcome week, as well as supports provided throughout the year.

Each of the four schools within the study conducted intake meetings between teachers of both schools, and/or administrators near the end of the Grade 8 school year. In these meetings anecdotal notes were taken to help shape the programming and intervention strategies they will use to support their new learners. Oakridge has several programs in place that support a range of specific groups within the school. The Transitions program is one of the longest running ones, which Roger stated was something that existed:

Even before Student Success, but now it’s kind of a more formalized process. In order to help the students, and get them into a building where they are more comfortable, there’s a lot of connections that take place between Oakridge and our associate schools. . . So it’s not only transition with the students, but its transition activities with the admin and the Gr. 7 & 8 teachers.

At Oakridge Secondary, Roger shared how they have:

High school teachers come to their environment, and they actually do a sample lesson. And they’ll kind of do things. In a math class what I will do is we’re going to look at a concept, and I’m going to do a lesson on how it might be approached from an academic classroom. And now we’re going to look at that same concept from an applied view. So that way kids kind of see what academic and applied level courses – now I can see the difference.

The supports for students continue throughout the entire first year in Grade 9, including peer mentorship programs at each of the four schools. These programs allow senior students to be positive role models in a leadership capacity by mentoring Grade 9 students. Three of these originate from a training program from California known as Link Crew. Link Crew uses a play-
based focus to establish strong connections early on with new junior students. Senior students benefit not only from the leadership experience they gain, but also in earning a secondary credit at the same time. Efforts at connecting with new junior students early in this transition year have been paying off.

Each SSL is responsible for submitting a Taking Stock report three times a year, and as Sofia reported, they “usually see over 45% students at-risk in Grade 9, and this year we saw it drop down to 21%. So for us that shows that the transition activities we’ve been doing, we’ve connected the appropriate supports for these students to be success.” Brock also highlighted those positive results, stating “when we took a look at those at-risk students, a review of mid-term marks, each and every one of them were connected to a caring adult.”

Along these same lines, there have been other efforts made to transform the character of Oakridge into a warmer, more caring place. One of the means of achieving this has been through the incorporation of Restorative Justice. As Brock shared “we’ve had a real emphasis in the last three years in Restorative Justice Practices. And not just after instances, the other part of restorative justice practices which some kids miss - the building of community. Having kids feel that they belong.” To this end, students and staff meet once a week as “the needs in this school are so high. We run after school every Wednesday a Restorative Justice circle. We’ll get 30-40 kids who show up plus 10 staff. Again just trying to build community so kids feel that they belong” (Brock).

Lastly, with the largest Aboriginal student population in the school district, Oakridge established an Aboriginal program to meet their specific needs. The program has:

. . . two Aboriginal youth workers, who actually are funded through the district, who work with students. We have a room for our Aboriginal students as well through the Urban Priority (grant). We have Aboriginal cultural worker to
support the native studies classes that we run here. So again that goes back to that programming piece. (Brock)

The program has become so popular that they now run 10 sections of it. As Roger also stated, they “have a package of about seven or eight Aboriginal courses”, the room they have been provided staffers “by Aboriginal caseworkers. And they are there to mentor Aboriginal students … they’re sort of there to be advocates for the Aboriginal students.”

**Attendance, Discipline, and Suspensions.**

With respect to attendance, discipline, and suspensions, it became clear through the interviews that a shift had taken place over the years. Student Success had provided an alternate lens to view these issues. Administrators have long grappled with attendance issues from disengaged learners, most often leading to a punitive disciplinary approach such as a suspension that ironically only serves to compound the problem further (Ferguson, 2005). With Student Success, as mentioned earlier team members are tracking in-risk students, trying to understand their situation and uncover any barriers they may face that interferes with their education.

Understanding the root causes of attendance and disciplinary issues is fundamental in order to eventually change student behaviour or provide appropriate and tailored supports. Each month the Student Success Team meets to review students who are in-risk of failing, and they recognize that non-attendance is directly related. Their efforts are aimed at getting students to class as best they can, as their data have shown that “students that are absent less than 30 classes, 93% of them pass … So that’s something that we try to emphasize with students - the importance of being here” (Brock). Over his 17 years’ experience as an administrator, Brock has found that one of the best solutions for getting his students back on track was working with the teacher to ensure the student was not overwhelmed with “here’s a package of what you missed over the last 15 days.” He gives his staff the permission not to teach the whole curriculum, but
rather to focus on the big ideas, and concentrate on the overall expectations. The positive spin-offs from attendance tracking, having a framework of supports, and encouraging staff to focus on the overall critical learnings has been significant. Brock says:

We’ve seen over the last four years, four years ago our daily absence rate was 24 percent. It’s down to 17 percent now. So students are coming more often. So we’ve worked hard at taking away those barriers to education. The things that get in the way of them coming to school. We took a look at some data where we took 30 absences, students with 30 or more absences as our cut-off, and we’ve seen through working with teachers and building community we’ve been able to increase the percentage of them passing by 10 percent over the last two years.

Trying to cut down the absence rate has been a challenge at times, as Roger alluded: “Sometimes the parental support isn’t there. Yeah your son hasn’t been there for the last five days. ‘Yeah he’s in bed. I’m having a hard time getting him out. What can you do to help me?’ And you’re like??” At the same time Roger fully understood the context:

School is just not a priority to them. They’re more concerned about where they are going to sleep, where food’s going to come from. This area is one of the poorest economic areas in all of Ontario. The highest percentage of single parent families. Sometimes the single parent family’s mom or dad works two jobs. Sometimes the kids have to look after the younger siblings. So when you’re talking to them about ‘I didn’t get that History assignment in’ it’s on the bottom of their priority list. Because they’re just trying to . . . survive.

Student Voice.

A recent survey indicated that students feel a much stronger sense of safety and community at Oakridge Secondary than they do outside the school where they live, a testament
to the work of all staff there. As noted above, many factors have gone into making this possible, including weekly restorative justice circles where students and staff can openly share their problems, including hearing both sides of a story - from the accused and accuser - in order to promote understanding and make amends. The use of school assemblies, and the promotion of Character Education traits have also proven beneficial, and here students have taken a lead. As Brock stated, they:

. . . took a look at the old character education and the need to help students with responsibility, respect and all those things. So I guess really taking away barriers to success for students. So we started an initiative called Eagles Pride which takes a look at all six of the learning skills that are included in that as well . . .

This has included:

. . . special days called Oakridge Cares, just to reinforce with students expectations. And not just the concepts of respect and that, but what does it look like? What does it sound like? So again trying to break it down in that way, so students understand. We have students do the presentations around respect, so it’s not just adults sitting there telling them, its students. In doing that, and I’ll use respect as the example, since that’s the one I’ve been talking about, we had a group of students and a group of teachers come up with ‘what does respect look like?’ So it was students as well as teachers and the amazing thing was the lists were almost exactly the same. Which was an interesting thing.

**Providing Programs that Enable Achievement**

The second of four pillars in the Student Success initiative has been providing programs that enable achievement. This includes providing varied programs that meet the
diverse needs of learners, organizing teaching to ensure in-risk students are matched with educators that care and can provide the balance of push/pull factors that can enable them to believe and succeed, and finally help to reduce failure rates through a range of programs/strategies.

**Varied Programs.**

The aim in providing variety in programming is to create a good outcome for all students, better meeting individual needs rather than using a one-size fits all approach. Roger, as the Head of Student Services, summed up succinctly the change that has taken place over the years in better meeting student needs:

You know what we realize that if we get you into classes that you want to take that you will be more successful, as to saying okay, maybe years ago we’d say you need Math, you need English, you need Science, you need History. There you go, these are your courses. But now I realize that if we’re more accommodating and flexible and get students into classes, that’s kind of a carrot for them, and the chances of them attending and being more successful are better.

Roger also chronicled the changes over time with respect to the array of nutrition, health and wellness programs that have been brought in:

The list goes on and on and on of supports that certainly didn’t exist six or seven years ago. Everything from getting kids glasses, to getting their teeth checked. Some of them don’t have family doctors. Clothes, food, transportation. It’s kind of been the school’s philosophy that if we can get the kids into the building, and here on a regular basis, then the teachers have a chance of getting them to be successful.

The addition of two SHSM programs was also mentioned by two of the interviewees. Brock, the principal, shared that upon his arrival “we took a look at programming to help engage
students to help them find a direction. So we introduced two Specialist High Skills Majors to the school. This school and two of my previous schools as well.” At the time the district provided critical supports in not only launching the programs at Oakridge, but in sustaining them. Completing the requirements for the funding by the Ministry can be a daunting task in and of itself at the onset. As Olivia described:

I think the supports that are in place, for teachers, for those of us actually administering the program are very good. The two who I deal with at the Board level, Cindy, who is the Admin Assistant I guess is fantastic. She keeps everything so well organized. And then Tina who is the Special Assignment teacher for it is really, really well informed. And they are super supportive of the kids as well. Which is huge.

Olivia went on to share how popular the SHSM program became with students once implemented:

The Hospitality program here, it exploded when we started it. … I think the first year we ran three lines of it. We were up to eight lines of it at one time. Now we’re down to five or six. Right now. And that’s cyclical right. That’s just the interest and the kids right now. We have a really big batch of academic kids, and that could change again. So it’s just not fitting in their timetable.

As a result, they have found many students within the program returning to school in their post-grad year to complete the co-op SHSM. Roger also echoed similar concerns when describing the pathways at Oakridge Secondary:

One of the difficulties with the SHSM that we’re finding is, especially with our Energy, is the kids find out about it in Gr. 9 & 10, they’re keen. They sign up for it. And say you are a university bound kid, trying to fulfill all of the SHSM
requirements, especially the two credit co-op, but take all the courses for entry to university, sometimes they can’t fulfill all of the requirements. It’s just too much.

Although these students are enthusiastic at first about the program, their concern by their senior years becomes the entry requirements and part-time jobs during the summer, which reduces the chances of them completing the cooperative work components. Roger summed up the shift he often sees in the view of senior students with respect to completing the SHSM program requirements: “At the end of the day if they get their red seal, and they’re going on to university, the kids are like ‘What is that doing for me?’ So they get it. And it’s hard to sell the SHSM to our university kids. Or rather hard to get them to complete it.”

**Organizing Teaching.**

Purposeful staffing is an essential part of an effective Student Success Strategy. This can be in the form of teaching staff or support staff. For the past five years this school had secured urban grant funding that allowed them to hire mentoring EAs “to attach that caring adult piece to some of our kids and provide extra support” (Sofia). Needless to say, the remainder of the Student Success Team, well-chosen individuals with an ethic of care, have made a profound difference in connecting with the students. Brock alluded to the impact the team was having upon Grade 9 students in particular when he discussed the drop of the in-risk student population in Grade 9 from an average of 40-45% down to 21%:

> When we took a look at those at-risk students, a review of mid-term marks, each and every one of them were connected to a caring adult. So we didn’t have any surprises there, which I think is really representative of the work staff is doing in order to connect with students.

Finding and retaining outstanding staff in critical positions is just as important at the district level, to provide continuity as vital relationships of support are fostered. As Olivia alluded to:
We’ve been lucky too because there has been consistency with our contacts at the Board. Because Tina’s done this job for three years. And Cindy has been her assistant for three years. It comes down to building relationships, right. Having the good working relationship. And they’re great. If there’s ever been a question they’re just a phone call away, which is fantastic.

**Help to Reduce Failure Rates.**

To help reduce the failure rates, the Student Success initiative has established two notable interventions, as well as encouraged a range of support programs. Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery are both now synonymous with Student Success, each intended to offer additional assistance for students who are close to achieving the credit. Credit Rescue is a preventative measure, an intervention effort by Student Success Teachers who have identified and are working with an in-risk student and/or their teacher to assist them in attaining the credit before the completion deadline. Credit Recovery is an option available to students only after they have failed a course, providing an attempt to bridge the learning gap for students that teachers have identified. Through a Credit Recovery Course Profile, the SSL can easily identify the key learning expectations of the course that the student was not successful in. Students have a two-year window of opportunity in which they can attempt Credit Recovery, through the assistance of a Student Success Teacher.

Oakridge provides student opportunities for Credit Rescue and/or Credit Recovery. At the end of the semester, once the exams are completed, many teachers provide to students who are very close to passing one last opportunity to rescue their credit. As Sofia stated:

It’s for kids that are close who can come in, to meet some of the expectations to be successful in that course . . . And that can be a culminating activity, it depends. It’s on an individual basis. And it’s just depends on the kids.”
Oakridge has also established a Student Success room for students, and provides teaching lines for Credit Recovery. As Roger reported: “Next semester we’re running five lines. We actually run an after-school Credit Recovery.” What they had found is that they just do not have enough lines to meet the needs of the students who are interested.

**Alternative Programs and Supports.**

Another strategy in reducing failure rates is in providing alternative programs which meet the needs of specific groups. As previously mentioned, Oakridge Secondary School has the largest number of Aboriginal students in the board, and offers a program to meet the needs of these students. This stay-in-school initiative is funded by the school district and the government and includes two Aboriginal caseworkers who serve as mentors. Through it they have been able to offer 10 sections of Aboriginal classes, programs for nutrition, cultural learning, employment counselling, as well as events and activities. The results have been encouraging:

We’re seeing more of our Aboriginal students being engaged, earning credits, and graduating. I mean we offer Aboriginal language, so students can learn Ojibwa. I think, I’m positive that’s the only school in (the city) doing that. . . In Grade 9 and 10 . . . they’ll bring in elders from the community. . . In the senior classes, there is an Aboriginal regale classes, and Aboriginal History class, that looks at current Aboriginal issues. So if the kids are Aboriginal they’ll buy into it. Because they want to learn about their culture and heritage. (Roger)

As part of continuing adult education, an alternative program was launched at Oakridge in 2011-12 designed to meet the needs of students from families who had recently immigrated to Canada when they were in their late teens. For students who are not able to complete all of their credits by age 21, the program’s location in a high immigrant community addresses the issue of equity by providing another option to achieve the goal of graduation. Students were able to
complete one to two credits prior to being placed in a Cooperative Education program where they could gain additional credits. The program also connected students with Erie College, providing a potential post-secondary pathway. In 2011-12 a total of 25 credits were earned by students. In 2012-13, 46 credits were earned, and eight students graduated. Finally, Oakridge also has a Return to Learn program that is offered after school. It is a dual credit program, allowing students to earn two secondary credits while at the same time earning two credits for Erie College.

**Improving Teaching and Learning**

The third of four pillars in the Student Success initiative has been improving teaching and learning. Oakridge has made efforts in recent years to improve teaching and learning, through the use of learning teams, and improving assessment practices.

**Learning Teams.**

When exploring the practice of improving teaching and learning, each administrator emphasized collaborative learning, otherwise known as learning teams. All four administrators began the learning process for improving teaching and learning by in-servicing department heads prior to all staff. The priority was to ensure these school leaders fully understood the concepts of big ideas, learning goals and success criteria.

A learning team approach is the most powerful method of engaging staff and changing practices. Several departments and staff members at Oakridge have been using collaboration as a means for reflection, exploring new strategies, and building learning partnerships that support one another, to move beyond their own comfort zone:

So there’s a little more risk taking. They’re willing to try things to see if they can get better results for students. To have more of them pass. . . We do a lot of sharing of
what departments are doing that has been successful for them. Where they are seeing better student results. (Brock)

Improving teaching and learning at times requires courageous conversations with staff, to revisit and challenge existing practices that are not optimal for student success in order to bring about improvement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b). Supporting data for these occasions can prove to be valuable. As Brock recounted:

Our Geography department failure rates were in our geography applied classes in Gr. 9. Forty percent of the students were failing. So we looked at that data. ‘Okay, what are you doing, where are the students starting to fall down. Let’s dig a little deeper into that. Where do you see the issue?’ And they identified ‘Well we do all of the culminating right at the end. The students miss a day or two and they end up in difficulty’.

Release time was provided for the staff, where they opted to structure the course in a way where portions of the culminating assignments were completed at the end of each unit. The result of this teamwork reaped dividends as student outcomes improved.

A team approach was also used to improve the student success rate on the OSSLT. Through working more closely with the students, they found they were having difficulty brainstorming ideas of what to write about when asked on the test:

So the next cycle we developed a couple strategies on how to brainstorm. Students we’re successful with it and we took it school wide. We introduced it as PD to all of our departments. The expectation is this is how you are going to teach students to generate ideas and they were doing it school wide. In fact we have Gr. 9s who walk into a class, ‘Oh yeah we did that strategy in this other class. I understand that. (Brock)
Brock went on to describe a group of teachers who are going a step further than the traditional professional development days learning experience, meeting and working together to improve their teaching strategies for the benefit of their students.

We’ve got a group of teachers who are trying out different strategies from a book called *Making Thinking Physical*. So they are trying them out in their classes, and getting together hoping that we’ll find some other strategies that will prove to be successful with our clientele here.

As education is moving to a more inquiry based learning approach, where teachers and students are co-creating and co-constructing together, there has been a struggle, particularly as it is a dramatic shift from past practices.

Because it means giving away some control. Even though we emphasize you go in there with an idea of what must be included, and you can add whatever. But listening to the students a little bit more. Assessment of and as, I think is, again the as learning part, that meta-cognition is one where students are talking about their own learning, is one that people still aren’t that comfortable with. (Brock)

As with any major shift, change requires a sound rationale for staff to buy in, involves tentative steps in the beginning, and takes time in order build capacity for it to take hold (Fullan, 2007).

To foster this mindset at Oakridge, a collaborative step-by-step approach was take:

And we’ve emphasized let’s do small things first. . . So we would have them visit another classroom or use the math facilitator to come in and work with them in their classroom to set up say a class with stations, as opposed to the traditional teacher directed at the beginning. Trying to use more inquiry. So I think that’s one of the things that we’ve seen there, and we’re seeing more staff, because they’re seeing success for kids by changing their instructional practices. And they’re more willing
now to take it a little further. So let’s try it with one lesson within a unit of study as a start. Let’s not worry about putting this in the whole course, or every day. But let’s start small. And I think, that’s really improved the teaching and learning for staff, as well as students. (Brock)

**Improving Assessment Practices.**

Connected with improving teaching and learning is re-examining assessment practices, reflecting on past and current methods with the lens of new views and theories, which ultimately seeks to improve outcomes for students. In the past, assessments were viewed as a final product – otherwise known as a “summative assessment” or awarding of a fixed grade on an assignment that would never be revisited again. Students may or may not have understood the rationale for their grade, based on the professional judgment of their teachers, and exactly what gaps they had exhibited in their learning (Friesen, 2009).

A profound shift has occurred recently with respect to assessment practices, particularly coupled with the 2010 Ontario Ministry of Education policy *Growing Success*, and Damian Cooper’s (2007) book *Talk About Assessment: Strategies and Tools to Improve Learning*. Assessment has become a critical teaching and learning tool for students to understand and bridge the gaps in their learning. The intention is to provide greater clarity on the expectations, including providing exemplars – samples of various levels of work – as well as providing greater consistency, and multiple opportunities for students to improve.

Upon arriving at Oakridge Secondary School five years ago, Brock spoke with each of the department heads to better understand the culture and needs, and quickly “realized that understanding of assessment of, for and as learning was very weak. So I wanted to start there. But I very quickly realized that I have to start at the beginning of the assessment continuum.” Once staff understood the designing backwards pedagogical approach, including big ideas,
learning goals, and success criteria, Brock then finally introduced assessment for, of and as learning. Another key decision he made was to allow staff to conduct culminating activities throughout the semester, as part of each final unit task, a decision that has research backing: “A school that sets out to organize itself so that student work was spread reasonably over an entire term could largely eliminate this end-of-term crush” (Levin, 2012, p. 102). As students have final exams to contend with in each course at the end of the semester, initiating culminating projects much earlier would certainly help ease stress levels in the final weeks and improve outcomes. Brock found this to be true in his experience:

Instead of students having to remember four months back. And what they found was it didn’t overwhelm the students. Here’s your culminating that’s covering the whole course. And even though they would try and scaffold it and break it down for them, students would still be overwhelmed by it. And we’ve seen 20 percent increase in the pass rate. Just from some changes like that.

Connecting with the Community

Connecting with the community is the fourth and final pillar in the Student Success framework. These partnerships include connecting with parents and families, community groups and supports, post-secondary institutions, as well as with local employers, all in an effort to guide, inspire and assist young people in their respective pathways. Of all the schools within the district, Oakridge has some of the highest needs:

Poverty is a huge issue in this school. So you know there’s all these other things, the basic needs of life students have first. In fact two of the three neighbourhoods in the 2003 census within the top three poorest neighbourhoods in Canada, in this area,
which you don’t realize . . . We’ve got a large ESL population, about 270 students currently taking ESL, and most of them are refugee students. So they’ve come from refugee camps, from war torn areas. We have female students that are never allowed to go to school in the countries that they’ve come from, and they arrive here at 16 and they’ve never been to school. We have students who are illiterate in their own language. So that makes teaching English that much more difficult. (Brock)

Clearly the challenges are significant. Community connections, and supports are all the more necessary in this context to ensure the most basic needs of students are met, so they can complete their secondary education.

Working with Parents and Families.

Oakridge Secondary School has a very diverse and large immigrant and Aboriginal population, and:

. . . they all have different views on education. They all have different needs from the school. So we tried to reach out to their community, bring our parent council, we encourage the parents to come so that they can actually learn about the Ontario education system. Because quite often it is different from what they’re used to.

(Roger)

In order to foster positive, productive connections with parents and the community which can translate to improved student achievement, the school makes sure that language interpreters are available for parent-teacher night. As Roger went on to state “Quite often the parents are newcomers to Canada, and language is a barrier. So the interpreters are very, very useful, so they can have discussions with the teachers. And find out where their children are struggling.”
Open lines of communication are critical in forging home-school partnerships focused on improving student success for all.

**Working with Community Groups.**

Along with connecting with parents and families comes the importance of connecting with community partners who can provide invaluable supports. These connections are made all the more easier though when the community comes to you, offering to provide additional supports to assist our youth. As Brock described:

A lot of agencies and people want to come in and help students in schools like Oakridge because they want to take away the barriers. They want these students to be successful. So often I’ll get calls from these agencies who want to come in. I meet with them and talk about what service they would like to provide. Sometimes it’s a service that’s already in the building. So I may be doing some coordinating saying ‘Have you spoken to such and such agency because they’re in here working with us?’

Oakridge Secondary works with 13 outside agencies to help support students. Within the last year and a half they started a health and wellness centre:

Because we found that 32 percent of our students did not have a family doctor and had no medical attention. Since we also added public health to that, with dental hygienists who’ve come in and started screening first with our ESL students, and found that 90 percent of them needed some sort of either their teeth cleaning, or major work. And then we just added this year . . . a program that deals with newcomers, acculturation, and also trauma, supporting students that way. Again those are some of those outside agencies that I’ve mentioned at the very beginning.

(Brock)
They also have a full time social worker, Alternatives for Youth worker, and Aboriginal support workers, as well as the John Howard Society working within the school.

Lastly, and yet of tremendous significance, was the point made by Brock, who emphasized how imperative it is to routinely meet with the community supports who work within the school, to foster and sustain these relationships. As he stated:

I do go around at least every couple of weeks to the workers who are in the building, and agencies who are in the building. And say ‘Hey, how’s it going? How are things?’ I’ll give you an example. We have an AY counsellor who we didn’t have for a while. For about four or five months. I met her and she said ‘Well I’m not getting any referrals.’ Okay, I’ll see why that’s happening.

Recognizing that these agencies are on tight budgets and want to make certain that they are making an impact for the services they provide, Brock makes an effort to maintain these lines of communication:

... just to make sure we’re all on the same page. There’s no issues, because I’m so appreciative of all these supports that are in place. Because they are making a difference. Let’s make sure everybody’s happy. That it’s remaining win-win. That we are meeting the needs of students.

**Working with Postsecondary Institutions.**

As part of Student Success, the past few years have witnessed new partnerships being established between the district/school and nearby postsecondary institutions. Olivia shared a little about their affiliation with Nipigon College, while Roger described the growing popularity of the partnership they’ve forged with Erie College:
We have the Erie Bridge program. I don’t know if you’re familiar with it. As part of Student Success, it’s the dual credits. We have more kids now in Erie Bridge certainly than we did five years ago. I think the Erie Bridge is filled every year now, every semester.

Another key partnership has also been developed with a well-known university within the community, certainly drawing the attention of university minded students. Roger described a little about this burgeoning relationship:

We’ve also implemented the Bexley Reach Ahead Program. It was a pilot project between Bexley and the (Board), and there’s three kind of schools that are involved: Bayview, Cliffside and Oakridge. And what it is, they know that the kids that come from this area come from a lower socio-economic area. . . each school tries to get between 8 – 10 kids, and what they do is they get two credits, two high school credits and there is a teacher attached to that. But they actually go to Bexley every day, and twice a week they attend lecture. So there’s a math professor teaching them, and at the end of the semester they get two (secondary) credits, and they get a Bexley 0.5 credit. So that way they are on the campus. They get a feel for the university life. They are getting first hand instruction from a professor. It’s kind of like test driving the university. So that’s been happening now for the last two years.

This partnership involves a great deal of work behind the scenes among all the parties involved to make this opportunity happen for the students, including bringing the parents in to fully explain the program. As Roger went on to state, “logistically trying to make that happen, three schools, thirty kids, getting transportation. From the university point of view trying to find space. Find a professor to do it. Cross-enrolling kids, collection of marks.” Often what seems so easy on paper involves a great deal of time and effort by many to break new ground. Once
established however, these initiatives can enrich all of those involved, most especially the lives of students.

Through fostering positive community connections, supports and partnerships via Student Success – in essence a pervasive and demonstrative ethic of care - there has been a growing sense of community and responsibility among students. In a Taking Stock survey, which was conducted about their school and bullying, “Ninety-three percent feel very safe within their school. But of the students here only 18 percent feel safe within their community. Which talks to that sense of building community” (Brock).

**District Support**

As interviewees have shared, the district support has been strong, from supplying Oakridge with permanent lines for two mentoring EAs, to having consultants work with staff to improve their practice(s), or helping schools establish a SHSM program, to even expanding the number of Credit Recovery lines. Brock highlighted the monthly meetings between the SSL and the district, which has allowed “a chance for sharing best practices, which is always a good thing between schools. You know what’s working with you, within your school. What’s your approach? So good ideas come out of that.” Roger recognized that Student Success may take different forms in each school, and that some may be fully aligned with the recent district directive of only one person overseeing the strategy, while others may not:

For instance now, there’s supposed to be one person doing Student Success at every school. And I still think that at some schools there’s still two people doing it. Now whether that’s good or bad, there’s still some inconsistencies from the one school to the next. But at the end of the day. All of the things they are trying to do
is positive, and it’s for the good of the students. It’s trying to improve graduation rates.

The district has also been supportive in holding district meeting for staff within the SHSM program, although Olivia did wonder why there was a change in attendees:

The one thing that I do miss with it, is we used to have a meeting of all of us that were involved in the SHSM, and that doesn’t happen anymore. It’s now gone to the Guidance leads. So they really, I know a few times they’ve come back and they said ‘We’re not sure why we were at this meeting.’ Because they’re not delivering the programming.

Ironically, the Ministry of Education had also changed its past practices with respect to regional meetings for SHSM Leads. Olivia stated that in the beginning the Leads met at a regional level, learning new information and sharing best practices with one another. Now the meetings are further away, for an extended time, which has made it more difficult to attend:

Ours has been in Windsor, which is ridiculous. I don’t know if there’s a bit of disconnect between the Ministry and what’s happening. To set these meetings, which is three days, which I have to travel. So the locations are not very central. So in some respects I miss that. Because in the beginning we were able to meet. In (city) there are quite a few of us who are Hospitality Teachers, and offering the High Skills Program, we don’t even have a chance to get together anymore and bounce ideas. (Olivia)

**Strategy Development**

As noted earlier, Ontario’s Student Success Strategy at the secondary level has evolved from its initial inception in 2005. Over the years a number of adjunct supports and programs have
become synonymous with Student Success efforts. These have included Student Success Leads who were placed in each school, primarily responsible for tracking and supporting students’ in-risk, including efforts toward Credit Rescue. It also expanded to providing teaching lines dedicated to Credit Recovery, helping provide both the means and support for students who were close to achieving their credits to close learning gaps with just a few key assignments, rather than have them face the daunting task of redoing their credits in their entirety. Efforts in welcoming and supporting the transition of new junior students to secondary school, as well as in providing authentic real-world work experiences through SHSM programs for senior students, have all developed to meet the varied needs of Ontario’s learners. The Ministry of Education has also provided funding for a range of additional supports to help some of the most in-risk students to become successful. All of these supports and programs flow through the district level in an effort to positively impact the students of Ontario, including those at Oakridge.

Over the years Student Success Leads throughout the district have met at both system and regional levels to share best practices, but each school has had a degree of flexibility, and in some cases additional Board and provincial funding to meet targeted needs. With respect to the schools within the study, Oakridge Secondary School is located in one of the neediest areas of the district, as well as the province, and as previously mentioned has received some of this additional funding, evolving over time. When interviewees were asked how the strategy has changed they shared a range of different responses.

Having been at Oakridge for five years, Brock has seen many of these changes materialize, from the establishment of two SHSM programs, to having three mentoring EAs and a wide range of community supports to help meet student needs. With respect to the mentoring EAs, a schedule has been set up so that:
our Student Success Teacher meets with the mentoring EAs every two weeks. Reviews their list of students that they are responsible for, which is about 20 – 25 each. . .To make sure we’re not missing any students. It used to be a little more haphazard, informal. So we formalized things a little bit, so that we’re getting all the students. I mentioned that we did start a Student Success room which we didn’t have before.

Sofia also mentioned the addition of mentoring EAs as being a critical component to fostering connections with students at Oakridge. As she stated “we have hired mentoring EAs to attach that caring adult piece to some of our kids and provide extra support.” The transitions piece however was key in her mind to establishing a connection with students, and the positive impact of their work was evident in a recent Taking Stock report where 21 percent of Grade 9 students were now in-risk, compared with 40-45 percent in the past.

Oakridge has also been grateful for the many community partners who work cooperatively with the school in meeting a wide range of student needs. These supports have grown to include medical, food, clothing, transportation and more. To avoid any duplication, Student Success has been keeping a database of students who are being tracked to “make sure every student in need has somebody attached to them, but not necessarily two or three people attached to them” (Brock). Hence, a key part of the evolution has been the impact of a caring adult in their lives: “The building of community. Having kids feel that they belong” (Brock).

Some of the other supports now include Link Crew, as well as a growing Aboriginal program. The Link Crew peer mentorship program uses senior students to serve as mentors to the junior transition year students, serving as a role model for them to be academically minded and successful. Furthermore, as Roger alluded, as a guidance staff, they have become much
“more accommodating and flexible” in getting students into classes that interest them, to sustain their engagement. Tracking data has also been critical in providing supports, as the Student Success Team meets monthly now reviewing student progress.

The establishment of an Aboriginal program has also been designed to meet a targeted need for many of the student population at Oakridge. This now includes a packaged program of courses, their own room in the school, as well as Aboriginal caseworkers to mentor Aboriginal students, a drumming group, and special events held during the year. The result of this has been “more of our Aboriginal students being engaged, earning credits, and graduating” (Roger).

**How Student Outcomes Have Changed Over Time**

Both qualitative data gathered from the interviews, as well as administrative data obtained, were analyzed to shed light on how student outcomes have changed over time at Oakridge. As previously discussed, the Student Success Team at Oakridge has regularly been making use of attendance and failure reports to provide critical, targeted interventions to support students in being successful, while administration has been using department data to identify problem areas where students are struggling, in order to challenge staff to reflect on and improve teaching and learning practices. This section will begin by exploring the administrative data first, followed by the qualitative.

The administrative data sets included data from Taking Stock reports, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) data from Grade 9 Mathematics as well as the Grade 10 OSSLT, and finally graduation rates. The SSL provided a wealth of Taking Stock reports, of which three in particular are noted below. For Grades 9, 11, and 12, there has been a decline in the number of “in-risk” students from the fall of 2011, to the fall of 2013. In particular has been the dramatic decline for those in Grade 9 (Figure 12). With respect to the EQAO Grade 9
mathematic results, the academic level has seen a steady and gradual rise in its overall success rates since 2008-09, narrowing the gap between its results and that of the district, save for a 4 percentage point decline in its rate for 2013-14 (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Students In-risk - Oakridge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Fall 2011</th>
<th>Fall 2012</th>
<th>Fall 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gr.9</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr.10</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr.11</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr.12</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13: EQAO Academic Mathematic Results – Oakridge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Oakridge</th>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The same is true for the applied success rates, as the percentage of students achieving level 3 or 4 has risen from 14 percent in 2008-09 to 26 percent in 2014-15, again closing the gap with that of the district (Figure 14).

Unfortunately Oakridge has not experienced the same success for its students with respect to OSSLT outcomes. Since peaking at 72 percent success in 2009-10, it has declined to 47 percent in 2014-15, mirroring a similar, albeit smaller decline in the overall district and to some degree provincial rates (Figure 15).

Figure 14: EQAO Applied Mathematic Results – Oakridge

With respect to its graduation rates, Oakridge in the past two years has held fairly steady at 57-58 percent (Figure 16). Oakridge has a disproportionately high ESL rate, receiving the largest number of new immigrants within the district, many of whom English is a second language, and some not even ever having attended school. In a challenging socio-economic context, the gap in the graduation rate between the school and district has narrowed from a high of 37 percent in 2010-11 down to 23.5 percent in 2012-2013.
From the standpoint of the data available, overall, Oakridge achieved notable gains. As indicated above, from the fall of 2011 to the fall of 2013, their in-risk student population among the four grades declined from 43.38 percent to 38.23 percent, a 5.15 percentage point improvement. From 2009-2010 to 2012-2013, their graduation rate improved from 40.4 percent
to 57.4 percent. As noted earlier this figure can be somewhat misleading due to the method of calculation used prior to the Ministry’s clarification. A better indicator is the change in the gap between the district and the school’s graduation rate. This rate closed from a 29.6 percent difference in 2009-10 to a 23.5 percent difference in 2012-13. Also notable, Oakridge during this time recorded a decline in its OSSLT results, but an improvement in percentage of students achieving the Ministry standard in mathematics.

When asked if they could describe the impact the Student Success Strategy had for fostering positive outcomes, interviewees from Oakridge reported a number. For Sofia, the SSL, what stood out has been the more positive relations between teachers and students: “I think the relationship we make are positive, because it gets them to school.” Sofia and Roger also acknowledged the variety of new programs and offerings to engage students, from the SHSMs, test preparations to improve their skills in literacy and mathematics, to new technology and dual credits in providing post-secondary pathways. Olivia also summed this up succinctly:

So I think here at our school just providing them with so many opportunities to be successful, having the strong supports from Student Success, having the two High Skills Major programs, having our very supportive resource, and the (Aboriginal program) room, and having our breakfast program. Putting all of these things in place to help the kids be successful.

Brock has seen many positive outcomes from the strategy over his six years at Oakridge from a drop in daily absences and suspensions to an improving graduation rate. Another positive has been teaching staff recognizing the importance of focusing on the big ideas – the key learning goals for the course – and encouraging them not to stress achieving all of the specific course expectations, particularly for students who have chronic attendance issues for a host of reasons which are not all in their control. The host of outside agencies that are working in the
school to provide critical supports for students has also been beneficial and appreciated in making a difference in one of the most challenging socioeconomic areas in all of Canada.

**Challenges Encountered with the Student Success Strategy**

Each of the participants were also asked about issues or challenges the development of the Student Success Strategy has generated. As Roger reminisced when the position first started with just one person, there had “been a lot of turnover in the Student Success site lead role. A teacher would get into it, and after a year go ‘I don’t want to do this anymore. This is too much’”. As a result most schools quickly found that dividing up the lines among more than one staff was optimal, building a team approach among teachers by sharing the tremendous workload tied with Student Success. As the demands increased for those within Student Success, either by mandate of the Ministry of Education, or by the district itself, Brock was candid in stating that he has had to intervene at times to prevent a change in direction that did not align with the best interest of his school. As he stated:

I think sometimes though our Student Success Leads get given direction from the Board on things they should be doing, or need to be doing, which maybe doesn’t always fit the school, or the direction I may be seeing as a principal. And now all of a sudden we’re getting disjointed. Or we’re going in too many directions. I think one of my more important roles is funneling and filtering the initiatives that come into schools, and approaches that we take. I found in the last couple years that every once in a while that my Student Success Teacher is in a bit of a bind because she is being asked to do something from the Board, and I say no we’re not doing that right now. This is the direction that we have decided as a school, and is the focus we need to have. So that’s been a bit of a challenge some times.
Another challenge identified by Brock, has been “having enough resources to meet the needs of the students. . . they come with very complex issues, which can’t be solved in fifteen minutes, or thirty minutes. It’s an on-going support.” The placement of mentoring EAs at Oakridge has certainly helped, and it has served as “a driver in getting staff and departments to look at changing their practices - it’s not good enough anymore to say ‘Well I taught it. They didn’t learn it’” (Brock). At the same time the EAs “get a little overwhelmed with the number of students they have to try and stay in touch with” (Brock).

For Olivia, the challenge she has found was with space as her SHSM program exploded with eight lines shortly after the launch. As she stated laughingly, “Ours is just space . . . I took over a drafting room. That’s what became a kitchen. The program has just grown and grown.” The last challenge identified with the SHSM program has been retaining university bound students in the final year, when the demands upon their schedule increase. Due to the entry requirements into their programs, many do not complete their SHSM cooperative placement, and hence do not attain the red seal for the completion of the program.

**How Would You Change Student Success?**

Finally, each of the participants was asked what they would change within Student Success if they could. The most common response among participants at Oakridge was the desire for more lines of Student Success – to have additional staff to carry out the work. Part of the reason for this has been the increasing demands placed upon the SSL over time, creating a significant workload. Roger, who has worked within Guidance for years, has seen the change in roles which has occurred by the Ministry that ultimately has not increased the staffing level for one-on-one support for students:
I think you need more personnel. There’s all these great initiatives. All these are great in theory. But you just need more manpower to meet the needs of the students. For instance, when I first started at Oakridge there were five counsellors. So you had the luxury of meeting with every single student every semester. Having that one-on-one. Now our students’ population has stayed the same. But now we’re down to three people in the department. And with more and more things being downloaded, so now you’re not unfortunately having the one-on-one with everybody.

In the end, the time crunch inevitably leads to reprioritizing, as staff simply do the best they can with increased demands and limited time: “The Board has more and more great ideas, and they download more and more and more. But the personnel aren’t there. They still have the same limited resources. But they have all these great ideas and initiatives. But on any given day you can only do so much” (Roger). One suggestion was having a few more lines of Credit Recovery which would be welcomed to help support students in completing their credits:

Last year we ran three lines of Credit Recovery every semester. Next semester we’re running five lines, we actually run an after-school Credit Recovery. And if we could have two periods of Credit Recovery every period, I’m positive that we could fill that. Absolutely positive. So the need is there. . . (Roger)

The Board has been receptive and increased the lines of Credit Recovery, but as Roger states the student need is still higher.
WILLIAMSBURG

Williamsburg Secondary School is a composite school that offers a wide range of programs, including two SHSM, and three Alternative Education programs. Located within the city, but outside of the central business district, it has a smaller student population at nearly 1,000, and not quite as diverse with students coming from 25 different countries around the world. It is also located in a slightly more affluent working class – low to middle socioeconomic – area of the city. Three participants from Williamsburg took part in the study. The participants included the Principal ‘Vicki’, the Student Success Lead ‘Lia’, and the SHSM Lead ‘Steve’.

Connecting with Every Student

A variety of strategies were used to foster connections with students at Williamsburg. These included monitoring student progress – particularly at reporting periods – assigning responsibility for following students, paying attention to specifics groups, tracking attendance, discipline and suspensions. A peer mentorship program using senior students has become an integral piece in fostering connections with new students who have transitioned to Williamsburg.

Monitoring Student Progress.

With respect to the impact of Student Success, the school Principal Vicki has noticed a dramatic shift. This shift has taken place for staff, as well as students, who are better meeting student needs. As she recounted:

Over the years, there’s been a big impact. I could look back through my whole career and watch the shift. But when I look back in the past ten years, we’re getting student success now. We’re understanding it, we’re getting it. You need to do different things for different kids and provide the supports they need, beyond
academics. . . I think we still struggle with what we do with 17 year olds who give up, as a system. When the kids are younger, we keep working harder, we keep trying to motivate them.

At Williamsburg, the general impression from the interviews was that there are targeted times in the semester when members of the Student Success Team meet to review the status of their in-risk students in order to provide timely supports, in particular at mid-term when students can benefit from the intervention of a caring teacher to help push them to improve their effort in a credit. As Lia, the SSL summed up, “We’ll look at the failures as soon as they’re up, we’ll target who’s dipped below the threshold. We’d like to look at, we do look at kids who’s sitting at four 50s because what’s going to happen to them next semester? So, using the data proactively”. The sense from the interviews was that the onus of monitoring student progress primarily lay with the Student Success Teacher. This apparently was a more recent development, the results of the new directive from the district to ensure the Student Success lines were distributed to only one teacher, preapproved by the district:

Before we used to have three people. Each persons would do their bit and collaborate with a team. Now going to one person, I for one have been overwhelmed this year by the amount of work. The different responsibilities. Knowing that you have a couple of other people to bounce ideas off, to help with some tasks, not having that has been really detrimental to the role, I find. And I’ve said it time and time again. This is more than a one person job. (Lia)

Lia has served in the role of SSL at Williamsburg since the position began, and has experienced the evolution of the role over time. She candidly described the duties now involved in monitoring student progress, with an underlying tone of how overwhelming the position has become:
. . . so the tracking of students, whether it be credit accumulation, attendance, lates, the general at-risk population of which we have a number of students trying to determine which two interventions would help students become more successful. The communication of that to counsellors, and to the rest of the school. There’s the transitions aspect of the role, ensuring the Gr. 9s are being successful, and also the transition from Gr. 8 – 9. Building the relationships with the associate schools. See that the Grade 8s, whether they are visiting the school, or I’m visiting the school, setting up Link Crew, so that they can communicate and collaborate with the other students. There is the early leaver report. These students need to be contacted twice a year to determine where they are going and how they will be successful. Maybe not in the building but setting up pathways somewhere else. Tracking students with the SHSM. And then there’s been still that shift that needs to happen where teachers are still identifying ‘Oh, I got a student who is in risk. That’s a Student Success thing. I have to contact the Student Success Teacher.’ Whereas we’re hearing more and more from the Board that every teacher is a student success teacher, and that we are to be utilized as facilitators to help build capacity for teachers to understand how can I make all students be more successful? Then of course we have the Taking Stock report three times a year.

The demands placed upon her have ironically meant that the one-on-one time she previously had to support students has been dramatically reduced. That one-on-one time can be critical in better assessing the needs and supports which can assist individual students who are in-risk not so much due to their placement, but rather due to other factors that are affecting them. As Lia described “with individual students, generally we find a trend that if a student is failing more than one, they are failing more than one for another reason. So it’s not necessarily the courses
they are taking. There are other issues”. Having a school team to work with and provide targeted supports which meet each individual student’s need is imperative.

**Assigning Responsibility for Following Students.**

One of the prime responsibilities of Lia’s has been in ensuring a smooth transition for all new students entering Williamsburg. The Grade 9s in particular have been priority number one for the school. As Lia stated, “I think we really focus hard on our Grade 9s and supporting them. With our Gr. 10s that support decreases, and by 11 and 12 there’s not really much there.”

The SHSM lead also plays an influential role at Williamsburg in connecting and supporting students. The program is very popular, open to students of all levels and pathways. As the Principal, Vicki reported “This semester coming, we’ve got 76 kids in a two-credit program. So, the tendrils of that, when we did Aida two years ago, we had 200 participants, when you count adult volunteers as well, but count the whole range of people”. For students who have become disengaged with traditional education, the experiential component to the SHSM offers a unique and practical work experience which can re-inspire students in their education. The SHSM staff are responsible for tracking the success of their program, including supporting students in their success along the way.

**Paying Attention to Specific Groups.**

One of the means Williamsburg had in place to support students was via a peer mentorship program. This opportunity allows senior students to be positive role models in a leadership capacity by mentoring Grade 9 students. By taking part in this initiative throughout the year and completing assignments, it also allows seniors to gain a credit in the process. Junior students also tend to be more receptive to the guidance of their peers than teachers. Lia at Williamsburg Secondary shared how their program was launched in the past year after she and two colleagues went for training for Link Crew:
The Link Crew is a program that is run by the Boomerang Project. They are a company out of California, and they’re focus is on transitions. So helping Gr. 8s transition to high school, and they also focus on a program that is for elementary students going into middle school.

The Link Crew program ran at three of the four secondary schools involved within the study, and has been a positive addition in helping with transition students at Williamsburg. As Lia described “it has been really, really good. Our senior students will tell us that. And our junior. We’ll do various activities every month, whether it be a social focus or academic focus”. This one example of student voice reaffirmed that both senior and junior students found the Link Crew peer mentorship program rewarding, with seniors learning valuable leadership skills, and juniors being positively influenced by their peers.

**Attendance, Discipline, and Suspensions.**

With respect to the impact of Student Success on attendance, discipline, and suspensions, Lia and Vicki shared some insights. Lia candidly stated “I don’t know if that’s really improved attendance. I wouldn’t say that anything has really improved in that sense. There are individual cases, but in general I think that it may have decreased, because you don’t have that opportunity to sit with some individuals”. Vicki has noted a decrease with respect to suspensions in particular. As she stated “an anecdotal observation, without the stats behind it. . . is that we’re getting most kids, fewer minor infractions, like minor suspensions and some kids then pop right up. It’s almost like the tier ones are getting better but the twos and threes are still really intense” (Vicki). As they have made some gains, they are candid that the struggle with some of the most disengaged of learners continues.
Providing Programs that Enable Achievement

In terms of providing programs that enable achievement, the SHSM factored in largely here. Organizing teaching was viewed as important - to ensure the right people were chosen for key positions - most notably Credit Recovery. Help to reduce failures rates, as well as alternative programs and supports rounded out this pillar of support for students.

Varied Programs.

As most secondary schools do, Williamsburg offers a wide range of programs to meet the needs of its students. These range from Student Success supports, such as Alternative Education programs, a SHSM, transition supports, to clubs and extracurricular activities and sports.

Williamsburg has had a Performing Arts SHSM program in Musical Theatre for five years now. Two interviewees specifically mentioned the SHSM program as key to fostering positive connections, including Vicki: “Our SHSMs huge in connecting with kids.” Steve, the SHSM Lead teacher played a key role in launching the SHSM program at Williamsburg Secondary, after a conversation with a colleague following a major production. By establishing a SHSM in Musical Theatre, they’re desire was “trying to engage all students who are interested in the performing arts. It’s been quite successful.” (Steve). The program’s appeal is connected to the authentic, tactile nature of the learning. As Steve further described:

The hands-on work, the field trips, the certifications that we’re doing really seems to get some of the kids who are not necessarily as engaged excited and they kind of feel special or that they get to do ... they’re having this extra effort given to them and the idea that they can use some of these skills somewhere else. I think that’s really what’s helped, especially our lower level learners to keep engaged, to keep involved.
The impact of the program has been impressive, including attracting students from across all levels and grades:

We had the highest grad rate in the Board for SHSM. Having a look at the 70 odd kids who are signed up for it this semester for our musical for example, most of them are in the SHSM, it goes straight across the spectrum of learning. We have L level all the way through kids who are applying to university. . . I have two girls in Grade 9 and I have some of my L level kids who are in their fifth year who, I’d say more than a handful, in their fifth year. (Steve)

Lia also shared how the SHSM program is bringing all students together across all levels, which is uncommon in the senior years:

The program itself, it is great, because it does offer a level, the completion for all levels. So students don’t necessarily have to be university or college bound. And we’ve had students be successful in graduating from the SHSM from all pathways. So I think that is a great initiative. Because it is accessible to all.

Vicki described the student response to the program, whose energy impacts the school daily:

Amazing, it’s big, it’s lively, it’s alive. On any other day you’d hear kids playing guitars half the day outside my door. Sometimes they’re singing, it’s a Performing Arts SHSM. The dancing’s all down in the back hall, lots of music and theatre happening here all the time. It’s wonderful, but the real key is the number of at-risk kids who’ve connected back through that. So, if you take another look at the kids who are actually participating in it . . . They don’t all look alike. They are the most diverse group of kids and all pathways are validated. Kids can earn a workplace credit, an open credit. We have … it’s got to be like an eight-way stack altogether,
of the courses that are available for them to learn in this package. So 76 kids are in
… right now we’ve got seven different courses but we’ll open another one if we
need to.

The popularity of the program is also reflected in the growing number of students completing
the full red seal, as well as the growing interest expressed by the junior students. As Steve
summed up:

For example, last year everyone, we were at 13 kids who did the full completion of
it, graduated with the full and got the red seal. This year we’re at 18 looking at
graduating, 33 in the full program, with almost 120 pre-SHSM kids.

Organizing Teaching.

One of the fine arts in administration involves organizing teaching. Vicki made it clear
that knowing your staff and utilizing their skillset is critical in maximizing gains within a school
for the sake of students. As she recounts her Credit Recovery teacher is “just the right teacher”,
which was interestingly enough the Head of Geography: “she’s learned so much about the kids
and who they are and where they come from and what their needs are and why they are the way
they are. And now she’s working one on one with the kids and providing the support they need”
(Vicki). Having worked with these students, and come to understand their lives and the barriers
they faced, this teacher is one:

. . . who believed in them, who would be down here. The teacher would be down
here advocating for us not to suspend them or send them home for more time when
they slipped out of class and were found out here doing something inappropriate.
It’s the number one catalyst. (Vicki)
Most often it is “just the right teacher” who also puts the tremendous work in to establishing as SHSM program, with the intention of fostering greater student engagement within their program. The only concern with that, as Steve summed well, is what happens when that individual leaves:

. . . you kind of need a champion, someone who is really interested to lead it and to keep it going. I know that they’ve had issues as a school closes, like we’re having in our Board. The teacher is being moved to a different school or maybe even had LTOs who have helped start up these programs and then of course not being permanent they’ve moved on. The program changes because that person who championed it, who did all the extra effort, has now moved on. I know the Board has worked hard to try and get someone else in there, but then you also run into the contractual, the political stuff, seniority list, that type of … it’s not necessarily who wants to run the program that’s going in. It’s the other contractual obligations that they have to do to fill these positions.

Finally, for administrators it can be such a relief and inspiration when the right person and position align, particularly in a long-term occasional position as Vicki stated “the past 12 months have been great here for co-op, because we’ve had a really, really strong LTO in co-op who’s done some amazingly wonderful work with the highest risk kids there too”. Taking note of these individuals who rise to the challenge for future hiring into a permanent position is what builds a strong Student Success Strategy, whether at the same school or even system wide within the board, maximize their expertise and talents for the benefit of the students.

Help to Reduce Failure Rates.

Williamsburg Secondary is employing a range of different strategies to reduce the failure rate. These include Credit Rescue, Credit Recovery and Alternative Education. Even in the post-
exam time period, many teachers are now open to providing one last opportunity for students who are close to passing:

. . . this happens all over the building, so I don’t even like to talk much about it, kids who have just bombed an exam, just an example but, there will be kids today who’ve bombed an exam, failed out of their teacher and they’ll say, something I can do? Is there anything? I froze, I couldn’t do this and the teachers will say, yeah, let’s look at that. So, between today and Friday, a whole bunch of informally, a whole bunch of credits will be rescued or recovered. . . So, that culture is there. I don’t talk about it because there are other people who will not support it. So, I’d rather just let it grow. It’s been growing since, I see more of it. (Vicki)

The range of targeted and timely interventions for students who were struggling or increasingly disengaged can reap satisfying rewards. As Vicki described:

I’ve actually, over the years, watched when kids accumulate credits, their credit recovery can back off, they’re no longer at risk, by definition, because now they’re back on track. Oh yeah, it is observable, especially given the comparator to that and going back to when we just expected them to drop out at 16.

As she went on to state, there has been a profound change in education, which is still ongoing. Where in the past dropping out was an acceptable alternative for those who were disengaged or faced regular disciplinary issues, that approach is no longer an option, even though some staff still subscribe to it. As Vicki summed it up perfectly:

But you can still, it’s tacit for some people, well, they just don’t belong here, because they’re not working hard or attending, whatever. Where do they belong? There’s no other place. They can’t go somewhere else and get credits. We’re the
credit place. If they don’t get them here there’s no magic place that they’re going to go get them.

**Alternative Programs and Supports.**

Williamsburg also runs different Alternative Education programs in order to better meet the needs of all students, as the school and district has done for some time. As Vicki elaborated “Alt-Ed changes size and shape and location, doesn’t go away. Depends a lot, again, on the people that are here and the enthusiasm. We have a system Alt-Ed class, so that’s a new change”. She also said that:

. . . we’ve got three different Alt-Ed’s running within this building. We’ve got Credit Recovery running as well as the Alt-Ed’s, because Alt-Ed’s will do Credit Recovery. We’ve got a stand-alone, continuous intake Credit Recovery for kids who don’t need a ton of support. They just need the credit. We’ve got Alt-Ed’s for kids who need a lot more support.

One of the Alt-Ed programs is specifically designed for junior level students. Vicki reported a little about the trial and error process of implementation with respect to the program, as well as the impact it has had upon the students:

Our junior Alt-Ed, which we played around with last year and tried a lot of things, kind of what worked, what didn’t, it’s up and running soundly this year. We have 11 kids who’ve completed … I’m trying to remember now if it’s 15 credits, 16 credits. Actually, it’s more than that, I’d have to remember. Because they completed at least two and some of them completed three, because it’s an all-morning program. So, the kids completed two point something credits, on average. One kid, he’s in Grade 10, halfway through Grade 10, it’s his first credit. So, the impact on these 11 kids, all of
whom were on the verge of dropping out, most of them were actually at the point of complete non-attending, they’re now being successful. And success itself is the biggest motivator for success. Kids, who for anywhere from one to three years, haven’t been successful at all in high school are now starting to get it.

The senior Alt-Ed program is similar in design to the junior program, with a marked emphasis on Credit Recovery:

It’s exactly how the senior Alt-Ed programs run too. Both the senior Alt-Ed and the system, a little more withdrawn, they’re a little more isolated, the kids are there all day. We’re not trying to integrate, certainly not the system kids, we don’t integrate them back in until they’re ready. The point with the junior kids is to catch them before they go too far and get them back into regular classes. (Vicki)

**Improving Teaching and Learning**

The third pillar in improving graduation rates for students is in improving teaching and learning. A critical component in this process is exposing educators to new ideas and approaches, having them self-reflect upon their own practice, as well as collaborating with colleagues to fuel the fires of pedagogical change. Vicki succinctly stated that “The biggest thing that I think, here, is getting people to look beyond their past practice. In whatever mechanism you can do that, getting them to go beyond what they’ve always done. So, there’s so many initiatives.”

**Learning Teams.**

Improving teaching and learning practices has involved a collaborative effort by all, with the support of others along the way. As other administrators have done, Vicki has opted to go
through the department heads to bring about instructional improvement:

Well, right now we’re doing it through Growing Success, learning, goals and success criteria and the SEF, obviously. . . But we worked hard with cabinet over the last two years, but especially last year, really worked hard with cabinet, setting goals and landed on where we, as a school, want to go. So learning, goals and success criteria and we’re just starting at the beginning of that section and working through it. By fostering a shared learning experience

In Vicki’s view, whether the material is new from the Ministry or not, any time staff can meet to dig into curriculum and discuss pedagogical practices is valuable in recapturing in mind the big ideas:

Sooner or later, when they get that shift to look at instruction and to look at it in a different way and to get the student learning at the Centre. And of course, Growing Success. That one’s been very powerful because they have to do it. The new curriculum’s wonderful too. Any time there’s a new curriculum, digging in and looking at digging right into the curriculum and making people look at the front matter. Even in an old curriculum, going back to look at the front matter. So, the big ideas behind the curriculum. It’s a tough shift.

Vicki has called in district consultants to help facilitate the learning process, recognizing that change takes time and on-going supports, whether it’s to assist with one staff member, or all. As she explained:

... the consultants are here talking to the vice-principals right now. One of them was in for the last two days, working with one of my teachers who needs a lot of support in trying to move her forward. She’s teaching a brand new course so the timetable is a tool to embed teaching and learning. Everything’s a tool to embed
teaching and learning, PD, conversations in the hall, talking about individual students, looking at student work.

Through this process of instructional leadership and improving instructional practice, hopefully the views of staff will continue to shift from “Oh, I got a student who is in risk. That’s a Student Success thing. I have to contact the Student Success Teacher” to one where “all teachers are Student Success Teachers” (Lia).

Improving Assessment Practices.

Vicki had an extensive background with assessment practices, having worked in that capacity with the Ministry for over a year, as well as for the district as a consultant. It included working on the development and roll out of Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). More recently, Williamsburg opted to be one of the schools in the forefront of assessment change within the district, by piloting a new software program. At the same time the change process aligned perfectly with a new curriculum document released from the Ministry. As Vicki shared,

For example, consultants are here with us all day tomorrow, working with departments on a number of things, one of them being Grade Book, because we’re going to pilot the new assessment tool for power school. But that’s an excuse to get everybody marking based on overall expectations and in levels.

As with any large organization and change, there is a learning curve involved, and it does take time to move practices in a new direction. Michael Fullan (2007) identifies this portion of the change process as the implementation dip, when some fully recognize the need and try and lead the charge, however many do not and are reluctant until they see the value of it and are
convinced that it is taking hold and that it is not just the mandate of one individual or a passing phase.

**Connecting with the Community**

There were two key priorities in terms of connecting with the community at Williamsburg. These included first and foremost working with parent and families and working with community groups.

**Working with Parents and Families.**

In an effort to engage parents in the learning partnership, Williamsburg not only hosts open houses, and meetings with teachers, they also provide information sessions on issues effecting youth and families. As Lia, the SSL stated, attempts are made throughout the year:

There may be programs for parents and students. How to build relationships, fostering relationships there. They are always invited to our events here. Whether it is Parents Night, we just had Parent Council, and Marjorie came to speak about mental health. So we certainly reach out to the supports we have available. In essence with our parents as well, to try and get them involved in what is being the hub for the other events/supports that are out there. We try. It’s not always successful. Parents don’t necessarily buy in.

Despite a number of strategies, ranging from using Synervoice, an automated mass communication tool to share information through phone messages, to notices on the school website or through flyers sent home, Lia had noticed no change in the degree of parental involvement within the school.
Working with Community Groups.

Williamsburg has developed a good working relationship with local community partners to provide necessary supports to students when needed. Lia described:

We do have a great system within the school, so we can have those additional supports. Whether it be through social work, our AY counsellor, through our public health nurse, and connecting them out to the community. I think that we do have a good system in place. More supports would be useful if we could have our social worker every single day, he would be busy every single day. But that time is so valuable.

Recent years have witnessed the expansion of additional supports, as Lia described:

Our Alternatives for Youth counsellor used to be here only once a day for the mornings. She is now available for two days a week, full days. So that is a huge support that a lot of our students are able to access. And the good thing about that is they can self-refer. The biggest one for us, the last few years, has been connecting back with the Hollowbrook community. Our school council is our main connection with the community. But we’ve been fostering an extra connection with the Hollowbrook community because there are two large city community improvement projects that impact on our school. . . and we’ve hooked up with that.

Both the assistant head of Student Services and a teacher sit on the committee to represent the voice of the staff in this community improvement project.

The school, namely the students themselves, has also made a tremendous connection with the local Aboriginal community in developing and performing a theatrical production on the residential school experience. This included going to the Plains Cultural Centre, and speaking first-hand with survivors, as well as having their musicians collaborate with the
students at Oakridge to understand the sound and meaning of native drumming. From this they developed original musical compositions, and a script which they performed for the community, including the retirement home on the reserve. As Steve described:

We had a phenomenal response from them. We were even given an eagle feather which is a huge honour. So talk about a community connection there. Definitely an unexpected one, but I don’t think we ever went in thinking that that would happen, but there’s definitely a huge connection that started from that and a huge cultural move in learning for our kids.

**District Support**

Staff appreciated the expertise of the consultants, and their support over time, from helping to champion the strategy for their respective school, to their assistance in completing the required paperwork for the Ministry in the beginning. As Vicki stated, “A ton of support through the program consultants this semester. This year, but last year too”. It included providing release time for teachers at Williamsburg to create material for a locally developed class, including class profiles, which was funded by the district. The consultants have also been helpful in communicating the goals and roles of the Student Success Strategy with staff as a whole, to provide additional support to the school leads. As Vicki also shared “They’ve been very good at . . . helping with things like how do you get people engaged into doing a CLA with you when really they didn’t sign up for this, but it’s part of the program”.

For Lia, the district’s decision to move away from monthly meetings of Student Success Leads, and instead providing on site visits, was also not as beneficial. As she described:

I think that specifically that this year they have tried to implement more support but it doesn’t feel that way. . . I think just the ability to get together with others was
better than the approach now. If you need something you sort of call and come in. That kind of individualized support. For some it may work well.

Steve highlighted the effort the district has been trying to make of late with respect to getting the message out to the public about the numerous programs that are offered. He stated, “I know the Board is making a concerted effort to start to better communicate what programs they can offer to the public”. In particular he was referring to the SHSM programs. As he went on and elaborated “I also know that there’s been talk of advertising. In (a local school board) for example, if you’re on a city bus . . . you can actually see OYAP and SHSM on the sides of the buses advertising. I’ve actually seen stuff for (another) Board and they’ve had full blown commercials on television. I don’t know if our Board is going to do something similar”.

**Strategy Development**

Over the years there have been a number of changes with respect to the Student Success Strategy at Williamsburg Secondary School. These changes have included the refining of their Transition program, growth of the SHSM program, promoting instructional leadership among staff, forging community partnerships and more. Lia, who has served as the SSL at the school since the inception of the strategy, highlighted the move from a team approach to the one SSL. She saw this as a loss to the strategy, as the demands are mainly “tracking and reporting. There’s not that personal connection that was once the next level of intervention or connection”.

One of the newer changes has been the addition of a system junior Alt-Ed class, bringing the number of Alt-Ed classes offered to three. The initial year of the program was one of growth and refinement, to where it is now better meeting the needs of the students. Another has been changing the mindset of staff with respect to learning resource. As Vicki described: “We’ve done a lot of changes this year and we’re taking a big step. For example, huge philosophy shift,
our Learning Resource isn’t a room any more it’s a support team. We’re just trying this part for the first time, housed out of the learning commons”. Over her career, and in particular since the dawn of Student Success, Vicki has witnessed the changes in better meeting student needs: “Over the years, there’s been a big impact. I could look back through my whole career and watch the shift. But when I look back in the past ten years, we’re getting student success now. We’re understanding it, we’re getting it”. The changes included not only programming, but the wide range of supports that have developed.

**How Student Outcomes Have Changed Over Time**

Analyzing the administrative and qualitative data provided from Williamsburg help shed light on how student outcomes have changed over time. Beginning with the administrative data, when examining the Taking Stock reports on students who are in-risk, Williamsburg’s results have seen a decline in the percentage of students failing a credit(s) in Grades 10-12, while those

![Figure 17: Students In-risk - Williamsburg](image)
in Grade 9 have increased by 10.6 percentage points (Figure 17). With respect to its EQAO testing results, in Grade 9 mathematics, at the academic level Williamsburg’s results have been mixed, from a low of 59% to a high of 79% in 2014-15 (Figure 18). It has narrowed the gap between its results and that of the district from a 19% discrepancy to within three percent. At the applied level, in 2014-15 it reached a high of 42% of students achieving Level 3 or 4, exceeding the district average (Figure 19).

Figure 18: EQAO Academic Mathematic Results – Williamsburg

Data from EQAO testing in Grade 9 Mathematics and on the Grade 10 OSSLT are “such large metrics that they certainly drive what we do in a number of ways but we get much more specific. Then we go all the way into kid data and drill in” (Vicki). Unfortunately with regards to OSSLT results, the gap between Williamsburg and the district has grown and been somewhat erratic since 2008-09, with a current 10 percent difference (Figure 20).
With respect to the SHSM program, data is collected regularly and reported up to the district and Ministry. As the Williamsburg SHSM has been highly regarded due to its popularity with students, including its high completion rate, it was used as an exemplar across the district for other programs:
They took our tracking sheets. We do promotional videos for our kids and stuff like that to be involved with the SHSM and that went down to the Board and I assume it’s to help other programs who are not doing as well. This is an example of what you can do to bolster it. Our goal really with the SHSM, we work really hard to make sure all the kids who are in it complete it. (Steve)

Finally, when looking at Williamsburg’s graduation rates, the most important indicator of success for students overall, the gap between the district and the school has narrowed from a high of 24 percent in 2010-11 to 11.6 percent in 2012-13 (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Graduation Rate - Williamsburg

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
<th>2011-12*</th>
<th>2012-13*</th>
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<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
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<td>Board</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
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<td>83.0%</td>
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* Data reflects the Ministry of Education clarification on the calculation of graduation rates based on a five-year cohort

To summarize the administrative data, the in-risk student population from Fall 2011 to Fall 2013 declined from an average of 30.13 percent among the four grades to 26.13 percent, resulting in a 4.0 percentage point improvement. With respect to their graduation rate, from 2009-10 to 2012-13 it improved from 58.2 percent to 69.3 percent, with the gap between the district and school closing from 11.8 percent to 11.6 percent, resulting in a 0.2 percentage point
improvement. With respect to EQAO testing, Williamsburg’s mathematic results improved slightly from 2008-09 to 2013-14, although as noted they experienced a decline on the OSSLT.

The qualitative data from the interviews reflects this trend; each of the interviewees could recall a turn-around story, of students who were re-engaged through some form of Student Success. For Vicki, it was the impact the Junior Alt-Ed program has had in improving credit completion for these students. Both Lia and Steve gave an example or two of turn-around stories, where through the care and effort of staff connected with Student Success, a student made a dramatic improvement. Lia shared two stories:

The one particular story was our 18 year old. Eighteen with 0 credits. He came back with a vengeance really, into Alter Ed. He has completed as of now I think six credits. So for someone who had 0 at 18 years to finally catch on that school’s important. Another kid I remember, he was my students when I was a counsellor and trying to. . . attendance was an issue, trying to get him here. He finally bought in. It took him until age 21, but he did graduate.

Steve cited a range of positive outcomes, from fostering connections with community contacts, to the impact the SHSM program hand on a number of students. He indicated that:

We had one student who was not succeeding very well here at all in traditional classes. I actually had him in Alt-Ed and once we … he was right at the beginning of the SHSM, and it clicked with him. Being on stage and someone saying you can learn how to memorize this stuff, you can speak out, you can be confident and it really changed his outlook. He ended up volunteering at other schools and helping out with productions there. If I remember right, it was about two years ago, he was at (a) big production and he ended up running the entire tech board for them. Whereas here he was predominantly an actor who took a production course that we
offered. Just to see how excited he was and just how much responsibility that he was taking on.

**Challenges Encountered with the Student Success Strategy**

All three interviewees from Williamsburg identified the tracking within Student Success as time intensive. Vicki and Lia in particular referred to how challenging the role of Student Success has become in the past school year with the move to one person per school.

The other challenge this year, the Board changing - because we were one of the schools that broke the . . . role into multiple people and did different things - and putting it into one role has been challenging. Because no one here really quite has embraced the role and I’m hesitant to tell people what to do about it because then it’s my work. (Vicki)

Having experienced the role of Student Success at Williamsburg since its inception, Lia voiced the greatest degree of frustration with the change. The frustration and fatigue was apparent in her voice as she candidly described:

Now going to one person, I for one have been overwhelmed this year by the amount of work. The different responsibilities. Knowing that you have a couple of other people to bounce ideas off, to help with some tasks, not having that has been really detrimental to the role, I find. And I’ve said it time and time again. This is more than a one person job. And I think that you need to have whatever works best for your school. So not to have the Board telling you, it needs to be this way, because it’s not one size fits all. So I think to be able to best determine what that looks like in the school.
As the demands of the position have risen, the time she needs for doing what is most important to her as a SSL no longer appears to be there: “In the past with our other Student Success lead teachers, there was more of that relationship building, one-on-one with students. Whereas now, all you’re doing is tracking and reporting. There’s not that personal connection.” Lia also felt the added pressure of being the key contact for all students in the school for any and all concerns:

You know you’re seen as the go to person. So having all the information about all kids all of the time. And you know what sorts of interventions, what sorts of preventions. What programs are out there? Access to system programs and finding out the information on how to get students into system program. Other resources out into the community. How students can access that. Having the ability to find out about where to access those supports has become my role. And setting students up with that. In addition to the number of students that are now tracking within the school. There’s a lot of responsibility.

Some of the challenges were directly connected to the SHSM programs. As Steve shared, even if students are interested in a program, many do not want to move from their home school and the connections and friends they’ve made to attend another school site: “Are they going to uproot themselves in Grade 10 to do their senior years here where a lot of it was a little easier when I think they were considering us in Grade 9 and 10 to make the move”.

How Would You Change Student Success?

When interviewees were asked how they could change Student Success, Lia reflected on how in the past the first priority was in fostering personal connections with in-risk students. Since that time the Ministry has demanded more data from the leads on the strategy, impacting
the connection with students because “there’s no time. So I don’t think that it’s gone in a direction that is conducive to relationship building”. The overwhelming paperwork, combined with now being the sole Student Success Teacher, had led Lia to the decision to leave the position mid-year. Part of the frustration was due to the number of reports that were required to be completed:

Tracking for what reason? That always gets to me. I’m pulling these reports and I’m identifying students, who have community hours but not their test. Literacy test completion but not their community hours. Where is this going? Why is it helpful? What is it doing for us as a school when all of this information is going to the Ministry? Can’t they do that? If this is just administrative type roles, than really should that be a teacher? And how are they helping their school by just giving numbers, and not actually following through with anything else? Is it improving anything within the school?

One of the time consuming tracking pieces for Lia has been meeting the requirements for the Ministry on the Re-engagement Initiative, an additional responsibility she does not believe Student Success Teachers should have to bear. As she stated, Student Success Leads are responsible for contacting all early leavers to try and re-engage them, a feat that has not been easy. This has included researching and reporting data on each of the early leavers:

Where they’ve gone. What they’ve done. For every student. And try and to reengage as many as possible. So that may not be necessarily within the school. It may be in other programs. But there has to be some sort of contact, and it’s, again they’ve left for a reason. With our transient population it is very difficult just to reach someone. They’ve moved. Don’t call again. Those kind of things that I don’t know why that would be a person’s responsibility.
An additional challenge Lia stated was the fact that no new additional programs had been provided for these students. Thus students could “come back and take the same courses before they left”, implying that she believed this strategy would benefit from a rethink given the time/effort involved in reengaging them once again. To ease the workload, Lia also recommended the responsibility for the Re-engagement Initiative be handed over to staff within Student Services. She felt that Guidance teachers would be better suited for it, but that it should fall within their charge:

It really is a counsellor sort of responsibility. Because there’s too many students for one person to be reviewing or tracking on their own. Especially here. So to have to do that with just one person is overwhelming. So we need to have it as a counsellor responsibility, in regards to credit accumulation and those types of things, because you can’t get to them.

With respect to the SHSM, Steve’s suggested recommendation was to extend the program beyond its two-year mandate. Enticing interested students to leave their home school midway through their secondary career to pursue a pathway at another school that interests them can be a challenge for a number of understandable reasons. These include leaving the comfort of their school, leaving their network of friends and teachers, and in some cases the difference it can pose in commuting. As he stated, “Personally I like the idea of the pre-SHSM or making it a four year program. If they can’t do the funding for four years then allow us to do pre-SHSM. It’s a tough one”. He also went on to describe the difficulty they have faced in competing with similar SHSMs within the area, and trying to find enough placements for all of the students:

I know in our area it’s been very difficult to find some of the co-op placements that we need. I do wonder sometimes by having multiples of the same sector if we’re not
making it even harder on our self as a Board to find that really good placement because instead of having one or two schools offering it, there’s three or four and we’re creating competition for those really good co-op placements.

Finally, Vicki applauded the Student Success Strategy. If there were any changes to occur, it would be in the form of supports students needed to make their dreams a reality. As she described:

I wouldn’t change Student Success. I’d change the rest of it. Kids should be able to – I’m right there with (the Director) – kids should be able to walk in and, with help and support, figure out what they want to do, where they want to go and, at any time, in any way, be able to access the learning they need to do to get there. That’s what school should be. It shouldn’t be a delivery system. It should be a series of supports and teaching, but guided teaching and supports for the individual to help these kids grow up and get to do what they want to do.
BAYVIEW

Bayview Secondary School, located in a transitional/residential zone of the inner city, is the oldest school in the district, with a population of only 670 students. Identified as a low socioeconomic area, the school has a diverse student population similar to Williamsburg, which is also highly transient. The school offers a wide range of academic and technical courses, and is part of the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP). The Student Success supports include an Alternative Education program, transitions, two SHSM programs, not including the traditional clubs, extracurricular activities, and sports secondary schools typically offer. Four participants from Bayview took part in the study. The participants included the Vice-Principal ‘Carter’, the Student Success Lead ‘Laura’, a Learning Resource Teacher ‘David’, and the SHSM Lead and Head of Student Services ‘Karen’.

Connecting with Every Student

At Bayview, a strong team approach was evident in their Student Success efforts to connect with every student. The strategies included monitoring student progress, assigning responsibility for following students, paying attention to specifics groups, tracking attendance, discipline and suspensions, as well as soliciting student voice.

Monitoring Student Progress.

What was apparent in studying each of the four schools was that the weight of responsibility for the SSL varied from school to school. What was unique at Bayview, was the sense of teamwork and collective effort involved, transcending beyond simply it being primarily the charge of the SSL to support in-risk students. As Carter, the Vice-Principal stated, the role each member played over the past four years developed with time:
The Student Success portfolio had been expanded. We did have a lead and that lead was tied to our guidance counsellor who also took on primarily the lead’s role. However, particular components are bided out to individuals. So for example, the transitions portfolio, part of it was with a specific person. The numeracy piece and the literacy piece, the numeracy with the math teacher, the literacy with an English teacher. . . and the community culture caring piece, that was basically everybody’s baby and we would reach out in a variety of different capacities in that one.

Karen, the Head of Student Services, summed up the best their perception of Student Success. In essence it is the collective capacity of many in making a difference for students:

Our whole department is the Student Success team. We are lucky here in that we work closely with co-op, learning resource, our mentoring EAs, our social worker has an office right there beside us and is here four days a week, the guidance counsellor. So we have a nice, big, open area here, and lets us all work together and communicate a lot. So I think that is the first thing that really helps us, is the way we can communicate with each other and work together. So whenever there’s something that comes up with a student, it’s a real team approach, instead of one person solving it all on their own. So we consult with each other, get expertise from each other, different expertise each other has, all that. (Karen)

As part of monitoring student progress, the Student Success Leadership Team analyzes report card data to identify students who are in-risk of failing in order to provide timely interventions. As Karen stated:

At every reporting period, we print off the failure reports, and we meet with those kids individually, starting with those that are failing four classes, three classes, two
classes, and then down to one. So we meet with all those kids and see what their needs are, see if it’s the improper pathway that they’re placed in, if there’s other factors. . . trying to see how we can help those kids get back on track.

Using failure reports and a team approach to identifying and problem solving each individual case was also cited by David, the Learning Resource Teacher. Again, it can be noted that a priority list is generated based on the number of credits in-risk by each student:

Student Success starts generating reports as far as which students are failing two or more courses at the midterm mark. And then we get together as a team and we start looking at these students and saying okay, what are we going to do as a team to start helping these students so that they can get back on track? Why are they failing? Let’s take a look at their attendance. Is it an attendance issue? Is it a behaviour issue? Are they placed correctly? (David)

Through the Student Success initiative a clear process of monitoring student progress and providing a wide range of supports has been established. As Karen noted:

There’s more accountability now, let’s say there’s less students that fall through the cracks. There’s still always going to be the odd thing that happens where we’re like, ‘Oh man, how did we miss that?’, but I find now there is more accountability on our part, and even on the kids’ part, too because we have more ways to check in with them.

**Assigning Responsibility for Following Students.**

The responsibility for following in-risk students at Bayview was seen as a collective role, and not just one primarily focused on the SSL. The team approach, echoed by all staff,
made it clear that they worked in tandem with one another to share the load, exchange ideas and strategies, and support one another in supporting students.

Two of the staff identified the use of mentoring educational assistants (MEAs) over the past five years as playing a key role as well in following students and providing additional supports. Funded through the district’s Student Success envelope, MEAs operated within two of the four schools in the study, and their role according to David is “slightly different than a typical educational assistant where they deal with our most at-risk youth”. As David explained further:

Those two mentoring EAs are sort of our point people for those tasks; helping identify our most at-risk students, providing them with the social emotional supports and helping them build those coping mechanisms that allow them to get to class, to get up in the morning as bad as their lives might be, to get through life, basically. Because these are the kids whose life stories just break your heart and need every support that they can possibly get.

Providing valuable social emotional supports, as well as reinforcing restorative justice strategies, their relationship building role had become a critical part of Bayview Secondary. As Carter shared:

So they came out of the Student Success portfolio, not out of the regular classroom-based support portfolio where educational assistance comes from. Their moniker was mentoring Eas. They were hired primarily from the Child and Youth worker, the CYW pools of people out there and as it fit their bill to build relationships, to build rapport, to work with our at-risk students and that became almost a de facto embodiment of what the Student Success person was supposed to be.
The MEAs quickly became another vital part of the Student Success Team of eight or nine people at Bayview working to foster connections and provide the supports the in-risk students needed to enable their success. Using data gathered from the Grade 8 intake meetings, one of the responsibilities of the MEAs has been to develop with the team a “list of students who are going to be a priority for them come Grade 9” (David). Once the school year has begun, each week they hold a ‘Boys Group’ and another group called ‘Girls Group’ meeting with these students, providing the connections and support they need to be successful. Working cooperatively as part of the Student Success Team, they have been able to assume part of the caseload, providing additional supports along the way in trying to reach each student:

We would have these case conferences, from time to time, in which we’d say okay, this is a relational piece that maybe an MEA can get on top of. This is an academic piece that perhaps guidance needs to be on top of and a Student Success lead. This is maybe an even bigger piece so now we need to get the VPs involved in something else like that and collectively we would all work together to try to help these students. (Carter)

**Paying Attention to Specific Groups.**

As in each of the four schools in the study, student transitioning to Bayview from Grade 8 to 9 is one of the highest priorities for Student Success. As part of the Transitions program, connections are fostered by visiting staff and students at their feeder schools. This includes having:

. . . our English, Science, and Math teachers that do some transitions with the Grade 8s English, Math, and Science teachers, so as a learning team, they’ll meet together and talk about the curriculum, and see what they’re doing in Grade 8, and what the
expectations are in Grade 9. They do that to try to help the kids be a bit more prepared for when they come here in Grade 9. (Karen)

As Laura, who was new to Bayview that year and took on the SHSM portfolio, stated they had been doing “a lot of work with transitions, from Gr. 8 to Grade 9s. So they’ve been attempting to get students from other schools into our building at least 5-7 times in the school year, to make them more comfortable, and to attach some more familiar faces and familiar environment”. In fact the transition process for the new students begins nearly a year earlier in the fall of their Grade 8 year with the first of four coordinated site visits. Grade 8 students spend a day at Bayview Secondary, taking on the schedule of Gr.9 students during the “Take Your Kids to Work” day. This is the first of four orientation sessions offered, not including open houses provided in the evening for parents to attend.

Towards the end of the school year, the transitions team connects with staff from each of the feeder schools to proactively prepare and support the students. Bayview went a step further than other schools with the notes from their intake meetings on the students who will be transitioning the following September to Grade 9. They:

. . . developed a program called Student Transition Information Database. We call it STID and what that is, its information gathering at the Grade 8 schools, the feeder schools. We do this towards the end of the year and it’s both myself, the learning resource teacher, as well as one of the administrators, a vice-principal. We go to each of the schools and we talk with the learning resource teacher, one administrator and they typically call in each teacher one at a time, the Grade 8 teachers, and we go over every single student that is transitioning to Bayview the following year. And they give us the good, the bad and the ugly. (David)
The anecdotal notes taken are used to learn about behaviours, and anything else that serves to interfere with a student’s learning, including family life situations and relationships among students. David stated:

So we’re basically troubleshooting and trying to forecast. What information can we gather that might be of use to have early interventions with these students so that the issues that were causing problems at their feeder schools do not cause problems at Bayview for those students or other students at Bayview?

An additional measure they have used to foster early student success has been the funding of CAT3 testing in Grade 8 for all new students at their feeder schools. The testing has helped in providing an additional means of recommending the appropriate placement level for students:

And when their option sheets are filled in, if there are recommendations from the Grade 8 teachers that aren’t in line with recommendations from the parents, then we refer back to the CAT3 testing … And this is done for every student. Last year we didn’t do this testing and . . . what we have found is that we have an increased number of misplaced students. (David)

At $2,000, the cost for this was expensive, one borne by the secondary school alone. David, however, found it “definitely worth the price” as it minimized the misplacement of students. Ensuring proper placement not only helped promote success early on, but also served to minimize course changes and lines used for Credit Recovery, better maximizing time available for staff to meet student needs.

Paying attention to specific groups is also achieved via Bayview’s peer mentorship program. Karen highlighted the use of peer mentors as a newer initiative aimed at promoting connections with students. These are senior students, leaders within the school, who commit to
the program for the year and earn a credit: “So the hours are tracked, they’re doing assignments and stuff as well for the teacher that’s overseeing it. So this is the first year, though … or was last year the first year … that they’re actually getting the credit for it” (Karen). The program reaps many benefits. As Karen elaborated:

We found here because our school is such an at-risk school, a lot of our stuff is really focused around the at-risk kids; those are the ones we’re meeting with the majority of the time in here, that we really don’t want to forget about our leaders and academic kids as well. So yeah, the peer mentors are someone that we think, you know what? . . we’re going to have high expectations, this is the bar that’s set, and the kids will meet it.

The peer mentors are responsible for going into the Grade 9 homeroom classes throughout the year, providing peer guidance in their course selections. As Karen concluded:

So all the Grade 9s are given their status sheets, and they’ll go over all of that with them, just to keep letting them know what courses they have, requirements they have to meet this year, reminding them about volunteer hours. Furthermore, at exam time they try to ease any anxiety by promoting Cocoa and Cram, so it’s studying with hot chocolate. In the spring, I think we call it . . . Freezie and Cram or something like that, and the peer mentors are there with them, too.

**Attendance, Discipline, and Suspension.**

One of the integral parts of Student Success at Bayview more recently has been tracking attendance in order to better understand what is interfering in their student’s academic success, and to provide appropriate supports so credits are attained. Carter stated:
We decided to remove ourselves from that punitive approach very, very early in me coming here because I saw people wrestling with it. So, over time, our discipline and our suspensions were primarily for significant behavioural pieces that were outlined in the Safe Schools Act, not for trying to correct behaviour around performance.

Bayview had recently begun to implement a routine attendance tracking system as part of its team approach to early identification and tracking of some of the most in-risk students. Karen described:

. . . the one thing we’ve found at our school is the attendance is a huge issue. . . we found that if the kids were in class, then they will get the credit, what’s keeping them from getting the credit is their attendance. So we started an attendance tracking meeting that we have, and we’ll start with the juniors, and then two weeks later we do the seniors, then another two weeks later we do the juniors again, and then two weeks we do the seniors.

Although it is a time consuming process, Karen believes that it has proven worthwhile:

It gets us connected to all of those kids that end up red flagged with attendance. We meet with them individually, we call home and talk to a parent, if we can make a connection there. Like I said, it’s time-consuming, but by doing that, we are meeting the majority of our population because they’re red flagged with us as soon as they’ve missed 10 classes. So at 10 classes, we start calling them down and talking to them, and then it goes progressively down the line. As they get higher up on the attendance review, then they’re meeting with VPs, higher up meets with social workers, so by then we’re getting a lot of team members involved in some of the extreme cases.
Not only has this process been helpful in getting students back on track academically, it has also served to identify and provide supports for students. As Carter shared:

. . . it’s given us a sense that the attendance just opens the door to a wider question of support. When we start to have conversations with students we realize something is going on at home. I’m having difficulty with my math. I can’t lead. I’m maybe misplaced in an academic and I should be in P or, I’m misplaced in applied and need to be in locally developed, something of that nature.

The issues and supports extend beyond this as well. They include anxiety, and self-harm, which the Student Success team now has personnel to provide the intervention(s) students require:

. . . so from that attendance review, we’ve been finding that anxiety is a huge issue here. So with our social worker, we’ve started a Chill Group, they’re calling it, so she has hooked up with some outside community people that have expertise in that area, she talks to mental health doctors and things like that. So this Chill Group is run once a week, and I think it’s a six-week program, and the students, they have to give us consent, the parents have to be on Board. Those meetings are closed to us, we haven’t been able to sit on them, but I know that there has been some good progress with those kids. Then through that attendance tracking, we also see other issues kids have, and some of that has been self-harm, we’re finding lots of students with some cutting, even burning, different things like that, so now we have a self-harm group. Again, we have an expert from the community that’s in working with our social worker and our mentoring EA. (Karen)

Student Voice.

When it comes to the issue of student voice, several participants at Bayview mentioned restorative justice practices. As David described, “the restorative justice circle is a reactive
process that we use but restorative justice daily practices, restorative justice language that we use with students is an empowering language for students but it’s also a language that holds students accountable”. Restorative justice is a move away from traditional discipline, requiring wrongdoers to face their victims, listen to the impact of their actions, and be accountable in making amends. The outcome of this is that it does provide students a voice, empowering them, and does “have a positive influence on credits earned, attendance, reducing disciplinary actions as well as suspensions for sure” (David).

Also mentioned within the study by two participants were the Student Voice forums that had been held Board-wide over the past three years, providing an opportunity for hundreds of secondary students to share their views on topics ranging from engagement in learning, assessment and evaluation, and school programming to bullying, equity and more. Bayview had conducted such a forum two years prior, which Karen described:

We did it in the café, and the peer mentors actually helped with that the one year. We had a set of questions that we wanted to have the students’ input in, and they’re on big chart papers in the cafeteria on the walls, and the students were called down in groups. The peer mentors were at each question, just facilitating it, explaining it to the students if they needed it, jotting down ideas, talking to them. So it’s big chart paper with lots of markers everywhere, and students were able to walk around the cafeteria and write down some points, or feedback, or advice or ideas that they had, with certain questions. So some of it is based on programming, some is based on the set-up of the day, some is based on our uniforms, there’s some on bullying, other groups they would like to see in the school, so all of that kind of input.
Student Voice has provided a rich, valuable resource for educators to thoughtfully reflect upon student feedback. One of the takeaways for Carter on what students said they appreciated occurred:

. . . when teachers took the time to get to know them and teachers took the time to understand why something either is or isn’t, which usually translates to is or isn’t handed in, or is or isn’t present in the class. So, for them, the feedback we got was that a kinder, gentler approach was giving them far more, a response.

Providing Programs that Enable Achievement

The second of four pillars in the Student Success initiative has been providing programs that enable achievement, and as noted below Bayview has several that help meet student needs, contributing positively to the school tone.

Varied Programs.

In an effort to provide varied programs that create a good outcome for all students, Bayview has operated a Health and Wellness SHSM program with a Child Care and Family Service focus. At the time of the interviews they were experiencing some major changes to their program. This included a new site lead – Laura, who assumed the position two months prior – as well the loss of the on-site day-care. As Carter explained, the program “. . . provided an enormous gateway to so many students who had proclivity towards a very caring natural disposition and so it funnelled a lot of students into Erie (College), into the early childhood education program”. The program has helped give students a sense of purpose and direction in their education. Karen described the view many of her SHSM students have experienced, that “by doing this in high school, I now have a focus on what I’m going to do when I graduate, so that helps. They also enjoy the certifications we get them because they get CPR and first aid
which would be expensive and time-consuming to get on their own, so the certifications, they’re happy with”. What they did find with the program however was that they had to change the expectations for the range of students who enrolled. As Carter explained:

. . . that was something that was done by the teacher in concert with us out of the best interest of the student as well, so we had a lot more success. We had kids who were fantastic practitioners of early childhood education and caring but might not have been able to write the essay about it as well as somebody else might have. . . They knew what the theories and the concepts were all about. They just needed a different way to express it. And wow, they’re doing wonderfully at Mapletown, thank you very much. We saw that . . . our SHSM needed to adapt to the profile of our learner and again, on a case-by-case basis.

**Help to Reduce Failure Rates.**

Both Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery were mentioned as critical supports in helping in-risk students at Bayview. The interventions provided by Credit Rescue most often began through Student Success Teams going through the failure reports identified above, and meeting one-on-one with students and/or teachers to provide supports. Most reported ongoing efforts throughout the semester, and particularly near the end of the semester in order to assist these students attain their credits:

So I know that Bayview uses the Credit Rescue days, where they would identify students who are falling behind in courses, and kind of give them a catch up period. And there’s also an opportunity, I’m not sure if it’s after exams, or before exams, I think it’s after – to identify kids who were close, who demonstrated a lot of effort in your classes. (Laura)
For those who were not success in their credit(s), Credit Recovery is encouraged as an option. Karen reported:

Oh, we also have our Credit Recovery, Alt-Ed in-school program here. It’s usually pretty full by the start of the year. . . The Credit Recovery is for those kids that have that 40 percent and over, to try to help them recover that credit. If we have any Grade 9 or 10 students that are in that point, then we try to give them that, so that by the start of Grade 11, they’re right back on track.

In order to convey the importance of credit success in Grade 9 and 10 to Student Success Teachers, and more importantly to students themselves, many participants recited a common phrase that was easily remembered, 16 at 16 plus 20:

We really have an expectation for the kids here, that we keep, every time we can present this to them, we call it 16 at 16 plus 20, so we are constantly reminding the Grade 10s that we want them to have 16 credits by the time they’re 16, plus 20 volunteer hours, minimum. We let them know that if they have that, then right now they’re on track to graduate. (Karen)

Bayview was also looking at providing other supports to reduce failure rates, whether it be on EQAO tests, or in subjects. As Laura explained “We are looking at implementing a numeracy and literacy line after school to help students, more so prep for upcoming Ministry testing. But also just to strengthen their supports that they need for additional clarification on subjects”.

Three of the four interviewees at Bayview did express some concerns with respect to the level of expectations placed upon students. David was concerned with the 50% barrier as to whether the threshold was too low for students. As he stated, “we’re seeing too many grades in
the 50s and that’s not enough to move on to the next course and be successful” as they did not meet nearly half the expectations. Laura also expressed her concerns with respect to the supports:

So your teacher’s bothered you and bothered you and bothered you to get work in. Now we’re going to give you Credit Rescue. Okay, you still don’t really pull it together and get it. So let’s put you in Credit Recovery, so you can only do a shorter amount of work. So I don’t really know. I go back and forth. Because I think that there’s a problem, and we’ve kind of found a support. But I don’t know if it’s a patch, and if it’s really going to help kids or not.

Carter acknowledged that Student Success is a culture that is not adopted by all teachers, but one that is growing. Although recent events have even given him pause for thought:

We’re starting to ask questions of how much we’re enabling victim behaviour. And what I mean by that is being victims of our own success is how much do we have to catch before you learn to catch yourself? We had some surprising experiences last year where some of our highest-flying achieving kids went to university and came back shocked that they could not handle themselves without the kinds of supports they were used to getting here. College students who came back and said I can’t do this without you guys. And we thought oh-oh, have we become too coddling? And again, I say coddling, it sounds pejorative. Let me go back to the metaphor, has our weave of our net been too tight. Did we not allow them to fall down enough and learn how to pick themselves up?

**Alternative Programs and Supports.**

Aside from Credit Recovery, alternative education is another option all of the schools provided, particularly for older students. As Karen went on to state:
We have Alt-Ed as well, for the senior students that we don’t want to put in junior classes. I know, myself, if I was a Grade 9 or 10 student, I wouldn’t be too comfortable in a class with some of these older Grade 12s who are 18-year-olds sitting in the class, it just changes the dynamics. So we try to, for those students that we get that are 18 or 17, and really low credit count, then we’ll try to work through a combination of alt-ed and co-op, different programming like that for them.

She went on to describe the additional benefit of their after-school Alt-Ed Return to Learn program: “it’s been good, too, for those older students that, let’s say, have a part-time job, have health issues and might not be able to be here, let’s say, in the morning”. Providing supports for students to reduce failures goes beyond simply a one-on-one connection and help between student and teacher. Additional forms of support are necessary to either foster connections between students who share common challenges that impact upon their school work, or simply a common culture or interest. Three of the four interviewees singled out the supports they now provide at Bayview for students suffering anxiety. Karen shed light on how they have been able to identify students dealing with anxiety and/or self-harm through their attendance review meetings, and have made progress with them through community supports, including personnel, who have come into the school and worked with the students in closed-door sessions.

**Improving Teaching and Learning**

The third of four pillars in the Student Success initiative has been improving teaching and learning. Through the instructional leadership of administration, consultants, and others, as well as self-reflection, teaching and learning can be critically reviewed and improved to better address the varied learning needs of our students.
Learning Teams.

An important strategy for re-engaging students is establishing learning teams, where teachers work collectively on effective teaching and learning practices. For Carter, the learning team experience that stood out for him was a memorable professional development day they had recently in the spring:

We had teachers visit each other’s classrooms and open their classrooms and said, ‘Here’s what I’m trying to do and what can you do to help me?’ And that was a real leap because I know in the union a teacher can’t evaluate another teacher but our staff are saying but you’re not evaluating me. We’re having a professional dialogue. So we made it an anonymous piece where people went around from class to class to class and just left sticky notes behind. “Have you thought about this? Come see me. I’m in Room 231 if you want to self-identify. I’m working on the same thing. Can we work on it together?” At the end of the day, the staff said it was the best PD they’ve ever had because they got a chance to talk to each other about their practice.

Carter went on to describe the shift he has witnessed among his staff in recent years:

And when we visit classrooms and we take a look at big ideas on the classroom walls, the learning goal of the day up, kids are talking about success criteria and some can actually use that language. There’s the sense that teaching has been more about the student than about the teacher getting through the material. And that shift has been, I think, really positive and really noticeable over the last four years.

Improving Assessment Practices.

As part of the process for improving teaching and learning, teachers at Bayview have also been challenged to reflect on their assessment practices. As Carter described, “we’re feeling
that focusing on teacher practice and student learning with kids’ work on the table has helped people understand a little bit more about their efficacy in terms of changing their practice towards some better outcomes.” The staff has also used assessment data from the school’s OSSLT results to improve literacy skills. Those connected with preparing students for the test thought that the multiple choice component would not be an issue for students, which turned out to be a key area they were falling down on. As Laura stated, this data has allowed them to “strengthen some of our literacy components and there is a focus school wide on how to support kids on multiple choice questions.”

Change in teaching practice, including assessment, is occurring, but as in any large organization staff members are at varying stages. As Carter stated:

Our teachers have been phenomenal with it. They’re becoming quite proficient at diagnostics and allowing those diagnostics to inform them along the way. Now, would I say that everybody is doing it? Heck no. Are all of them doing it? They’re trying. Some are doing wonderfully but I think all are attempting it.

In any profound change there is a learning curve involved, and it does take time to move practices in a new direction.

**Connecting with the Community**

The fourth pillar in the Student Success initiative is connecting with the community. Forging partnerships with parents and families, community groups, post-secondary institutions, as well as with local employers in providing cooperative work experiences for students, each and all provide collaborative connections and supports that can inspire young people as well as serve to make learning relevant.
Working with Parents and Families.

Through the interviews it became apparent that along with struggles in trying to engage learners, schools also struggled in trying to engage parents and families as partners within education. As Carter candidly disclosed, “We have, I would argue, an abysmal turnout rate for Grade 8 nights, parent-teacher interviews, student-parent council.” Part of the reason stemmed from an incident, a stabbing, which took place over six years ago and that had tainted the reputation of the school within the community. As Carter stated, “I heard it as recently as yesterday about don’t go to that school, that’s the school you’ll get stabbed, and that fleeting moment . . . just won’t go away in the community. There’s a stigma attached to our school that it’s violent.” David echoed this, further illustrating the challenge a school faces in overcoming the stigma that can be attached to one incident, putting it into perspective to how non-violent it truly is:

And some of the students in Grade 8 that we ask what school they’re coming to and if they say they’re going elsewhere, a lot of the times what we hear is ‘oh Bayview is a dangerous school’. And it’s funny because I can’t remember the last time there was a fight. I don’t think that I’ve ever seen a fight while I was here and I’ve been here for two years now.

The candid observations others have shared with Carter upon visiting Bayview also demonstrate the truly character of the students and the school:

One thing we find when people visit our school, the trucks that came around to deliver things and whatnot, they’ll always come to the office and say it’s one of the only places where the kids will open the door and say ‘Can I help you?’ And kids say, I’m in the hall and I’m maybe going somewhere and they say ‘Can I help you?'
Are you looking for someone?’ and they’re like ‘Wow!’ It’s not that other schools aren’t like that but it’s almost like they don’t expect it coming down here, this little gem. (Carter)

It comes as no surprise that student desire for parental participation in schools declines as they become older, which is reflected in decreasing attendance to school events, particularly at the secondary level. Some of this is to be expected. Laura shared she has seen schools offer “free dinners, we’ve offered prizes to parents who attend parent, or like a ballot for parents who attend Parents Night, or you know Information Nights.”

**Working with Community Groups.**

Along with connecting with parents and families comes the importance of connecting with community partners who can provide invaluable supports. The Social Worker at Bayview has been instrumental arranging these connections, including providing counsellors to assist youth dealing with anxiety and/or self-harm. This task is made all the more easier when the community comes to you, offering to provide additional supports to assist our youth.

At Bayview Secondary, they have had Youth Outreach Workers for the past four years, sponsored by Westside Ministries. Wearing red shirts these workers go throughout the community, including the school at lunch once a week, carrying a backpack of resources and supports to provide youth:

If they need a shelter, they’ll give them information on that right away, if they need a food bank, they’ll take them to the food bank. If they want to know where they can go just for recreation, to play basketball or to go swimming, then they’ll give them that information. (Karen)

Any time the school needs the supports they can provide, they know they can be called upon:
For example, we just had a student last week that needed to meet up with them because they needed housing, and they didn’t want to go on their own, so they were taking them to Westside Ministries to apply for the housing there. So they’ll come here, meet a kid, and go with them places, travel with them. They’ve travelled with some of our teen girls to Sunset Haven or St. Matthews’s Manor, to look at that as a possibility while they were pregnant. (Karen)

There have been a range of other community contacts as well that have been of assistance in supporting Bayview students. As Laura described:

So we had a couple engineering students from Mac who volunteered and came in, and helped our kids with science and math. And we had an English professor who was retired and she would come in and help with just the technical aspects of writing an essay. Those kind of things.

Other contacts have included a Child and Youth Worker from the John Howard Society that is “here twice a week to communicate and work with our most at-risk youth that have been identified by administration and otherwise” (David).

The Kiwanis are also a tremendous support, having begun to offer an incentive program for students at Bayview, known as “Raising the Bar”. Students who agree to take part in this two-year academic program are provided academic support, and if they sustain strong grades they receive a “$1,000 cash incentive at the end, by following through with it” (Karen). As noted earlier, when staff identify students who are suffering from mental health issues, including anxiety or even self-harm, community personnel have been drawn in to provide either individual or group support, as necessary. Furthermore they also have the YMCA Summer Jobs for Youth Program that helps place youth in a summer job:
Every year we’ve had over 30 kids . . . get a job. The ideal candidates for that are students that have never had a job before, so if they’re been part of the program the previous year, they can’t do it again because it’s to get them that initial job experience in the summer. (Karen)

**District Support**

Participants in the study were also asked if they could explain the role of the district in supporting the Student Success Strategy at their school over these years. Along with this they were also asked if the focus changed at all over this time period, and if so how? The responses varied, from appreciating additional funding and supports that had improved their strategy, to the monthly meetings which provide additional training, a renewed focus, and additionally collegial expertise and supports.

For Carter, the district has been instrumental in providing funding and supports that had made a profound difference for the school over the years he has been there. In this time they have been able to move from a reactive approach to problem situations, to a preventative approach. As he stated:

Whenever we’ve asked for something, we’ve usually received it. For example, the MEAs, the mentoring EAs, they were supposed to be a short-term gap and for the first couple of years, I had to work with them to craft how everything they did aligned with the pillars of Student Success and with the pieces that were inherent in that milieu. We basically argued it to the point where it needs to be a permanent solution all the time and the Board was willing to say ‘Yeah. You know what, we agree’. Whenever we’ve asked for extra help, releasing teachers to be trained, or learn from each other, or visit other schools to see pockets of excellence here and
there, they’ve always supported us and given us some more release time or money or things of that nature to help us. So I have to say when we have asked we’ve usually been given the answer yes. I have to certainly thank them for that, they have been very helpful.

Karen also has seen more support, including that of superintendents, in order to meet the data requirements by the Ministry and Board. As she described:

We’re getting more support now, and I think that comes from, too, the superintendents will come for their check-ins, and they want the report on Student Success. There’s also now the monthly Student Success site lead meetings, so at the Board level, they’re meeting with superintendents monthly, the superintendents are coming to the schools, and they’re making sure that we all have to report our Student Success data and initiatives and stuff to them, so the schools are held accountable for it as well.

**Strategy Development**

For Bayview Secondary School, there have been a number of changes that had occurred to their Student Success Strategy over the years. The Transitions program has been in place from the beginning, although it has developed over time as well. A number of staff meet infrequently with teachers from the junior panel of the feeder schools to review the curriculum between grades eight and nine, to ensure there is alignment in their programs to ease the transitions process for students. Future students are also invited five to seven times throughout their Grade 8 year to Bayview to become more familiar with the school. During the intake meetings in May and June each year, staff not only take anecdotal notes of their new students,
this information is loaded into their Student Transition Information Database that is accessible for all team members’ use. Another intriguing aspect of their transitions approach was their use of CAT3 testing, conducted at their feeder schools in order to ensure students are not misplaced in their pathway from the beginning.

The two SHSM programs, and the mentoring educational assistants have been in place at Bayview as part of their program for years. The SHSM programs have been helpful in inspiring students into a career path, so they see that their credit completions are leading to future employment. It includes not only gaining valuable certifications and work experience, but also dual credits through the Erie Bridge program. The mentoring educational assistant’s, added five years ago, have also become an important part of their program. As Carter shared, their role has changed over time:

They’ve morphed from the hall monitor safety person to an integral part of supporting student well-being. And what I mean by that is going after the supports towards emotional, social well-being that are impeding students’ abilities to being successful in the classroom, or have the confidence to even be in a classroom.

The mentoring EAs now each have a caseload of students that they track, meet with, and are responsible for, providing that critical one-on-one support that enables some of the most in-risk to succeed:

That came as a very organic piece through fits and starts, that saw the opportunity to speak with kids as not being ‘Come on, get to class, where are you supposed to be’, to ‘Why aren’t you going to class and how can I help you to get there?’. Even the lexicon, the language of interaction with students made a profound difference in the way that students responded to what was being asked of them. (Carter)
Two other recent developments instituted by Bayview include the peer mentorship program, and the tracking of student attendance. In the peer mentorship program senior students enrolled are required to attend weekly lunch meetings with their teacher, complete assignments, and track the hours they work mentoring junior students, and at the end of the year they earn a credit from their experience. The work includes timely reminders and advice on requirements juniors must meet, and assistance near the end of the semester, helping Grade 9 students adjust to the intense block of culminating activities and exams. The diligent tracking of junior and senior student attendance as a team effort recently has also begun to make a difference. As Carter shared:

I think, one of the things that’s been probably the biggest turnaround, is that attendance check. And again, we call it an attendance check but it’s so much more than . . . It’s so accountable because we don’t just look at the number and say oh, VP’s got to make a call now, or oh, social work has to call. We’re asking the question why and that is the difference because as soon as we ask the question why, we start to burrow into the home.

Discovering what the barriers are which impact student attendance has helped to bring in required supports, supports which progressively move upwards if they have not proven effective, all in an effort to engage students and foster student success.

Lastly, the theme of a caring and team approach was echoed throughout the interviews by the participants. Laura shared her perspective that one of the big changes over the years with Student Success has been the push for teachers to be “caring adults”. In particular this includes being concerned with the outside lives of students, and understanding the unique barriers each may face, preventing them from fully engaging. Carter also commented on this on several
occasions, including this statement that demonstrated the ethos of the team and teachers as a whole:

As we started to take that kind of gentler approach, we found ourselves moving further ahead with that and that is something that the Student Success role here has always had. I came into a school that was full of remarkable individuals, who already were acting in that way in guidance in the Student Success portfolio.

Despite the district’s decision to move to all six lines of Student Success being in the care of one person, Bayview has had and still had a strong team approach to supporting students. This was evident throughout all four interviews, from discussing transitions, to attendance and credit tracking. As David, the Learning Resource Teacher stated:

Midterms is really where we as a team, start generating reports, Student Success starts generating reports as far as which students are failing two or more courses at the midterm mark. And then we get together as a team and we start looking at these students and saying okay, what are we going to do as a team to start helping these students so that they can get back on track?

There was no indication that business as usual had changed, or that the workload had been shifted primarily to the SSL.

**How Student Outcomes Have Changed Over Time**

In order to determine how student outcomes have changed over time at Bayview, both administrative data connected to Taking Stock reports, EQAO testing, and graduation rates, and qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed.
With respect to the Taking Stock Reports, which calculate those students who are in-risk, I was only able to obtain two data sets from Bayview. Students are deemed “in-risk” if they have failed one or more credits and do not obtain eight credits by the end of Grade 9, 16 by the end of Grade 10, and 22 by the end of Grade 11. As can be noted below, there has been a decline in the number of students deemed in-risk in Grades 9 and 10 over the one year period, while the opposite was true in Grade 11, as those in-risk rose by 9 percent. In Grade 12 there was a small 2.4 percentage point increase (Figure 22).

**Figure 22: Students In-risk - Bayview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jun-12</th>
<th>Jun-13</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gr.9</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gr.10</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr.11</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr.12</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EQAO testing takes place province-wide each year for mathematics in Grade 9 and for literacy in Grade 10. With respect to Bayview’s mathematic results, both the academic and applied programs have seen a sharp decline in their outcomes in recent years except for 2014-15 (Figure 23 and Figure 24). The 27 percent gap between Bayview and the district at the Academic level closed to within 4 percent in 2014-15, an impressive turnaround, mirroring its 2010-11 results. The Applied level gap is still large at 16 percent, but has improved as well.
With respect to its OSSLT results, Bayview has seen a decline since 2008-09 when 68 percent of students were successful, a -15 percent gap with the district (Figure 25). Although it had made some gains from 2012-2014, its 2015 results at 50 percent were -26 percent that of the district, its greatest gap to date.
Perhaps the most important indicator of the impact of the Student Success Strategy is the graduation rate for Bayview. As the line graph and chart below demonstrates, graduation rates have been improving (Figure 26). It should be noted that the rates for 2009-10 and 2010-11 are non-standard school and district rates, prior to the Ministry’s clarification to the district on what constitutes a “cohort” graduation rate. From 2011-12 onwards, only students who began and completed their secondary education within the same school district were to be used in the calculation of graduation rates.

In summary, the in-risk student population among the four grades declined from 21.58 percent to 21.53 percent from June 2012 to June 2013, resulting in a 0.05 percentage point improvement. With regards to the graduation rate, from 2009-10 to 2012-13 it improved from 58.2 percent to 72.8 percent, again due in part to the alignment with the Ministry formula. The gap between the district’s graduation rate and the school’s rate improved by 2.7 percentage points over this time. With respect to EQAO testing, Bayview’s results in both tests experienced a decline over time, although OSSLT results are showing signs of improvement.
Figure 26: Graduation Rate - Bayview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009-10*</th>
<th>2010-11*</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bayview</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Board</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data reflects the Ministry of Education clarification on the calculation of graduation rates based on a five-year cohort

With respect to qualitative data, one of the changes Carter has noticed over time is how proactive the students are becoming: “I think one of the most important things . . . is that we are finding that more and more we’re not going out to find the kids, they’re coming to us now.” Another positive outcome has been the move over time from a reactive approach in dealing with students in crisis, to a more proactive and preventative approach, intervening and supporting students in need earlier:

Again, as I say, it’s gone from Student Success as, ‘let’s get rid of crises to get kids back to class’ and moved to ‘let’s get to know our kids more to get back to class’. So, instead of chasing the problems, I think, gradually over time because of the supports and the ability to know that they’re going to be here from year to year to year, we’re able to get in front of a few things now and be proactive. And that would speak to things like the girls’ groups we have, the self-harm group we have, the positive space group we have, all of these things that make you feel included in the family that is our school. (Carter)
David found that the addition of the mentoring Education Assistants to work with in-risk students, and the use of restorative justice practices, have both been instrumental in fostering healthy relationships and reducing the behavioural issues that had existed at Bayview in the past.

Along the lines of positive outcomes for the Student Success Strategy, Laura was quick to respond that there is:

. . . more of a push for us to be caring adults. And I think that the kids are really recognized. Oh, they’re not just concerned with how I’m doing at school. They actually care about my home life. But maybe that’s just my perspective in coming into more of a student services role. But I’m much more aware of that, just saying hello to the kids in the hall, and asking how they’re doing really makes a difference in their life.

Finally, Karen stated, “There’s more accountability now. Let’s say there’s less students that fall through the cracks.” With a strong Student Success Team routinely reviewing attendance and failure reports, students have staff members who are concerned and ready to intervene to provide a range of strategies to assist them to become successful.

**Challenges Encountered with the Student Success Strategy**

Each of the participants was asked, “What issues or challenges has the development of the Student Success Strategy generated?” In previous years the district had allowed schools to allocate the six lines of Student Success each was given as they saw fit. Laura found the recent change of all six lines being designated to one person as counter to their best practice: “I think that making Student Success fall under one teacher is a bit of a challenge now. . . . I do think that it really needs to be a team as opposed to a single individual.”
There were other challenges participants spoke too as well, including staff perceptions of the program, and additional challenges tied to the SHSM program. Two of the participants at Bayview Secondary stated they have faced cynicism, with staff believing they are doing a disservice to students by fostering a culture of enablement. As Laura stated, “I think that a lot of people wonder if we are enabling kids, if we’re providing too much support for kids. That’s definitely something that comes up a lot if we’re really helping them in what, where they need to get”. Carter echoed this statement:

One of the challenges has been sometimes staff perception. I think often times the words Student Success when used together is followed quickly by a sneer. I love the fact that our staff is very frank and very open and feels confident enough to decide, my goodness they have no other way. But they will say, back to enabling, some people see Student Success as a means to allow students to decide how school is going to be. And they feel a bit disempowered, well, hang on a sec here, growing success is telling me that these kids can do whatever they want, whenever they want, however they want. Where do I come in? That’s been a challenge to help teachers try to understand, no, it’s not about that, it’s about understanding your kid and the circumstances determining what is best for them. We all want to be pulling together in the same direction but they see the supports, they see the differences to a school day as being ‘going easy on kids’, quote, unquote, and that piece has been hard. And again, I’m not trying to blame the teachers because they struggle day in and day out with trying to get kids learning, get them engaged and things of that nature.
**How Would You Change Student Success?**

Finally, each of the participants was asked what they would change within Student Success if they could. Some of the changes suggested ranged from allowing schools greater autonomy and flexibility in staffing the position to allow for a team approach, to additional lines, and a greater investment in the program, including allowing more time for one-on-one connections with students.

The top suggested change was a return to greater autonomy in school staffing and decision making for the program. Four of the participants voiced a desire to return to a team led approach. As Laura summarized her thoughts on it:

> I think that I would more change the role of the teacher to be a team led approach because I think that you know if we have more teachers who are connecting with students then their students will be in a better place. I also think that I would rather see Student Success driven by . . . the need of the school.

The recommendation for more school lines, combined with greater school autonomy, was also put forth by Laura. As she stated, each school is different, and as such the Student Success Strategy should have greater flexibility in staffing levels, to align with the varying needs of schools:

> But I feel sometimes like Student Success is driven by the Ministry mandate. And I think that while, yes we need to be answering to people, I think that at the same time not every school is the same, and the needs are so diverse and different that you know maybe one school doesn’t require 6 lines of Student Success, whereas maybe another school requires 12 lines. It’s just so diverse, and I think it’s really just trying to put the right people in the right positions, and also kind of meeting what the school needs.
EASTDALE

Eastdale Secondary School is located within the city and has an enrolment of approximately 810 students. Situated in a lower to middle socioeconomic area, this composite school offers specialized programming through Alternative Education and two SHSMs, as well as a wide variety of clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities to engage all learners. Four participants from Oakridge took part in the study. The participants included the Principal ‘Demi’, the Student Success Lead ‘Lena’, the Head of Student Services ‘Eric’, and the SHSM Lead ‘Leticia’.

Connecting with Every Student

As with the other secondary schools involved in the study, connecting with every student involved monitoring student progress, assigning responsibility for following students, paying attention to specifics groups, and tracking attendance, discipline and suspensions. The Grade 9 Transitions program was a top priority at Eastdale Secondary to fostering healthy connections early on with students.

Monitoring Student Progress.

Eastdale has a School Student Success Team in place. As Lena, the SSL, stated, “There’s a great team here, and we meet for Student Success meetings. We have Student Success meetings on a monthly basis.” Part of the tracking process includes monitoring student attendance and achievement to identify any concerns that could affect credit outcome as the semester progress. As Eric, the Head of Student Services, described:

The other connection we make with students in terms of success is constant tracking of attendance and progress. So we have the standard Board reporting times, but we also go through and track attendance on a weekly basis. If we have concerns we
track students and in terms of going right to the teacher. Talking to the teacher about
the strengths, weaknesses . . .

Lena identified the Grade 9 students as their highest priority, as they are transitioning to
secondary school life. She conducts monthly meetings with staff to review their progress,
discuss individual cases, as well as strategies to enable student success. Maintaining ongoing
communication has been a top priority in supporting staff and students involved in the transition
year. At the same time, monitoring student achievement across all grades begins at the earliest
possible opportunity – the preliminary reports:

. . . which are a few weeks into the semester. I know that it’s a very rough estimate
for most teachers, because they haven’t done a lot of major evaluations at that point,
but we do target those kids to see how they’re doing and we follow them to mid-
terms to see if they’ve improved or not. But because they may have had a lower
ranking at the prelims, we don’t just follow them to mid-terms, we follow them right
through. (Eric)

Experience has taught them to always maintain a watchful eye on in-risk students, taking the
time to touch base with them during the semester to support their success: “We’re looking at
every student that has failed at least one course, and they’re on our Student Success radar, and
we’ll meet with those students and we’ll discuss with those students and we’ll come up with
strategies to help them try and get that credit” (Eric).

**Assigning Responsibility for Following Students.**

As in the other schools, the primary responsibility for following students fell on the
shoulders of the SSL. As in the case of the Principal, Lena, the SSL, was new to Eastdale as
well. A good deal of her time was spent pulling reports, and tracking data, which Demi readily
acknowledged, and clearly felt somewhat frustrated with on her behalf: “And I think that the
crazy reliance on reports. The number of reports that Student Success Leads have to generate is a little bit nuts.” Thankfully Demi recognized “what the job entails is almost more than one person can handle”, and strongly believed in a team approach. Although all of the lines had now been realigned in each school to one person, a team approach in following and supporting students still existed at Eastdale. As Lena shared, “We have Student Success meetings on a monthly basis. So I do definitely get support there.”

**Paying Attention to Specific Groups.**

The Transition program for Grade 9 students is a central piece of Eastdale’s strategy of paying attention to specific groups in the school, and two of the interviewees spoke to its importance. As Eric stated, “Transitions is probably the biggest connection we make.” The connections included meeting with the Grade 8 teachers from their feeder schools to open a dialogue with them and ensure students are as prepared as possible. This dialogue amongst teachers provides a critical means of bridging the learning gap, so both elementary and secondary teachers understand the curriculum expectations between the two years and help ease the transitions. It also provides the valuable opportunity for secondary schools to better meet the learning needs of individual learners. Site visits are made to ensure appropriate course selections for each student transitioning into the secondary life of Eastdale, and in particular meeting with the students to generate some excitement. Lena shared an example:

So we are part of Griffin Elementary career day. We went in and ran the whole afternoon, where we did hands on different activities from making cookies to doing tech experiments where they are burning pencils to drama, to clubs so it was really good. They made buttons as well. So that was something that was really positive. I am continually in the feeder schools, doing bulletin’s boards, talking to kids,
meeting kids. We’ll be doing presentations soon. So our feeder school community, we have strong connections with.

Lena had also taken over a leadership group of senior students, who assist the new students in the transition process throughout their first year, known as the Eastdale Mentors.

Reflecting on the program, Eric shared with pride the impact their work with transitions has had upon student success:

And I think two years ago was probably the best job that we had done in terms of the transition piece. The amount of interaction that we had with the Gr. 8 teachers and the students. And to me that translated when we saw the pass rate. The pass rate for that particular age group, that grade group, in their Grade 9 year was 96 percent. So that’s amazing. So to me when I look at the amount of work put into transitions, seeing the pass rate made it all worthwhile.

**Attendance, Discipline, and Suspensions.**

With respect to Eastdale’s approach to tackling sporadic attendance, discipline, and suspensions, Student Success had made it a priority to track these students throughout the semester and provide supports. For those who find mainstream is not working them, the off-site alternative education program has provided new hope. As Eric described, “In the past when the student just wasn’t performing and attending, and you couldn’t engage them they would act out and suspension would happen. Now that we provided an opportunity for them to show that they can be engaged in school, and we give them a different look at education in general, those suspensions have gone down.”

Demi, the new Principal at Eastdale, with 14 years’ previous experience as an administrator, observed that “Student Success, what I see as far as credit accumulation, as far as
decreasing attendance issues, as far as decreasing discipline, is that it gives them hope, it gives them the caring adult piece”. Careful tracking of student attendance, monitoring of their academic progress throughout the semester, and varied programming are all important aspect of reducing disciplinary issues and promoting student success.

**Providing Programs that Enable Achievement**

Offering variety in programs was key at Eastdale in order to enable achievement. The SHSM program factored in as a central component of this pillar. Organizing teaching, help to reduce failures rates, and alternative programs and supports were also provided to students.

**Varied Programs.**

Vocational programs existed prior to the launch of the SHSM program, although in smaller numbers. This was the case at Eastdale, which was the home site for a unique, collaborative cooperative education program between the Emily Stowe Hospital and the school district. The popularity of the program draws interested students from across the district to Eastdale. As Leticia, the SHSM Lead stated:

This program existed before the Specialist High Skills Major program, and will exist even if the Specialist High Skills Major program collapses. This program is here because the hospital and Board wants it to exist. Through one semester in this program you will meet almost all of the requirements of the SHSM. But it’s only one semester. So you would have to fulfill all of the other requirements at your school. This program, in terms of the outcomes for students, is unbelievable. It’s been fantastic. Like if you had to say rate it from 1 – 10, I would say a 10. The opportunities that it gives the kids in the hospital, the students that have gone on to nursing.
For some students in particular, the experience has been transformative. From being disengaged in school, often manifested in sporadic attendance, to being rekindled with a sense of purpose:

I had kids that I didn’t even realize when they first come in have the attendance issues that they had. And they said ‘I’ve never attended like I attended here.’ It was because everything was meaningful. Everything that we learned in class was because it was related to what they did in co-op. And everything that we did was because it was something that they wanted to learn about. Because it’s all healthcare, and that’s all they care about. (Leticia)

She also went on to describe the thrill it gave parents to see their child become reengaged and motivated to go to school:

I’ve had comments from parents ‘I’d never thought my child would wake up and go early every day like this to school. I never seen them like this’. I’ve had kids say ‘This changed my life.’ It’s just the kind of things you don’t really hear in a regular course. ‘These are the best marks I’ve ever had.’

The success of the program over time in moving students into their chosen pathway has been impressive. It has provided students with training and work experience that is rare at the secondary level, and confirmed for many their career choice:

The nine weeks of shift work, full time shift work these kids do in the hospital, they could write that on their resume, all the stuff that they did. They can go into an interview and talk about what they did in a hospital, and the skills that they have now. That’s unbelievable, and on top of that the certifications and training that we give them through this program. They get their CPR, and First Aid at the healthcare level. They get infection control training, waste management training, medical
terminology training, it just goes on and on, everything that we provide them with.

That they can put it on a resume, tell a potential interviewer. (Leticia)

As impressive as this is, students are also trained and required to go through a mock interview, so they understand the expectations and are better prepared for future employment. In fact, the experience of the program has been so valuable for both the students and the community sponsor – the Emily Stowe Hospital - it has led to many students finding employment shortly thereafter. As Leticia recounted, “I would say since the program started in 2003, I think at least 60 students have been hired. But that’s really the data they’re trying to keep track of. I’m trying as much as possible to keep track. I know which ones get hired.”

The popularity of the program has led to increased enrolment and the graduation of students with the SHSM seal, which involves completing all of the components. As Lena stated, “Our grad rate went from, I think we had seven grads last year, and this year we’re going to have 23 if they all stay on target.” There are a host of reasons why some do not complete the program, including the invaluable realization from this experience that they were “not cut out to be a nurse” and decided to pursue a different path or career (Leticia). For others, the completion of all of the SHSM components can be a challenge, particularly for university bound students who are concerned with ensuring they have all the requirements. As Eric described:

The Specialist High Skills Major throws a little bit of a roadblock into their progress there, because one of the components is a co-op. By adding the Co-op into their timetable, it has to be two periods back-to-back, either in the morning or the afternoon. And that creates a very difficult timetable for them, going into their Gr. 12 year. So many will shy away from doing that.

As he elaborated, anyone interested in the health care sector and “is looking at going into that in university, they require more requires going into that. They need their Chemistry. They need
their Biology. They need their Calculus. They need their Advanced Functions. So less time to take that co-op component” (Eric).

**Organizing Teaching.**

Purposeful staffing is an essential part of an effective Student Success Strategy. Demi, with fourteen years’ experience as an administrator, was new to Eastdale Secondary, and recounted how the rise in credit completion in her last school could be credited to the staff within Student Success. As she stated:

So the schools I came from, where there was a focused Student Success, saw credit accumulation increases. And it wasn’t just the admin’s view of the fact that we’re going to have more kids achieving credits. I think it was the work those people did. Grabbing those kids and working with the teachers and saying ‘Failures not an option’. ‘Everybody’s going to get through, and here are two adults who are going to help you get through.’

Both Demi and Eric indicated how the secret to their school’s credit recovery and alternative education program was also the caring adult within the room:

Alternative education is not an area of the school that a student can choose to go to, we refer them into that area. And we start with Credit Recovery. . . having the appropriate staffing in those areas. I’d like to say every teacher is caring, but having teachers in that really understand the student that’s in front of them, and that they do have difficulties in being able to connect. Those programs at our particular school have really increased. (Eric)

For students who are having difficulty meeting the expectations of traditional schooling, Eastdale has operated an off-site alternative education program for six years. Choosing the right
people for Student Success is essential, but as Demi shared, “the principal of the building sets
the culture tone.” In the past year administration has been working hard to build a Student
Success mindset with all of her staff:

. . . they’re very caring, they are absolutely wonderful, but they still have the old
knee jerk reaction, which is the kids not passing take them out of my class. . . So the
Student Success Lead and I had some really great conversations about changing the
culture . . . We have the heart already there. Now we just need to move in to some of
the other pieces, to get them on board. (Demi)

Part of this process has included building staff capacity, taking them out of their comfort zone to
extend their experience and skills. They have begun recruiting school leaders - department heads-
- to work one semester at the alternative education site to enhance “their teaching because you
need a whole different set of skills to deal with kids who are fundamentally disengaged”.
Therefore both the students and staff become winners through this process “to also build the
teacher’s strategies and the tool kit for working with kids. Everybody comes back the richer, if
we do it right” (Demi). The transformation was apparent in the Head of Family Studies: “She
said it’s opened her eyes to a different kind of kid, and different strategies. And that was Keith’s
(Vice-Principal’s) goal” (Demi).

Help to Reduce Failure Rates.

Engagement is critical in sustaining student interest in schooling and reducing failure
rates. Eastdale provides a wide range of programs in order to engage all learners as best they
can:

. . . this is a great school. We provide so many different options for students and it
doesn’t have to be based on any particular ability or skill. There’s lots of different
sports team to try out for. . . But above and beyond that, we have a lot of different music – classic, music council, and glee club. We have the Eastdale Mentors, which is a leadership group year. I took it over this year. There is a math club – they’re very keen, a great group of students. Our Positive Space is the biggest group in the Board. (Lena)

Another unique alternative that was mentioned by Eric was to assist misplaced students in particular who are struggling. This has evolved over time to staff working collaboratively to assist struggling students achieve some form of success, even if it includes changing the course designation mid-semester, which is more work for the teacher. As he stated in an example:

We usually get the parent involved, and the counsellor involved. And we talk about what would be the benefits of that student meeting the expectations for the E level course. So we allow them to meet the expectations of the E level course so we rescue that credit. But it doesn’t eliminate them from taking that college level course again if college is their destination. It just lays a better foundation for them. So the flexibility that our teachers are providing these students in our classrooms to change levels without changing an entire class has been tremendous. (Eric)

Most reported ongoing efforts throughout the semester, and particularly near the end of the semester in order to assist these students attain their credits. As Demi had stated, it could be simply the relentless pursuit of the team gently pushing students by stating “failure’s not an option” and providing the support of teachers.

**Alternate Programs and Supports.**

With respect to reducing failure rates, it became clear in the interviews that their alternative program was a central pillar in reaching some of their most disengaged students. As
Lena stated “We don’t do a credit rescue. We do Credit Recovery through our Alt-Ed lines. And then we have our very unique program, which is our off-site program.”

When asked what strategies or programs were in place which they believed helped reduce the failure rate and enabled student achievement, Demi immediately responded by focusing in on the off-site alternative program that is helping “the ultimate disengaged” continue their education. The program recognizes that for some students “you need something else because mainstream is not working for you right now” (Demi). On one of her first visits to the school before assuming the position, Demi attended the year-end breakfast celebrating the successes of the students who had attended the program throughout the semester. She spoke with a student “who had achieved the least, got three credits in the semester. And I asked her, ‘How did you feel about that. ‘Well, Ms. I was averaging one before. So this is my most successful semester.’”

Over the course of the past year, the program had been repurposed, undergoing a profound change. In the past “it was like ‘Come whenever you feel like. Go to Co-op if you want. We don’t really care’ . . . so they lost more than they gained. But they could, you know, pat themselves on the back with ‘Well we gave them a shot and they failed. But it’s not really our problem because they’re not really Eastdale students’” (Demi). Lena shared her perspective on the change she helped usher in:

I was a big part of that last year. We kind of rebranded it, we just completely redid the whole program. So that’s very unique. It allows students who are disengaged here, or not meeting the expectations that we have set out, or who need a break from this environment for whatever reason it could be. Social, behavioural, they’re just not succeeding here. It is a Co-op experiential base program. Students are put in co-op and we run a class on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
Using the formula of two days of classes, and three days of work experience, many students have found success in test driving potential career pathways. As Demi described:

They’re kids who don’t work well in the classroom, but I go and visit them and in the semester they’re getting 5, 6, and 7 credits, because they’re working so many hours in co-op. And they’re like ‘Ms., if regular school was like this, I’d be fine’. So now they’re in a job where they’re getting positive feedback, some of them are becoming apprentices, they’re getting paid co-op, so they’re feeling valued again. So, again, without the Student Success and that flexibility, I don’t think those options would have come about.

They have also worked hard to change the staff view of these students to “they are very important Eastdale students, who are given another opportunity here, and then we’re hoping they’ll come back” (Demi). The goal is to eventually have students re-enter the mainstream; however they do have graduation plans for those who prefer to continue in an alternate program. Demi shared the story of one student’s experience:

I’m thinking of the girl there this semester, who has her first child, she’s 16, living with her boyfriend, and she needs the paid co-op, and she needs access to daycare, and will she ever come back in the school? Probably not. It’s not what she wants. She likes the fact that she can do her education. So to me that’s success, because we’re keeping her engaged, and keeping her basically able to finish and get a high school diploma.

**Improving Teaching and Learning**

The third pillar in the Student Success initiative has been improving teaching and learning. At Eastdale this has included developing learning teams to change the mindset of
educators, as well as improving assessment practices. All of this led by the instructional leadership of administration, building the capacity of their staff.

**Learning Teams.**

Educators need to model the practice of continuously learning. Demi summed up the shift she has gone through as an educator in a candid comment that reflected her journey:

The change has been in the mindset that all students can be successful. I mean again, you go back 10 years, so I was fledging administrator, VP, and I still believed that some people, you know much to my chagrin now, I still believed that some kids should be kicked out, and things like that. Um, so that’s been a fundamental change in education, where we really do at our hearts believe that everybody can and should be successful.

Now at a new school, she is leading this re-culturing process among staff who have traditionally had “the old knee jerk reaction, which is the kids not passing take them out of my class”. She recognized that the change process could not be delayed and would require some courageous conversations on teaching and learning. The immediacy for change was partly due to school closures by the district, which has led to the movement of students, and the changing culture of schools who are/will be serving a broader spectrum of student – including Eastdale.

Demi had been informed by the district that another secondary school close by would be closing, and as a result student enrolment at Eastdale would be soon rising sharply:

With the closure of Cliffside, we are going to be inheriting probably an additional 400 students next year. Many of whom will be operating at the L and the P level. So changing the mindset this year has now become critical. We have lost the advantage of time because I need to make sure that every teacher see’s themselves as a student success teacher, before we have more at-risk kids in the building”.

To move staff towards the perception that all are Student Success Teachers and have a vested role to play in better meeting the needs of all learners, Demi has made it a priority to start the learning process with the department heads. This process was overdue as she summed up:

The SEF (School Effectiveness Framework) had never been mentioned in this building. There had been no professional development since the last VP left four years ago, ‘cause she was doing it all. So, we decided to start with the Heads and I said ‘Okay guys, I’m going to go through something with you, and it’s what I think you know, and if you don’t then we need to talk about closing those gaps.’ . . . And it was a shock to many people in that room. They didn’t know about the SEF. They didn’t know about instructional leadership.

As part of the process in building capacity, Demi began discussions with some of the teachers who were familiar with Growing Success and the School Effectiveness Framework, and found strong support because “they’ve got great things going in the instructional point of the classroom, but no one else knew about it. Because there was no sharing.” Building capacity was the first step. Demi described the process they went through in working with department heads about Principal Learning Teams (PLT) and the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP):

So we put it out to the heads that we wanted them to be instructional leaders, and we would help support them. So we started with our first P.A. day of having them build PLTs, and we said - again, PLT’s and TLCPs? Foreign language to them - so we started with ‘We want you to get a group of teachers together. We want student work on the table, and we want you to look at the student work, and say ‘what do I need to learn to help improve the student work?’ . Let’s start with the teacher
learning to improve student learning. So that’s where we’ve started. A lofty goal. In one year to try and catch them up.

Providing training for her department heads first, and demonstrating trust and belief in their leadership skills and abilities, was the first step in building an effective culture of change in teaching and learning practices:

I think looking at the PLT’s and pushing the Heads to be the instructional leaders. And trusting them, and giving them our trust and belief that they are valuable members of the team and that they are the instructional leaders in the building.

That’s the most critical component. (Demi)

Respecting the voice of her staff, a conscious decision was made to build upon the two areas of school improvement that the school had chosen the previous year, namely student mental health and engagement. To begin this process they began gathering some data on engagement by asking students:

Just tell us what makes you choose class A. Why makes you always attend class A. What is it about this class that makes it great? What’s about this class that turns you off? How are they engaging you and making you excited about learning?

(Demi)

Part of building capacity is having those courageous conversations with staff on issues that are on-going and need to be confronted (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). At Eastdale, one of those issues was how to engage and sustain the engagement of those students who are fundamentally disengaged, before Credit Recovery or the alternative education program is required. This not only would reduce the number of staff required for the program, but further the concept that all teachers can be Student Success Teachers, by collectively working to
improve their teaching and learning so that all students can achieve success in their courses. As Demi summed up:

Right now, this year we’re running 24 lines of alter-ed. between the off-site program, and the on-site credit recovery. And my comment to my Student Success Lead and my Guidance Head, was I’m going to go to Heads in January and say we need to have a better plan, because we don’t have the luxury of continuing to peel off 4 teachers to do what we fail to do the first time – which was to get them their credits in the first place. So we need to be more proactive instead of reactive. And I think that’s Student Success when used properly.

The classroom teacher has also become an ally in Student Success, talking about the strengths, weaknesses, what could be done to support them in that situation. By providing staff relevant data, and using this data to drive improvements in teaching and learning, the end goal is building collective capacity to improve long-term student success. Demi summed up:

So we are going to be presenting at Cabinet, a look at their pass/fail rates as well as to me what’s important is the mark breakdown. Because you and I both know it’s really easy to have 100 percent pass rate – we just give everybody 50 and we’re done. But if you get a 50 in Grade 9, what are your long term prospects? Not good. So we’re looking at what’s the mark distribution, where they kids going, what’s the long-term health for them? And if we can start them and spark them in Grade 9, then we . . . because our biggest this year, our biggest failure rate is in Grade 12, which horrifies me.

One learning team that has been operating prior to Demi’s arrival has focused on literacy. Improving literacy outcomes for all students has been a high priority at Eastdale, particularly given the Grade 10 OSSLT all students are required to pass prior to graduating. This
has led to team conversations on improving teaching and learning practices in general. As Lena elaborated:

We provide a lot of supports around literacy. We did our practice test today. Every student, even if they achieved a Level 4 on the literacy practice test gets feedback, because they can do better. So they are individually marked, moderated by a team of teachers. We have a literacy course close to the test, and the Grade 9 lunch meetings I told you about, where we discuss different strategies that work for students. I found that very helpful, because a lot of teachers frustrated with the way a student is behaving in one class and found the strategies that worked, like ‘oh just move them here or don’t let them get out of this . . . or whatever it is. So it is helpful.

**Improving Assessment Practices.**

Along with improving teaching and learning practices, conversations surrounding assessment practices have also begun. Where assessment was once viewed as simply the outcome of the teaching process, demonstrating a student’s learning, staff who have never heard of assessment of or as learning are becoming aware that it can be a critical piece in the learning process for students. Improving assessment practices was another priority for Demi when she arrived at Eastdale, when she realized:

They never heard of John Hattie. Some of them had read *Talk About Assessment*, but didn’t really, really know what it was all about. Didn’t know *Growing Success*. . . so there was these huge gaps, so we’ve been working really hard on our goal as an admin team is to build up the confidence and the efficacy of our heads, so that they can lead our teachers.
These critical conversations on teaching and assessment practices are now taking place, providing that valuable opportunity for professional development using the expertise of leaders in the field.

**Connecting with the Community**

In terms of connecting with the community, working with parents and families were a key priority – although challenges were encountered here – as well as working with community groups, and local post-secondary institutions. The SHSM program factored in largely with respect to these connections, particularly with finding local cooperative work experiences within the community, and offering dual credits through a partnership with post-secondary institutions.

**Working with Parents and Families.**

Through the interviews it became apparent that along with struggles in trying to engage learners, schools also struggled in trying to engage parents and families as partners within education. As Lena stated, “I think that connecting with parents is big a challenge for many schools. It certainly is for ours.” Whether it be a Grade 8 welcome night, or parent-teacher interviews, low attendance was a common occurrence at Eastdale. For Eric, every effort is made to engage parents when it comes to trying to validating a student’s absences to rescue a credit, where a student is struggling and not on track to complete it. As he described: “The teacher has a conversation with the student. We usually get the parent involved, and the counsellor involved. And we talk about what would be the benefits of that student meeting the expectations for the E level course.” By allowing for a course level change part way through the course, a student’s time and effort is not wasted, as they are allowed to achieve the expectations at a different level.
Working with Community Groups.

Partnerships have also been forged between the school and community groups to benefit the student learning experience. One example is a partnership with a local church to use their facilities for their most in-risk students, serving as the location for the off-site alternative education program. Through this program students are provided two days of in-class learning, and three days of cooperative work experience. The latter has led to some strong connections with local employers who have served as mentors, providing valuable work experiences for the students. As Eric elaborated:

The employer also knows if this is a student who may historically have attendance issues, or there are many employers that if we have a student with anger-management issues, they’re willing to take that student on because they want to foster that and help them through that. So there is a number of different employers that will take a number of different students for a number of different reasons. So when I talk about fostering that relationship within the community, I think that our off-site alternative teachers have done a fantastic job of doing that. Some of the relationships are really, really good.

Not only has the Alternative Education teachers done a good job of this, so have the teachers connected with the SHSM program. Leticia shared a little about these positions:

She does a lot of placements with the students. In community healthcare settings. So that creates a lot of connections with the community. A lot of placements in pharmacies, and long-term care facilities, and health clinics throughout the community. That’s something that I think, the SHSM has increased a lot. I don’t
think a lot of the co-op teachers had those connections to begin with. But once the SHSM got in place, a lot more of those.

The employers who have agreed to provide Eastdale Students with placements, both in the alternative education program, and the SHSM program, also provide them with a valuable mock interview experience:

So I prepare them with how to dress for the interview, what to say, everything like that. You set them up with the interview and they pretend they are going in for the job for real. I don’t even sit in on the interviews. And they get live feedback as to their resume, cover letter, how they looked, and what they said. And that way when the real job postings go up these kids know exactly what to do. That gives them at least a leg up. (Leticia)

**Working with Postsecondary Institutions.**

Recent years have also witnessed increasingly closer ties between secondary schools and local post-secondary institutions. This relationship has grown to include visits, a range of supports, as well as partnerships in preparing students for post-secondary schooling. Lena fostered a strong relationship with Erie College, who “come in quite a bit, and they’ll go to our off-site program as well. Great resources there at Erie. Fantastic supports.” These partnerships have grown to also include the creation of dual credits for students, where students can earn not only secondary school credits by taking part in the SHSM program they are in, they also have the added benefit of gaining two post-secondary credits in a range of areas. The students:

work at Erie College for four days, and on the last day they can work on two co-op credits, or they can work on independent learning packages to earn high school credits. . . So when they walk into Erie College they walk in with two credits in that
program. And the beautiful thing I learned this year is that those college credits are now transferable. . . Especially kids that are ready to make that move, but are afraid to make that move. So this is kind of a safety net. They’re in college but they’re still tied to our school. (Eric)

District Support

Eric in particular singled out the district wide meetings of Student Success Leads as being an important support. As he stated “We have monthly Student Success meetings that are initiated by the district, and I think that those help to keep the focus of what Student Success is. There is a lot of sharing that goes on, so different things that are happening at different schools.’ Through these meetings new ideas and valuable strategies are exchanged, which go a long way in supporting new leads, sustaining and growing the initiative.

When asked if anything had changed over the years, participants did identify some changes. The roll out for the start of the most recent year was markedly different than that of the past. Instead of just having the district wide meetings of Student Success Leads, they began the year off by having consultants do site visits that were appreciated. Lena said:

This year what I really liked was they came to us first. Our first meeting was a personal meeting at the school. And we had the Student Success consultant come in, asking what our needs were, what our challenges were, and how they can support us. Our second meeting was as a group, which was still very valuable, I really liked it. But I think traditionally they had group meetings. And now their third and fourth visits are going to be at the school again. And I really like the individualized approach.
Strategy Development

Since the inception of Student Success at Eastdale, the strategy has evolved to better meet the needs of the students. Lena had a more system-wide view of the change which has taken place:

I mean I can’t speak specifically for Eastdale, but I can speak for the Board. I think there is a focus on getting to know our students. I agree with that 100 percent. Getting to our students, reaching out to them on a more personal level. Student voice has become more important. And letting them shape what effects their education.

Demi candidly described how her own perception has changed over time, a change which mirrors that of many, and the essence of Growing Success – providing a wider range of pathways and supports for all students:

I think for me and for education, the change has been in the mindset that all students can be successful. I mean again, you go back 10 years, so I was fledging administrator, VP, and I still believed that some people, you know much to my chagrin now, I still believed that some kids should be kicked out, and things like that. Um, so that’s been a fundamental change in education, where we really do at our hearts believe that everybody can and should be successful. I think that a number of programs, and supports we have access to now has grown exponentially as well in the last 10 years.

Eric, the Head of Student Services, recounted the early days of Student Success and how the strategy has developed:

I remember the first time I was involved in Student Success, we really weren’t sure what our role was as Student Success Teachers. So we tried to target a specific
group in the school. I know that our particular school we targeted the Gr. 9s & 10s. We looked at how are we going to support all of those students? And how were we going to identify those students at risk. It has evolved today the way we have Student Success set up now. We focus on the students coming in Gr. 9, but we follow them to 10, 11, and 12. We tried to touch base with all the kids. And obviously there are kids that we feel that are at risk that are going to get a little bit more attention, because that’s usually what they require. But I think the whole structure of Student Success over the last four years has changed from just identifying the kids at-risk, to really providing the appropriate support for every student in your school.

Data tracking with respect to attendance, or semester reports have become critical components of this process, in order to provide appropriate supports for in-risk students. Through this process staff have come to better understand the barriers that may exist in individual student lives that are impeding their efforts to succeed. As Eric explained:

I think in the past it was a statistic. This student has been away 37 times. And there was really no investigation into why that student was away. I think we have a better handle since Student Success came in . . . I’m finding that those absences, we have more excused than unexcused because we’re touching base with the parents and students, and we’re having them validate their absences. . . So it could be for medical reasons. It could be for family issues. It could be mental health. So in terms of attendance, I haven’t see attendance go up or down, but I think the reasoning for attendance we can validate more statistically why students are away.

The focus of Student Success has also broadened over time to include not only students whose credits were already in jeopardy, to those who were walking the fine line of:
. . . getting a 50 or a 51, in two or more of their courses, and we’re starting to look at that, because potentially they could be at risk. In the past, we looked at that ‘It’s a pass. That kids good.’ So we’re starting to look back now, we’re looking at the overall failure rates, and if you look at the historical data, we’re seeing some students who had the 50s and 51s didn’t achieve the credit at the end of the semester. So we felt it important to include that data as well. So the use of our data is evolving based on what we’re seeing the year before. (Eric)

Supports for students have improved at Eastdale, including the Alternative Education program. As Demi summed up the Alt-Ed program:

Originally, it was the way to get rid of all of the difficult kids that they didn’t want here. That weren’t ‘Eastdale’ quality students. . .So before, it was like ‘Come whenever you feel like. Go to Co-op if you want. We don’t really care’. So she and Keith last year started the three days a week Co-op, and two days a week in class. So that’s been a morphing. Before they used to be given booklets and do go Co-op. They weren’t in class. So they lost more than they gained. But they could, you know, pat themselves on the back with ‘Well we gave them a shot and they failed. But it’s not really our problem because they’re not really Eastdale students’. In the last year it’s morphed to ‘They are very important Eastdale students, who are given another opportunity here, and then we’re hoping they’ll come back’. That’s our goal. Our goal is not to graduate them out . . . Our goal is send them there, teach them the skills that they need to be able to re-enter mainstream. If they can’t, we do have graduation plans there.

Supports for students have also moved beyond simply success in credit completion, to recognizing that students may be in-risk in other areas. As Eric elaborated:
And that support may be just the fact that student, the support may be in terms they are having trouble with their career path. They don’t if they are going to college or university. They don’t know what type of education they require for whatever career path that they are going into. So that may be the support that they need. So it’s not necessarily at-risk in marks, it’s at-risk in terms of judgment, and where they think they’re going, and how they’re going to get there.

Even with respect to improving teaching and learning, there has been a notable change, more recently, towards instructional leadership, from the Principal to the Department Heads. As Demi recalled upon her arrival:

So there was these huge gaps, so we’ve been working really hard on our goal as an admin team is to build up the confidence and the efficacy of our heads, so that they can lead our teachers. Because we need to give the heads confidence in their abilities . . . we put it out to the heads that we wanted them to be instructional leaders, and we would help support them.

The rewards for these efforts have become apparent, from marked gains in testing scores and credit completions for Grades 9 to 12, to gains in Eastdale’s graduation rate:

In terms of Credits earned . . . more credits earned in the Gr. 9 last year than in any of the other groups. . . And I would say that our graduation rate, for pure Gr. 12s in the past three years, has hovered around 83-85 percent rate. So the Gr. 12s that are age appropriate Gr. 12s, 83-85 percent of those students are graduating. So that’s an increase compared to where we were at this particular school 6-7 years ago.
How Student Outcomes Have Changed Over Time

An analysis of both administrative and qualitative data from Eastdale Secondary School provides an indication of how student outcomes have changed over time. Beginning with the administrative data, I was only able to obtain two Taking Stock reports from Eastdale to shed light on in-risk students. As the graph and chart below demonstrate, some grade levels have seen an increase in the number of “in-risk” students, where others have seen a decline, notably in Grade 12 from 47.6% to an impressive 14.4% (Figure 27).

Figure 27: Students In-risk - Eastdale

With respect to EQAO mathematic results, Eastdale has witnessed an improvement most notably at the academic levels recently. This includes an 18 percentage point improvement since 2011-12, closing to within 5 percentage points of the district results. At the Applied level, few real gains have been made since 2010-II (Figure 28 and Figure 29).
Eastdale has also seen an improvement in its OSSLT results in the past two years, matching its performance in 2008-09, while the district and provincial results have seen a decline. When drilling down further into the data, there were several notable findings that became apparent. First, its results have held fairly steady throughout much of the five years,
except for two spikes in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 (Figure 30). When analyzing the data for those two specific years, what became apparent was the high deferral rates of 41% and 25% of students respectively. By 2014-2015, the deferral rate had dropped to only 10 percent of students. Although it had been three percent above the district in 2013-14, it had dropped to -3 percent below the following year, with a respectable 73 percent success overall. When examining its graduation rates, Eastdale has seen a steady improvement, including a 2.6 percentage point increase from its June 2012 to June 2013 results, closing the gap that existed between its results and the district and Province, which were unchanged (Figure 31).

Figure 30: OSSLT Results – Eastdale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Eastdale</th>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To summarize the administrative data, from the Fall of 2012 to June 2014, their in-risk student population among the four grades declined by 7.62 percentage points, from 27.05 percent among the four grades to 19.43 percent. From 2009-10 to 2012-13, their graduation rate also improved from 57.7 percent to 78.8 percent, again due in part to the district’s alignment with the Ministry’s clarification on graduation rates. Even taking this into account, the graduation rate has improved for Eastdale, particularly when comparing the graduation rate
between the district and the school over these four years. The gap between the two closed from 12.3 percent to only a 2.1 percent difference, resulting in a 10.2 percentage point improvement. For this reason, Eastdale experienced the biggest gains in student outcome based on the administrative data.

Figure 31: Graduation Rate - Eastdale

With respect to the qualitative data, interviewees mentioned the positive outcomes that the Transition program has had on new secondary students. Eric recounted with pride on the success they had with the effort they poured into the Gr. 8 teachers and students they had two years ago “the pass rate for that particular age group, that grade group, in their Gr 9 year was 96 percent”. Another positive outcome Eric stated was in how they have become more proficient at validating why a student is absent, which is helpful in better understanding unique situations many students face, including barriers, that affect their success.
For Lena, the positive outcome has been the connections that have been forged, and the capacity building:

I think that students definitely have better connections with staff. I think that just having a Student Success Teacher allows us to build capacity for other teachers getting to know students. So we might find out something as counsellors and Student Success Teachers that we can share with teachers – an understanding of what’s going on.

She has also seen the positive impact the renewed Alternative Education program has had on students. As she stated: “we found a lot of success with students, especially through co-op, because a lot of students may have been too intimidated to go out on their own. We push them a little bit. We had eight students get jobs last year” (Lena). Leticia found the same positive outcomes from students engaged in the SHSM program, through the training and work experience that have rekindled the desire for education for many within her program.

Two other significant outcomes over the years has been the drop in suspensions and the improvement in Eastdale’s graduation rate. As Eric stated “in the last four years our suspensions have gone way down”. At the same time “the Gr. 12s that are age appropriate Gr. 12s, 83-85 percent of those students are graduating. So that’s an increase compared to where we were at this particular school 6-7 years ago.”

**Challenges Encountered with the Student Success Strategy**

Each of the participants were also asked “what issues or challenges has the development of the Student Success Strategy generated”. Among the interviewee’s from Eastdale, the greatest challenge identified was with respect to the recent move from the district to mandate that the six lines for Student Success be given to only one person, collaboratively selected between the
school and school administration. In previous years the district had allowed schools to allocate the six lines of Student Success each was given as they saw fit. As Eric summed up:

I think the model that we have that our district has made us go to has been very difficult. Because it’s a huge job to ask one person to overtake. Where at our particular school when we were able to do it over three people, they shared the responsibility, shared the duties, and they would naturally be able to go where their strengths were.

Lena also echoed the challenge the change has brought by stating, “I think it is challenging putting it all on one person. I like the idea of a team better. . . I think a team approach is ideal.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Demi, who also found the move problematic:

What’s not helpful is the going down to one. I haven’t seen any research, and maybe you have, maybe you can direct me to research that says one person doing the job, versus having 2 or 3 is better? But that was a directive, from our director.

What became ever so clear from each of the participants comments on this was the shared concern – the sheer workload tied with the Student Success position. Demi acknowledged the taxing toll of the position, due to the requirements imposed by the Ministry of Education:

And I think that the crazy reliance on reports. The number of reports that Student Success Leads have to generate is a little bit nuts. And I just think, what the job entails is almost more than one person can handle. And whether you then split the line . . . whether there should be more than six lines attached to it. Forget whether it’s one person or three people, whether it shouldn’t be 8 lines is a question that I have with all the work that goes into that for making sure everyone is successful.
Demi went on to say that the paperwork also required by the Ministry due to the SHSM program, conveyed the tremendous load:

Because to me one the problems is the Ministry expects too much freakin’ paperwork from all this. And I know that they have to justify spending all that money, and I get that. But there’s got to be a better way to do it. Somebody centrally somewhere has access to all this data. Why we have people filling out reports when it could all be grabbed another way I don’t understand.

Eric also echoed the same thoughts on the position being under resourced by the Ministry. As he stated:

And I know that everything comes down to budget and money, but if we want to do this properly, we have to have the proper resources in tack, and our best resource is having people being able to do that. And I just feel that we don’t have enough people.

The last challenge identified with the SHSM program has been retaining university bound students in the final year, just when the demands upon their schedule seem to increase. As Eric described:

The Specialist High Skills Major throws a little bit of a roadblock into their progress there because one of the components is a Co-op. By adding the Co-op into their timetable, it has to be two periods back-to-back, either in the morning or the afternoon. And that creates a very difficult timetable for them, going into their Gr. 12 year. So many will shy away from doing that. So what we’re finding statistically is that kids that are taking the Gr. 11 program to give them a taste of the healthcare sector. And then we have our Gr. 12s, not many from our school are doing it, but the
system program we’re seeing more than naught it’s post-graduates that are coming back.

Due to the entry requirements into their university programs, many do not complete their SHSM cooperative placement, and hence do not attain the red seal for the completion of the program. Leticia confided:

The SHSM does not provide any advantage over another student as far as I know right now. I’ve seen the OCAS website, I’ve seen the OAS website. I mean they might have a little checkbox. I think one university, one or two, given an entrance scholarship if you have your SHSM. . . But getting in, no.

How Would You Change Student Success?

When the interviewees at Eastdale were asked how they would change Student Success to better meet the needs of the students, three of the participants voiced a desire to return to a team-led approach. This included the desire for a return to greater autonomy in school staffing and decision making for the program. Demi highlighted the same recommendation:

I’ll preface it by saying that I’m a little concerned this year with the mandate in this Board that we have one person do it. I think the model prior where schools had two or three people being the Student Success Teachers allowed us to get to more people [students].

When reflecting on this question, Eric elaborated on the impact the move to one Student Success Teacher has had upon their school. In essence the loss of a network of collegiality and supports that had evolved over time by, and a shared team approach:
I know how Student Success works. How it has been working at our school with us having the flexibility to run it, with the personnel that we thought was best able to do that. But being handcuffed a little bit, that there’s only one person per semester that’s in charge of all of the areas, we have to cut some things out. I’m going to give you an example. The Literacy Test is not something that would fall under the Student Success umbrella. When we had three people working on Student Success that was the thing that they took over because literacy is important in every area, not just the English classes. Literacy was something that we wanted to promote and develop in every single classroom. So being able to do a good job at trying to prepare these kids for the literacy test takes a lot of resources.

The shared ownership of preparing students for the graduation required passage of the OSSLT provided more boots on the ground, an interdepartmental effort at promoting the importance of literacy, connected with their Student Success Strategy. As Eric expounded further:

When we had three people working on it, one person was able to focus their energies on that particular area, and make it a Student Success, because it still could be linked to Student Success even though it may not fall under the original umbrella. So preparing those students for the literacy test is huge. . . And now that we only have one person involved, we’re finding it very difficult to have that person be able to have that under that umbrella and spearhead that initiative.

Lena’s recommendation summed up the essence of Student Success as a facilitator, directly connecting with students and staff more often to provide needed supports:

I think I’d like an opportunity to get to know the students better. I think that if there were opportunities for that, and more time to work with teachers. As far as
strategies, their needs go, and how can I help facilitate their learning, and how can I help with their issues and problems. If I could have more time with teachers and students. I don’t know what that would look like or if that is possible.

The SHSM program has been one welcome addition for senior grades, offering a focused package of courses within a career field of their interest. Changes were suggested within this area as well by the SHSM leads. Leticia for example reported how she has met many students who were interested in her program, and had spoken to Student Services staff in the past about ensuring they had the right mix of courses to pursue a career in health care, only to find out when they applied for the Gr.12 program that they were not properly prepared for that pathway:

I don’t know if the schools are doing a good enough job in connecting with their kids with this. Because I’m still hearing too much where they didn’t know what was available. Kids in Grade 12 still don’t get what the pathways were. How do you start Grade 9 telling your guidance counsellor that you want to be a nurse, and you get to Grade 12 and you don’t have the pre-requisites for nursing? . . . They’re frustrated. They are. But I just say come back. Just come back next year and you’ll get this great experience. But just go back and get what you need right now to do it. And yeah a lot of them are, they’re very frustrated.

Leticia also expressed concerns on the delivery of the program, and changes she felt needed to be made to align with the original vision of what the experience was intended to provide students:

To be honest with you, the way that they are delivering it at the schools, I don’t think that the way they are doing it is the way the SHSM was originally intended to be delivered. I was at those original meetings. I was there, and I really understood
what they were trying to do. What the SHSM is supposed to do is give students a lot of background in a certain area in an authentic way. It’s not about just getting that red seal on their diploma. Are they getting the certifications and training? Are they getting really authentic co-op placements that will help them make career decisions and get jobs and that kind of thing?

Authenticity was important for Leticia, who valued the original vision of providing students a program with personnel who were in the career field. Individuals who could speak knowledgeably about the pathway they had taken to their career, the trials and joys of their daily work experience, and who could serve as a mentor for the students. As she elaborated, this is not occurring at all schools:

And I think, the way that I’m seeing it being delivered in some of the high schools is like ‘check, check, check, did we do this? Did we do that?’ And I don’t know if they are really providing it in the way it was intended to be delivered. So how would I improve that? Maybe some more quality control. Going in and checking. How are you delivering your CLAs? How are you delivering your certifications and training? And who is providing them? Are you actually getting people in health care to deliver these? Or are these just teachers saying ‘Yeah we did inspection control. Yeah we did medical terminology?’ because if it’s just the teachers delivering it, that’s not what it was originally intended. You were supposed to be getting people from those industries coming in and providing that training to the students. And I’m not seeing that done all the time. We are. We’re in the hospitals, we have hospital people coming in doing all the training. But at the schools I know that a lot of teachers are just delivering it themselves. And that’s not what it was intended to be.
Ideally it should be, as long as everything functions properly. As Leticia had earlier described above in this section, not all of these supports function as they should. Perhaps one of the changes would be in providing additional supports that ultimately better the end goal of helping students achieve the post-secondary pathway they desire.
CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

This study explored how the Student Success Strategy has developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario school district. This chapter presents a summary of the study and discussion on the findings in light of the literature reviewed in the previous chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand how the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes in one school district. The sub-questions included: (1) What program elements did the four schools emphasize? (2) How did the program develop over time? (3) What were the program outcomes? (4) What challenges did the schools encounter? The literature provided a summary of leading research surrounding the issue of student engagement, factors leading to disengagement, the effects of disengagement, and solutions. Having now completed my research, I believe my choice for the conceptual framework was sound. The four pillars of the framework include connecting with every student, providing programs that enable achievement, improving teaching and learning, and connecting with the community. It also included how the programs developed over time, the program outcomes, as well as the challenges schools encountered.

Both the qualitative and administrative data presented rich insights into the Student Success Strategy. The participants involved in the interviews were all members of the Student Success Team in the four schools. The data from the interviews were examined from an inductive approach to identify major ideas or categories, with themes emerging from the categories. Three categories of findings were found from this analysis, which are organized in accordance to the conceptual framework, but they are not limited or bound by it.
Discussion of Findings

The first category of findings pertained to the program elements each school emphasized and the resultant outcomes. The second category related to the development of the Student Success strategy within the schools. The third category of findings were the challenges encountered with the Student Success strategy.

Program Elements Each School Emphasized and Outcomes

In reviewing the data the first category of findings related to the program elements each school emphasized, and the resultant outcomes of this. Four distinct themes emerged: connecting with students; providing programs that enable achievement; improving teaching and learning; and connecting with the community.

Connecting with Students.

Educational researchers who have studied the issue of student engagement at the secondary level have proposed three key interrelated dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (Anderson & Macri, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2011). The first pillar of Student Success – connecting with students – aims to foster the emotional dimension, building a sense of belonging where someone cares about the student as a whole (The National Academies, 2003). Among the four schools included within the study there was program consistency and variability that existed within this pillar. Three of the four schools – Oakridge, Bayview, and Eastdale – identified a Student Success Team in place that met regularly to monitor student progress, comprised of a Student Success Teacher, an administrator, a member from Student Services and/or Learning Resource. This team approach to early identification and intervention of in-risk students is encouraged by leading researchers, as each will bring their expertise and help ensure no child is left behind (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2012; Ungerleider, 2008).
Both attendance and course progress data were pulled to identify students who were in-risk of potentially failing, in order to plan an intervention strategy. In each of the four schools, non-attendance was cited as a leading factor in jeopardizing a student’s chances in completing their credits. Carter, Bayview’s Vice-Principal, described that although their efforts to combat non-attendance had made gains in the beginning, the trend had flat lined to 19 percent, with one in five students not being where they should be. At Williamsburg, the responsibility for monitoring and tracking students weighed heavily on the Student Success Teacher, who having been in the position since its inception, had decided mid-semester it was time for a change.

At Oakridge and Bayview, the district funded mentoring educational assistants through the Student Success portfolio, and these individuals have become an important part of the stakeholders in connecting with students. Their responsibilities have grown to include the monitoring responsibility of a caseload of the most in-risk students, sitting in on the monthly Team meetings, and also meeting every two weeks with the Student Success Team to analyze the school attendance reports to provide targeted interventions. These adult mentors serve as an important intermediary between teacher and student, providing an additional voice and caring support, and serve as an integral part of turnaround strategies (Barton, 2005; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, DePaoli, Ingram, & Maushard, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Balfanz et al., 2007; Lyche, 2010). Bi-weekly attendance tracking has become a recent addition to the team strategy at Bayview, and has begun to pay dividends. At Bayview, Carter had found that the one-on-one meetings with students opened up a conversation on barriers affecting their success, from discovering a student may be misplaced in their course level, to a range of issues stemming from outside the school. Karen described the progress they had made with identifying and supporting students suffering from anxiety, leading to the social worker intervening and starting a Chill Group which has accessed community experts to support the students. They had also
been able to identify students dealing with self-harm, which has led to a student self-harm group which includes the support of a community expert, their social worker and a mentoring EA.

By taking the time to openly discuss with students the barriers that are preventing them from attending regularly and succeeding, they can better understand their individual context and provide encouragement and support to enable their success, an approach that aligns with the work of Raymond (2008) and Rumberger (2011). Intervention in the form of a caring, supportive and judicious educator does pay dividends in helping students realize that there are adults who are concerned with them as an individual, rather than only the data of attendance, assignments and grades (Ferguson et al., 2005; Fredericks et al., 2004;). As Bridgeland et al. (2006) found in their research *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, it was often the one-on-one attention of a teacher that made all of the difference in turning them around.

All four schools have also now incorporated the use of peer mentorship programs, to support Grade 9 students. In the last two years three of the four schools have adopted the Link Crew program from California, which uses a play-based approach to establish strong connections early on with new junior students. The programs is a win-win scenario, providing a valuable firsthand leadership opportunity for senior students, who actually gain a credit from it. This approach is supported by researchers, who confirm that students are often more receptive to peer influence than teachers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Bridgeland, 2006; Dynarski, 2009; Lyche, 2010). The peer mentors complement the mentoring educational assistants at Oakridge and Bayview as another program provided to students to promote their success.

With respect to paying attention to specific groups, all four schools singled out the Grade 9 transition’s students as having the highest priority in their work. Their priority seems well placed as research confirms that student interest in schooling begins to sharply wane in Grades 9
and 10 (Bridgeland, 2006; Ferguson, 2005; Jerald, 2006). Lia candidly shared that they focused hard on their Grade 9s, and that the support from Grade 10 onward decreased. The Grade 10 supports are mainly in the form of literacy supports, in preparation for the OSSLT, which is a graduation requirement. They recognize that if they help foster a good connection with students early on, and provide supports so they are successful in their first year, students will more likely stay on track towards graduation. Eric recounted with pride the success they had with the effort they poured into the Grade 8 teachers and students they had two years ago where the pass rate for the Grade 9s that year was 96%. The work begins with site visits to the feeder schools while students are still in Grade 8, as well as the coordination of visits at their respective schools, including evening Parent Information sessions. Coordinating these site visits existed prior to the Student Success initiative, but as Roger alluded to the process has become more formalized. At Oakridge, secondary teachers visit the feeder school sites to meet with the students and carry out a secondary lesson in order to demonstrate the difference between expectations of the same credit at different levels. This included conducting a lesson at the academic level and then doing the same concept from an applied level so students could see the difference in the approach.

Each of the four schools also conducted intake meetings between the Grade 8 teachers, and a Student Success member or Team. The intake meetings conducted at the end of the Grade 8 year provide critical information to better understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of each student, serving as a preventative measure for some of the most in-risk students in particular. Bayview went a step further than the others by uploading their intake notes into a computer program known as the Student Transition Information Database (STID), making these anecdotal notes accessible to all members of the team. Once in Grade 9, the peer mentors at each of the four schools play a big role in helping students acclimatize to their new environment. They also conducted CAT3 testing in the past for Grade 8 students at their
expense, which David mentioned was certainly worth the price in ensuring students were properly placed in their courses, helping to minimize changes and reduce the demand for Credit Recovery.

Two schools that stood out in particular for describing how they were addressing the needs of a specific group(s) within their school were Bayview and Oakridge; both were able to identify common barriers a number of students were experiences, and provided community run programs dealing with anxiety and self-harm issues. Oakridge has the largest Aboriginal population within the district, and in order to improve their engagement and success they have implemented a range of supports. These include a program of seven to eight Aboriginal courses, funding for two Aboriginal youth workers, providing their own room in the school to meet, as well as supporting a drumming group.

Another critical means of connecting with students is in soliciting student voice. Who better to speak about the condition of education, than the students we serve (Bridgeland, 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2010; European Commission, 2013; Levin, 2012;)? With respect to student voice, two schools – Oakridge and Bayview – highlighted the impact restorative justice circles have had in allowing students to openly discuss any issue, including disciplinary infractions. The circles have helped reduce school issues and suspensions by allowing students to openly share the impact of a negative event and find a resolution. Oakridge has made a concerted effort in openly discussing character education and respect in school assemblies, with students playing the lead role in demonstrating what this looks like. Brock credited this initiative for the 30 percentage point reduction in their suspension rates they experienced over the past two years.

**Providing Programs that Enable Achievement.**

The results of the study provided rich data on how the second pillar in Student Success – providing programs that enable achievement – has evolved over time. As in the first pillar, there
was consistency and variability in the responses provided among the participants in each of the four schools. One of the consistencies was that each of the four schools acquired one or more SHSM programs in order to provide greater options for students. As part of the Student Success Strategy since 2007 at the district, SHSMs in essence are an extension of a cooperative education, providing a package of courses – including dual credit courses - certifications and a work experience in a career field of interest for students. These real world work experiences combined with secondary credits have been offered for decades, and lauded by many researchers including John Dewey who firmly believed that combining education with occupational experience was for more conducive to furthering a student’s learning than any other means (Dewey as cited in The National Academies, 2003, p. 169; Ferguson et al., 2005; Lamb, 2008; Wallenborn et al., 2009). With a similar mindset, when Brock arrived at Oakridge they re-examined programming and opted to introduce two SHSMs to help engage and provide students some direction.

For each SHSM launched, there has been a passionate lead teacher who had invested the time and energy in working with district personnel to complete the required Ministry application, obtain approvals, acquire the equipment, and build a sustainable program. With the coordination of the district, 22 programs were distributed across the system. The enthusiasm of students has been strong, leading to surging enrolments. In sharing her experience, Olivia described how the Hospitality program just exploded in the first year. It was clear that the enthusiasm, expertise and connections these teachers had not only launched, but also sustained student interest. The tactile learning approach, work experience and certification students can earn has led to turnaround stories, reengaging some of the most disengaged learners in each of the schools. From Oakridge’s Energy program, Bayview’s Child Care program, and Eastdale’s Health Care, to Williamsburg’s Musical Theatre focus. As Leticia from Eastdale shared, she has
had feedback from parents saying how they had never seen their child this engaged, as well as comments from students describing how life changing they had found it, providing a sense of fulfillment and direction in a pathway of their choice.

Ironic as it may seem, another consistency among the schools was that the demands of the Grade 12 year had been forcing many students to reevaluate their enrolment within the SHSM, leading many to abandon their goal of completing it and earning a red seal on their diploma. This is due to the difficulty of coordinating a schedule that would allow them to complete all of the course requirements they need for post-secondary while completing a half-day cooperative work placement. This was reflected in the district SHSM data in recent years as the rapid expansion of the programs and surging enrolment experienced a sharp decline before beginning to stabilize.

Part and parcel with providing programs that enable achievement is organizing teaching to play upon the talents of staff. What resonated in this respect for the interviews was the impact a caring teacher could have in connecting with disengaged learners, and serving as an advocate for them, reaffirming the work of Jerald (2006), Thompson (2008), Fullan (2010), and Bridgeland et al. (2010). As Vicki, the Principal of Williamsburg shared, her Credit Recovery teacher is just the right teacher, who has learned so much about the lives of her students and the barriers they face. With an off-site Alternative Education centre, Demi’s approach was markedly different at Eastdale, as she provided an opportunity for department heads to also build their teaching strategies in learning how to deal with some of the most disengaged learners they would ever meet. She credits these experiences with opening their eyes to a different kind of student who required different strategies, a process which left everyone the richer in the end.

Another consistency has been the use of Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery among all four schools. Both have been in existence for years, and staff is becoming accustomed to
providing extra additional assistance to students as part of Credit Rescue to close the gap in the final weeks of the course so they are successful. This strategy is backed by Levin (2008, 2012) and Fullan (2010). As both Vicki and Demi stated, this approach is a sharp contrast to just a few years earlier when most on staff believed that if students were not being successful, they just did not belong and should consider dropping out to seek employment. A sentiment expressed by two participants (Oakridge and Bayview) was the need for additional lines – teachers to cover a large caseload of students who are trying to recover a credit. At the same time, it was Bayview staff that expressed some serious concerns with respect to how much support should be given to a student, and whether the supports have now gone too far. As Carter, the Vice-Principal at Bayview described, they had some of their highest achieving students come back from University shocked that they could not handle themselves without the support they had grown accustomed to. In the absence of any significant improvements in teaching and learning, one would indeed have merit in arguing whether Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery perpetuates lower expectations and disengagement, as students know they will have multiple opportunities to complete the course (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2010). If this were the case, then both of these programs would do little at getting to the heart of the issue of reengaging learners via inspiring teaching.

Finally, another program – Alternative Education – had been in place in the district since before the time of Student Success, serving to reengage some of the most disengaged learners. Alternative Education programs were in existence at each of the schools in the study, from the establishment of a recent Aboriginal program, as well as an adult education alternative program at Oakridge, to the junior Alterative Education program at Williamsburg, to complement the two others they also ran. These programs, some of them off-site, provide strong one-on-one supports with a teacher for students to complete their credits as well as provide practical cooperative
education work placement positions. This approach to removing students from mainstream to such a program has support in research literature, and can serve as the impetus to reengagement (Aud et al., 2011; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). Both Lia at Williamsburg and Demi at Eastdale found this out with students, with one confiding to Demi that if regular school was like her Alt-Ed experience she would be just fine.

**Improving Teaching and Learning.**

As with the other pillars in the Student Success initiative, this one had both consistency and variability among the four schools. The administrators at each of the schools saw themselves as instructional leaders, facilitating the teaching and learning process with their Department Heads. The principal as the instructional leader, guiding the professional development of their staff, is a fairly recent phenomenon that has been advocated for by the research community (Fullan, 2009; Fullan, 2010; McCullen, 2006; The Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013; The school principal as leader, 2013). Two administrators, Brock and Demi, described how they sat down with their department heads in the first weeks they came to their school to assess the gaps that existed in their instructional practice. For Brock that was five years ago, and from these meetings he quickly realized that the understanding of assessment for and as learning was lacking. Over the years the professional development at Oakridge has revolved around big ideas, assessment, and backward design, eventually leading to common course outlines and culminating activities. To ensure a firm foundation of capacity building, Brock’s strategy was to take their time in building understanding, checking with departments to make sure they were comfortable with the new learning and change process. This approach aligns with Boone et al. (2006), Smith et al. (2009), Mourshed et al. (2010), and Fullan (2010) of fostering a CLC which involves deliberate planning, facilitators that can extend the learning, resources, and patience to guide the learning process for all involved. The 2013 European
Commission report *Reducing Early School Leavers: Key Messages and Policy Support* reached a similar conclusion that educators need the combination of autonomy, time, and space to allow for self-reflection, teamwork, innovation, and evaluation. Departments at Oakridge have now reached the stage where they have the freedom to go through the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway process on their own, choosing their own direction.

In fact, when asked about improving teaching and learning, each of the participants spoke of collective capacity build efforts underway. For Demi, the process began just a short four months prior, after having sat down with her two Vice-Principals and then her department heads. She quickly found out that her staff had never heard of the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF), and that there had been no professional development since the last Vice-Principal left four years prior because they were doing it all. She began the professional development with the heads to identify and begin to close the gaps. Those gaps included learning about assessment for, as, and of learning, as well as becoming familiar with *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). Their aim as an administrative team was to raise awareness of this important shift in educational practice to boost the confidence and efficacy of their heads, so they could lead their departments with confidence. By developing a strong CLC with department heads who were advancing their teaching practice, distributed leadership was taking hold as they began to model improved assessment approaches, a professional development strategy cited in the work of Fullan (2010) and Levin (2012). As is often the case in change theory, Demi had discovered that there were several on staff who were quiet leaders in this approach, already doing great things in the classroom which others no little about.

At Bayview, the biggest priority had been on assessment. Carter candidly shared that their efforts to improve teaching and learning was beginning to pay dividends as many on staff
were becoming quite adept at using diagnostics to inform their approach. What stood out the most here was a recent professional development day that solicited staff voice, fostering collegial, reflective discussions to push instructional strategies forward – an outcome of the CLCs. Staff agreed to open their classrooms and share on their boards what they were doing to open up a professional dialogue by inviting suggestions others might have. Staff spent the time going from class to class sharing encouraging comments and ideas on sticky notes left behind to build motivation in taking risks and provide a means of collegial support.

For Vicki at Williamsburg, the teaching and learning process with her department heads had been occurring over the past two years, with the last year in particular. The focus on big ideas, learning goals, success criteria, and assessment was the same as at Bayview and Oakridge, with her biggest priority being to advance pedagogical practices. As Vicki mentioned, the process can be a big shift because changing practices challenges the comfort of the known, how educators themselves were taught. Yet, it is for that very reason educators must be challenged to reflect upon their practices and emboldened to take a risk to improve teaching and learning to align with the needs and expectations of today’s rapidly advancing society. Report after report has demonstrated the disconnect students have expressed with their education, and the need to be challenged and inspired in a new way, from Early School Leavers (Ferguson et al., 2005), The Silent Epidemic (Bridgeland et al., 2006), What Did You Do In School Today? (Willms, 2009), and Building a Grad Nation (Balfanz et al., 2014) to Raising Their Voices (Bridgeland et al., 2010).

One strategy that the administrative teams of Oakridge and Bayview have in common was summed up by Carter, who believed that teaching is more about the students than simply trying to get through the course material. Recognizing that students often face barriers beyond their control that affect their attendance, and in the spirit of fostering a measure of hope that they
can still attain their credit, Brock wanted staff to rethink the approach of simply dropping a large package off at the office of all the work the students missed. His priority was for staff to focus on the big ideas in the course, rather than stress trying to teach the entire curriculum. Along the same lines of putting the students first, Oakridge’s professional development has now moved on to promoting an inquiry approach within the classroom, where teachers also become learners in the process, co-creating and co-learning with students. It does involve giving up some control to include greater student voice as well as to promote assessment as learning, a process known as meta-cognition. This inquiry, self-reflective approach to learning aligns with Michael Fullan’s *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning*, a global initiative in inquiry learning (Fullan & Langworth, 2014; Fullan & Scott, 2014).

For Brock, who has been working with his staff for five years, improvements in teaching and learning are taking place. More teachers are willing to try new things and take risks to see if they can achieve better results and have more students pass. He is encouraging staff to try a new strategy once, and reflect on it, minimizing the pressure on staff and allowing them the latitude to experiment. This helps avoid the pressure of large-scale change, which can be daunting. The sharing of best practices has also been encouraged, similar to Bayview’s professional development day, which only serves to build capacity among staff.

Another vital part of the process in building capacity is having courageous conversations with staff on issues that are counter to Student Success, barriers that are usually unintentionally created and unseen by educators. Educational leaders using this approach are willing to challenge ineffective existing practices, and move to create a collaborative learning culture, providing support, while expecting accountability, all with the intent of improving student outcomes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a). A good first step is presenting staff data and using an inquiry approach to spur them on in reflecting on how they can alter their teaching
approach in the best interest of all students. This approach to instructional leadership on the part of administrators aligns with the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (2013) and *The School Principal as Leader* (2013). Both documents promote an instructional leadership approach to administration versus a managerial approach, having administrators model the effective use of data analysis by co-leading staff in drilling down to reveal ineffective practices in order to promote conversations on improving teaching and learning for improved student outcomes. When informed that Eastdale was running 24 lines of Alternative Education, Demi’s reaction was to present the situation to her department heads to collaboratively rethink their approach, as it was difficult to justify using four full teaching positions to teach what students did not learn the first time. These courageous conversations may be with all staff, a department or one staff member. At Oakridge, department data revealed a forty percent failure rate in Grade 9 applied geography. After presenting this to the department staff Brock encouraged them to dig a little deeper and uncover the reason. Once they identified the existing barrier, release time was provided for the department to find a solution, which they did. By allowing the students to complete smaller culminating tasks at the end of each unit, rather than one large culminating only at the end – which many opt not to complete – the success rate improved substantially. Demi provided another example of a teacher whose class median was in the 50’s, who saw no need for change until it challenged the acceptable provincial standard.

Furthermore, in relation to capacity building, both Oakridge and Williamsburg used district consultants/personnel in improving teaching and learning strategies whether it was moving one teacher forward in their strategies, or their staff as a whole. As Vicki shared, their role has been important in providing another voice of the need for change, and particularly in providing support. As she further went on to highlight, teaching and learning conversations should be an on-going process, not just at PD sessions, but in the hallway, deconstructing
approaches which could work well for all as well as individual students. Promoting student success through better teaching and learning reflects the commitment of Ontario’s educators to the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* by putting students’ front and centre, through advancing their professional learning and practice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2015). Developed by the Ontario College of Teachers, the regulating body governing the teaching profession within the province, two of its five key commitments in this document are a commitment to students and student learning and pursuing ongoing professional learning.

With respect to demonstrating in a measurable manner the direct outcome these efforts in improving teaching and learning have yielded, there is admittedly a lack of hard quantitative data, aside from that connected to the SHSM program. As noted, collective capacity building is leading to greater risk-taking among educators, instructional and assessment practices have changed and are changing, and there is a greater sense of accountability and effort to support students corporate and individually to be successful in their credits throughout each semester. Working amongst the teaching ranks, I can attest to the changing climate for educators, including the collective responsibility for promoting the success of *ALL* students – no longer believing that some are just not cut out for school – and the evolution of our pedagogical practices in these past two decades. This includes embracing differentiated instruction and rich collaborative discussions and efforts on incorporating technology, inquiry based and experiential learning, and building in community partnerships. Having been satisfied for years with qualitative indicators which have shown merit in changes to their practice, for example, greater student engagement and improved outcomes, rank and file educators are only now coming to grips with the empowering value of using data-driven, evidence-based practice. Although quantitative data are lacking in this study to clearly demonstrate gains made directly related to changes in teaching and learning specifically – presenting a research topic for a future
study – there are however indirect indicators which support the claim. For example, the number of students identified as in-risk in Grade 9 and 10 has declined district wide by 5.95 percentage points and 4.81 percentage points respectively between 2008-09 and 2012-13. This can be attributed to not only greater efforts in connecting with students and providing additional supports and programs, but as well with the outcome of efforts in improving teaching and learning and connecting with the community. As we know, no single strategy will engage all learners. As the old adage states “it takes a village to raise a child,” and so it is through the combination of these pillars and collective efforts that these gains and others reflected in Ontario’s rising graduation rates since 2003 have occurred. Despite the best of efforts to inspire and engage all learners, there will always be some who have the capacity to excel but for a number of reasons choose not to, content to remain as disengaged as best they can, exerting only enough effort to pass their credits and graduate. Bearing this in mind, it would be our failure as educators not to try to improve teaching and learning, for success ultimately is not measured simply by the number of students who earn an A or B, but also by the skills and intangibles they gain, and in which we play a part, in their journey towards their diploma in preparation for their post-secondary path. With respect to the effect of Student Success on the four schools in the study, the results on the whole were somewhat mixed. Those students considered in-risk varied by grade, and by year, although as noted the overall trend was improving. The Grade Nine EQAO mathematic results were either static or improving, although it is notable that all four schools and board results identified lower achievement results on the OSSLT in recent years. Graduation rates also demonstrated an improvement over the years. Although the analysis of the administrative data is discussed further in the strategy development section below, what is clear is that concerted efforts in reducing the number of students identified in-risk, in improving mathematics outcomes, and the overall graduation rates have borne gains among the four
schools. As education systems are very fluid organizations by nature, with ever changing variables – including staff and students – fostering CLCs of reflective practitioners who seek to sustain and build upon best practices in teaching and learning for improve student outcomes is critical.

**Connecting with the Community.**

Connecting with the community is not only the fourth and final pillar in Student Success, but it was also one of the key themes in the results. These partnerships include connecting with parents and families, community groups, post-secondary institutions, as well as with local employers, all in an effort to support, inspire, and assist young people in their respective pathways. One consistency expressed in the interviews was the difficulty they found in engaging parents, a trend cited in research findings (Balfanz et al., 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Corner, 2005; Rosenthal et al., 1996). Williamsburg had used a range of strategies to communicate with parents, including using a voice messaging system known as Synervoice, notices on the school website, sending flyers home, and more. These included invitations to school events and even programs, such as fostering healthy home relations. In the end, Lia had noticed no change in the degree of parent involvement within the school over the years. At Bayview, Carter was more candid in stating that the turnout for parent-teacher interviews and Grade 8 nights was abysmal. And at Eastdale, Lena confirmed that they faced the same daunting challenge. As Oakridge has a large immigrant population, one of their strategies for boosting engagement is to provide language interpreters for parent-teacher night.

Aside from the struggles school identified in engaging parents, all did experience some improvements in fostering connections with community groups. Each of the secondary schools had supports that included a social worker and public health nurse, while Oakridge and Bayview also had an Alternative for Youth counsellor. Oakridge faced some of the greatest challenges
within the district, but also stood apart because of the wealth of support it receives from community partners. As Brock disclosed, they have 13 outside agencies working at Oakridge to assist students in removing barriers for them to be successful. These supports have been strong over the years and have continued to develop, as Oakridge has recently added a health and wellness centre in the past year and a half. They also demonstrate an ethos of care by the school and community partners working collaboratively for student wellness and success. It aligns with the finding of Sanders (2007), Zegarac and Franz (2007), and especially Joyce Epstein (2007), who encourage protective factors and risk-reducing mechanisms be put into place. These include public health, access to dental care, and a program to promote acculturation for newcomers. At Bayview the local supports included the Kiwanis offering grants, the YMCA with summer jobs, and Youth Outreach Workers from a local social service agency who go through the community and school providing resources and supports to help youth, from information on a shelter, food banks, recreation, and more. Other community health supports include personnel who will guide students through mental health issues, such as anxiety or self-harm, depression and more.

Developing and maintaining strong community supports for students to be successful requires an ongoing effort of positive networking and collaboration, soliciting their voice and expertise. Participants did share about their efforts to foster connections, however Brock’s approach in particular stood out for emphasizing the conscious effort he makes to go around at least every two weeks to the agency workers in the building to touch base on how the work is going to see if he could provide any further support. Appreciative of all the supports they provide to his students, he recognized that failing to do so could lead to the loss of their support if their efforts are not being maximized. His objective was to ensure a win-win scenario to meet the needs of his students. Such networking approaches are advocated as critical to building and
sustaining community supports, and can be found in the work of Epstein (2007), Sanders (2007), Fullan et al. (2014), and The Ontario Leadership Framework (2013).

Local employers are one of the vital community contacts that enable the experiential learning and work experiences students are seeking. As noted in the study findings, local employers play a critical role in both SHSM programs and Alternative Education programs, and in reigniting engagement in schooling for many students. As noted above, there is strong support in research literature for trade-based experiential programs in secondary schools (Dewey as cited in The National Academies, 2003, p. 169; Ferguson et al., 2005; Lamb, 2008; Wallenborn et al., 2009). Some employers are willing to take a risk on certain students who have identifiable issues, in order to provide them a positive experience to mature. As Eric from Eastdale shared about the Alternative Education program, with certain employers they have developed such a strong relationship that if they have a student with anger management issues, the employer is willing to take on the risk to help mentor the student. These types of partnerships from the community are referenced in Sanders’ (2007) work – employers who are willing to play the role of a mentor – to directly or indirectly promote students’ social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. For the Healthcare SHSM, Leticia prepared students with interview tips, conducting a mock interview, and providing feedback, as well as the invaluable work experiences they gained through their cooperative education placement.

The schools have also joined in partnerships between the district and local post-secondary institutions. These include Dual Credit programs, where students can gain the rich experience of attending a post-secondary institution for a half-day in one semester, and gain both a secondary and post-secondary credit. These community partnerships were strongly encouraged in Levin’s work (2008, 2012), and were recently lauded in The Learning Partnership report It’s Their Future: A Pan-Canadian Study of Career Education (2013). Those most
notably mentioning these partnerships in the interviews were Eastdale and Oakridge. Both schools are part of the Erie Bridge program, with students attending Erie College and gaining two credits, both at the secondary and college level. As Eric from Eastdale summed up, students spend four days of the week at Erie College and on the last day work on two co-op credits, and in the end they have two college credits that are even transferable. As he elaborated, the experience can be reassuring for students who were unsure if they could manage post-secondary education, as it provides a safety net for them in that they are still in secondary school at the time, gaining secondary credits, with supports to assist them along the way. Oakridge is also part of the Bexley Reach Ahead Program along with Bayview. The Bexley Reach Ahead Program provides students, many of whom are the first in their family, with the unique opportunity to attend university and gain a 0.5 credit, along with two secondary credits. The Bexley Reach Ahead is a newly developed program of only two years that required a great deal of coordination by all partners to make it happen.

Finally, as Steve’s experience demonstrated, community group are more often than not very open to working with schools and students, even if the contacts may not necessarily be long-term and ongoing. While developing a theatre production on the residential school experience, they connected with a local Aboriginal community. Students were able to interview and speak with survivors of the experience, gaining rich, first-hand accounts. They also learned far more about the culture from their lives, music, and art. The response from the community was phenomenal, as they honoured the students’ production with an eagle feather for their hard work. In short, this was a memorable learning experience for all, and the students in particular, affirming what researchers know and what we as educators should always strive for, namely a fluid partnership between schools and the community.
**Strategy Development**

Upon reviewing the data from the interviews, it became clear that one of the key findings was how the Student Success Strategy developed within the schools and district as a whole. From its initial launch in 2005, where the Ministry provided funding for a Student Success Teacher within each secondary school, the strategy has evolved greatly (Ungerleider, 2008). Each of the Student Success Teachers, and some of the administrators, spoke to the monthly system meetings, as well as the occasional regional meeting sponsored by the Ministry, where ideas, strategies, and resources were shared. This approach aligns with the work of Fullan (2007, 2009, 2010), who recommended investment in capacity building and being transparent in the change process.

When Student Success was first launched there was a sense of ambiguity with respect to the role and responsibilities involved. Realizing in short order the workload connected to the position, each of the four schools in the study had decided to spread the three teaching lines per semester provided by the Ministry to two or three teachers, creating a team approach. The greatest priority for each school’s Student Success Team early on was in easing and supporting the transition of students from Grade 8 to 9. Each school spoke to the time and energy invested in sending staff to feeder schools to inform students about their programs, with teachers collaborating from both levels to close any gaps in curriculum expectations, and better meet student needs. Each school also hosted Grade 8 students during a visit from the feeder schools, and hosts evening parent information sessions. The intake meetings conducted at the end of the Grade 8 year provide critical information for understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of each student. This approach aligns with the work of a number of researchers who emphasized the importance of the early identification of risk behaviours, as well as the coordination of prevention and intervention strategies (Dynarski et. al., 2008; Lyche, 2010; Mac
Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Neild et al., 2007; Pinkus, 2008). In-risk factors range from educational performance, lack of motivation, delinquent behaviour, absenteeism, to identifiers such as English language learning status, special education status, and demographic criteria. Early identification of in-risk students is a critical component in implementing timely prevention and intervention strategies that can avert students further disengaging and eventually dropping out. Bayview took a unique approach from the other three schools by going a step further in uploading their intake notes of new students into a computer program they referred to as the Student Transition Information Database (STID), making these anecdotal notes accessible to all team members at any time.

Each of the schools has also used the reporting periods to identify any students who may be in-risk with their credits, including both the preliminary and mid-semester reports. Two schools – Williamsburg and Eastdale – stated that they had also gone beyond this in an effort to be proactive, by identifying students who had more than one mark in the 50s. Each had also singled out attendance tracking as another critical intervention tool in identifying in-risk students, reaffirming the work of Dynarski et al. (2008). For the Student Success Team at Bayview, attendance tracking has been more recent, and has begun to pay dividends. As Karen described, they first focus on the juniors and two weeks later the seniors, an often times in their conversations with the students one-on-one they uncover issues that students are struggling with, dealing from anxiety to self-harm.

In 2007 the district launched SHSMs in order to provide more varied programming to all learners. Effort had been given to distributing programs throughout the district. Each of the schools involved in the study had one or more SHSM programs in place. As noted earlier in the district data, the SHSM have produced positive results, leading to a significantly higher percentage of credit completions, particularly at the open, college, and workplace levels.
Alternative Education programs are also offered, including a junior Alt-Ed program launched at Williamsburg in 2012-2013 to complement the two existing programs, while Oakridge set up a Student Success room and an Aboriginal studies program.

Two other additions to the Student Success Strategy over the years have been the use of mentoring educational assistants at two schools and peer mentorship programs. Due to the high in-risk populations at both Oakridge and Bayview, the district had provided additional funding for mentoring EAs, who are each responsible for tracking a group of 20-25 students that they regularly check in on and support. All four schools have also now incorporated the use of peer mentorship programs to support Grade 9 students. In the last two years three of the four schools have adopted the Link Crew program from California, which uses a play-based approach to establish strong connections early on with new junior students. The program is a win-win scenario, providing a valuable firsthand leadership opportunity for senior students, who actually gain a credit from it, while many Grade 9 students are more open to following the advice and experience of the peers they look up to, rather than their teachers (Fredericks et al., 2004). The mentoring EAs, as well as the peer mentors, are just another of many new programs and supports that have been provided to students to promote their success.

As noted, the study revealed that schools have established a range of programs and supports to meet the individual and contextual needs of their specific school population. This was shown at Oakridge, which has an extensive range of supports for their students, many who are first generation immigrants. With the largest Aboriginal population, it also has allowed for the development of a specialized Aboriginal program of eight courses, along with two Aboriginal youth workers and a drumming group. At Bayview, staff connecting with students to discuss concerns relating to attendance and success soon identified a root cause and larger need that had to be addressed. As a result, Bayview’s social worker worked with community contacts
to establish a support group for students dealing with anxiety and another group for students struggling with self-harm. As well, at Oakridge, community partnerships have not only widened the network of personnel connecting with students, they have especially played a critical role in providing supports ranging from medicine, food, clothing, transportation and more, that students faced.

Improving teaching and learning practices for staff was a key priority in supporting student success among the four schools. The concept of the administrator as the instructional leader was apparent. All four administrators began the learning process for improving teaching and learning by in-servicing department heads prior to all staff. Two in particular, Brock and Demi, stated that one of their top priorities upon arriving was to speak with department heads to better understand where staff were at in their instructional practices and the specific needs, so as to tailor future professional development towards improve teaching and learning practices. The priority was to ensure these school leaders fully understood the concepts of big ideas, learning goals and success criteria, and were working towards improving assessment practices that are transparent and scaffold student learning, including assessment as and for learning. To this end, administrators also solicited the support of district consultants to help support this learning process.

Finally, since the launch of Student Success, each school had a fair degree of autonomy with distributing the teaching lines until the 2013-2014 year. At the behest of the Director, each school was now required to assign the three lines per semester to one individual, who requires district approval. Many of those interviewed cited this as the greatest challenge the strategy is currently experiencing, due partly to the workload attached to the position.

The administrative data obtained in the study provided another light to examine the outcomes of the Student Success Strategy over time at each of the schools. This included the
Taking Stock data of in-risk students that the SSL submitted to the Ministry, as well as EQAO test results in Grade 9 mathematics and Grade 10 literacy, along with the graduation rate. According to the limited Taking Stock data I was able to obtain, each school made gains in reducing the number of students identified of as in-risk. Eastdale had the sharpest decline, with a 7.62 percentage point drop of students identified as in-risk, followed by Oakridge, Williamsburg, and Bayview. It should be duly noted, however, that there was some variance in the number and timing of the reports obtained by each school. With respect to EQAO testing in mathematics, Oakridge demonstrated the greatest improvement in its rates, followed by Williamsburg. Most were noteworthy improvements, particularly at the academic level, which may reflect the outcome of the district initiative to improve teaching and learning on problem solving. For EQAO testing in literacy, all experienced a decline since 2008-09, and most here were significant. Finally, with respect to graduation rates, Eastdale experienced the greatest improvement in closing the gap with the district overall, with a 10.3 percentage point improvement from 2009-10 to 2012-13. Oakridge followed next, with at 6.1 percentage point improvement, followed by Bayview with 2.7 percentage points, and Williamsburg with 0.2 percentage points. Thus the results were mixed overall, depending at times on the grade and year; however, overall notable gains are clear in the reduction of those identified as in-risk, in improvements on the Grade Nine EQAO mathematic results, and in improved graduation rates.

It was clear that in analyzing the development of the strategy, there were more similarities than differences among the schools. As part of its Student Success Strategy each school came to adopt and refine a combination of programs and supports, including the flexibility of providing initiatives to meet the individual needs/context of their school learners. Given the number of programs and/or supports provided, and the variance at each school, to identify any one as providing the decisive influence for the Student Success Strategy as a whole
would assuredly be an overgeneralization. Hence, it is the combination of programs and supports that meet the varying needs of the students that are having an impact. The principals of Oakridge and Eastdale both stated that upon their arrival they met with their department heads to better determine the gaps that existed in staff learning, thereby allowing them to plan meaningful professional development. They were also both willing to challenge staff on achievement outcomes that concerned them, notably higher than average failure rates, and to provide the means for staff to work towards improving these outcomes. Brock also worked towards streamlining the number of programs and supports provided at Oakridge to reduce any overlap and improve overall effectiveness, and the district supported the evolution of an Aboriginal program. Eastdale has worked towards expanding the instructional skills of their department heads by recruiting them to teach in the alternative education program for a semester, and thereby better understand the needs of some of the most in-risk students. Bayview highlighted a strong team approach with respect to Student Success, uploading their cross-panel intake meeting notes of upcoming Grade 9 students and using CAT3 testing to better meet the needs of in-risk learners early on. Williamsburg’s new junior Alt-Ed program has been a welcomed addition, and they along with Eastdale have identified the importance of monitoring potential in-risk students as well - those who have a number of grades barely above the 50 passing mark. Lastly, the SHSM program(s) at each school offer additional inspiration for students who are career focused to find greater meaning in their senior secondary years. In the end, these similarities among the schools, which range in degrees, are a reflection of a common leadership approach by the administrators and broader Student Success Teams. Hence, as schools have their own unique student and staff populations, although there were similarities in how these supports and programs evolved, ultimately there was variance in what these looked
like within each school to best meet the unique contextual needs of the community they were serving.

**Challenges Encountered with the Student Success Strategy**

As mentioned above, all of the participants in the study spoke positively about the impact of the Student Success Strategy. This is not to negate the fact that there were some challenges identified. These can be classified under three sub-categories: workload, changes to the position of the SSL, and challenges connected to the SHSM program. For example, of the 15 participants, seven identified the workload involved for the SSL as a challenge. As Roger reminisced when the position first started with just one person, there was a significant turnover in the position as teachers became overwhelmed. As a result most of the schools in the district, including all four in the study, quickly found that dividing up the lines among more than one staff was optimal, building a team approach among teachers to share the workload tied with Student Success. Hence, a teacher would be teaching two lines of a subject area, and be responsible for one line of Student Success. One of these would be designated as the SSL. They would divide up the number of students deemed in-risk, providing necessary supports during their period of Student Success.

As any new initiative often develops, the workload attached to the strategy increased over the years. This is reflected in the administrative data collected from reports highlighted in this study, demonstrating the accountability environment respondents were working in. For Lia, who had served as the SSL since the inception of the strategy, the fatigue of the position was apparent. For any students having a problem in their courses in the school she was seen as the person to go to for either providing preventions or interventions. As an administrator, Demi felt for her staff, recognizing that much of their time was actually absorbed by completing
paperwork, often overriding the interventions and supports which they are expected to provide. Part of the workload includes completing the paperwork required by the Ministry to obtain and sustain funding for the SHSM programs offered at each of the four schools. The impact of completing these reports upon the position of the SSL was apparent in Demi’s frustration with the process. Although she acknowledged the need for accountability in these reports, they seem to have steadily grown to the point of overwhelming the SSLs, negatively impacted the one-on-one time they had formerly had with students, which was viewed by participants as central to the role of the position.

The second challenge identified was a result of recent changes made to the position of the SSL by the district. As several participants noted, decisions made at the district level may not often meet the needs or direction of the school. In 2013-14, the district mandated that the Lead be given all six lines of the position for the year, and be solely responsible for Student Success. As Vicki, the Principal of Williamsburg, stated, they like other schools had formerly broken the role into multiple people to share the load. Now that it was the sole responsibility of one person, the role had become challenging. Eric agreed, referring to the new position as a tremendous job for any one person to take over. Lia, who had been a SSL since the inception of the strategy, found the change by the district overwhelming, resulting in her decision to leave the position mid-year. Interestingly enough, none of the four participants interviewed at Bayview had identified this change as a challenge, perhaps in part to the team approach they maintained with Student Success.

The third challenge identified in the interview data was connected to the SHSM programs. These ranged from adequately meeting the needs of a growing program to recruiting and sustaining students within the programs. Once launched, the popularity of the SHSMs led to a surge of student enrolment and the expansion in the number of sectors. The downside to this has
been the difficulty in finding adequate space to accompany the needs of the programs, as well as finding enough cooperative work placements for students.

The participants were also asked what they would change within the Student Success Strategy if they could. There were four main recommendations suggested: allowing greater school autonomy in decision making; increasing funding to expand the program; reducing the workload within Student Success; and making changes within the SHSM Program. Providing schools greater autonomy in how the Student Success Strategy would be staffed was one of the four key suggested changes. This included allowing administrators the flexibility to staff the position as they saw fit, as well as recognizing the individual needs present within each school community. Several voiced a desire to move back towards a team led approach in Student Success – one that Bayview in particular appeared to voluntarily sustain. Laura also emphasized her desire for each school to be given greater autonomy, with the understanding that some schools may need additional supports due to a varying student population.

Along with greater school autonomy in staffing and meeting the needs of their student population, participants also recommended increased funding and an expansion of the strategy. The need at Oakridge was so high, that additional funding could have been immediately used to positively impact student outcomes. Hence, more equitable funding as opposed to equal funding in programs, where greater consideration and funding is given to the higher needs of certain schools, beyond mentoring educational assistants. As Roger stated, they could easily fill two lines of Credit Recovery each period. The third main suggestion put forward was for a reduction in the workload of the SSL. As several participants have already highlighted, the workload can be overwhelming. As Lia shared, it has gone counter to relationship building. To ease the workload, one of the suggestions was for the responsibility of the Re-engagement Initiative to be given over to Student Services. Finally, the last main recommendation for changes put
forward by participants related to the SHSM program. These included expanding the length of the SHSM program, better preparing students in leading up to it, and ensuring the quality of the training involved remain high.

Chapter Conclusion

This discussion chapter outlined the findings from this study. Beginning with a summary of the study, key findings emerged. These included the program elements each school emphasized and the resultant outcomes, how the programs developed in each school, and the challenges encountered with the Students Success strategy. In the final chapter, conclusions and recommendations will be offered based upon the results of this study, as well as implications for possible further research.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

This final chapter presents conclusions on the study of how the Student Success Strategy has developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district. Also included within this chapter are recommendations offered based on the study’s results, as well as implications for theory. Final remarks are also provided at the end.

Conclusions

The study revealed three categories of findings. The first category centred on the program elements each school emphasized and the resultant outcomes. The second provided in-depth findings on how the Student Success Strategy developed over time. The third category highlighted the challenges participants have identified with the strategy.

Program Elements Each School Emphasized and Outcomes

There were four key themes that emerged from this category of findings. The first focused on the development of positive connections with students. The second highlighted the range of programs that had been established in order to enable student achievement. The third detailed the progress administrative teams made on improving teaching and learning. The fourth noted the gains made in fostering connections with the community.

Connecting with Students.

This study revealed that successful connections with students involves a multi-tiered approach – layers of intervention and supports – that takes time, and are making a positive difference. Although there were many similarities among the schools, a differentiated approach also existed. Each school established a Student Success Team that met regularly to monitor student progress, identify in-risk students, and provide targeted interventions to enable their
academic success. Team members who met with students over time often uncovered a wide range of contextual factors that were serving as barriers in attaining their credits, from familial responsibilities, to mental health issues. These triggered some differentiated supports in schools to appropriately meet individual student needs. For example, the implementation of the Student Transition Information Database and CAT3 testing at Bayview serve as preventative measures to better inform Student Services staff in the properly placement of students from the onset. The Transition programs were highlighted by participants as one of the greatest investment of time and effort in their strategy to foster an early connection with students – a priority backed strongly by years of educational research. Schools take great pride in their successes, as noted with Eastdale highlighting that 96% of their Grade 9 students two years earlier had earned all eight of their credits – certainly a notable accomplishment! Oakridge also had school assemblies to boost engagement, using student voice to guide the message of building a positive school climate of respect. From an administrative standpoint, the district data on the decline in suspensions by 32.5 percent and the 6 percentage point improvement in the credit completion rate from 2008-13 reflects the improving emotional and cognitive engagement of students in their education.

**Programs that Enable Achievement.**

The study also highlighted the range of programs that have been put in place to enable student achievement, leading to a surge in student interest, improved academic performance and credit completion. This included a wide range of SHSM programs at each of the four schools, from Performing Arts, to Energy and Health and Wellness. The district had launched SHSM programming in 2007-08 with seven programs in three sectors within seven schools. By the 2014-2015 school year, the district had 25 programs in 13 sectors within 14 schools. Student enrolment within the SHSM programs surged as well with the expansion of the programs.
However, it has now begun to stabilize. The impact of the program was unquestionable. As Olivia at Oakridge stated, the hospitality program surged in enrolment in its first year. Williamsburg had a Performing Arts SHSM with 76 involved that has made an impact across all pathways. As Vicki described it, the SHSM is lively and serving to really connect with a number of in-risk students. Lead teachers in the SHSM program have witnessed turnaround stories and shared qualitative feedback of these stories from students and parents, including how it changed lives. Notable in this was the variance in earned versus attempted credits between SHSM and non-SHSM students, particularly in Open (+7 percent), College, (+8) and Workplace courses (+15). The SHSMs have also led to the creation of dual credits, where students earn not only valuable certifications for a particular career field, but they also earn combined credits at the secondary and post-secondary level. One challenge that had emerged with the program has been the incompletion rate for those who signed up, due largely to Grade 12 students experiencing difficulty in completing the requirements – particularly the cooperative education placement. Facing so many demands in their final year of secondary school, including ensuring they have all of their requirements for their post-secondary program they are seeking, many opt not to finish their SHSM.

Other programs in place to enable student achievement have included Alternative Education, the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program, Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery. Alternative Education programs were in place at each of the four schools to reengage some of the most disengaged. Williamsburg and Eastdale have been in the process of revamping their programs to improve student success, and have also had their share of success stories, including one student confiding to Demi that if regular school were like this, she would be doing well. With respect to Credit Rescue and Credit Recovery, although no administrative data were collected on these programs, qualitative data revealed that they are contributors to credit
completions. As Vicki stated, teaching practices have changed with educators now routinely going out of their way without prompting at the end of the semester to connect with students to help close gaps so that as many as possible can rescue their credits. Participants also identified the importance Credit Recovery plays in helping students who had failed but were close to passing their credits close the gaps, and attain them without having to redo the entire course. This included the decision by administrators to expand the number of teaching lines to support Credit Recovery. These ongoing efforts, although beneficial in reducing overall failures, also raised serious concerns with two of the interviewees – Laura and Carter – who expressed the sentiment many of their staff have aired, wondering if they were enabling students too much. As Carter stated, even some of their best students had returned after their first few months of university and college to share that they found the experience overwhelming without the former supports they had in place. This alone gives pause for reflection.

Lastly, part and parcel with this and other programs connected to Student Success is the importance of organizing teachers, which several administrators spoke of. Individuals who had a passion for teaching, an ethic of care that connects them with the most disengaged, and work ethic to transform and improve programs.

Improving Teaching and Learning.

The study confirmed that administrators are indeed taking on the role as the instructional leader of their school. Both Brock and Demi described that when they first arrived at their school they sat down with their department heads in the opening weeks to assess the gaps that existed in instructional practice, and plan appropriately. Both sought to first foster the efficacy of their department heads, using a distributed leadership approach based on the premise of the *Ontario Leadership Framework* in order to build the capacity for change. A collaborative learning culture was established in all of the schools, including Bayview and Williamsburg.
Vicki and Brock both reported that they used the expertise of district consultants to help move staff forward, whether that be one or all. To foster a sense of hope for students who have chronic attendance issues, Brock had given his staff permission not teach the entire curriculum, but rather to focus on the big ideas. He also advocated a greater focus on inquiry and student-led learning, aligning with current pedagogical theories on improving student engagement. Another vital component to improving teaching and learning is administrators who, using department and school data, were willing to have courageous conversations with staff members to improve instructional practices. Revealing a high failure rate within the Grade 9 applied Geography classes at Oakridge, Brock followed up the conversation by providing funding for release time in order to allow staff members to develop an effective plan of action. Allowing them to take ownership of the problem led to changes in their instructional approach, which was rewarded with a 20% reduction in the subsequent failure rate. Furthermore, the administrative data for the schools and the district as a whole revealed a reduction in the number of in-risk students, as well as improvements in the graduation rates, which can partly be attributed to improvements in teaching and learning, whether it be due to the instructional leadership of administrators, the support of board consultants, or even involvement in a CLC.

**Connecting with the Community.**

Connecting with the community was another key theme throughout this study, revealing itself in many forms. Although participants had seen or tried a wide range of strategies to engage parents, from flyers, food, and new technology, they appeared to have borne few results. This is not uncommon at the secondary level. However, qualitative and administrative data did reveal greater success in connecting with community groups, including post-secondary opportunities. This ranged from the 13 outside agencies that were working at Oakridge providing supports to students, to mobile Youth Outreach Workers who wore red shirts and
carried a backpack containing a wide range of resources for students, from brochures on local recreations, to contact information for a shelter or food bank. Each school also has a social worker and public health nurse that was available to students. As well, Cooperative and Alternative Education, and SHSM programs have led to rich training and employment contacts within the community, enriching the lives of the students. Through the SHSMs, for example, students are benefitting from the certifications and even Dual Credits at the post-secondary level, understanding success strategies for employment application, gaining valuable work experience in an interested career field, as well as obtaining post-SHSM employment.

System wide from 2012-13, 253 students were involved in earning 342.5 dual credits, for a 78.5 percent success rate of those attempted. As well, nearly 900 students are currently in 25 SHSM programs across the district, with a significantly higher credit success rate in open, college, and workplace level courses when compared to their non-SHSM courses. As noted, some employers are more than willing to take a risk on some challenging students, to offer them a chance to mature and develop the skill sets they need to go out in a workplace setting. These relationships with community supports and employers do take effort to develop over time, as well as an on-going effort to be sustained, as Brock demonstrated. Yet they are undeniably yielding rewards for our students.

**How the Student Success Strategy Developed**

When the Student Success Strategy was launched collaborative learning communities were established both at the district and school level. These teams served to implement Ministry policy and share best practices to refine and improve the strategy as whole. Occasionally Student Success Teachers were also invited to regional meetings held by the Ministry, with the similar intent of fostering collective learning and best practices. To build capacity at the school
level, each school distributed the three lines of Student Success allocated each semester, to ease the increasing workload connected with the strategy. One consistency was that schools improved their Transition program for new Grade 9 students, which was reflected in both the qualitative and administrative data. Most notably, the credit completion rate for Grade 9 students improved from 72.8% to 78.8% from 2008-2013 at the district level. This was largely achieved as well by the tracking of and intervention with in-risk students at the school level. The implementation of mentorship programs, either in the form of peer mentors or mentoring educational assistants – and in some schools both – has added a further layer of support for students. Another consistency was that each of the four schools developed and launched a SHSM program to provide additional pathways for students. As well, through supplemental funding provided by the Ministry, such as *Urban and High Priority Funding*, allocated through *Grants for Student Needs* districts have also been able to fortunately establish other programs and/or supports tailored to meet some of the more specific and/or highest needs student populations in certain schools.

With respect to the outcomes of the strategy, there was a great deal of variance amongst the participants. The views ranged from highlighting the additional supports and technology which now exists for students, the improved accountability, and the increasing success of their Grade 9 students due to the Transitions program, to declines in truancy, the transformation attributed to the SHSMs, the rising graduation rates, as well as students feeling comfortable enough now to come to staff when they have an issue. Nevertheless, there was consistency in the concern with recent changes that allocated all three lines affiliated to the Student Success Teacher’s position to one individual, fearing it would jeopardize the team approach all had come to depend on, and result in an overwhelming workload, which was apparent in one particular case.
Challenges Encountered with the Student Success Strategy

The final key finding in the study was concerned with the challenges encountered with the Student Success Strategy. The study offered an opportunity for those on the ground who fulfill the mandate of Student Success to share their own perspective on the challenges they encounter. These challenges fell within three broad themes: the workload involved, recent changes to the position of the SSL, and challenges connected to the SHSM programs. Shortly after it was launched, it became apparent to those involved that the workload connected to the SSL position was demanding, leading to administrators at the four schools dividing up the three teaching lines in order to foster a team approach that would support one another. This workload has only intensified over time as the program and strategies have expanded. The recent directive by the district that all three teaching lines connected to the SSL must not be divided among staff was troubling to many concerned with the workload – including administrators – leading to one SSL who had been in the position from the onset to request a transfer to a new position. The third challenge was connected to the SHSMs and included trying to manage the growth of such programs in a limited space, as well as finding enough cooperative work placements for students. With regards to the changes they would wish to see in Student Success, participants identified the following: greater school autonomy in decision making; increased and more equitable funding for programs – notably Credit Recovery; a reduction in the workload of Student Success; as well as changes to improve the SHSM program which included expanding the length to boost red seal completion of all requirements, as well as to ensuring high quality training by those within the career field.
Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based upon the findings of this study that sought to understand how the Student Success Strategy had developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district. To begin, for policymakers it was reassuring that key components of the Student Success Strategy – based upon the four pillars conceptual framework of this study – are having an overall positive impact. Connections with students are being fostered to the point where students are noticeably becoming more proactive and open to staff when issues arise. Programs for enabling achievement and student well-being have been established. Teaching and learning practices are improving as educators are being challenged to critically reflect upon instructional practices, particularly with the use of data. And connections with the community have developed. Great pride can be taken in these advances.

It would be presumptuous of me to assume that any recommendation I could offer comes with a full appreciation and understanding of the intricacies of the Ministry of Education and/or the work of those within this study. At the same time, to offer no recommendations at all would beg one to question the point of this research. It is worth reminding the reader that the findings are based upon four schools and the testimony of 15 participants. Thus, the recommendations that follow are made simply to promote critical reflection and discussion with the hopes of advancing education for the sake of our students. To begin, at the provincial level the Ministry of Education can take pride in the gains made through Student Success and is encouraged to continue an open dialogue with board leads to further advance the overall strategy and meet ever changing needs. With respect to future new funding, consideration could be given to conducting a supply and demand survey by Student Services with respect to Credit Recovery, as two of the schools stressed the inadequacy of the funding for their respective student population. Another challenge that participants identified is connected to the paperwork expected of the Student
Success Teacher. Combined with the expectations of serving as the key contact for in-risk students, and meeting with them one-on-one on an on-going basis, it has contributed to staff burnout. Reexamining this workload in a wider study, and any alternate means possible of reducing or obtaining the data requested in Ministry reports could ease this concern.

At the district level, administrators and staff were appreciative of the many supports they have received over time. From funding for mentoring educational assistants or interpreters for parents night, to the support from consultants in establishing SHSM programs or leading staff professional development. There was one serious challenge that participants voiced from this level in particular. This was the recent change from the autonomy schools had in distributing the six lines of Student Success to more than one teacher – to create a team approach – to realigning those lines to one teacher, who would be selected with district approval. Given that the study involved only four secondary schools, a wider study within the district that would invite the voice of members of the Student Success Team – notably administrators and the Student Success Teacher – could provide further valuable feedback which may benefit the strategy. Some participants also voiced a desire to return to monthly system SST meetings, while others voiced encouragement for district advertising of the SHSM programs. Renewing and sustaining a collaborative learning communities among SSTs will certainly pay dividends in sharing best practices, building programs and/or raising awareness within the community of the pathways (e.g., SHSMs) available for students. In the best interest of the students, promoting a greater openness in communicating the various SHSMs that existed system wide, to avoid the closed doors Leticia encountered when trying to share her program at other schools, is also recommended. One of the greatest, if not greatest, challenges the schools faced with respect to improving academic achievement was tackling chronic absenteeism, which a few participants noted was as high as 20% on any given day in their school. As noted earlier in the research
findings, school attendance is one of the most accurate predictors of student disengagement and students dropping out. The district may find merit in exploring a range of options, from soliciting student voice on this issue in particular, to forming a stakeholders’ professional learning partnership to research the problem and solutions, to field testing a few proposals including perhaps a communication or media campaign regarding the importance of attendance. A data-driven approach, which reaches down to include feeder schools at the elementary panel where early identification and intervention can begin is recommended. At the same time consideration would have to be made not to increase the workload of staff who are already stretched thin, leading perhaps to a funding request directly to the Ministry to tackle this pervasive issue which is hindering gains, even in a research context. With respect to a communication or media campaign, most recently New York City has embarked on an effort to promote greater dialogue and foster better community relations on this problem. This has included an advertising campaign known as “It’s 9 A.M., Do You Know Where Your Children Are?” which was launched in 2013 (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). Another strategy – to complement the first by offering support – could be a celebrity wake-up call campaign with inspirational morning messages. The “WakeUp! NYC” campaign achieved very positive results, with over 30,000 students signed up. With respect to EQAO testing, efforts at improving teaching and learning within the district on problem solving appear to have contributed to improved mathematic outcomes in Grade 9 – particularly at the academic level – which is to be commended. To avoid the decline witnessed in the literacy results, investment must also be made in sustaining these effective strategies and building staff capacity, notably in sharing best practices in an ongoing collaborative approach, as staffing can be quite fluid. Finally, to establish a conversation around community partnerships and build upon staff capacity, one suggestion could be for the district to put a call out for conducting a one-day workshop on how
educators have built a strong rapport, or to invite this input within a survey in order to share best practices and build upon these valuable local networks.

At the school level, it was clear that each of the four pillars was having an impact on improving student outcomes. Administrators and teachers are to be commended for their daily efforts at the ground level in implementing the strategy so effectively, and for their passion in making a difference. One recommendation could be to continue to solicit student voice, from Grade 9 students providing feedback on their transitions experience, to surveys on students’ knowledge of the variety of programs and supports that are offered, and what could be done to retain students until their completion of the SHSM program. For administrators, their instructional leadership is critical in sustaining these pillars, and is important in continuing the message that all teachers are Student Success Teachers, so that educators are continually reminded that fostering positive connections and their instructional practices are having an impact on engagement and student outcomes. The district, administrators, and educators are also encouraged to continue to nurture the relationships within the community, by demonstrating appreciation for their role, soliciting their voice to maximize the effectiveness of these partnerships, and discovering new avenues to build bridges, which will ultimately benefit student pathways. Finally, these recommendations are by no means exhaustive. They are simply intended to continue to explore further means of ultimately improving student engagement and student success.

**Implications for Further Study**

After reviewing the findings from this study, there are a number of areas that would merit further examination. As the primary research question focus was how the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district, additional
research in schools and districts throughout the province would certainly extend our understanding and paint a more complete picture of the evolution and impact of the strategy as a whole, and could lead to a number of other avenues of study. This could include examining the impact the change in administrators and/or Student Success Teachers have upon the strategy. Or there could be an investigation into how the rest of school staff members and students view the Student Success Strategy. For schools located in districts that are more rural in nature, how has location impacted the development of their SHSM programs, namely the exposure to career and dual-credit opportunities for students and what alternatives are there? It would also be interesting to obtain the voice from community members involved in the strategy and the benefits and challenges they have experienced, including any suggestions they might have to benefit student outcomes, examining further within this district how the move to one Student Success Teacher has benefitted or created challenges for the strategy or the impact on staff and student outcomes in addressing the challenges mentioned in this study by the participants. Further research done in any of these areas would help address many of these yet unanswered questions. Although it is still an area that has been understudied and would benefit from additional investigative research, nevertheless the Student Success Strategy has become an integral part of secondary education in Ontario, and contributed to improvements in student outcomes. These suggested theoretical research opportunities presented are provided only as an invitation to extend this critical dialogue on effective and meaningful programs we can provide for our students.

**Final Remarks**

The Student Success Strategy today has made an indelible mark upon the students within Ontario. Since its launch in 2003 it has been a contributing factor to over 130,000 additional
students graduating, while EQAO test scores in literacy and numeracy have improved province wide. As noted, by 2010, the gains Ontario had made had already hit international headlines, and were celebrated at the Building Blocks for Education conference in Toronto with the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in attendance. Two months later the first Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic report was released in the United States (Balfanz et al., 2010), launching a Civic Marshall Plan whose planks mirrored those that drove Ontario’s success story – recommendations for transformational change that had been proposed by educational researchers. Since 2010 Ontario has continued to make gains, and a turnaround in graduation rates has taken hold in the United States.

This study has shown how Ontario’s Student Success Strategy has developed within one school district, and which program elements were important at which time. Early on the strategy focused on launching Student Success Teams to track in-risk students, and overseeing the transition of students from Grade 8 to 9 to ensure supports were in place that would result in early success. Specialist High Skills Major programs were added for senior level students to provide additional pathways beginning in 2005. This has also resulted in stronger connections with community contacts, from employers providing work placements, to social services volunteering their expertise. These are but a few examples of a multi-tiered approach of interventions, supports, and programs which are in place, leading to improved outcomes for students. Improving teaching and learning, with administrators serving as instructional leaders, has been the most recent phase in improving engagement and learning outcomes. As noted, there are consistencies, and variability in each school in this area – as well as in each of the others – which comes as no surprise since each school population is different and as such requires different supports to meet the needs of the community it serves. Furthermore, at the
district level, administrative data has demonstrated that credit completions have significantly improved, both short and long-term suspensions have decreased, and additional pathways have contributed to higher graduation rates. Student Success has also fostered greater connections between students, educators and community members, even leading to community interventions to assist students in overcoming barriers to deal with personal crises. In all, Student Success has demonstrated that well executed policy can have a profound effect, and that the collaboration of all stakeholders must be on-going – soliciting their voice, energy and expertise – as we continually reexamine and improve our efforts in achieving excellence in Ontario’s public education system for the sake of our students.
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Appendix A
Information Letter for Participants

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6
Tel No. (416) 978-1150
Fax No. (416) 926-4741

Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study: Understanding how the Student Success Strategy has developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district

To the participants in this study,

My name is Yvan Brochu and I am a graduate student at the Faculty of Education at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. I am currently researching how the Student Success Strategy has developed within one school district. A total of four schools have been selected for the study based on different approaches to student success. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. James Ryan, Faculty Advisory from the University of Toronto.

The inclusion/exclusion criteria for the participants include the following: the Superintendent for Student Success; and the Student Success Team from each of the four schools involved, consisting of the Principal (or Vice-Principal), the Student Success lead teacher, a guidance counselor and/or a special education teacher, as well as a SHSM teacher. I am seeking your participation since your role in the process will shed light on student outcomes within the district.

The 30-45 minute audiotaped semi-structured interview consisting of a series of closed and open ended questions which you will be provided with prior to. You will be provided a consent form which will seek your permission for the interview to be audiotaped and transcribed. This form will be reviewed orally prior to the beginning of the interview, and participants do have the choice to decline to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. As a participant you will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm. No value judgment will be placed on your responses. I will conduct the interviews at a place and time convenient for each of the participants. Each interviewee will receive a copy of the transcript of their interview. Any section which they wish to have amended or deleted from the transcript of the interview will be amended or deleted as requested.

The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location (secure vault). All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, the school district, and communities cannot be identified within the thesis, or for any reports, publications, or public presentations thereafter. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed no later than five years after the completion of the study.

As participation is voluntary, you may at any time refuse to answer a question or even withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or
audiotape, be eliminated from the project. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

For individual participants, this study offers worthwhile professional development by allowing them time to reflect upon their own practice and views, talking about pedagogical issues pertaining to students success and student engagement. For teachers and leaders, the research can also facilitate further critical conversations and understandings on how the Student Success Strategy developed and contributed to student outcomes within one school district. For the scholarly community the research can also serve in the same manner for the advancement of knowledge on how the program has developed and contributed to student outcomes even within one school district.

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research subject you may contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Yvan Brochu at 905-388-2036 or by email at yvan.brochu@utoronto.ca or Dr. James Ryan, Faculty Advisor, University of Toronto at 416-978-1152 or at jryan@oise.utoronto.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

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Appendix B
Participant Consent Form

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6
Tel No. (416) 978-1150
Fax No. (416) 926-4741

Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education

Understanding how the Student Success Strategy has developed and contributed to student outcomes in one Ontario district

Consent Form

I have read the invitation to participate in a research study letter, and have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate in the study. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

______________________________
Printed Name of Participant

______________________________
Participant’s Signature

______________________________
Date
**Appendix C**

**Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opening Question</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Please tell me a little bit about your experience as an educator, and your connection with the Student Success Strategy.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting with Every Student</strong></td>
<td>How has the program itself developed over time in several schools?</td>
<td>2. Can you describe what your school has been doing to foster connections with every student over the past four years?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have student outcomes changed over time?</td>
<td>3. Can you describe how your efforts in fostering these connections have developed over these years?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Programs that Enable Achievement</strong></td>
<td>How have student outcomes changed over time?</td>
<td>4. Can you describe the impact the Student Success Strategy has had with fostering positive outcomes?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How has the program itself developed over time in several schools?</td>
<td>5. Can you describe the outcome of these efforts over time with respect to credits earned? Attendance? Discipline? Suspension? Student voice and input?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improving Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
<td>How have student outcomes changed over time?</td>
<td>6. What strategies or programs are in place at your school which you believe help reduce failure rates and enable student achievement?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How has the program itself developed over time in several schools?</td>
<td>7. Can you describe how these components developed over time?</td>
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<td>8. Can you please describe the role your school’s SHSM program has had on student achievement?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9. To what extent has data been used to reduce failure rates?</td>
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<td>10. Can you tell me what your school has been doing to improve teaching and learning in the last four years?</td>
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<td>11. Which of these you identified in the previous question has been the most successful? Least?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12. Can you describe how your school’s efforts in improving teaching and learning have developed over these years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13. Can you describe the outcome(s) improving teaching and learning has had upon staff? Students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How has the program itself developed over time in several schools? How have student outcomes changed over time?

What issues / challenges has the Student Success Strategy generated (for the participating schools)?

Can you please describe what the school has been doing to foster connections with the community?

Can you describe how your efforts in fostering these connections have developed over these years?

How effective do you believe your school has been at communicating with the community the options available through the Student Success Strategy for students?

Can you describe the role SHSMs have had in fostering community connections?

What did the district do to support the Student Success Strategy at your school over these years? Has the focus changed at all over this time period? If yes, how so?

What issues or challenges has the development of the Student Success Strategy generated?

How would you change Student Success to better meet the needs of the students in your school?

Is there anything else that we haven’t talked about that you think is important for this study? Any other suggestions?