

Identifying Academically At-Risk Students: The Role of Suburban High School PLC Educators

Cheryl L. Burleigh, EdD¹

¹ *Contributing Faculty, Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership, Walden University*

ABSTRACT: Accountability and ownership of learning are no longer educational priorities; instead, academic success is reduced to an academic performance index score. A focus on test preparation for mandated state assessments hinders educators, forcing them to abandon teaching in favor of managing the business of education. This case study explored the relationship between social and behavioral factors that may cause students to be academically at-risk who attend a suburban Northern California High School. These students had less than-average grades and achieved scores of proficient/advanced on state-mandated standardized testing and reporting assessments. Twenty-three study participants, who are staff members at the study site, completed the survey. Of those, nine study participants engaged in focus group discussions. Responses were analyzed, revealing four themes, including the social and behavioral factors in identifying academically at-risk students, academic performance and competency, the role of parents/guardians, teachers, and peers in academic success, and state-mandated standards and assessments. Research findings indicated that the best ways to support administrators, educators, and counselors to assist academically at-risk students included collaboration, awareness of academic responsibility and accountability, increased counseling and school funding, and school-specific intervention programs.

KEYWORDS: At-risk students; school leadership; accountability; professional learning communities

I. INTRODUCTION

Increased accountability per federal and state education mandates, including the Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act of 2015, preceded by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and Common Core State Standards, have shifted the ownership of learning. Student learning, mastery, and application of subject content matter are no longer the educational priority of many schools; instead, academic success is reduced to an academic performance index score, an annual measurement of academic performance and progress of individual schools in California. A primary focus on producing excellent test results has hindered educators and forced them to abandon teaching in favor of managing the growing business of education (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Reform measures initially mandated by NCLB may have driven the academic accountability issues educators face. ESSA continues to require subject content area framework standards, state-mandated assessment testing, and accountability of student academic achievement (California Department of Education, 2022).

NCLB was the driving force of school academic accountability (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). The original NCLB mandated that students would be proficient or advanced in core subject areas by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), was modified in ESSA to reflect more realistic accountability goals and expectations of proficiency on state assessment tests, English language proficiency, and graduation rates with an action based program to effect positive change in all schools, especially among the lowest performing schools (Klein, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Individual states determine academic accountability goals, which are then approved by the U.S. Department of Education (2017). The challenge for educators is the dynamics of academic achievement, which could place students at-risk of academic failure and may prevent them from achieving proficiency in core subject areas. This study addressed the issue of academic accountability for at-risk students in a suburban Northern California high school professional learning community (PLC). For this study, academically at-risk high school students failed subject content area classes despite demonstrating proficient or advanced academic knowledge and skills as measured by the yearly Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) mandatory assessment.

Students not identified as academically at-risk through poor standardized test scores are more likely than their peers to fail subject content area courses (Fiona & Winne, 1996). A possible result of misidentifying academically at-risk students includes a decrease in student learning and achievement, a reduction in the number of students graduating from high school, and an increase in the high school dropout rate (Lieberman, 1995;

Krasny, 2008). One objective of a PLC is to identify at-risk students for academic failure and develop a set of school-wide goals to focus on student academic accountability (Fullan, 2006; Honaker et al., 2022). School leaders and policymakers may have the opportunity to prioritize scarce resources to "effectively improve teaching and learning across all classrooms" (Childress et al., 2005, p. 13) when the risk factors related to academic achievement and the processes for identifying students are clearly understood.

II. PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND

This study focused on recognizing and examining the factors that could be perceived by school administrators, educators, and counselors to aid in identifying students who may be academically at-risk in an affluent suburban Northern California high school. Students are at-risk for school failure because their background or environmental factors may increase the likelihood of failure. The inability to recognize and address these factors may increase student academic failure and expulsion rates (Suh et al., 2007; Warren, 2014). In Northern California, academically at-risk students compose 15.8% of high school student dropouts (Lambert & Willis, 2022). Currently, effective practices are not in place to identify academically at-risk students at the study site. Administrators' and educators' perceptions and attitudes toward academically at-risk students are vital in understanding the phenomenon of student failure (Gillentine, 2006). Still, these perceptions have not been addressed in the PLC of the school.

Furthermore, identifying academically at-risk students was not considered an issue within the school community. Recognizing academically at-risk students may provide opportunities to develop intervention programs within the school, possibly contributing to these students becoming productive members of the community (Breheny Wallace, 2019; DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Trilling & Fadel, 2012). The identification process can serve as a model for recognizing students who need additional academic assistance in core subject content courses while encouraging the scholastic interests of the student (Trilling & Fadel, 2012; Wagner, 2014). Current educational research focuses on at-risk students in urban schools and does not address suburban high school students who may be at-risk academically. The gap in literature reveals that students who attend suburban high schools, specifically those in affluent areas, are not considered an academic risk population. Reasons noted in educational research studies include traditional factors, such as the parents' formal education and income, which are typically higher in affluent areas (Breheny Wallace, 2019).

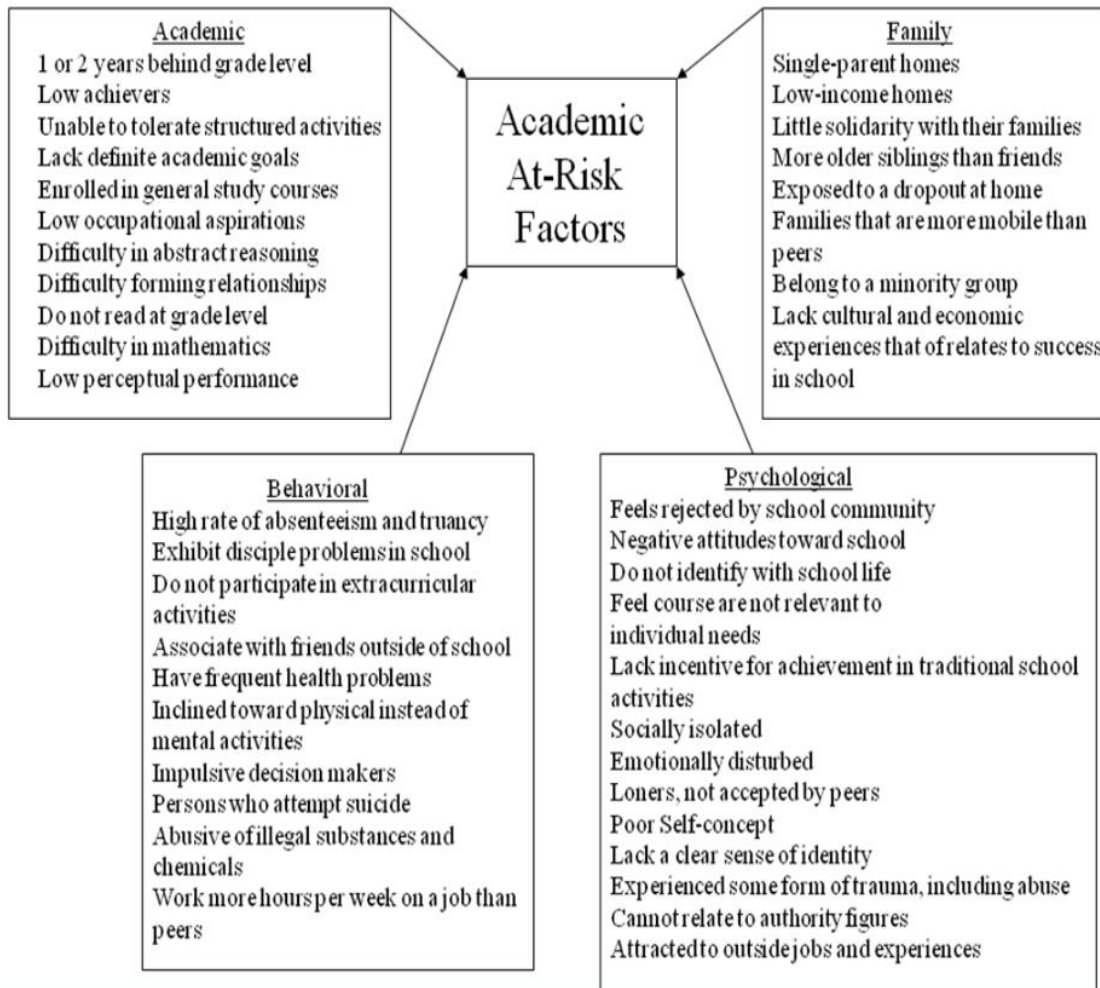
III. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore possible causes of academic failure when students have less than average grade attainment in subject content areas and achieve a score of proficient or advanced on the STAR assessment test. Students not identified as academically at-risk may have an increased academic failure rate in future high school courses (Breheny Wallace, 2019; Horton, 2015). By ascertaining specific social and behavioral factors that may contribute to students being at-risk for academic failure and correlating this information to academic core subject grades and California STAR assessment scores, a greater possibility may exist in understanding the best methods to mitigate this problem. This led to the research question: *How do social and behavioral factors contribute to identifying an academically at-risk high school student despite proficient or advanced academic knowledge and skills measured on the STAR mandatory assessment?*

IV. SIGNIFICANCE

Based on current state-mandated assessment data results, not all students readily demonstrate academic success through testing alone (Fensterwald & Willis, 2022; Hale, 2020). A direct correlation exists between student content area subject grades, the STAR assessment scores, and academic success or failure. The value of the correlation between student content area grades and factors such as academic, family dynamics, behavioral and psychological issues (see Figure 1) may cause students to be academically at-risk is confirmed by several scholars (Fensham et al., 1986/2019; Oates, 2004; Horton, 2015).

Figure 1
Factors Involving Academically At-Risk Students



Note: Adapted from Fensham, P., Power, C., Tripp, D., & Kemmis, S. (2019). *Alienation from schooling*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1986)

Researchers caution that stressing grade achievement, state mandates, and assessment scores in the classroom may create additional problems; thus, fostering an environment for students to be increasingly at-risk of academic failure (Breheny Wallace, 2019; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Vohs & Heatherton, 2004). The implication, students who are not identified as academically at-risk and are not provided the resources needed to pass core academic classes to graduate from high school successfully, may not develop noncognitive factors, have low levels of self-efficacy or self-esteem, and may not become productive members of the community (Apple et al., 2013; Farrington et al., 2013; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). The concepts which characterize social and acceptance models and cognitive learning to gain a deeper appreciation of a positive impact on student academic outcomes are improving the understanding of learning and personal fulfillment. Multiple theories and models are needed to shed light on this complex construct. These include the need-fulfillment theory, social network support model, social learning theory, gestalt theory, expectancy-value theory, and the social development model. Students have a greater chance of academic success and personal fulfillment when educators cultivate a school community that supports personal growth and development's moral, emotional, and psychological dimensions (Miller, 2005). Effective instructional practices can be learned through teacher collaboration focusing on academic accountability through student learning and achievement rather than test scores (DeHartchuck, 2021; Kramer & Schuhl, 2017). To enhance opportunities for teacher collaboration, school districts may consider developing and employing a PLC at each school site. The PLC increases academic accountability, needs assessment, identification of academically at-risk students, and the development of academic intervention programs (Fullan, 2006;

Kramer & Schuhl, 2017). By combining the collaborative efforts of school site administrators, educators, and counselors, the school community can collectively define and address the factors that positively impact student academic achievement. Recognizing students as the primary customer of learning is critical to developing effective education programs.

V. BACKGROUND

The definition of academic accountability in education changed with the passage of NCLB and was further updated by ESSA (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003; Klein, 2016; Lee, 2018). Since 2001, California public school funding has been partially based on academic data from federal and state-mandated assessment testing (Popham, 2006; Warren, 2014). The distribution of school funding by districts occurred via two landmark decisions. In 1976, the California State Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Serrano v. Priest* required equalizing school funding for all public school districts regardless of local community wealth (Kemerer & Sansom, 2013). Following the passage of *The People's Initiative to Limit Property Taxation of 1978*, known as Proposition 13, the limitation on the taxation base of homes and property greatly affected the revenue stream to California public schools (Martin & Citrin, 2009). The consequence was increased pressure on educators, principals, and school districts to demonstrate higher performance data indicators to fund schools adequately. With the pressure placed on school staff to increase assessment scores, educators spend more time teaching to the test. As a result, teachers no longer have the time to identify potentially at-risk students who were not revealed by standardized test scores, let alone provide individualized instruction to said students (Jimenez & Modaffari, 2021; Trilling & Fadel, 2012).

In California, the contextual definition of academic accountability has changed to include restructuring the STAR assessment. Academic accountability did not consider the diversity of student populations within each state region concerning past performance on state-mandated assessment tests (Easton, 2007; Jimenez & Modaffari, 2021). A school district can apply safe harbor rules if certain subgroups within the school's population fall below proficiency targets (Davidson et al., 2015). Not all school districts have safe harbor classification due to the region, affluence of the school district, or composition of the student population. A flaw of the safe harbor, measured results are not based on the same cohort of students but rather on the "change over time in the average performance of a subgroup" (Davidson et al., 2015, p. 351). When defining an academically at-risk student, criteria must include not only the subject content area grades and results from the STAR assessment test but also the diversity of the school body, economic status, parent's education, and the student's current living arrangements, which are not accounted for in the state and federal reporting guidelines (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Most academic achievement research focuses on urban dropout prevention for students in low socioeconomic areas whose parents may have limited formal education (Krasny, 2008; Paul et al., 2021). Few studies focused on suburban students whose parents are high school graduates (Breheny Wallace, 2019; Krasny, 2008; Walsh-Reuss & Moore, 2007). The continual rise of academic assessment standards at the state and federal levels contributes to the increase in suburban high school student populations of academically at-risk students (Brodinsky, & Keogh, 1989; Spring, 2005). This trend will persist unless the school community implements effective intervention strategies and academic enrichment programs that may identify and target academically at-risk students.

Administrators, educators, and counselors who do not continuously examine their educational programs for improvement may lack the desire and motivation to employ new methodologies to improve student learning and achievement (Fullan, 2006; Gillentine, 2006). Identifying academically at-risk students is imperative to promoting success within the school community and beyond (DeHartchuck, 2021; Fiona & Winne, 1996; Toth & Montagna, 2002). The reflective dialogue process within the PLC and school community permits communication on academic accountability issues (Hord, 1997; Louis & Kruse, 2008). Hord (1997) noted that when the school community supports a PLC, an increase may occur in school-wide collaboration time for creating a common system for identifying academically at-risk students, developing a meaningful curriculum, and sharing practices for implementing school-based programs. Increasing academic proficiency will provide a stronger foundation for each student's personal and academic success (Fullan, 2006). Educational reforms have focused on helping teachers implement mandated changes to the curriculum while serving the needs of diverse student populations (Diamond, 2008). Educators must be allowed to work with colleagues to identify and address the issues that focus on data-driven instruction (Adkison & Tchudi, 2001; DeHartchuck, 2021). Data obtained from collaboration informs teaching and learning practices to meet the school community's goals (Adkison & Tchudi, 2001; DeHartchuck, 2021). The possibility of educators identifying those students who may be academically at-risk provides the opportunity for teachers to design targeted interventions to help these students reach their full learning potential (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005).

The demographics of the traditional academically at-risk population have changed. No longer can at-risk students be thought of as individuals who attend an urban high school, are influenced solely by the level of parental education, or socioeconomic factors alone contribute to poor academic performance (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Breheny Wallace, 2019; Edelman, 1989; Wehlage, 1991). Affluent suburban high schools also have academically at-risk student populations, and that trend will not diminish (Breheny Wallace, 2019; Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Wehlage et al., 1989). One of the pressures students face in an affluent suburban school community is the expectation of outperforming their peers, especially in the classroom (Breheny Wallace, 2019; Fensham et al., 1986/2019; Luthar & Becker, 2003; Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Offord et al., 2000). Academically at-risk students may no longer desire to attend school for academic and personal achievement since their academic achievement and performance are significantly lower than their peers (Aldridge, 2003; Mashingaidze, 2012). Instead, these students may find other avenues to voice and exhibit their academic frustrations, including disruptive behavior, truancy, vandalism, and dropping out of school. A balance in the academic accountability system should be implemented by providing opportunities for academically at-risk students to participate, become actively engaged, and take responsibility for their learning (Aldridge, 2003).

VI. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Aligned with exploratory case study design, the concepts which characterize social and acceptance models and cognitive learning to gain a deeper appreciation of a positive impact on student academic outcomes are improving the understanding of learning and personal fulfillment. Multiple theories and models are needed to shed light on this complex construct; these include the need-fulfillment theory, social network support model, social learning theory, gestalt theory, expectancy-value theory, and the social development model. Students have a greater chance of academic success and personal fulfillment when educators cultivate a school community that supports personal growth that develops moral, emotional, and psychological dimensions (Miller, 2005).

For school administrators, educators, and counselors to better understand student academic needs, behavioral theories that relate to academic achievement must be relevant. Maslow (1943, as cited in McLeod, 2022) theorized that if individuals are in the right environment, actualization progresses; therefore, they will realize their full potential. Maslow postulated individuals might not be able to obtain self-actualization or potential because of the hindrances placed in their way by society. One of those hindrances is the lack of effective educational practices within public schools (Simons et al., 1987). McLeod (2022) posited that educators should respond to an individual's potential by providing a positive classroom environment that supports relationships in which a student's ability and self-actualization can be cultivated. Glasser (2010) theorized that individuals are naturally motivated and driven by basic needs for belonging, freedom, fun, and power. People's basic needs are the foundation for the idea of control theory. Glasser noted that when individuals can control their behavior, they will practice the most satisfying behaviors. Glasser applied this theory to schools, stating that if a student does not believe there is a sense of belonging in the school community, no one cares, or thinks they are academically unsuccessful, the student will become academically disengaged. Glasser further described that a school environment that does not meet the student's psychological needs might result in a greater chance of being academically at-risk or dropping out of school. Behavioral issues will lessen when student needs are met through a positive school environment, increasing academic success (Glasser, 2010; Van Wagner, 2008). Therefore, students will feel less susceptible since they are viewed as important and valued within the school community.

The foundation of the social network support model contends that at-risk behaviors students may display are not developed in isolation (Eggert & Hertig, 1991). At-risk behaviors result from the individual's environment and are manifested through the support of like-minded peers (Eggert & Hertig, 1991; Eggert et al., 1994). To understand and thus effect change within a student's thought process and to improve academic performance, Eggert and Hertig's (1991) study focused on the importance of a social network support model from the perspective of the social context of at-risk students who need to strengthen academic and behavioral skills with educators, school staff, parents, and peers. Supporting need-fulfillment theory and the social network support model, the concept of social learning theory is the relationship of learning in a natural setting through observed modeled behavior (Eisenberger et al., 2005). Once the behavior is observed, the learned behavior needs to be practiced by the individual. Adopting the modeled behavior depends on the value the individual places on the behavior. The concepts of Gestalt theory applied in an educational setting allow students to learn the relevant structure of a situation or problem to derive a solution (Gredler, 2008). Katona (1967, as cited in Gredler, 2008) examined Gestalt theory through "experiments [that] demonstrated the role of guided discovery in facilitating an understanding of structural principles in visual problems" (p. 64). Katona further observed that knowledge acquired through guided discovery could be easily transferred to new learning situations.

The expectancy-value theory focuses on social interactions and psychological reasoning (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Students use the expectancy-value theory to determine which academic choices should be made in school and among peer groups. Students' expectations and values of success are important determinants of their motivation to engage actively in achievement-related behaviors based on the task chosen (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; 2002). The factors contributing to students' motivational beliefs are within their social sphere of influence: the school community, family, and peers (Eggert & Hertig, 1991; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The environmental setting plays a prominent role in determining the direction a student may follow based on the positive or negative influences present in the individual's environment, including previous experiences (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

The social development model proposed by Catalano and Hawkins (1996) illustrates the social relationship of a student to the school community. The model describes two outcomes; a strong bond or pro-social behaviors and a weak bond or antisocial behaviors. The findings from the present study provided insights into how knowledge from the need-fulfillment theory, social network support model, social learning theory, gestalt theory, expectancy-value theory, and the social development model could be implemented by school administrators, educators, and counselors to identify academically at-risk students before class failure which could lead to a greater understanding of the complexity of issues facing students in an affluent suburban high school (Edelman, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989).

VII. METHOD AND DESIGN

This study explored the possible social and behavioral factors of students at-risk of academic failure in a suburban public high school. To achieve the desired goal of the study, an exploratory case study design method was applied to solicit the perceptions of school administrators, educators, and counselors in identifying possible factors that may cause a student to be academically at-risk. The descriptive information ascertained from the case study results may be revelatory and provide insight into the experiences of the school community members (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2017). Inductive analysis was conducted via a survey of 23 educators and school leaders, followed by two focus group interviews comprising nine participants.

The Setting, Population, and Sample: The exploratory case study addressed specific educational issues and factors of academically at-risk students in a high-performing suburban Northern California high school. The specific educational issues and factors that may cause a student to become academically at-risk include, but are not limited to, truancy, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, the home environment, and personal relationships (Bergman & Brough, 2016; Breheny Wallace, 2019; Wehlage et al., 1989). The high school comprises 2235 students and 119 staff members, including teachers, administration, and support staff. Education staff and administration have, on average, 9 years of teaching experience, and 85% of the staff have attained a master's degree or higher. Purposeful sampling encompassed 23 high school staff members, including administrators, educators, and counselors. The selected participants were those with direct experience and were concerned about the student population who were academically at-risk at the selected high school. One criterion of the study participants was to obtain a range of experiences and observations based on interactions of individuals in the school site PLC, collaborating with colleagues, and working with students. This information was obtained by recruiting a diverse population of staff members based on responsibilities at the school site.

The sampling frame included at least two educators representing each academic core subject area offered at the school site. By having at least two participants from each subject area of the school site, differences in experiences could be included in the research, which may contribute to a greater depth of information for collection and analysis. The sampling of participants for the study were staff members who currently worked at the high school study site.

VIII. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data for this exploratory case study were collected through surveys, focus group interviews, and school documentation, including academic core subject grades and STAR assessment test data. Written permission from the school-site administrator was required before the collection of data. Volunteer participants were solicited through an introductory letter of the proposed study. Those interested in the study were contacted via their school email address. Appointments were arranged with each study participant to discuss the study's purpose. The objective of the appointment was first to answer any questions or concerns a participant may have and obtain their informed consent before completing the survey and participating in the focus group discussion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The survey was distributed electronically and consisted of two sections, one focusing on perceptions of student achievement and academically at-risk behaviors and the second regarding subject area collaboration and academic achievement; each section of the survey consisted of three and two parts, respectfully. The first section encompassed 79 Likert scale survey questions, and the second included 15 Likert scale survey questions. Focus group interviews were conducted with participants who worked at the school. The first focus group interview comprised five participants, and the second four individuals, including school site administrators, educators, and counselors. Nine questions were asked during the focus group discussions (see Appendix A), which revealed administrators, educators, and counselors' observations, perceptions, and opinions regarding factors that may be attributed to academically at-risk students. Data collected during the focus group interviews were organized into categories of prevailing themes (Saldaña, 2021), such as the role of the school's PLC in identifying student academic achievement, student at-risk behaviors, and the development of academic intervention programs.

The process of employing school site focus group interviews and surveys provided data on the school's population who are academically at-risk despite proficient or advanced levels of ability and achievement, as revealed in STAR scores. NVivo was employed to validate the manual identification, sorting, and coding of the data from the focus group interviews, observational notes, and school document findings to aid the qualitative data analysis process. Triangulation via surveys and focus group interviews aided in checking the validity of the data to ascertain the perceptions of school administrators, educators, and counselors about factors that may cause students to be identified as academically at-risk. Quantitative data analysis provided an opportunity to measure the responses from each participant in numerical terms based on the responses given to the surveys (Yin, 2017). The demographic, student behavior, collaboration, and student achievement data obtained from the surveys were coded predicated on the question type and were analyzed using Excel software. The frequency of the responses was compared between each question to see if specific trends existed in behavioral or academic factors that may cause a student to be academically at-risk. Bivariate analysis of the survey question data occurred when investigating the connections and changes between variables to understand the extent of those relationships (Wetcher-Hendricks, 2014).

IX. FINDINGS

The data review and discussion summarize the relationship of the findings to each research question and the coherence of the main themes identified from the quantitative and qualitative data. Triangulation of data from surveys, focus group interviews, and school data confirms the validity of this research study. The administrator, educators, and counselors shared their observations and perceptions of the PLC's role in identifying academically at-risk students at the research study site. The data results indicated four overarching themes, *social and behavioral factors: identification of academically at-risk students, academic performance and competency, the role of parents/guardians, teachers, and peers in academic success, and state-mandated standards and assessments*. Identifying these themes could then lead to opportunities for the PLC to develop and implement intervention programs to support students identified as possibly at-risk for academic failure.

Social and Behavioral Factors in Identifying Academically At-Risk Students: The data from the quantitative survey provided insight into the administrator's, educators, and counselors' views of the possible social and behavioral factors that may contribute to the identification of academically at-risk high school students. All 23 survey participants strongly agreed that there was a strong relationship between student achievement and attendance and reasons students may be at-risk for academic failure. The survey participants found student attendance played a role in the identification of students who may be at-risk academically. Respondents observed that absenteeism and truancy, 91% and 96%, respectively, were factors in identifying at-risk students of academic failure in their classrooms. SP 8 remarked, "We all know the major and overarching issue is poor attendance." Poor attendance, excused or unexcused, including home hospital, are factors for students performing below their capabilities in the classroom (SP3, SP11, & SP16). SP8 affirmed, "If a child misses a significant amount of school, their chances of passing classes or even graduating from high school can greatly diminish."

The completion of homework and in-class projects and labs also contributed to a student's success in the classroom. Seventy-eight percent of the participants reported students within their classroom were at-risk of academic failure if homework was not completed. Seventy-four percent of the respondents observed their students who did not complete in-class projects and labs were at-risk academically. SP6 observed, "Some bright students don't seem to worry about missing assignments. I guess they think they are smart enough to make up the points in the tests". Another participant, SP2, asserted,

"I don't think some of them understand why they need to do the homework or turn things in." The focus group discussion participants realized one of the behavioral factors that may cause students to be at-risk academically is motivation. Motivation is a factor for students who may be at-risk for academic failure. The focus group interview participants stated that motivation, work ethic, and effort are why many students are not attempting or completing homework, including in-class projects and labs (SP2, SP5, SP6, SP13, SP16, & SP19). SP 16 described at-risk students at the research study site as not intrinsically motivated to do well in school. A classroom educator noted one reason for the lack of motivation: some students don't know what to do after high school (SP2). No importance is placed on academics, regardless of how bright or smart the student may be (SP2, SP19). Motivation is the key factor (SP13) for students to do well in school.

An educator, SP 16, shared an experience with one of her students related directly to at-risk behaviors, motivation, and academics. *I had a student who was a gifted athlete. During the summer, she was injured. Now her hope of getting an athletic scholarship is gone, yet she does not have the academics to back up her ability to go to college. So, what happened, was her grief took over, and she spiraled, started hanging out with the wrong crowd, drinking, and doing other risky behaviors. Part of the reason is that she did not get the parental support she needed. It is okay if you don't get an athletic scholarship. Let's work together and move forward. What got her turned around was her love of the sport. When she realized that she was okay, she viewed the sport as something to enjoy and not count on for her future. There became intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to focus on school, which wasn't her priority in the past. She had to go through many heartaches on her own but managed to come out of it fine. I think the only thing that helped was she could confide in a teacher at school because she wasn't getting the support needed at home.*

The focus group interview questions allowed participants to delve deeper into the specific social and behavioral factors observed in students who may be identified as at-risk for academic failure. The participants also noted a student's home life and the peers a student may associate with as contributing factors, both behaviorally and socially, in identifying academically at-risk behaviors.

Academic Performance and Competency: All research participants noted school attendance was a factor that affected the academic performance and competency of high school students at the research study site. Besides school attendance, the research participants observed that completing homework, in-class projects, and labs correlate to a student's academic success and grade achievement in core subject content area classes. Other factors noted by the participants included substance abuse, driving and drinking alcohol, and riding in a car of a person who consumed alcohol. Of these factors, 96% of the survey participants noted drug use as a factor that may directly relate to students' academic success in their classroom.

More than half of the survey participants responded that classroom behavior that resulted in detention, Saturday school, suspensions, and expulsions influenced high school student's academic performance and proficiency. Students taking personal responsibility for their classroom behavior were a concern addressed by focus group interview participants (SP2, SP5, SP6, SP11, & SP19). SP 11 observed the choice of peers a student associates with in a class often influences their class productivity and behavior. Peer pressure, the choice of peers a student may associate with, and a student's level of maturity play a role in reckless social behaviors (SP2, SP8, SP11, & SP19). Participants suggested students feel pressure from family and peers that may cause them to turn to reckless behaviors to 'get away' or feel nothing. SP 5 conveyed "that a student might start associating with the wrong crowd, become withdrawn, or do things they would not normally do because of an unstable home environment. This way, the student does not show outwardly that they are directly affected by what is happening". SP 11 continued the discussion. *I had always thought that students who were quiet in class were the ones who were always hitting the books hard. I assumed they would be studious and good students if they were not social in the classroom. That is not necessarily so. It's not. If they cannot socialize, it may be because they are unorganized in other aspects of life. But sometimes, they are the ones who do not know how to socialize with their peers. There are other aspects of their personal or home life that they cannot cope with or know how to get the needed help.*

SP 5 noted, *The student may feel like they are an outcast, have depression or anxiety, or need help but don't know how to ask for the help they need. Maybe they see the need for help as a sign of weakness. So, they would rather do poorly in school than get the help they might need. Or would be willing to take on behaviors they would not normally try, such as drinking or drugs. This could be a cry for help, but no one listens or wants to get involved.*

The focus group interview participants concurred that a student's classroom behavior influences academic performance, aptitude, and grade attainment. Research study participants indicated a relationship between academic performance, competency level, and student grade achievement.

Role of Parents/Guardians, Teachers, and Peers in Academic Success: During the focus group interview, participants shared their observations about how parents, teachers, and peers influence the academic success of suburban high school students. The focus group interview participants all agreed parents should take more responsibility for their children's success in school. The level of support does not mean writing or accepting excuses for the student not completing work but ensuring they stay on top of the work (SP11). SP 13, a school counselor, stated, *The parental relationship is the most important relationship a child can have in any home environment. Parents need to be present and support the student in high school through all types of situations. When working with high school students, those who do not have support and are not able to communicate with their parents are the students that seem to have the most difficulties personally and academically.* The participants all observed that the relationship between parents, as well as the home environment of the student, contributes to the type of peers a student may associate with at school.

Survey participants noted almost half of their students who may be academically at-risk live with one biological parent and approximately one-third of their students who may be academically at-risk live with one biological parent and a step-parent. One issue articulated by the focus group interview participants is that students may be at greater risk for academic failure when moving between parents (SP2, SP5, SP6, SP13, SP 16, & SP19). SP5 indicated that one thing that drives kids to reckless behavior is the parents going through a nasty divorce. SP13 affirmed that in many instances, the kids are in the middle, moving between homes, and the parents do not communicate. Instead, they use the kids or lawyers to talk. Participants indicated that the level of communication between the parents and the home environments is inconsistent (SP3, SP8, SP16, & SP19). SP 19 noted, "If the separation and divorce are nasty, the parents may not even communicate with one another, and the kid suffers."

SP 16 agreed this is a concern when the "parents shuffle the student between homes if they are divorced or separated. This is where a breakdown in communication happens". SP 3 suggested that the focus is no longer on communicating with the ex-partner to help their child succeed academically or to find out what is the matter with them. Another concern expressed by SP16 was difficulty establishing a line of communication with parents and the classroom teacher or counseling. *When the student is not living with their natural parent but is living with friends or at a hotel, the lines of communication are difficult to establish or maintain. With that group [academically at-risk students], there is not one thing that affects their academics; it is a multitude of things happening simultaneously. Therefore, if there is no way to communicate with the parents, they cannot know how their child is doing scholastically or socially at school (SP16).*

Additionally, the participants observed peers might have a greater influence on the types of reckless behaviors a student may be willing to attempt. The study participants noted that communication between parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors could assist in developing and implementing a plan to work with students who may be at-risk of academic failure. The focus group interview participants suggested teachers would have greater success working with students in the classroom if parents/guardians had realistic expectations of their child's academic accomplishments. If a parent/guardian is not actively involved in the child's education, taking responsibility for their child's learning, and not being realistic in what their child can do in the classroom, then the parent/guardian could be setting up the student for academic failure (SP8).

Participants observed parents/guardians will go against the advice of educators and counselors by enrolling their child in a class beyond the student's academic skill level or ability. Therefore, the focus group participants indicated the function of school counselors play a significant role in assisting students who may be personally and academically at-risk.

Funding for counselors and reduction in class size were specific topics addressed by the study participants. Study participants cited the need to increase the available counseling services at the research study site to assist in identifying academically at-risk students. The focus group interview participants expressed the necessity for students to access counseling services, including an onsite psychologist, group discussion and intervention sessions, and adding two counselors to the staff. The focus group interview participants expressed the importance of having on staff one counselor dedicated to working with "D" and "F" students who are at-risk of academic failure.

A focus group participant suggested an additional counselor at the study site could be responsible for working directly with and counseling students who exhibit mental and emotional problems. The issues addressed by this counselor may include dealing with stress, peer pressure, motivation issues, other questionable behaviors, and suicide prevention. Focus group participants suggested the need for an onsite psychologist or referral services available within the school district to assist students who exhibit mental or emotional limitations that cannot be addressed at the high school.

Currently, the research study site has four school counselors responsible for approximately 505 high school students (SP13). Counselors have little time to interact with students to address personal or academic concerns and class placement issues and suggest future high school classes based on postsecondary scholastic interests. Study participants indicated many students are not properly placed in academic core subject content area classes. SP15 discussed possible reasons for improper course placement, including the student's cognitive ability to grasp the material, improper placement in middle school courses, students barely passing prerequisite classes, or parents who have insisted their child take a course that is more challenging than the student can academically manage.

The research study participants reported a lack of funding as a reason why class sizes have increased and the ability of educators to identify academically at-risk students has decreased. One focus group participant, SP19, noted English classes have increased in size from 20 to 22 students in one year and the following year to 26 students. The educator has less time to work with students individually with an increased classroom population. A focus group participant revealed if one-on-one time with a student was mandatory in the science classroom during a normal 55-minute class period. Each student would only have 1 minute and 30 seconds with the teacher. The participant discussed how the lack of individual time with students may result in students who fall through the cracks and not being identified as academically at-risk until late in the semester. The study participants supported a reduction in class size in all core content subject areas as a possible means to reduce the number of students who may be at-risk of academic failure.

State-Mandated Standards and Assessments: The study participants recognized state framework course content standards and assessment as a driving force in the curriculum delivery and implementation of pacing guides at the research study site. Study participants discussed the pressure placed on individual teachers to adhere to the pacing guide. By April of each school year, student mastery of the course content standards leaves little time for educators to review material and work with academically at-risk students. Eight-seven percent of study participants reported students who may be at-risk academically scored below average on classroom tests and quizzes. The study participants, who are classroom educators, noted possible reasons bright students who score proficient or advanced on STAR assessment tests and do not perform well on class tests and quizzes are boredom, lack of intrinsic motivation, or lack of personal academic responsibility. Counselors concurred with the educators and indicated students were also using poor academic performance to get attention from parents.

X. DISCUSSION

The findings provided insights into the complexities of identifying those students who could be at-risk for academic failure. Recently, a renewed focus has occurred on exploring student populations, regardless of socioeconomic status and geographic region, to understand further why there is a disconnect in classroom learning and engagement. Stakeholders within a school community should be vested in examining how they can better support students' mental health, wellness, and academic achievement and engagement. Furthermore, the PLC should self-reflect on the programs and strategies currently practiced and where revisions and interventions are needed to improve the campus culture and climate. The first step is to help community members understand the link and importance of a positive home environment to student learning outcomes. All study participants expressed that students have difficulty performing to their academic potential when home environment and parent issues exist. A positive home environment has been linked to increased student academic self-efficacy, motivation, and effort in learning (Hayat et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 1991). The level of parent/guardian involvement in the student's academic career is critical and directly correlates to the academic success a student achieves at the high school level (Chen, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Wehlage, 1991). Parental involvement depends on numerous factors, including understanding the importance of being involved in their student's learning, holding the student responsible and accountable for learning, and awareness of the social and emotional difficulties the student may face when attending high school (Ames, 1992; Chen, 2022). A stable home environment with noticeable parental/guardian involvement in the student's life can positively influence the academic success of both urban and suburban students (Chen, 2022;

Simpson et al., 1991). The research participants observed when the level of parent involvement or support from family members is greatly reduced, high school students are more likely to practice risky social behaviors, including drug abuse, alcoholism, cutting class, and truancy. Students' academic success and motivation are built upon structured programs that include parental involvement (Chen, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2010). The study participants noted a correlation between the level of communication with parents and their involvement in their child's education. Focus group interview participants commented that when parents were willing to communicate with the classroom teacher or school counselor regarding academic, social, and behavioral concerns, those students were less likely to continue academically at-risk behaviors. Programs that inform parents of their child's academic behavior in urban and suburban high schools assist educators in developing a curriculum that builds upon the academic success exhibited in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Simpson et al., 1991). Darling-Hammond (2010) suggested that "successful programs help teachers structure the interaction between students and subject matter that must be intertwined, like the double helix of a DNA chain, if learning is to occur" (p. 215).

Although developing a positive school culture can begin with stronger partnerships with parents and guardians, students do need to be held accountable for their active learning and level of engagement while on campus. Administrators, educators, counselors, and the school community can support student academic achievement, yet learning can only occur when the student is willing to take ownership of their academic prowess (Hayat et al., 2020; Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). The study participants indicated three areas in which student responsibility and accountability should be addressed and may decrease the likelihood a student may be at-risk for academic failure. The areas noted by the case study participants included attendance, homework and class work, and classroom and social behaviors. When student responsibility and accountability are addressed, there is a likelihood of a decrease in the potential for students to be at-risk for academic failure.

The focus group participants observed an association between academic success and attendance. The number of days a student was present in school positively affected learning outcomes, increased motivation, and reduced the risk of academic failure (Gottfried, 2010; Steinmayr et al., 2019). The focus group participants further observed students with a significant number of excused and unexcused absences are at greater risk of not passing the class or graduating from high school. Besides absenteeism, the frequency in which a student is tardy to class can affect the ability of the student to be academically successful (Athlos Academy, 2022; Garcia & Weiss, 2018). When there is no serious consequence to the student by the administration, if they are tardy 2 minutes or 25 minutes into the class, the student misses class time, including the introduction of new course material, interactions between the class and their teacher, and reviewing the course content. This vital information and the context of how the information was presented are lost.

The level of student engagement is an important component of academic resilience and success for all high school students (Finn & Rock, 1997; Romano et al., 2021). As noted by the study participants, students who do not complete homework and classwork might be at-risk academically. A possible reason why students are not performing to their academic capabilities is due to underachieving (Rimm, 2008). Underachieving students, as defined by Rimm (2008), are unconscious manipulators who lack control over their academic success. Underachieving students are disorganized and have poor study skills (Johnson et al., 2022; Rimm, 2008). Another reason, as focus group participants observed, is that students were not motivated to complete the material assigned. Course content and assignments' absence of real-world applications and relevancy does not hold students' attention. The difficulty, as indicated by focus group participants, lies in the teacher's aptitude to develop and implement meaningful, differentiated instruction to increase the rigor of the course content. Maintaining an unrealistic pace to complete course content within seven months of the school year is proving to be a disservice to students, especially those who may be at-risk of academic failure (Dimmitt, 2003; Hanushek et al., 2002). Most educators see increased school accountability and rigor as favorable; however, dictating how course content standards are implemented is seen by the study participants as a form of lock-step teaching (Easton, 2007). The focus should be placed on creativity in the classroom while using the state framework as a guide to instruction (Easton, 2007). Therefore, the challenge resides with the classroom teacher to develop a multi-tiered curriculum and differentiated instruction that is rigorous and relevant to the course and student learning which is delivered at a pace and level of comprehension for student mastery (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Students who are resistant to learning may not understand the instructions given or refuse to follow through with the assignment based on the perceived difficulty of the work (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). One focus group interview participant noted that having time to review and re-teach concepts

students did not understand may reduce the apathy students feel towards completing an in-class or homework assignment. When clear expectations of learning, rigor, and relevance are provided to students, educators can take the initiative to enforce the expected learning outcomes of their students (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Wiersma & Licklider, 2007; Wehlage, 1991). Academically at-risk students who are willing to participate in class activities and complete assignments may be able to decrease the possibility of academic failure (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Stein & Hussong, 2007; Wiersma & Licklider, 2007). The student can then enjoy the process of learning and achieve academic success in the classroom.

Psychologists have found parallels between the behaviors of suburban and urban students in which both groups may suffer from similar social factors that may cause students to be academically at-risk (Edelman, 1989; Evans et al., 2018). Study participants reported student classroom and social behaviors could negatively impact a student's ability to be academically successful. A student's level of academic achievement is intertwined with the peers with whom a student associates (Evans et al., 2018; Hanushek et al., 2002). Students can be greatly influenced by peers regardless if the student attends an urban or suburban high school (Evans et al., 2018; Hanushek et al., 2002). Thus, negative peer pressure may result in poor scholastic productivity and antisocial behaviors (Criss et al., 2016; Elliott & Menard, 1996).

While peers may influence how a student performs in the classroom or the types of risky social behaviors the student may attempt, other factors may cause a student to exhibit poor classroom and social behaviors. One focus group participant indicated students who feel that they do not fit into a specific group or club within the school community tend to be influenced and associate with other students who are more likely to try drugs or alcohol. The internal social relationships between students profoundly influence the choices a student may make during the school day and affect their ability to function academically in the classroom (Criss et al., 2016; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Additionally, students pressured by parents might turn to reckless behaviors to get attention or "get away" from specific family or personal issues (Breheny Wallace, 2019).

To promote positive social school-based relationships, high school administrators can increase the number of counselors, which could result in a greater likelihood that students would be properly placed in academic classes, thus reducing the possibility of students being overwhelmed and at-risk for academic failure (Clabaugh et al., 2021; Dimmitt, 2003). The actual class size is directly related to the proper placement of students in classes, as observed by a focus group participant. As another focus participant shared, teachers can cultivate and develop meaningful relationships with students when class size is manageable. There is a "greater likelihood of a significant relationship between a teacher and student as well as more individualized instructional opportunities" (Dimmitt, 2003, p. 342) in classrooms with fewer students. Smaller class sizes would affect the number of classes a student would need to repeat, possibly increasing the number of high school graduates and reducing the number of students contemplating dropping out of high school (Berger, 2022; Finn et al., 2005; Toth & Montagna, 2002).

Although the study focused on the school community's role in identifying and supporting academically at-risk students, all participants recognized the importance of collaborative relationships at the research study site. Collaborating with colleagues is important for sharing teaching strategies and curriculum and discussing other school-related issues (DuFour et al., 2006). The study participants viewed the role of the research study site PLC as a conduit of teacher collaboration solely for curriculum, development of common pacing guides, and implementation of assessment practices. Study participants reported the significance of collaboration among other subject content area educators for sharing best classroom practices, developing cross-curricular projects, teaching strategies for differentiated instruction and scaffolding of curriculum, and identifying academically at-risk students.

Study participants expressed the need for the PLC to address procedures for identifying students who may be at-risk of academic failure, the intervention strategies, and guidelines for following up with counselors and administrators once these students have been identified. McEvoy and Welker (2000) identified professional staff development and training as a method to appropriately assess school-wide practices for the early identification of student antisocial behaviors, academic aptitude, increased educator-student contact time, and improved academic success. For teachers to successfully work with academically at-risk students, all educators within a school community need to be responsible for student learning and advancing student achievement (Berry et al., 2010; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). The success of intervention strategies and programs is based on the ability of the school community to identify and modify school climates in which academic failure and antisocial behavior occur (Criss et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2018; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). The purpose of improving

school climate is to reduce academic failure and antisocial behavior among students identified as academically at-risk (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Each focus group participant concurred that the PLC's role should be to develop and implement intervention programs to support students identified as academically at-risk. Intervention programs could include study programs, tutoring, teacher office hours, small group counseling sessions, and increased non-college preparation courses offered on campus.

XI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings generated from this study are limited to the scope and qualitative nature of a case study and cannot be generalized to a broader population. The study is also limited to one research study site to represent suburban Northern California high schools and to the experiences of an administrator, educators, and counselors who took part in the study based on their observations and perspectives of the possible social and behavioral factors that may cause high school students to be at-risk for academic failure. Another limitation, the findings may not be comparable to similar populations of other high-performing high schools with similar demographics and performance outcomes on the STAR assessment test. Future research may include a replication of this study for comparison to a different affluent suburban public high school located in another region of California or the country. Expanded research may include analysis of cultural diversity, socioeconomics, community involvement, variety of academic courses offered, and intervention programs available within the high school to assist in identifying students who may be at-risk of academic failure.

XII. CONCLUSIONS

School administrators, educators, and counselors may construct new meaning and knowledge by understanding the possible factors that may cause suburban high school students to be at-risk for academic failure. The research findings from this study may encourage educational leaders and administrators to develop and implement programs to assist students who have been identified as at-risk for academic failure. A relationship exists between the home environment, parental involvement, and the other themes identified in this study for urban and suburban high school students. Regardless of parental income or level of education, the same basic needs must be met to encourage all high school students to be academically engaged. This is not exclusively an urban high school problem. Implementing specific programs designed to assist administrators, educators, and counselors in developing meaningful educational programs for academically at-risk students may provide an educational foundation for academic improvement. By employing intervention programs and strategies during the school day, students may be given a greater opportunity to increase their academic achievements and competency beyond high school.

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APPENDIX A

Focus Groups Interview Questions

1. Please describe your role at the High School(HS)
2. What role does the HS professional learning community (PLC) play in the identification of academically at-risk students?
3. How can the HS PLC/school community be proactive in identifying students who may be academically at-risk?
4. Does the HS PLC work collaboratively to identify academically at-risk students?
5. What processes does the PLC use in this process?
6. What are the behaviors you have seen in students attending HS that may cause students to be academically at-risk?
7. Based on your interactions with students what are three factors that may cause students to be academically at-risk? Why?
8. What programs or recommendations can the HS PLC implement to reduce the number of academically at-risk students?
9. Why do you think students who may score proficient or advanced on the STAR assessment test may be academically at-risk in their subject content area courses?