The Public School Response to Cyber Charter Programs: Fiscal Considerations, Retention and Recruitment Strategies, and Participant Experiences

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty
of
Drexel University
by
John Christopher Hardin
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
May 2015
This EdD Dissertation Committee from The School of Education at Drexel University certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

The Public School Response to Cyber Charter Programs:
Fiscal considerations, retention and recruitment strategies, and participant experiences

John Christopher Hardin

Committee:

________________________________________
Dr. Allen C. Grant

________________________________________
Dr. Kathleen Provinzano

________________________________________
Dr. Katherine H. Kieres

Date
Dedications

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Angelica, for her constant support throughout my work on this endeavor. Your love, enthusiasm, patience, reassurance, and understanding buoyed my spirits when my energy reserves were at their lowest. I also dedicate this dissertation to my father, mother, and stepfather for their guidance and emphasis on the importance of growth through educational attainment and the seeking of knowledge. I also thank many other family members who supported me during this often challenging journey toward the completion of my degree.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express great gratitude to Dr. Allen Grant, my committee chairperson, who was continuously prompt in his responses to all my queries and provided me sage advice throughout my study. Special thanks to committee member Dr. Kathleen Provinzano for her feedback and suggested revisions early on in my proposal process, which helped propel me toward a more focused topic. Further kudos to committee member Dr. Kate Kieres for her support and suggestions regarding numerous study questions as well as for serving as a source of inspiration as one who completed the Ed.D. degree.

I would like to thank the students, parents, and school administrators who served as participants in this study and the various members of the school site who were extremely supportive of my research into gaining a better understanding of the experiences of those involved in online learning. The following members of the school administration displayed considerable interest in my study and graciously allowed for flexibility that enabled me to complete this process: Dr. Bridget O’Connell, Dr. Karl Scheibehofer, Mr. Rich Kiker, Mr. Drew Bishop, and Mr. Rich Heffernan. Thank you.
# Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. vii

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ viii

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... ix

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................... 1

Statement of Problem .......................................................................................................... 2

Purpose Statement ................................................................................................................. 2

Research Questions ............................................................................................................. 4

Conceptual Framework ........................................................................................................ 5

Researcher Stance and Experiential Base ........................................................................... 5

Research Streams ................................................................................................................ 9

Fiscal Conditions ................................................................................................................ 9

Retention and Recruitment ................................................................................................. 10

Participant Experiences: Administrators, Students, and Parents ....................................... 11

Definitions of Terms .......................................................................................................... 13

Limitations ........................................................................................................................... 15

Summary ............................................................................................................................. 17

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................... 18

Conceptual Framework ....................................................................................................... 19

Cyber Education and Funding/Fiscal Conditions ............................................................... 20

Recruitment and Retention Strategies ................................................................................ 23

Student, Parent, and School Administrator Experiences With Online Learning ................ 25
Artifact: Teacher Survey Information ................................................................. 101
Artifact: Financial Documents and Past Records ........................................ 101
Financial and District Savings ......................................................................... 102
Results and Interpretations ............................................................................ 104
Summary ........................................................................................................... 107

CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ................................................. 108
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 108
Recommendations ............................................................................................ 112
Advertising ........................................................................................................ 112
Quality of Purchased Courses ......................................................................... 115
Overall Retention and Recruitment Practices .............................................. 116
Possible Action Steps ....................................................................................... 116
Recommendations for Further Research ....................................................... 118
Summary ........................................................................................................... 119

LIST OF REFERENCES .......................................................................................... 121

APPENDIX A: STUDY APPROVAL LETTER .......................................................... 128
APPENDIX B: ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DELIMITATIONS ............. 129
APPENDIX C: ALIGNMENT WITH RESEARCH QUESTIONS, RESEARCH METHODS, AND DATA SOURCES ............................................................ 130
APPENDIX D: PROBING QUESTIONS ................................................................. 131
APPENDIX E: THEMES AND PARTICIPANT GROUPS’ KEY POINTS AND PHRASES ...................................................................................................... 132
APPENDIX F: WORD WEBS ................................................................................ 148
VITA .................................................................................................................... 151
### List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Probing Questions Asked to School Administrators</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Probing Questions Asked to Students and Parents</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dissertation Timeline</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis Timeline</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Themes, Participant Responses, and Number of References</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Emerging Themes</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>In-District Budgetary Amounts</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>In-District Budgetary Savings</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>B1. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>C1. Alignment With Research Questions, Research Methods, and Data Sources</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>D1. Probing Questions</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>E1. Themes and Participant Groups’ Key Points and Phrases</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

1. Conceptual framework........................................................................................................ 8
Abstract

The Public School Response to Cyber Charter Programs: Fiscal Considerations, Retention and Recruitment Strategies, and Participant Experiences
John Christopher Hardin
Allen C. Grant, Ph.D.

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to determine contributing factors for students’ and parents’ decisions to remain in, or return to, a district’s cyber school program. This study also sought to determine the efficacy of a school district’s cyber program, and how efficacy specifically contributed to students’ and families’ decision-making process about where to attend online learning. This study examined the practices that one public school district employed in its management of cyber programming, as well as its retention and recruitment plans as they related to in-district cyber education in K–12 schools. The primary research questions of this study were: What are the experiences of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district program? Why are students remaining in the district’s cyber program? Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program? What are the factors that influence a student to either remain in or return to the district’s cyber program? What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?

The researcher used semistructured interview questions to determine the most effective means of student retention, recruitment, and cyber program development while understanding experiences of students, parents, and school administrators. The researcher attempted to find a relationship between district cyber programmatic design and student
academic interest or need as well as parental responses that indicated vital programmatic characteristics from their perspective. Ideally, the results of this study will eventually lead to the development of a template for K–12 in-district cyber program success after viewing the results from the district in this case study research. Seven themes emerged from the semistructured interviews: teacher quality, retention and recruitment, program perception, support, flexibility, social interaction and costs/financials. Results points toward the importance of having in-district teachers involved in the program to ensure quality feedback from teacher to student both online and face to face, which is important in supporting student success. Schedule flexibility is an excellent byproduct of the in-district program; increasing program understanding through advertising as it could further support retention and recruitment. It is also important to pay close attention to costs associated with students leaving the district for cyber charter programs, as they can be extremely high. Recommendations point toward increasing advertising associated with in-district cyber programming, analyzing the quality of purchased cyber courses, and reviewing current retention and recruitment practices.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Economic volatility, combined with rapidly increasing cyber charter enrollments, has many districts looking for ways to defray costs and keep themselves fiscally sound amid the rising per pupil expenditures that districts must pay to cyber charter schools. Foster (2011) has remarked that these current economic conditions may lead to long-term instability in the educational funding system, highlighting the importance of developing in-district cyber programming. A growing and extremely challenging problem for districts is how to construct quality cyber programs.

Throughout Pennsylvania and the United States, K–12 students are opting for a flexible education that allows for a full cyber or blended learning school experience (Democratic House Education Committee, 2014). According to the Pennsylvania School Board Association Issue Brief (PSBA) on cyber schools, cyber charter school enrollment across the state has increased by “more than 14,000 students” (p. 1) from the 2005–2006 to the 2010–2011 school year. To meet the needs of these students and families, Pennsylvania authorized the implementation of cyber charter schools, which are defined by the Educational Law Center (2013) as a “school that provides most of its instruction to its students through the Internet or by some other electronic means” (p.1). These cyber charter schools are funded through traditional public school districts on a per pupil tuition basis. Because the increasing enrollment of cyber charter schools and the public school response with its own cyber programming are relatively new phenomena, there is very little research regarding the success or failure of in-district cyber programs in the United States, and particularly in Pennsylvania. Additionally, many school districts are either
struggling to retain and recruit students in their own in-district cyber programming or do not possess a program at all. There is limited research regarding the successful strategies that school districts can utilize to effectively address the needs and wants of parents and students regarding district online programming. Therefore, research on the topic of recruitment and retention of in-district online school students and the successful strategies that support student and parent desires is a worthwhile and beneficial course of study. Also, other districts across the state could utilize the results of this study given that little data or findings are currently available on K–12 cyber student recruitment/retention and student, parent, and administrator experiences.

**Statement of Problem**

School districts are struggling to retain current students and develop programs that are viable compared to cyber charter program offerings. At the time this project was undertaken, the in-district cyber program in this study was facing competition from several cyber charter programs within the region and the state. The majority of students attended two different cyber charter programs while the remaining students attended several different online charter options. Cyber programming necessitated a deeper understanding of the district’s retention and recruitment strategies and an exploration into how these strategies were aligned or misaligned with student and parent cyber expectations.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to determine how the district was recruiting and retaining students interested in attending cyber programs within the region of southeastern Pennsylvania, and how it could improve its current practice. This study
analyzed which specific programmatic elements students and parents in the district deemed vital in a K–12 online learning environment that may have supported retention or recruitment practices. Public school districts are required to provide tuition payments for students who opt to attend cyber charter programs; this subsidization causes significant financial issues for nearly all public K–12 schools and districts throughout Pennsylvania. Research from the Pennsylvania School Board Association concluded that cyber charter school costs vary from several thousand dollars to amounts over $20,000.

This issue is a lamentable one for school board members, school administrators, and members of the school community who are becoming more aware of the costs associated with cyber charter and charter programs. In general, many community members and school leaders are seeking their local political representation to best address current concerns regarding these educational options that are financially challenging to local public school districts.

The next major area of importance pertains to recruitment and retention strategies, which provide insight into what programmatic elements may support the growth of in-district cyber program development. Pape, Revenaugh, Watson, and Wicks (2006) have explained that successful “online programs take seriously the need to measure the success of their programs through extensive data collection,” but that “the lack of common measures demonstrates the challenges for parents and students who are making education choices, and policy makers responsible for overseeing these programs” (p. 57). Moreover, Pape et al. (2006) found that “carefully tracking who is teaching the course is also important,” such as tracking teachers who are highly qualified or have previously taught the course; they also determined that “persistence of effort matters” (p. 57) by
online students, and that these students must be engaged in the content. This finding would support the notion that providing engaging programming within the in-district cyber program would equate to student and parent satisfaction.

Berge and Huang (2004) have asserted that online programs should create “a customizable model of student retention that takes into account personal, circumstantial, and institutional factors, as well as the interconnectedness of these factors” (p.1). Individualizing student learning is critical to the respected and universal practice in K–12 education of differentiating instruction for the needs of learners.

The last area of focus is on understanding student, parent, and school administrator experiences within the context of online learning, which is key to developing an ideal program design and positive student outcomes. Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer (2004) stated that teacher quality and the frequency of communication between students and teachers is vital to online academic outcomes (as cited in Kozma et al., 2000). K–12 online learning is a relatively new program, and much more research must be conducted to fully understand the perceptions of students, parents, and school administrators to create high quality in-district cyber programs, and to eventually generate a template for other districts to follow.

**Research Questions**

Primary Question:

1. What are the experiences of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district cyber program?

Subquestions:

2. Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program? Why are
students returning to the district’s cyber program? What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program?

What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?

**Conceptual Framework**

**Researcher Stance and Experiential Base**

Creswell (2013) has noted that one must consider the ontological impact when beginning research. Grix (2002) explained that ontology is “the image of social reality upon which a theory is based” (p. 177), which relates to how research and research outcomes can influence how theories are developed and perceived. The researcher evaluated how the current understanding of the research site may influence his experience with participants and their responses. The researcher was cognizant of the necessary steps to avoid researcher bias, as noted by Creswell (2012), and abided by the requirements to use “language that avoids demeaning attitudes, including biased assumptions, and awkward constructions that suggest bias because of gender, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic group, disability or age” (p. 277). Other than name, specific descriptions of participants in the study afforded an appropriate distance between the researcher and participants, as recommended by Creswell (2012). The researcher stated in writing that participants would not be penalized for their responses or decision not to participate in the study. Although the researcher was employed by the district in which this study was conducted, participants were made fully aware—via consent forms—that participation or lack thereof in no way negatively influenced their relationship with the school. Additionally, participants were informed that pseudonyms were used in the written report to allow for confidentiality. Only the researcher had access to interview data, and the data
were not shared with school officials. It is also important to note and consider the
different perspectives and outcomes that arose based upon the type of research model
being employed and the lens through which the research was viewed and evaluated.

The researcher was tasked with evaluating the “evidence of multiple realities
including the use of multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of
different individuals and presenting different perspectives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20).
Because this research was a case study, the researcher was able to “provide an in-depth
exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, an event, a process, or an individual)
based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2013, p. 617). The researcher took a social
constructivist approach to the research study as, according to Creswell (2013),
“individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop
subjective meaning of these experiences” (p. 23), as such multiple realities related to in-
district cyber learning experiences exist, and the researcher had to explore those realities
to paint a complete picture related to this district’s cyber program. The recording of the
experiences of students, parents, and administrators served as a tool to determine what
factors are important to in-district cyber school success, while considering areas of
growth and improvement. Each participant and participant group provided its own unique
experience and opinion during the semistructured interview process, allowed for
authentic commentary on in-district cyber education, and illustrated important factors that
this district and others may seek to continue or establish regarding online education
programs.

Additionally, this particular case study was categorized as a descriptive case
study, as “it serves the purpose of illuminating a particular issue” (Creswell, 2012, p.
Merriam (2009) has stated the following about a descriptive case study:

“Descriptive means that the end product of a case study is a rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (p. 43). Merriam (2009) concluded, “Thick description is a term from anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated” (p. 43). Merriam (2009) reported that case studies may “include as many variables as possible and portray their interaction, often over a period of time” (p. 43). During this study, the researcher was able to determine how variables may impact the in-district cyber program as well as detail strengths and areas for growth. The researcher was able to examine the unique phenomenon of K–12 online learning and the factors involved in determining programmatic success. Through the careful examination of these authentic experiences of administrators, students, and parents, the researcher was able to access commonalities that displayed consensus among participants regarding ideal or essential online learning design, implementation, and instruction.

The concept and practice of in-district cyber programming is a new and emerging area in the field of education. Excursions into the use of online learning should be taken with a measured approach that assures that course content and instructional practices will remain intact. Unfortunately, many school districts are being adversely impacted by the financial losses associated with students leaving for cyber charter school options. As cyber charter school programs expand and drain funds from public school resources, public school leaders and administrators are seeking fast solutions that lead to student retention and recruitment. The researcher believes that inquiry into this topic can reveal which practices that one school district used with its in-district cyber school program should or could be universally or systematically applied to public schools around the state.
of Pennsylvania and the nation. The researcher’s current experience as a teacher of cyber courses within the public school setting allowed him to see the successes and failures of cyber programming and will hopefully enable him to carefully apply these experiences to a template for other schools to follow. The researcher believes that a set of implementation standards and recruitment and retention practices could elicit significant change and guide public school districts toward K–12 cyber implementation excellence. The conceptual framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Conceptual framework. This figure displays the participant experiences, fiscal conditions, recruitment/retention strategies for how each component makes up an in-district online learning program.](image)

According to the researcher, the most influential elements of research in the field of cyber education in K–12 public schools most likely center around a small number of
public schools in Pennsylvania currently implementing in-house or district K–12 cyber programs. The financial costs associated with students choosing cyber charter programming outside of their home district are prohibitive for all districts. In-district cyber programming is an attempt to curb this fiscal concern, and this researcher seeks to determine factors that lead to increased student recruitment and retention with feedback from administrators, students, and parents.

**Research Streams**

**Fiscal Conditions**

With the rapid expansion of cyber programs around the nation, the question of funding is of the utmost concern as districts attempt to manage the rising costs and expenditures associated with online learning. According to one superintendent in Berks County, Pennsylvania:

> It costs $4,500 to $5,000 per student for Brandywine Heights to run its own online program. However, the district ends up paying tuition to cyber charters of more than $9,000 per student. The number is even higher for special education students. (Mekeel, 2011, p. 2).

Unfortunately, public schools are not able to fully fund each student’s tuition while cyber charter programs are allowed to keep a surplus of funds. Keagy, Peterson, Strauss, and Yarworth (2010) explained that Pennsylvania has been quite lenient regarding the governance of cyber charter school finances and possible surpluses:

> While the School Code creates a cap of school districts’ fund balances of 8-12%, charter schools have no such cap. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, 80% of cyber schools have fund balances exceeding the cap placed on school districts. (p. 16)

Although online learning may make or provide more options for students at cyber charter
programs in Pennsylvania and around the nation, K–12 public school districts are financially responsible for providing tuition for each student who chooses to attend one of these programs. However, K–12 public school districts are attempting to save money by providing their own in-district cyber programming in an effort to retain and recruit potential or current cyber charter students. One example regarding in-district program cost savings comes from the Quakertown Community School District in Bucks County. This district reported that its cyber program “grossed more than $156,000” and allowed for “savings of $50,000 per year” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013, p. 2).

Finally, initial reports from the school district via the business administrator (2014) mentioned that, from 2009 to 2013, the district’s budget for charter school enrollment, which included cyber charter tuition reimbursement, had increased from $466,269 to $749,160 annually, not including special education students. In the 2011–2012 school year, the district saved a total of $86,352, $126,821 in 2012–2013, and $270,000 in 2013–2014. The aforementioned costs accounted for students who were budgeted to attend a cyber school. The business administrator (e-mail message to author, July 8, 2014) stated that it is very difficult to determine or measure why students decided not to attend the cyber charter program based upon the offerings at the school district.

**Retention and Recruitment**

Barbour (2010) noted that retention issues are one of many factors currently impacting online learning, as some students are not equipped or ready to complete online coursework. Cavanaugh (2009) explained that student isolation and the quality of online programming impact student retention in the online or cyber format (as cited in Barbour, 2010, p. 4). Rice (2006) stated that students’ performance could be based on the delivery
model of instruction and their experience in the environment (as cited in Barbour, 2010, p. 4). Further research is needed regarding specific kinds of retention or recruitment strategies that may support student consistency in a district cyber program. Smith (2005) stated that “understanding and improving student persistence,” “issues related to satisfaction and motivation,” and “identifying and remediating characteristics for successful online learning” could foster a better understanding of what leads to retention and high rates of student recruitment (as cited by Barbour, 2010, p. 8).

Preliminary research regarding online learning has indicated that when a program is able to “develop organized evaluation systems that examine multiple aspects of distance learning to facilitate consistent data collection” (Rice, 2009, p. 174), then schools are able to clearly determine successes and failures within programs. Schools that understand the importance of effective evaluation of these key areas plan to see improvement relating to attendance, retention, and student outcomes.

Lee and Figueroa (2012) remarked that “discussion boards, e-mail, telephone, Skype, instant messaging, and any other forms of communication tools available” (p.25), are likely to engage students in the online educational experience. Lee and Figueroa (2012) also stressed the importance of parental involvement to online learning success along with evaluation tools or pretests that students must take prior to beginning an online course. Lee and Figueroa (2012) further stated that ease of course use with an emphasis on short, concise modules and a focus on skill mastery are also key to student success.

**Participant Experiences: Administrators, Students, and Parents**

The administrative, student, and parent experience with K–12 online learning is a
valuable component to understand when considering best practices for in-district program development. To develop strong in-district cyber content and procedures, it is important to understand both the positive and negative experiences reported by parents and students. The United States Department of Education’s (2010) report regarding online learning found, “Distance learning outcomes were less positive when instructor involvement was low, with effects more positive, up to a point, as instructor involvement increased” (p. 74). Cavanaugh et al. (2004) concluded that, at times, “students may feel isolated, parents may have concerns about children’s social development, students with language difficulties may experience a disadvantage in text-heavy online environment, and [with] subjects requiring physical demonstrations of skills” (p. 5). Furthermore, research by Rice (2006) recorded that:

Students across studies appear to enroll in online courses for similar reasons. Convenience, flexibility in scheduling, credit recovery, accelerated learning opportunities, conflict avoidance, and the ability to take courses offered at a local school are just some of the reasons identified in the research. (as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 434; Tunison & Noonan, 2001)

Also, parents and students are likely to choose online learning in the K–12 setting because “the local brick-and-mortar school down the street is not meeting their needs” due to a variety of reasons, and also as “a way to avoid negative influences or bullying. Kids with special needs make up 10% of K12’s student population” (Riley, 2011, p.1).

Lastly, it is important to note that, according to Huett, Moller, Foshay, and Coleman (2008), “The majority of research on student success in online courses has been conducted in higher education settings” (as cited in O’Dwyer, Carey, & Kleiman, 2007, p.65; Ronsisvalle & Watkins, 2005). Clearly, further research is needed to appreciate the best practices of retention and recruitment in online learning; the analysis of fiscal
considerations and the recording of parent, student, and administrative perceptions and experiences is a vital component to understanding best practices considering in-district online learning. This study examined the experiences of administrators, students, and parents while providing insight into retention and recruitment outcomes in the context of a school district’s cyber program.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Asynchronous*: Recorded or the accessibility of course content at the student’s own pace. Not live or in real time. Materials are available online, and students complete the assignments through online submission based on due dates.

*Blackboard*: Online course platform that provides the organization and navigation of the online course.

*Blended learning*: Students complete portions of their coursework online or face to face. The number of required traditional face-to-face meetings varies based on the design of the program or course.

*Blended schools*: An online course developer, content provider, and professional development company; provides cyber courses to hundreds of school districts throughout the State of Pennsylvania.

*Cyber charter school*: An entire online educational entity devoted to online instruction, not necessarily required to abide by state mandates and testing regulations (Pennsylvania School Board Association, 2011).

*Cyber school*: A school or program in which students can complete K–12 coursework entirely at home or another location or partially at home and in a designated cyber school environment (Education Law Center, 2008).
Cyber student: A student in grades K–12 who, by his or her own choice or through the designated approval of his or her parent or guardian, chooses to attend and take coursework entirely online without required face-to-face instruction.

Director of online learning: A school administrator responsible for all functions of cyber and blended learning within a public school district. The director is also responsible for recruiting and retaining students that may have left, or are considering a cyber-charter educational program or school.

Full-cyber student: A student who takes all of his or her coursework online. He or she may attend the school site as needed to access tutoring or support services, but all instruction is based online. These students typically take three to five online classes per semester.

In-district cyber program or school: An online educational program designed and supervised under the scope of a K–12 public school district.

Local Education Agency (LEA): A school district that provides schooling and educational services to those in a given community.

Learning Management System (LMS): An entirely online platform or web-based system, such as Blackboard, that organizes and records course content, grades, discussion, and a variety of other online communication tools.

Online class: An educational course delivered by a teacher entirely through the use of computer technology. The course may be conducted via asynchronous or synchronous instruction. Students are often required to communicate with the instructor or teacher virtually.

Online learning: Students participate and take courses utilizing a computer,
conduct discussion through online discussion boards, and utilize a LMS (Learning Management System).

*Partial cyber student:* These students take one or more online classes, but still attend their home school district on a regular basis for face-to-face classes. Students have access to support from regular and cyber students while physically attending the school building.

*Per pupil costs:* The dollar amount associated with the cost to educate each student. The costs associated with educating a public school student in a traditional system versus an online student in the cyber charter program is considerably higher in the public school face-to-face setting. The per pupil costs imposed by cyber charter schools are a major contributing factor to financial difficulties for public school districts.

*School district (or district):* An area or region containing schools that a school board is in charge of; a unit for administration of a public-school system often comprising several towns within a state (*Merriam-Webster, 2014*).

*Synchronous:* Live or real-time participation by students and instructors regarding course content, conversations, lectures, assessments, etc.

**Limitations**

Some of the difficulties associated with a study such as this one stem from the relative newness of K–12 cyber education programs and options. Many districts were just beginning to formulate plans to incorporate cyber programs within their public schools, and this research ran the risk of being met with criticism, as the study examined the successes and failures of one school district, not hundreds. Additionally, what works for one district may not translate into success for another district seeking to implement the
best practices delineated in this study’s findings. Moreover, this research assumed that
districts in the State of Pennsylvania would be receptive to results pertaining to other
districts, and perhaps would want to conduct their own study to address specific concerns
relative to their particular school and district. This study also operated under the
assumption that the vast majority of schools were considering ways to combat the flood
of students leaving for cyber charter programs. The fact that research supports the rise in
cyber school enrollment does not mean that each school district within the State of
Pennsylvania or around the country is likewise impacted in a negative manner.

However, this research does surmise that a number of school districts throughout
the state and country would consider the findings and outcomes regarding best practices
of a high-performing district and public cyber program to be quite noteworthy and
valuable. The stagnant economy and rise of per pupil cyber education expenditures do
speak to the viability of this particular research and its potential effectiveness.

This researcher sought to examine one district that was utilizing a cyber school
program or cyber classes. The district is located in Upper Bucks County approximately
55 to 60 miles north of Philadelphia. The district is deemed rural-distant code (42), as
noted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), which is defined as “more
than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural
territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban
cluster” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, p.1). The district had an
enrollment of approximately 1,800 students with three elementary schools, one middle
school, and one high school. Although this study may be relevant to districts of this size,
limitations could arise regarding its application to large urban school districts in and out
of the State of Pennsylvania. This researcher interviewed school administrators in this district, with the goal of determining how the district could recruit back or retain students in its current in-district cyber program. The researcher interviewed three administrators in the district as well as 12 students and five parents; it was possible that this small number of participants would not reveal or provide substantial support for or against this district’s cyber education practices. Other limitations may pertain to the lack of analyzable data because—at the time of this study—this program had only been in existence for five years. Delimitations concern the researcher’s decision not to conduct research in large suburban or urban districts due to the marked difference in programmatic design and implementation. The researcher did not interview elementary students who had or were participating in the in-district cyber program, as their experiences may have been difficult to accurately record and analyze. Lastly, the researcher did not specifically study cyber charter schools and their programs because the researcher’s goal was to analyze public in-district cyber programming experiences.

Summary

This chapter explained the format, design plan, and potential pitfalls associated with a study of in-district K–12 cyber programs in a rural school district. The research in this study aimed to determine which factors were most helpful to establish a successful public cyber school that is able to retain and recruit students from competing cyber charter programs. Ideally, the outcomes described in this particular chapter would support the development of other in-district cyber programs in the State of Pennsylvania while providing evidence championing the revision or establishment of policies and practices that are supportive of student, parent, and school administrator needs and goals.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Pennsylvania School Board Association Issue Brief (PSBA):

Cyber Charter School issue, cyber charter school enrollment across the state has increased by “more than 14,000 students” from the 2005–2006 to the 2010–2011 school year (Pennsylvania School Board Association Issue Brief: Cyber Charter Schools, 2011, p. 1). Tuition payments for which traditional public school districts are responsible range from “$5,000 to $15,000 for per pupil costs” (Pennsylvania School Board Association, 2011, p.1). Wagner (2012) also noted that Pennsylvania has the highest per pupil spending cyber charter system in the country, at “$12,657 per student while the U.S. average per charter/cyber student is $10,790” (p. 2). According to former Pennsylvania Auditor General Jack Wagner’s report (2012), “charter and cyber charter education funding reform should save taxpayers $365 million annually” (p.1) if his recommendations were considered. The expense of this tuition reimbursement is now prompting the implementation of in-district cyber programming as a cost-saving measure.

Because the costs of losing students to cyber charter programming are so prohibitive, school districts are developing in-district cyber programming in an effort to recruit and retain students. School administrators, students, and parents, along with their experiences, are key factors to understanding the in-district cyber planning strategies that support successful retention and recruitment outcomes. This literature review provides a background on current fiscal conditions that influenced a district to begin an in-district cyber program while analyzing cyber recruitment and retention practices along with the experiences of key school administrators, students, and parents in the area of K–12 online learning.
Conceptual Framework

Fiscal factors, recruitment, and retention strategies, along with the experiences of students, parents, and school administrators were all insightful as to how an in-district cyber program successfully met the needs of district stakeholders and supported educational goals. The fundamental questions that can help understand what constitutes a successful in-district cyber program are as follows.

Primary Question:

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district cyber program?

Subquestions:

2. Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program? Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program? What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program?

What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?

The three streams of data most important for understanding one district’s in-district cyber programming are fiscal conditions, recruitment and retention, and participant experiences. In the first stream, fiscal conditions within this particular district and throughout the United States point to the high costs of allowing students to leave their home district for another cyber charter or charter opportunity. These rising costs present a major problem for most districts in Pennsylvania and around the country. The second stream, recruitment and retention strategies for students who may have attended another cyber program or are considering it, is a significant area of research, since it influences
why students and parents feel that a particular program is successful or not. Research
determined the common factors associated with cyber recruitment and retention
strategies. The third stream of research determined and analyzed how school
administrators, students, and parents perceived the cyber program, and how a district or
cyber charter program was meeting or met their needs for learning.

**Cyber Education and Funding/Fiscal Conditions**

The continual evaporation of local, state, and federal resources is creating a crisis
of epic proportions for K–12 schools across the nation. Over the last five years, the
economic recession has depleted many of the traditional funding resources for K–12
educational programs. Hull (2010) stated that budgets might suffer for a number of years
as inflation will likely occur by 2014, causing price increases for a variety of services.
Klein (2008) reported that educational funding was the last priority as government
officials struggled to save private sector jobs and prevent a recession. Eger (2009) argued
that the lack of educational monies available to schools through local, state, and federal
funding has forced school districts to increase property taxes, lay off workers, and reject
proposed budgets throughout the country. Foster (2011) remarked that the current
economic situation might lead to long-term instability in the educational funding system.

The aforementioned financial issues, combined with the increase in student
attendance in cyber charter programming—which requires tuition reimbursement from
K–12 districts, has created a major issue for traditional public schools. According to the
Pennsylvania School Board Association Issue Brief (PSBA) Cyber Charter School issue
brief, cyber charter school enrollment across the state has increased by “more than 14,000
students” from the 2005–2006 to the 2010–2011 school year (Pennsylvania School Board
Association Issue Brief: Cyber Charter Schools, 2011, p. 1). Additionally, the cost associated with tuition reimbursement at cyber charter schools that public schools must finance is “$5,000 to $15,000 for per pupil tuition costs” (Pennsylvania School Board Association, 2011, p.1). Wagner (2012) also explained that Pennsylvania has the highest per pupil spending cyber charter system in the country, at “$12,657 per student while the U.S. average per charter/cyber student is $10,790” (p. 2). The expense of this tuition reimbursement is now triggering the implementation of in-district cyber programming as a cost-saving measure.

With the rapid expansion of cyber programs around the nation, the question of funding is of the utmost concern as districts attempt to manage the rising costs and expenditures associated with online learning. Furthermore, budget shortfalls in each state and most school districts in the United States require study of the amount of dollars spent on buildings and the option of educating more and more students in a virtual or blended environment. As noted in Burgess-Watkins (2011), one school district in Florida sought to acquire funding based upon individual student performance. The Florida Virtual School received state aid as well as contributions from public schools that sent students to the cyber school. Unfortunately, public schools are feeling the burden of the virtual school costs and are not able to fully fund each individual student’s tuition. Ash (2010) reported that cyber schools must then charge student tuition to make up for the shortfall between student costs and public school district contributions. Many critics have argued that the cost of educating a student in cyber school is far less than the traditional face-to-face model and often wonder where the money is going.
Other research has pointed to the need for K–12 online learning as a cheaper way to educate students, while simultaneously saving money and increasing student engagement in the curriculum. Friedman and Friedman (2011) noted that blended learning programs may make the most sense for students and can still allow schools to save money by cutting instructional costs. Although this isn’t an actual type of alternative funding, cyber education does appear to be a money-saving measure—but the full benefit or proof of K–12 online merits remains to be determined.

Additionally, research regarding K–12 online learning models and funding address the concept of grant funding aid to support cyber schools beyond public school contributions (Barbour, 2010). Unfortunately, these grant funding dollars may have to come from the state and require substantial contributions that are presently not available. Again, this type of funding structure does not seem to be a sustainable way to support the needs of scores of schools (K–12 tradition and cyber) around the nation.

Another form of research points to the necessity that K–12 schools provide their own in-house cyber programs in an effort to save funding that typically goes toward the private charter schools providing online programming. Horn (2010) found that the public school-developed cyber courses are quite essential to the financial stability and sustainability of public education. Some states have begun to withhold monies to public schools that fail to support cyber education through the implementation of their own programs. It is also important to note that 34 states across the country are utilizing state-run cyber programs that inevitably take monies from traditional K–12 school models. Additionally, some component of online learning is currently used in 60% of schools in the United States (Arora, 2009). Over the last several years, cyber schools have been
growing at a rate of 20% per year, and additional funds are required to support these increases. Simultaneously, most states will face a budget crisis by 2013, and many did, leading to fewer dollars available to schools (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009). It seems apparent that it would be financially irresponsible for public schools to ignore the need for online programming, as scores of students have decided to access their education through nontraditional means.

**Recruitment and Retention Strategies**

Davis (2012) found that the individualization of course content with various course choices was attractive to students and families regarding online learning. Davis (2012) recorded that “Adam Emerson—a school choice analyst for the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute, said online-choice legislation over the past few years has had a direct impact on offerings for students, particularly in Florida” (p. 1). Therefore, this type of competition has spurred the development of in-district cyber programs.

Attrition rates can elicit study of best practices for recruitment and retention as well as goals or strategies for in-district programs. Angelino, Williams, and Natvig (2007) reported, “Attrition rates for classes taught through distance education are 10-20% higher than classes taught in a face-to-face setting” (p. 1). These attrition rates apply to the college and university student experience, but the findings of Angelino et al. (2007) can still be useful as various strategies for improving one’s online learning experience, and are transferrable to K–12 education. Angelino et al. (2007) stated that capturing early engagement from students during the course is key to student success, as is the effort to “initiate contact with students via phone call,” “conduct a pre-course orientation,” and “facilitate informal online chats throughout the course website,” all of which lead to
“frequent contact with students” and “encourages spontaneous interactions among students and faculty” (p. 10). Angelino et al. (2007) also remarked that teachers attempted to develop content that “focuses on the learner’s needs; not just what is easy. Online students may have similar needs for assistance and resources as traditional students” (p. 10).

Berge and Huang (2004) have recommended that online programs develop “a customizable model of student retention that takes into account personal, circumstantial, and institutional factors, as well as the interconnectedness of these factors” (p. 1). This suggestion aligns with the educational practice of differentiating instructional goals and processes to meet the needs of students who often have a wide range of areas and complexities to consider.

Cavanaugh et al. (2004) explained that “virtual school teachers must be adept at helping children acquire the skills of autonomous learning, including self-regulation” (p. 6) as young learners need continual guidance and support to be successful with online learning coursework. Within the scope of online learning, Cavanaugh et al. (2004) found that “younger students will need more supervision, fewer and simpler instructions, and a more extensive reinforcement system than older students” (p. 7). Among the quality program elements that Cavanaugh et al. (2004) mentioned for students are “frequent teacher contact with students and parents, lessons divided into short segments, mastery sequences so student progress can grow in stages, and rewards for learning such as multimedia praise and printable stickers or certificates” (p. 7). Lastly, Cavanaugh et al. (2004) explained, “Online learning environments, when designed to fully use the many tools of communication that are available, is often a more active, constructive, and
cooperative experience than classroom learning” (p. 8), but this is clearly a challenging proposition.

The Rogers Family Foundation (2011) stated that its online and blended learning program provides content created by its teachers, and that all courses have dashboards that provide students, teachers, administrators, and parents access to the courses. The Rogers Family Foundation (2011) also reported that teacher instructional practice should include “small group instruction, integration of digital content, differentiated instruction, use of data, self-efficacy and increased satisfaction” (p. 5). The report and plan also noted that “increased capacity: improved IT support; expanded capacity for instructional coaching involving the use of technology; flexibility” (p. 5) are all elements of successful cyber and blended programs for schools, students, parents, and so forth.

**Background information on online learning.** Rice (2006) explained:

Distance education programs can serve entire populations of students that traditional classrooms do not by providing increased opportunity through choice, tutoring and supplemental services to: students who live in remote areas, students in home school settings, those who are hospitalized or homebound for health reasons” or many other potential scenarios. (p. 427, as cited in Bogden, 2003; Chaney, 2001; Patrick, 2004).

Rice (2006) also noted that at the time of this publication, it was quite difficult to develop an accurate comparison or assessment of K–12 online learning due to the new nature of this style of educational programming.

**Student, Parent, and School Administrator Experiences With Online Learning**

According a U.S. Department of Education (2010) report on the evaluation of practices in online learning, “Distance learning outcomes were less positive when instructor involvement was low, with effects becoming more positive, up to a point, as
instructor involvement increased” (p. 74). The report also noted, “Educators making decisions about online learning need rigorous research examining the effectiveness of online learning for different types of students and subject matter as well as studies of the relative effectiveness of different online learning practices” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 75). These findings point toward the relative newness of the field of online learning in K–12 and how frequent communication and engagement is important both in the traditional and cyber classroom settings.

Moreover, Cavanaugh et al. (2004) explained that some “students may feel isolated, parents may have concerns about children’s social development, students with language difficulties may experience a disadvantage in text-heavy online environment, and subjects requiring physical demonstrations of skills” (p. 5) aforementioned areas may cause problems with the completion of these assignments and tasks in a fully online environment. Cavanaugh et al. (2004) also stated that K–12 districts are continuing to develop the practice of online learning because the field is quite new to these schools and districts. Cavanaugh et al. (2004) mentioned that certain content areas can be rather difficult to navigate in an online setting, specifically, “Virtual school student scores in mathematics at grades, 3, 6, 9, and 12, and the sciences at grades 6 and 9 lagged significantly behind scores of non-virtual school students” (p. 6 as cited in Scholllie, 2001). Cavanaugh et al. (2004) also specified that teacher quality and the frequency of communication between students and teachers is vital to online academic outcomes (p. 6 as cited in Kozma et al., 2000). Cavanaugh et al. (2004) also cautioned that K–12 school leaders be careful not to underestimate the difference between online learning in higher education or adult learning versus the level of structure needed for younger learners.
Glass (2009) conveyed that “one measure of effectiveness of virtual schooling is whether it has won acceptance broadly among, say, parents of K–12 students whose children might be exposed to online teaching” (p. 6), as this reception influences parental and, likely, student satisfaction. Glass (2009) described that a survey conducted by Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup in 2001 and 2007 displayed an “increasing acceptance of online teaching-learning in small amounts, but an increased skepticism of virtual schooling constituting the bulk of a student’s high school education” (p. 6). Glass (2009) also explained that schools will be able to offer higher quality learning environments online as technology continues to develop in the coming years. Glass (2009) noted that the “legitimacy of the credits earned via virtual schooling will depend in large part on the legitimacy of the process by which assignments and tests are known to be the work of the individual receiving the credit or diploma” (p. 13), and that the evaluation of cyber programming through some type of formal process will be key to gaining credibility moving forward.

Barbour, Siko, Sumara, and Simuel-Everage (2012) specified that online students have been unsuccessful due to factors such as “not understanding the course content, and if these students also feel that their online teachers are difficult to contact, and that the asynchronous course content is poorly designed” (p. 14). Barbour et al. (2012) also concluded that “similar to well-designed supports for face to face courses, virtual education need(s) to be provided with systemic support for K–12 students learning in online environments” (p. 14).

Other online research has asserted that “course and instructional design are important considerations for online learning effectiveness” as a way to develop better
cyber programming (Patrick & Powell, 2009, p. 8). Patrick and Powell (2009) also reported that “interaction is the heart of online learning. Teachers have reported that their interactions with students, parents and colleagues were more often focused on teaching and learning in online courses than in the traditional setting” (p. 8, as cited in Weiner, 2003). It is important to note that this study is just one representation of the online experience that this group of participants had. Patrick and Powell (2009) cited another study from the National Survey of Student Engagement in 2008, which reported that students can achieve “better use of higher order thinking skills, integrative thinking and reflective learning” (p. 8) and grasp concepts in more depth than their traditional in-class counterparts. This particular research and literature demonstrated a strong positive relationship between online learning and student performance.

**Student experiences.** Huett et al. (2008) explained that “although K–12 students can benefit from the independence offered by virtual schooling, this same independence has the potential for negative impact” (p. 2); thus, students with high levels of motivation and individual achievement are more likely to perform well in online settings. Huett et al. (2008) noted that successful online students possess “autonomy, metacognition, self-regulatory skills, positive self-efficacy, motivation, and internal locus of control” (p. 64 as cited in Cavanaugh et al., 2004). Students with these skill sets are more likely to report positive experiences during their time as online students, making parents more likely to explain satisfaction with the program as well. Rice (2006) explained:

Students across studies appear to enroll in online courses for similar reasons. Convenience, flexibility, in scheduling, credit recovery, accelerated learning opportunities, conflict avoidance, and the ability to take courses offered at a local school are just some of the reasons identified in the research. (p. 434, as cited in Mills, 2003; Tunison & Noonan, 2001)
Parent experiences. Riley (2011) noted that parents and students chose to attend cyber programming because “the local brick- and-mortar school down the street is not meeting their needs” (p. 1). Also, online courses afford students with challenging schedules flexible learning options and offer “a way to avoid negative influences or bullying. Kids with special needs make up 10% of K12’s student population” (p. 1). Riley (2011) explained that a variety of reasons led parents to choose online options such as harassment, scheduling concerns, and student interest.

Research on K–12 online student outcomes and experiences. Huett et al. (2008) explained that “the majority of research on student success in online courses has been conducted in higher education settings” (as cited in O’Dwyer et al., 2007; Ronsisvalle & Watkins, 2005, p. 65). Huett et al. (2008) also stated that most research that has been conducted on K–12 online learners pertains to students in grades 6–12—a product of the relatively new status of online learning in the K–12 setting. O’Dwyer (2007) reported that her study of Algebra I online students found that they “enjoyed using technology to learn math, and enjoyed the new learning experience,” and that the most helpful components of the experience were “graphing calculators, Graphire 2 Digital Tablet hardware, as well as animated tutorials and e-mail communications” (p. 302). O’Dwyer (2007) found that the use of a blended learning option for students was beneficial, further commenting that students who received delayed feedback from teachers felt disengaged and were more likely to perform poorly in the courses. O’Dwyer (2007) noted that there is a “continuing need for sound empirical evidence about the
effects of these programs on teaching and learning outcomes, and in particular on student performance” (p. 304).

Rice (2006) further stated that students taking online coursework needed direct and clear instruction due to the intellectual development processes of youth. Rice (2006) explained that in research conducted by Tunison and Noonan (2001):

The most common student response to the question of benefits of a virtual school course was their appreciation of the autonomy and freedom. Although most students identified the teacher as the ultimate source of information, many students enjoyed the opportunity to work on their own. (p. 436)

Rice (2006) also found in research by Weiner (2003) that “a high degree of student-teacher interaction, including feedback and summaries to students, are a necessity in the virtual classroom, otherwise students felt ignored, lonely and lost in their courses” (p. 436).

Lee and Figueroa (2012) explained that when considering online learning practices and programmatic success, “motivation is a key to success not only in a face to face learning environment, but also in online courses” (p.23, as cited in Weiner, 2003). Lee and Figueroa (2012) stated, “Motivation is a crucial factor to the other successful components in distance education, such as time management and active participation” (p. 23). Moreover, Lee and Figueroa (2012) discussed that “self-motivation needs to be taken into consideration prior to enrolling in a virtual course. Commitment and support are important for motivation” (p. 23). Other factors, such as peer interaction, time management, healthy living habits, and learner responsibility, were mentioned as key components to student success in the online setting (Lee & Figueroa, 2012). Isolation and lack of communication were noted as barriers to student learning, but Lee and Figueroa
(2012) explained that “active participation can lessen the perceived distance by communicating with peers and teachers frequently. This also helps to overcome the feeling of isolation” (p. 24).

**Student perceptions and recommendations.** Smart and Cappel (2006) wrote that “research can continue to explore how and when online instruction is most effective,” as well as determine “motivational factors affecting students” in courses (p.215) Smart and Cappel (2006) also noted that “future research is to compare student learning outcomes between classes using a blended learning approach versus those using traditional instruction” (p. 215).

**Online at-risk learning.** Archambault et al. (2010) determined, “Virtual education institutions need to recognize what makes learners at risk in order to accommodate them” (p. 18), and that many first-time online learners may fall into the *at-risk* category, as noted by Barbour (2009). Archambault et al. (2010) concluded that schools need to “explore how the identification of at-risk students affects the attrition and course completion rates in virtual schools and what measures virtual schools take once a student has been identified as being at-risk” (p. 19), as well as determine what types of online materials, styles, models, and platforms support learning, along with incorporating best practices for student engagement with virtual learning communities and schools.

Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, and Pagani (2009) remarked:

School-based interventions should address the multiple facets of high school experiences to help adolescents successfully complete their schooling. Creating a positive social-emotional learning environment promises better adolescent achievement and, in turn, will contribute to a healthier lifestyle which could be applied to struggling students in the online setting. (p. 408)
Archambault et al. (2009) also mentioned that students who have difficulty with “rule compliance, interest in school, and willingness to learn” (p.4) experience challenges with behavior within the school setting, which would often apply to an online environment as well. Furthermore, Archmabault et al. (2009) stated that interventions and engagement practices must be employed on a regular basis to support those with potential dropout risk.

Martinez (2003) found that “e-learning requires a higher degree of self-motivation, self-directed learning and greater persistence and commitment from the learner. These requirements can create the serious problem of high attrition rates and costs if not recognized and managed strategically” (p. 7). Additionally, Martinez (2003) explained that “personalization complements and extends more traditional approaches, including attrition management plans” (p.7) and is a vital component for student success in the online setting. Martinez (2003) also remarked that some “non-traditional attrition studies are considering the impact of psychological factors on persistence” (p. 7). Martinez (2003) summarized by stating that e-learning, or online learning programs, should seek to understand the entire student to evaluate one’s level of persistence to support at-risk learners.

**Types of Online Programming**

Rice (2006) categorized a number of online learning options and systems throughout the country with the following description: statewide programs are those where “students take individual courses but are enrolled in a physical school or cyber school within the state”; district-level supplemental programs are those that “are typically operated by autonomous districts and are typically not tracked by state agencies”; single-
district cyber schools “provide an alternative to the traditional face to face school environment and are offered by individual districts for students within that district”; multidistrict cyber schools “are operated within individual school districts but enroll students from other school districts within the state”; and, lastly, cyber charters, which “are chartered within a single district but can draw students from across the state. In many cases they are connected in some way to commercial curriculum providers” (p. 5).

Effective online program practices. Pape et al. (2006) explained that successful “online programs take seriously the need to measure the success of their programs through extensive data collection,” but that “the lack of common measures demonstrates the challenge for parents and students who are making education choices, and policy makers responsible for overseeing these programs” (p. 57). This statement confirms the need for formalized evaluation processes and procedures that identify best practices in the field. Pape et al. (2006) found that “there is no general agreement about what to measure and how to measure” (p. 58) when considering the online course evaluation process and what are ideal benchmarks for schools and districts to strive toward.

Pape et al. (2006) asserted that “carefully tracking who is teaching the course is also important,” such as those teachers who are highly qualified or have previously taught the course; they also determined that the online student’s “persistence of effort matters,” and that these students must be engaged in the provided content (p. 57).

Burgess-Watkins (2011) explained that quality online courses and programs consisted of monitoring teacher effectiveness as well as working cooperatively with parents with dependable involvement in their child’s academics. Burgess-Watkins (2011) stated that:
During observations, the teacher and program manager simultaneously view various portions of the courses management system and discuss instructional practice, student progress, and student-teacher communication to make certain that quality teaching and learning are taking place within the virtual classroom. (p. 6)

Burgess-Watkins (2011) explained that parents should be actively aware of student log-ins, passwords, assignments, academic schedules, and teacher contacts, and should be sure to follow up with their child regarding coursework on a weekly or daily basis to ensure compliance since K–12 online education deals with developing learners.

Rice (2009) found that the implementation of online learning programs should attempt to “develop organized evaluation systems that examine multiple aspects of distance learning to facilitate consistent data collection” (p. 174), including areas such as attendance, retention, and student outcomes. Rice (2009) determined that further research is needed regarding:

- Special needs and at-risk learners in distance education environments...[and] funding for training and require that distance educators possess the specific qualities necessary for success. This includes training for administrators as well as teachers. As growth continues, the need for administrators with leadership and evaluation in online environments will only intensify. (pp. 174–175)

Lee and Figueroa (2012) stated that communication practices such as “discussion boards, e-mail, telephone, Skype, instant messaging, and any other forms of communication tools available” (p. 25) should be readily accessible for students on a regular basis to ensure optimal student engagement and participation. This practice ideally fosters relationship building between teacher and student, increasing opportunities for academic success. Lee and Figueroa (2012) reported that students should be very familiar with how to access online content. Lee and Figueroa (2012) stated that “assessment tools that determine a student’s readiness for virtual classes often include questions about computer access and
skill level” (p. 25), thus supporting the concept of a required entry level skill set prior to taking online or cyber courses in the K–12 setting.

Lee and Figueroa (2012) explained, “Parents are the most important teachers to students. Students are more likely to benefit from a virtual course if their parents are active in their virtual learning process” (p. 26). Lee and Figueroa (2012) stated that optimal online courses should “be divided into very short modules that lead to mastery of a skill,” and that “activities that build a community of learners should be present in virtual courses” and contain “activities such as discussion posts, online study groups, and collaborative projects [that] are considered to lead to successful work in an online course” (p. 26).

Summary

School districts in various states are looking to curb the number of students opting for online programming outside of their home district. The development of in-district cyber courses seeks to address the expensive per pupil tuition costs that districts are required to pay to cyber charter and charter schools. Recruitment and retention strategies that are aligned with student and parent desires can lead to programmatic growth that supports engaged student learning. However, further research is required in the area of student, parent, and school administrator experience regarding K–12 online learning with in-district programs. The primary goal of this research was to determine how the experiences of school administrators, parents, and students might impact retention and recruitment strategies concerning in-district cyber courses and programming. The extant literature is limited regarding how the recent rise of cyber charter educational programs has contributed to the establishment of in-district cyber school programming, and how
these in-district programs can understand the needs of parents and students in this competitive online environment. Research and literature on the retention and recruitment practices of in-district cyber programs is sparse and is certainly needed as more and more districts seek to improve their current practice or establish their own online program to combat the unsustainable problem of tuition payments to cyber charter programs.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Throughout Pennsylvania and the United States, K–12 students are opting for a flexible education that allows for a full cyber or blended learning school experience. Per pupil tuition costs have continued to rise, and student enrollment in cyber charter schools has been on an upward trend over the past five years. As the demand for online programming increases, various K–12 cyber charter programs are expanding while simultaneously requiring public schools to support tuition costs for their programs. Therefore, this research aimed to determine how public school districts can understand and implement online programming that is attractive to—and supportive of—student and parental needs or demands, specifically in Pennsylvania.

The questions below provide direction toward the goal of this case study.

Primary Question:

1. What are the experiences of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district cyber program?

Subquestions:

2. Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program? Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program? What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program? What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?

Research Design and Rationale

Because the research required various interviews with school administrators, students, and parents, a qualitative approach with semistructured interviews was utilized.
The case study approach is most aligned with this particular research because—as Creswell (2012) has noted—it “is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based upon extensive data collection” (p. 465). Additionally, “The case may be a single individual, several individuals separately or in a group, a program, events, or activities” (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). This particular case study focused on a group of individuals involved with the district’s in-district cyber program. Administrators who had designed and implemented, or were implementing, the program were interviewed, as well as current high school students who were enrolled, had been enrolled, or who had left the program but subsequently returned to the program. Parents of the students were invited to participate via email. These individuals provided the researcher with the thick description needed to carry out a descriptive case study. The researcher conducted these semistructured interviews with the goal of understanding their experiences regarding retention and recruitment at an in-district cyber program. Merriam (2009) has stated that the goal of a descriptive case study is to “provide a rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (p. 43) that allows for a deep understanding of participants or information analyzed in the research.

The descriptive case study approach aligned with the concept of understanding in-district recruiting and retention strategies and how participant experiences helped guide understanding of online programming or development. By utilizing a descriptive case study, the researcher sought a thorough understanding of participants’ experiences within the unique context of an in-district cyber program. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research looks to “identify our participants and sites on purposeful sampling, based on places and people that can best help us understand our central phenomenon” (p.
The school superintendent, director of online learning, and business administrator shared experiences as they related to strategies that retain or recruit online learners to their original public school. Interviews with students who were currently enrolled in the in-district program as well students who had previously attended a different cyber program outside the district were asked to participate. Parents of these students were also asked to share their experiences through interviews. Via interviews with students and parents, the researcher was able to determine factors or commonalities associated with the perceived success or quality of district cyber programming or what components made the in-district program more appealing.

Additional research into other populations beyond school administrators such as students and parents provided insight into effective strategies that recruited students back from cyber charter programs to their original home school. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. The researcher was prepared to offer the option of telephone, Skype, or video conference, but none of these options was necessary. All participants preferred to utilize the face-to-face format. The participants signed the consent and/or assent forms. The researcher provided a copy of the consent and/or assent form to each participant. It was important to document each participant’s experience with cyber programming in order to determine the best course of action as it related to student experience, program construction, and practicality.

**Site and Population**

The participating district was located in Pennsylvania, approximately 55 to 60 miles north of Philadelphia. The district was comprised of a student population of approximately 1,800 students from grades K–12 in a rural region of the county. The
district was surrounded by vast acres of protected or preserved space. In this farming community, small businesses often involved in construction and landscaping were scattered throughout the region. The district had a *rural-distant* code (42) distinction as noted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2012). Rural-distant is defined as “more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

At the time of this study, the district had three elementary schools with grades kindergarten through fifth, one middle school with grades sixth through eighth, and one high school with grades ninth through 12th. The researcher interviewed school administrators, students, and parents in this district with the goal of determining how districts recruit back to or retain students in the current in-district cyber program offered. The researcher spoke with the site’s director of online learning and inquired as to which students and parents were presently participating in the in-district cyber program. The researcher received a list of email addresses from the director of online learning. The researcher sent an email invitation asking parents and students if they would be willing to take part in the interview process regarding their experiences with the in-district cyber program and, if pertinent, their experience with other cyber charter programs. The researcher did not have any students or parents that required a letter mailed to their home. Student and parent participants were neither screened nor evaluated prior to participating, and there was no knowledge on the part of the researcher regarding their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the program. Specifically, the students interviewed were of high school age, and were best able to comprehend the nature of the questions, as they had had
recent experiences with the cyber or the in-district online learning program offered.
Parents who participated in the study had children in grades 11 or 12, which is the same age and grade grouping of students involved in the study. The district entered its fourth year of active in-district cyber school programming during the course of the study and was in the beginning stages of providing blended learning opportunities for a number of students in the district.

**Rationale**

This school district was chosen based on its development of an in-district cyber program. The district as it was at the time of this study practiced collaboration with online content service providers and Learning Management System (LMS) models, and noted some level of success at recruiting students back to their home district. The success and advancement of the cyber program regarding cost savings to the district and student exposure to online content courses was another important component of this study. The online learning program at the district employed a director who provided online learning support beyond the traditional scope of K–12 schools. The expertise of various school leaders in the district provided insight into the planning, recruitment, retention, and implementation process as they related to online learning in public schools. Additionally, student and parental participation in this study was of the utmost importance in considering the personal and educational reasons why students chose to stay or return to their home district for online or cyber education coursework. Parents and students from the district possessed the unique experience of being involved in in-district cyber learning coursework and classes.


**Population Description**

The researcher, by selecting current full and partial cyber students and parents of full and partial cyber students as well administrators involved with the development and oversight of the program, accessed average examples of participants who represented the in-district online learning experiences.

The researcher selected the participant groups below in order to represent the experiences of students and parents involved in the in-district cyber program that had both full cyber and partial cyber educational interactions. The researcher also selected the three administrators based on their extensive knowledge of the in-district cyber program from its inception through the current operation, while possessing knowledge of retention and recruitment strategies as well as financial considerations of the program and per pupil costs.

The type of sampling done in a study such as this one—which considered participant groups—is designated as *purposeful sampling*, as noted by Merriam (2009), because the researcher sought to interview students, parents, and administrators within the context of an in-district cyber program that served full and partial cyber students and sought to understand their experiences about the program for programmatic evaluation and possible improvement. Merriam (2009) mentioned that within purposeful sampling, various subgroups emerge—one which is defined as a typical sample that “is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 78).

This set of participants consisted of high school students in 11th and 12th grade who had completed (within the last year) or were enrolled in an online course in the
district. A total of 12 students participated in this study. Twelve students were representative of the number of students who agreed to participate in the study. Furthermore, two to five high school students were actively participating as full cyber students. The researcher also sought to provide an equal balance of partial cyber students to the study to record their experiences and note similarities and differences. Students who had taken or were presently taking online coursework within the in-district program were asked to participate in the study. The study looked at partial cyber students, as well as students who had been full cyber students at some point over the past year or longer. This meant that full cyber students take all of their courses virtually and partially cyber students, which described students that take online courses and also attend face-to-face or in-person courses at the high school. The researcher interviewed both full cyber and partial cyber students in order to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences in these participants’ experiences with the in-district cyber program. Also, full cyber and partial cyber students who had previously attended a cyber charter program were part of the study, specifically in the interview process. Again, these participants were students in grades 11 through 12.

Parents of students who had taken online coursework with the in-district program were recruited to participate in the research. Five parent participants took part in the study. Some of the parents in this study had students that were both full cyber and partial cyber students as well as just partial cyber students. Parents were able to provide feedback on how their student performed as a full cyber or partial cyber student. These parents had or had had children who participated in secondary online learning within the in-district program or with another provider. Some parents also had a student presently
taking an online course during the course of the study. The researcher was fortunate to be able to meet with parents and students who had experience with the in-district online program as well as with other online educational programs such as cyber charter schools. Students who were previously cyber charter students were able to report their experiences in comparison to the in-district program. Students and parents both signed consent or assent forms prior to any type of participation in the study. Students answered semistructured questions via face-to-face interviews. These meetings and questions were recorded with written permission and the acknowledgement of interviewee and parent or guardian. Five parents participated in one-on-one interviews and answered semistructured questions in face-to-face conversations.

School administrators asked to participate in this study were: the school superintendent, director of online learning, and the business administrator. The three administrators selected for this study had extensive knowledge of the problematic scenarios associated with students choosing to attend cyber charter programs and were able to answer specific questions about financial considerations along with retention and recruitment strategies and outcomes. Each of these administrators was actively involved in the development, oversight, and analysis of the in-district cyber program and provided feedback regarding planning objectives, financial considerations, student demographics, short- and long-term objectives, data analysis, student academic performance, costs to the district, and other essential components that emerged during the semistructured interview process. Specifically, the school superintendent was selected due to the nature of the planning and implementation of the program, and his understanding of the importance of creating a competitive online learning environment and addressing cost concerns. The
director of online learning was included in the study to provide experiences about student retention and recruitment, and his knowledge of program offerings and strategic planning for future in-district cyber programs or coursework. The business administrator was able to assess cost savings and projected cost savings, which were a major factor in the creation of in-district cyber programming in this study and likely in other school districts in Pennsylvania and around the country.

The researcher decided not to include or interview elementary-age students or parents of elementary students who had or were currently participating in the in-district cyber program. The researcher determined that the experiences of elementary students and parents may be difficult to accurately record and analyze; and the complex nature of the questions might have made it challenging for elementary students to adequately answer. Also, the elementary program had been in operation for only two years compared to five years at the high school level. The researcher was not specifically studying cyber charter schools and their programs because the researcher’s goal was to analyze public in-district cyber programming experiences. The researcher was also not studying large urban and suburban districts due to vast differences in program design, as he would not find the data in this research to useful.

**Data Collection and Site Access**

The overall goal of gathering data from the school administrators, parents, and students was to determine the best source of evidence concerning how in-district cyber programs can retain or combat the exodus of students to cyber charter programs. The research recorded the experiences of full cyber and partial cyber students and the parents of these students. The school administrators served as participants based on their
experience with financial outcomes and considerations regarding an in-district cyber program as well as their understanding of K–12 in-district recruitment and retention practices. The researcher received approval for the study from the school superintendent. The researcher contacted the school administrators, students, and parents who had experience with the district’s in-district online program and courses regarding participation in the interview process. The researcher invited each school administrator, student, and parent that met the established criteria via email. Thirty-five possible participants were invited via email. The potential participants responded via email if they were willing to participate or not. The researcher provided interview date opportunities that best supported the schedule of participants. The researcher held interviews at the district’s high school with students and parents at times and locations that were convenient for the participants. The researcher held interviews with school administrators at the central office building. The researcher did not need to conduct Skype or telephone interviews with participants, as face-to-face meetings were possible for all willing participants. The researcher also provided several weeks’ notice prior to a participant’s interview. Some participants changed their interview date as needed, and participants were not subject to any penalties as a result of a date change. No participant decided to remove him- or herself from the study. The researcher explained via email and in person that opting out with no penalty was an option for participants.

Via email, the researcher stated that the goal of this research was to document the experiences of the students, parents, and administrators that had taken—or were presently taking—part in the district’s in-district cyber program. The researcher provided the option of a gift card incentive of 10 dollars to students, parents, and administrators in the
email describing the study. Participants were not required to accept the gift card. Consent and/or assent forms were required of all participants, as detailed in the initial email as well. Face-to-face interviewees received a consent or assent form that they signed in the presence of the researcher. The researcher collected the signed document. No participants took part in the online interview option. The researcher then filed the consent and assent form documents in a locked desk drawer or compartment. Sources of data came from two formalized processes: semistructured questions and artifact review.

Interviews were conducted in person, but phone or Skype was offered as an option as well. The interviews were recorded (the interview protocol is located in the appendix section of this study). The researcher posed several research questions depending upon the participant group (see Table 1). The researcher then followed up with several probing questions that sought further details about student, parent, and administrator in-district cyber experiences. The probing questions are in Tables 2 and 3.
### Table 1

**Research Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the experiences and perceptions of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators/ parents / students</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participants experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

**Probing Questions Asked to School Administrators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probing questions</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of programs can school districts put into place that address the financial implications of expanding cyber charter programs throughout Pennsylvania?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>School administrators</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participants experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of cyber/online programs can be put into place that attract students back to their home district and retain current students considering cyber/online educational options?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors are most influential regarding the retention and recruitment of students in their K–12 in-district cyber school program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Probing Questions Asked to Students and Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probing questions</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What decision making process led you to return to your home school or remain at your district for cyber/online coursework?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Students / parents</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participants experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can the in-district cyber program vastly improve the retention/recruitment of students with their own cyber programming?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the cyber course quality of home district programming versus cyber charter courses a factor in the decision making process?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consent and assent were granted by participants as they related to recording audio or saving data and responses in surveys or written interview responses. Participants were informed that the researcher recorded the interviews utilizing an audio recording device with the iPhone application REV and laptop computerized software. The recorded interviews were sent to TranscribeMe! for transcription service. The recorded interviews did not contain the names of the interviewer or interviewee. If they were accidently stated by the interviewee, the names were removed from transcription. The recordings were password protected and not accessible to anyone other than the researcher and professionals at the TranscribeMe! transcription service. TranscribeMe! reported the following statement regarding confidential information and the safety of the audio recordings submitted to their service:

TranscribeMe! will use the Confidential Information solely for the purpose of providing the TranscribeMe! Service to you (the “Permitted Purpose”).
TranscribeMe! will not without your prior consent, disclose to any third party your Confidential Information, other than furnishing such Confidential Information to our directors, officers, employees, agents, consultants, contractors, representatives or affiliated entities (collectively, “Associated Persons”) who need to have access to such Confidential Information in connection with the Permitted Purpose. (“TranscribeMe!”, 2014, para.12)

*Permitted purpose* refers to the reason for using the TranscribeMe! Service, which is to receive a written transcript of typed interviews that will be returned to the client who paid for the service. Additionally, *confidential information* refers to audio recordings, passwords, or other related log-in information created or submitted by the user or client.

Participants were informed and notified in writing about the recording and transcription process. Potential risks for the participants might result from stolen audio files on the researcher’s computer or cellular phone, both of which were password protected. This potential risk has not occurred. The audio files could be stolen from TranscribeMe! as well, but the audio files were also password protected by the user and transcription company. This potential risk has not occurred. The content discussed during the interview process regarded specific programmatic in-district cyber experiences and did not contain personal names or specific identities that could be used against the participant. The researcher edited out any potentially identifiable information. The benefits of participation in the study were as follows: all participants received a gift card unless they declined the gift card, and the results of this research study provided feedback on areas of growth and affirmed strengths for the in-district program, which in turn provided information that could be used to improve the district’s current practice. Possible additional benefits might result from student, parent, and administrator reflection on the
in-district cyber program and how this type of learning was supportive to students’
growth, parents’ understanding, and administrators’ plans for future programming.

The researcher also evaluated artifacts or materials made available by the district
that related to in-district cyber programming. Artifacts included cyber charter, in-district
enrollment, academic, behavioral, attendance, and demographic information pertaining to
students who agreed to participate in the study as well as to strategic planning and the
evaluation of in-district processes and procedures. Students and parents who completed
consent and assent forms were informed in writing and in person that artifact information
pertaining to student records such as previous schools attended, behavioral and academic
issues, attendance, and demographics might be analyzed by the researcher to help support
the quality of the study. This artifact information was analyzed during the study.
Timelines related to this study are included in Tables 4 and 5.
### Table 4

**Dissertation Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Descriptive details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submit IRB</td>
<td>10/20/14</td>
<td>Completed entire submission process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Approval (2 week minimum)</td>
<td>11/7/14 to 11/14/14</td>
<td>Made revisions and re-submitted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Organization for Housing Data         | ASAP once IRB is complete perhaps: 11/14/14 to 11/21/14 | Data stored in the following places/areas:  
  a) Flash drive- will contain transcribed data  
  b) Password secure TranscribeMe! (transcription)  
  c) Audio recording system on laptop  
  d) Backup Audio recording on tape recorder  
  e) Signed consent forms printed/stored in locked drawer  
  f) Verified and schedule access to artifact in district office  
  g) Scheduled interviews with participants |
| Start field research                  | 12/1/14-12/8/14       | Began artifact review in district office (1st time)                                  |
|                                       | 12/8 -12/22           | Conducted interviews with participants                                              |
|                                       | 1/5/15-1/12/15        | Finished artifact review in district office (2nd time)                                |
| Complete field research               | 1/19/15               | Finalized all research and data collection                                           |
| Data analysis (e.g., coding)          | 1/20/15               | Submitted audio or video (if utilizing Skype) to TranscribeMe! for transcription service |
|                                       | 1/26/15               | Completed transcription                                                              |
|                                       | 2/2/15                | NVivo: program to support the coding and analysis of qualitative interviews.          |
Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Descriptive details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Draft of Chapter 4</td>
<td>2/9-2/16/15</td>
<td>Began draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2/23-3/2/15</td>
<td>Completed draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft of Chapter 5</td>
<td>3/2-3/16/15</td>
<td>Began draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3/23-3/30/15</td>
<td>Completed draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response and revision of 4&amp;5 with SP</td>
<td>3/23-4/6/15</td>
<td>Submitted to supervising professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed dissertation draft to SP</td>
<td>4/6-4/13/15</td>
<td>Submitted to supervising professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisions of dissertation – you and SP</td>
<td>Mid-April</td>
<td>Completed various corrections/updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation Orals (“defense”)</td>
<td>May, 11th 2015</td>
<td>Completed defense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5  
*Data Collection and Analysis Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Week/Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schedule interviews:</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; week of November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Administrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather cyber documents/artifacts</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;/3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; week of November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with school district officials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review materials and take notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin interviews:</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;/3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;/4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; week of December 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Administrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisit/gather cyber documents</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; week of January 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with school district officials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review materials and take notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; week of January 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit audio recordings to TranscribeMe! for transcription service</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;/4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; week of January 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Review</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;/3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; week of February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze transcripts for themes and code the interview transcripts with a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>computer program QSR NVivo.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Compare table/diagram of administrator, student and parent responses,</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; week of March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>themes and codes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Write summary of findings including interviews and artifact</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;/4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; week of March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>documentation</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; week of April</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Upon the conclusion of the semistructured one-to-one in-person interviews, which were seven to 15 minutes in length and recorded via iPhone and the application Rev, along with a laptop audio system, the researcher sent the recorded file to TranscribeMe! for transcription service. The researcher categorized, coded, and analyzed themes from the typed transcripts prepared by TranscribeMe! The researcher used the computer program QSR NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program that helps support the identification of themes and results from open-ended interviews. Creswell (2013) noted that the use of a computer program allows for the retrieval of specific phrasing, code labels, and patterns, which are important for understanding commonalities among participants.

The researcher reviewed each interview and coded responses based upon common themes that emerged. The researcher recorded how often and in what context the common themes were mentioned and detailed how these responses were indicative of in-district cyber programmatic strengths and weaknesses. The researcher utilized the QSR NVivo computer program, which analyzed the content of the participant interviews and provided the most commonly used terms, phrases, and topics to the researcher. The researcher also manually coded each participant interview. The researcher created a series of tangible charts for each individual participant as well as according to the question asked of the participant. It was readily observable that the QSR NVivo findings were very similar to the hand-coded data. The researcher used both hand coding and QSR NVivo to ensure that the emerging themes were consistent and accurate representations of the interviewed participants. The researcher created separate categories or sections for
each type of participant group, which consisted of administrators, students, and parents. The researcher created a chart that displays each group and patterns, themes, or codes that emerged. Through the use of tables and diagrams, the researcher created categories pertaining to teacher quality, retention/recruitment, participant perceptions, support, flexibility, social interactions, and cost/financials or other considerations and findings relating to in-district cyber programming. The researcher also analyzed if any similarities were present among the three groups of participants. The researcher developed categories and subcategories that specifically addressed themes that were more specific and more common when comparing the three groups of administrators, students, and parents. Merriam (2009) has noted that “categories should be responsive to the purpose of the research” and “categories are the answers to your research questions” (p. 185). The researcher narrowed the categories or themes down to five to seven primary categories that best represented the most common and valuable information regarding in-district cyber retention, recruitment, and financial content.

During the course of the coding process, the researcher also utilized “reflective remarks” and “marginal remarks,” as explained by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 67), in order to best organize the responses of each participant. The reflective remarks were helpful for providing context when describing and clarifying the meaning behind various participant and quoted responses. Marginal remarks were also used when hand coding each of the interviews, as such details greatly aided the organization and tracking of how often particular comments were made. The researcher found that the topic of advertising emerged rather clearly through the use of marginal remarks and became somewhat interwoven into the responses of many parents and students with regard to suggestions
for improving cyber programming and exposure within the school district community. Marginal remarks were essential for the researcher to determine how often a particular theme was present and what particular questions tended to elicit certain responses. Additionally, the researcher used “pattern coding,” as noted by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 69), to identify the most frequent and meaningful topics identified by the participants, which in turn became the themes. Pattern coding also helped track and record the number of references related to each theme within several charts and were found to be repeated topics, which brought forth the specific themes described in this study.

**Artifacts**

The researcher also reviewed documentation from the district’s central office regarding in-district and cyber charter enrollment information. Documents reviewed were district records of students and the specific cyber program they attended or were attending. Student artifacts analyzed included: student demographics, academic and behavioral materials, and attendance information. This documentation was found through the school district’s student management system, PowerSchool and PowerTeacher. PowerSchool and PowerTeacher served as a storing house for all student information that the school district must track and record. PowerSchool allows for the organization and storing of all pertinent information, whereas PowerTeacher allows teachers to enter in grades, take attendance, compose notes, contact parents, and more. Other documentation reviewed pertained to financial records of cost savings or records of costs associated with students attending cyber programming outside of their home district or in-district setting. These financial records were maintained by the business office of the school district and
were reviewed several times a year to ensure accuracy for budgetary purposes. These documents were also subject to audits by state and local officials as the in-district cyber program was, of course, under the umbrella of the entire public school district. The purpose of this review was to determine if any patterns were currently present among students and families who chose to attend an in-district cyber or cyber charter program. The research examined any relationships among student behavior, attendance, academic performance, and participation in the in-district cyber program. The researcher also reviewed any strategic planning documentation that outlined the process for retention and recruitment of students while analyzing the best practices and/or areas in need of improvement. The strategic planning documents consisted mostly of memos, meeting minutes, letters, as well as long- and short-term goals regarding the implementation and growth of the in-district cyber program. The researcher organized and included a written summary of the findings in order to provide additional insight as to why students and families chose to participant in online learning in and out of their home district.

**Ethical Considerations**

When interviewing school administrators, parents, and students, the researcher carefully considered each individual’s privacy and rights. The researcher clearly stated the intentions of the study and sought to be in compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Creswell (2012) has cited various ethical concerns and provided strategies to maintain district or student anonymity—such as refraining from citing the original name while using research from multiple sources in order to prevent viewers of the report from determining the origin of the findings. Creswell (2013) noted that “a researcher protects the anonymity of the informants, for example, by assigning numbers or aliases to
individuals” (p. 174). Creswell (2012) explained that during action research and, in this instance, a case study approach, “This close relationship between the researcher and participants means that data collection cannot be coercive” (p. 588), which is of particular note regarding interviews with students. Creswell (2012) further stated that “students or participants (such as in one’s own classroom) can opt out of a study if they so desire without being penalized” (p. 588). Additionally, Creswell (2012) noted:

Some of the ethical needs in collaborating with community participants are to continually negotiate the purpose of the study, to consider how the results will be used, and to involve participants in as many phases of the process of research as possible. (p. 588)

Creswell (2013) also articulated that participants in research should be well aware of all question intentions and refrain from any practice that could be construed as deceptive or fraudulent in anyway. As for this study, because the researcher was an employee of the district being studied, the researcher explicitly stated that student and parent participation in the study would have no positive or negative bearing upon any social or academic interaction or policy established by the school district. Participants received written notification that they were able to withdraw from the study at any point without fear of any academic, social, or other possible penalty due to the researcher being an employee of the district being studied.

When interviewing students, the researcher received written permission from the school district, parent, and student, especially if the student was under the age of 18. Two students were 18 years of age. Without consent from parents and students, there are potential legal ramifications as they relate to school–student confidentiality. Overall, it is important to provide a detailed description of the research goals of the interviews to
participants (school administrators, parents, and students). All participants were informed and gave consent regarding the audio recording of any/all interviews.

Creswell (2013) has also cautioned against the interviewer sharing “personal experiences with participants” (p. 175), as doing so will more than likely minimize or lessen the impact and amount of information acquired during the interviews. Another potential issue that can arise during the interview process relates to “off the record” comments made by participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 174). Creswell (2013) stated that unofficial comments should be deleted because, if recorded in research, they could end up negatively impacting participants.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & RESULTS

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and analyze the experiences of students, parents, and school administrators in an in-district cyber academy program, while determining factors that influenced retention and recruitment of students. By reviewing artifacts with the district office and conducting one-on-one interviews with 20 participants in a semistructured format, the researcher was able to identify several consistent themes: a) teacher quality, b) retention and recruitment, c) program perception, d) support, e) flexibility, f) social interaction, and g) cost/financials.

Primary Question:

1. What are the experiences of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district cyber program?

Subquestions:

2. Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program? Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program? What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program? What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?

Findings

The researcher coded by using the QSR NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software and by hand coding. The QSR NVivo 10 computer software was able to identify common wording among the participant interviews and words or concepts that were similar to other themes. The QSR NVivo 10 program provided a clear starting point of possible themes that were reconfirmed by the hand coding results. The researcher hand
coded by printing all of the transcribed interviews and organizing them into sections according to participant, question, and participant group. The researcher used notes—also called marginal notes—on hard copies of the interviews to record repeated concepts that later became the themes. Themes represent the most frequently stated concepts mentioned by participants. Each thematic section contains information explaining the number of references to the identified theme and an analysis of each participant’s response. Table 6 presents the number of references per participant group, percentages per participant group, and totals. Table 7 presents the emerging themes identified.

Table 6

*Themes, Participant Responses, and Number of References*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant groups</th>
<th>Teacher quality</th>
<th></th>
<th>Retention and recruitment</th>
<th>Program perception</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Flexibility</th>
<th>Social interaction</th>
<th>Cost/financials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School administrators (3)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents (5)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (12)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 presents the emerging themes identified.
The researcher found that the concept of teacher quality was a common thread through the interview process with administrators, students, and parents. There were 37 references to teacher quality, the largest recorded number compared to the other five themes. Teacher quality was mentioned numerous times by school district administrators as a key component of the in-district program success. Students felt that teacher feedback was an essential element of their success in the online program, and several students stated that district teachers performed in a superior manner compared to cyber charter or non-in-district cyber programming. Parents also noted that they were pleased with in-district teacher feedback and responsiveness, which also points to teacher quality as a main contributor to a successful in-district cyber program. The following quotations are
taken from one-on-one interviews with school administrators, parents, and students, and best represent the theme of teacher quality.

Administrator Participant 1 remarked that teacher quality was a key component of the in-district programmatic success both instructionally and financially. He added a reference about how parents perceived the program to be of high quality due to the utilization of in-district teachers:

We were going to create something that allows us to use our teachers that we knew were good and that would deliver a cyber program, that there was a need for students to have. Having our own program run by our teachers that didn’t cost us 13, $14,000 per student to go to an outside cyber school. I think the quality speaks to a lot of parents and I think they know that they’re getting the same teachers that they would get if the student were here in school, but for whatever reason they have to go to cyber. I think that’s what keeps the people here. I think the quality. I think our Director of Online Learning, so I think he’s done a great job in developing a program that keeps the kids. I think they could come, there’s 1700 kids that are getting an education here with those teachers and they get that experience and those teachers that are proven. We want them to get our education from our teachers delivered with our standards, as opposed to any state cyber school that may or may not have the same standards. I know that our teachers are involved in communicating with the student, whether it be through the online platform or through email.

Administrator Participant 2 also stated that the quality of the instruction provided by the district teachers was a key factor of the in-district cyber program’s success and central to retention and recruitment:

They want to maintain or return, stay in the district or return to the district is because of the quality of the instruction. We take a lot of pride in our teaching staff and we expect that our online teachers are teaching with the same strategies, with the same remediation approaches, with the same level of support that they do in their face to face classes.

Administrator Participant 3 explained that teacher accessibility and interaction with students supported the program’s success:
The other piece that was important was interaction with their teachers, so having students access their instruction in-house. They can, if they’re doing a blended model, they can walk down the hall and visit their teacher with a question that they have, as opposed to trying to contact a teacher that may be somewhere, anywhere, really throughout the state. They’re being taught by teachers that they’ve known for quite some time, they can visit those teachers. So it provides an option to our homeschool families that they didn’t previously have. A teacher recognizes where students are finding success and struggling in some aspects. As long as there’s ongoing communication, and support, and guidance, whether it’s online, or brick and mortar classroom, to me, there’s not a difference between those models of instruction. From an educational standpoint, again, when our students are able to talk with their teachers, and go visit them, and sit down and understand a concept or ask a question, those are some of the tangible pieces that go into creating an online program.

Parent Participant 3 mentioned that there was a level of difficulty establishing consistent communication with the online teacher. This participant’s experience was primarily with a cyber charter program not affiliated with the in-district program. This participant noted that online learning requires self-motivation and teacher encouragement. The response was in regard to the question, “What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?”:

In our experience, very little. When we signed-up, we were told, someone would talk to you all the time, there would be—that I wouldn’t be the one having to...guide and prompt. And it wasn’t, we were kind of set up, promised things and then left and I think if you’re a good self-motivator—it’s great—but I don’t know a lot of 16, 15, 16 year-olds that are.

Parent Participant 5 found that courses not taught by in-district cyber teachers were problematic due to the lack of consistent feedback:

If I had known there would be so little participation by the actual teachers in this building, (due to taking courses outside of the district’s cyber program through a third party provider) I probably wouldn’t have selected this program based upon feedback and how confident I was that she was actually learning. Because feedback is so important--especially with math. And it’s centered around feedback, and it was frustrating, extremely frustrating--when you have a child involved in their education. But yet, you have educators who are working with your child and supposedly teaching your child and they don’t get the importance
of feedback (in reference to the third party cyber class provider). We need more online classes taught by in-school teachers, instead of going out and putting our faith in other programs, and we don’t. There was a lack of classes that she needed to take to be able to—needed to take by home or in-district teachers. I came here because I knew I wanted her to have the rigor. I wanted her to be challenged. So If I knew at the time when I came here that it wasn’t so—there weren’t a lot of classes being taught by in-district teachers, I probably would’ve made the decision to look into another school.

Participant Student 1 noted that teacher interaction and involvement was sufficient with the in-district cyber program:

I believe that the teachers’ involvement is good here at this school, and I also believe that the parent involvement is also good due to the system that they have set up. If you’re not passing a class, they give you a chance to fit and if you don’t fix it, emails get sent.

Participant Student 3 explained that the in-district program was of good quality with the inclusion of the traditional high school curriculum:

It’s a very solid program. And all of the teachers—at least in my experience and from what I’ve heard, all the teachers who have cyber courses that they teach along with their actual in-school curriculum, they all do a very good job of managing their online courses and providing help for students. The district has a very good cyber program. They’ve got a lot of different courses that you can take online, and they’re all very well managed by responsible teachers that are really on top of their game, and are very good at working with the online curriculum.

Student Participant 4 explained that teachers followed up with students about assignments: “I would say they’re pretty high because they have a big involvement with how you complete your assignments and when they’re due, and how they’re due.”

Student Participant 4 also noted the difference between in-district cyber and cyber charter program response time and teacher accessibility:

I would say that the in-district schooling is a lot easier to use and a lot easier to understand the concept because there is a teacher that I can go and ask and I didn’t have to wait two weeks for them to get back and email me. And then at the charter school, it was like, “I didn’t get back to you for two weeks,” except for
two weeks you still have keeping doing school, so then you move on and then you’re confused.

Student Participant 8 found that knowing the in-district cyber teacher and taking an online class in a familiar setting were helpful when adjusting to online learning. The participant also found the class to be organized and not too difficult:

I think it’s pretty organized, and it’s not hard to—once you take one, you feel pretty confident taking another one, because they’re all set in Blackboard. And it’s really not that hard to figure out and follow through with it, so I feel that once you’ve got one under your belt a student would feel confident taking another course. Well, it was easier because it’s right there and I know the teachers who are teaching the course. Also, I can easily set it up with my guidance counselor and the credits would easily into my high school career.

Student Participant 9 stated that in-district cyber teachers were supportive of student learning while allowing independent development of their online learning skills: “But I think that they’re pretty good at being patient with the kids and understanding where they’re coming from, that they’re teaching themselves and that they need to learn at their own pace.”

Student Participant 10 found that feedback from in-district cyber teachers was of high quality particularly compared to a cyber charter school: “Overall, it’s a very positive feedback. You always get feedback on general things from other people. So, I think that’s why I wouldn’t go back to a charter program, because I like it much more. It’s more professional.”

Student Participant 11 stated that interactions with in-district cyber teachers were positive and that teachers were knowledgeable and supportive:

When I came into school to talk to one of the teachers, it was good. They knew what they were talking about, and they would try to influence me as much as possible, to get the work done. It’s a good experience.
Summary. Upon review of quotations gathered from the interview process, it is apparent that school administrators, students, and parents strongly value the importance of teacher quality and prefer the utilization of school district teachers with the in-district cyber program. Participants stated that in-district teachers provided frequent and helpful feedback, were responsive to student and parent questions, and were available to meet face to face. Participants from the student and parent group also stated that the quality of in-district teachers was a factor in the decision-making process concerning returning or remaining with the in-district cyber program. Research has further supported these findings, as cited by Cavanaugh et al. (2004), who remarked, “Virtual school teachers must be adept at helping children acquire the skills of autonomous learning, including self-regulation” (p. 6). Cavanaugh et al. (2004) also explained that “frequent teacher contact with students and parents” (p. 7), was indicative of best practices for online learning and mentioned the theme of teacher quality throughout. Overall, teacher quality was an important consideration for school administrators, students, and parents, as these groups evaluated the key elements associated with an in-district cyber program.

Retention and Recruitment

The theme retention and recruitment appeared 27 times during the interview process. Retention and recruitment was a vital aspect of the in-district cyber program as it allowed the district to build upon its existing course options, and therefore reach more students in the district. The participant groups had a wide range of responses that related to the strategies or reasons why students chose to remain in or return to the in-district cyber program. Students were recorded as making the most references to retention and
recruitment with 13 references, and an even number of school administrators and parents responded with eight and six references, respectively.

Administrator Participant 1 remarked that overall the district’s reputation and value of its diploma were important considerations regarding student retention and recruitment:

I feel our reputation here is one factor that would get parents to keep their kids here. I think that should be another reason that parents would want to have their kids through a cyber program offered by a public school district, is that degree that has a little more status than the other degree.

Administrator Participant 2 stated that student support and an on-campus, in-district cyber center likely contributed to retention and recruitment. Additionally, the flexibility that the in-district program afforded a student was often an attractive option:

I’d like to think students are remaining with the district cyber program because of the way we’ve built it with some onsite support, taught by our teachers, so that a local educator is there to support the students. They have the cyber center option to come in and get support, as I mentioned. Let’s not just create cyber programs that are just for kids that are choosing cyber, but let’s give other kids in the district the same opportunities to have flexible scheduling, maybe overload their schedule to graduate early, or maybe remediate to recover credits.

Administrator Participant 3 noted that individualizing learning online was important and that listening closely to the needs of students and parents in the school and district could support retention and recruitment. Also further attention should be paid to parental expectations and desires regarding the program offerings:

We created our program to tailor student needs and parent needs. I would say that students are identifying this program as really tailoring and meeting their individual needs. It’s not sort of mass education anymore. It’s recognizing that students have different interests inside school and out of school and this is a way for parents and students to tailor their own instructional program. I would recommend to any school that’s looking to do it, and I’ll just speak to the high school, pay close attention to those courses that are requirements but often cause significant strain on an individual student’s schedule. But parents, I think, is
where I would want to go next as far as the recruitment and retention. Because if parents aren’t buying into the experience their sons or daughters are having, that may be the reason why students chose not to take an online course.

Parent Participant 1 noted that it was important to make courses readily available:

“Make sure that all the courses are available. I know one of my children wanted to take Latin II and it was not available. I still don’t understand why a cyber course can’t be available.”

Parent Participant 2 stated that financial considerations most likely drove the development and focus on student retention. Parent Participant 2 explained that more focused advertising could help support in-district cyber program growth:

They seem to really appreciate it, probably mostly from a financial point of view in that they’re trying to retain as many students as they can before they wander off in to charter school- costing the district $10,000 and up per year. So it’s a huge win for the district administrators budget-wise. I don’t think it’s publicized that well. My sense is that it’s put out there as, “Well, if you can’t fit something in, we can if we can offer you this.” I don’t know that it’s presented as a favorable option. It’s presented as a last recourse type option.

Parent Participant 3 stated that issues with the non-in-district cyber program created a sense of urgency to enroll in the in-district program. “So sheer nervousness brought me back to this school, and I’m glad I did it. Now that I look back, there’s all the reasons. I think, most importantly, is to get across that it’s a quality program.”

Student Participant 1 stated that the in-district program allowed for schedule flexibility and was a reason for using this option: “For the next coming year and this current year, the classes that they provide for us online, I really couldn’t get in this school district (regular, face-to-face classes).”

Student Participant 1 also stated that access to technology resources and social components played a role in being an in-district cyber student:
I wanted to stay here and because of the fact that the school did supply us with an online learning system, I think that’s what made my decision is, meanwhile, my friends are able to still do their classes here.

Student Participant 2 noted that technology accessibility was important for encouraging participation in the in-district cyber program: “Just increase the technology, I guess. More and more people have computers than before when didn’t have as much.”

Student Participant 3 felt that understanding how to navigate the in-district online courses as well as the district’s advertisement of online course options would be beneficial to program growth. The participant stated that students should have a better understanding of the in-district cyber options:

For me, the factors were whether or not I felt the course was manageable to have online because there are definitely some courses I could never see myself taking online, such as maybe math courses.

I would say that they could advertise it more and maybe at the beginning of the year or even during the summer when schedules are still more open to changes, they could just talk a bit more with parents and students, and let them know the advantages and the possible disadvantages. And just kind of market it a little better I had to do--not necessarily a bit of digging but I kind of had to go and talk to my counselor and learn more about it before and I felt comfortable taking an online course.

Student Participant 4 mentioned the importance of advertising the program and what students could expect if they enrolled in the in-district cyber academy:

Definitely just like advertising it more so then more students hear about it, and make it more hand-on and everything, because everybody says that you don’t want to do cyber because then, you’re just all by yourself but sometimes that’s good like explain that home situation is going to be alone sometimes.

Student Participant 6 described that a quality work environment with technological resources and support from teachers was important for retention and recruitment:
Most definitely by providing a really nice work environment and resources, and also people that will be able to help them if they have questions. If a kid is struggling with something on the computer, if there is always somebody by to kind of help them out and even keep them on task, I feel like people would be more confident using the cyber program.

Student Participant 7 also mentioned the importance of clearly advertising the program as a viable option for students who might struggle in the traditional classroom setting:

I think they could maybe put it out there and be like—It’s a great opportunity for you. It’s a different way of learning. And maybe more focus on the kids who struggle in classes, and tell them that this is a new way and see if they enjoy it.

Student Participant 8 cited course variety and advertising as elements that would encourage retention and recruitment for the in-district program. “Maybe offering a more variety of courses or even advertising more and presenting the benefits of them. Like I said, you could take them and place them in other classes and it’s not that much more work.”

Student Participant 9 said a clearer explanation of the program should be provided to students as well as a description of what students could expect if they decided to become an in-district cyber student:

So most students return back to it because they found that they’re more comfortable working that way, and you adapt to the environment you’re in. And I found that it was more comfortable to be able to work in my own pace. I think it needs to be described better. I think that most kids think, “Oh, cyber school, you sit at home. You don’t do anything all day except sit on your laptop and do your work.” I think that they need to explain better to the kids what they’re going to be doing and how it works. I felt like, when I started, that I was thrown to the wolves, like no one explained to me exactly I was going to be doing.

Student Participant 10 pointed toward advertising available classes and how this style of learning may be beneficial for students:
I think that if they advertised more classes available. There are classes like online English I know some people take, because it can’t fit in their schedule, but if there are more maybe elective classes that they offered. So, I feel like to recruit more people into the cyber program, just advertising those specifically would gain it more of positive outlook on it, rather than like, “Oh cyber classes, I don’t want to take those when I can just take an actual class.

Student Participant 11 found that students were not entirely sure what the in-district cyber program entailed and offered students. Further advertising or information sessions would support student recruitment and retention:

I feel like they should talk to students more about it, because I know a lot of students know about the cyber program, but they don’t know what it is exactly. They just think it’s online stuff, but there’s a lot of videos and stuff that you can do, to further your education on the topic that you’re in.

Student Participant 12 noted that blended learning or face-to-face sessions would be helpful along with in-district cyber classes. Face-to-face sessions would help engage more students already involved with online learning and possibly encourage more students to become in-district cyber students:

I don’t know if this would be possible, but possibly administrating like once a week like an in-class thing where they just comment and they talk about what they’ve learned. Or also, discussion groups are really helpful. When we have discussion on Blackboard, I think it is helpful because then you really have to think about what you’ve learned and respond to other people, that really good for interacting.

Summary. School administrators noted that the district’s reputation played a role in retaining and recruiting students back to the district. Additionally, students built relationships with students, teachers, and other staff within the district, which is an attractive feature of the in-district program for students. Individualizing the cyber program to student needs was an important part of the retention and recruitment process as well. This finding aligns with previous research by Davis (2012), who stated that
online retention and recruitment strategies point toward creating personalized learning with as many course options as possible. Parents noted that course availability would support retention and recruitment efforts, and that the district was concerned with the costs associated with losing students to other cyber programs. Several participants noted that the district should employ advertising of some sort about the in-district cyber program and what it actually entails. These participants felt that more students would be inclined to participate in the program if they were more aware of course offerings and what it meant to be an online student. Several student participants remarked that there appeared to be some confusion among other students about what online courses actually were and how they were taught. Participants mentioned course variety as an element to employ when assessing retention and recruitment strategies.

Program Perception

With this theme, 26 references were made to program perception during the course of the interviews with students, parents, and school administrators. Program perception refers to various viewpoints about the current in-district cyber program based upon each participant group. School administrators noted that members of the school community were somewhat skeptical or unsure of the in-district cyber program’s quality. Also the level of work required to implement the program was quite substantial, as explained by another school administrator. Parent participants expressed doubts or concerns about the implementation of online learning and the subsequent quality of the classes and program. Parents also noted that more information was needed to adequately evaluate the program. Student participants had a variety of responses about the program’s
quality, ease of understanding course content, and reasons for taking online courses, among many other topics.

Administrator Participant 2 stated that people in the school district community were potentially concerned about the in-district cyber program quality and if it was worthwhile:

When first learning about the program, the interpretation was that the feeling about the program is that it may potentially be inferior because it’s what people are not used to. I think initially there is some trepidation before adoption and seeing it as a valuable entity.

Administrator Participant 3 explained that during the beginning stages of the in-district program, district stakeholders needed to understand the process. More recently, opinions had become positive instead of skeptical:

I know there was a lot of work that needed to be done in those early years in education parents, and students and administrators, and teachers as to what we were doing, why we were doing it. So I would say perceptions have changed rather significantly over the past three years from when we first started the program to where we are now.

Parent Participant 2 stated that parents of students in the in-district program were not currently in favor or pleased with the current product: “Parents are almost universally unimpressed from what I’ve heard, which is not to say they’re against the program, or they have strong—but they’re just not impressed, or at this point they’re not sold.”

Parent Participant 3 noted that school district employees found the in-district program to be successful but that it had placed his or her student at a learning deficit:

I think that the administration and teachers, think that it works better than it does. And I thought it would be a great idea when we started, but it wasn’t what I thought, once we were involved in it. Our experience was not that (regarding that the program was not a good fit for the parent’s child). Our experience was, we were catching up from having done it.
Parent Participant 4 reported a mixed view of the use of technology in learning and was neither strongly for nor strongly against it as it pertained to the in-district cyber program. “I like technology but I’m also like the kind of person that doesn’t like technology. I can see the good and bad in it.”

Parent Participant 5 had several points regarding in-district program perceptions and noted that the in-district program should only have district teachers teaching the online classes. The participant found that online courses purchased from providers not affiliated with the in-district program were of poor quality. This participant found that cyber charter or purchased online courses that were not taught by in-district teachers were of poor quality and lacked adequate feedback:

From what I’ve observed with the administrators is, it can be somewhat frustrating because if it were up to the administrators, the program would be based solely on the school district because it’s a well known factor. You know the teachers, you know what the rigors they—and what standards that they try and maintain.

It’s frustrating for administrators when we have to purchase our online classes through other organizations, because feedback is the major issue. As far as teachers are concerned, I get the overall feeling that teachers don’t feel that it’s a productive or legitimate way for a student to learn I think I’ve found that more and more. From a student’s perspective, it’s extremely frustrating when you’re doing work and there’s no feedback provided.

Online learning, now that I see—online is great for a variety of reasons, but I don’t think people’s perceptions of the amount of negative factors involved is—I just don’t think they get it. I think that the most important thing is that you’re delivering a quality product (ensure that they are adequate resources).

Student Participant 2 explained that in-district online courses could be confusing and required detailed instructions:

I think they should be more clear with their instructions, because a lot of them are really vague. And have examples, because some of the projects, they don’t have any examples and you don’t know how to do it. And some of them respond late
when I email them or ask them questions. And I think a lot of kids think it’s just easier to do on the computer rather than to do face to face conversation.

Student Participant 5 stated that some students might not be aware of how much work is required to complete online classes. This participant’s parents thought the online coursework would be more challenging:

I didn’t really know anything about it, but a lot of students thought that it was just like an easy way out of taking a normal class. But once you take it, you realize that it’s a lot more in-depth and a lot more work than most of the students perceive it to be. For my parents, they thought that it would actually be more difficult than a normal class, because you have to do everything on your own to stay caught up.

Student Participant 6 discussed a lack of preparation for what online learning entailed. This participant would have preferred more support while taking online classes:

But I’m somebody who gets easily distracted by a lot of—by my friends. I’m pretty social. But it was kind of a letdown because, when I ended up doing it, I was really not prepared. I didn’t really have any preparation for being in an environment like that. I was left alone to do all my own stuff and it was kind of just... I didn’t have anyone to check in on me. It’s a great thing—for people that are easily distracted and what not. But I think... I don’t know, it works.

Student Participant 8 thought that some teachers and students saw online courses in a negative light and that school administrators stressed the difficulty of online coursework. This participant learned how to manage online coursework and found it was not necessarily challenging:

In my experience the students and sometimes even the teachers of the online classes just think of it as an extra burden or just a class. They still think of it as a serious class, where some administrators even think that it’s harder because it is online, which is true in some cases, but in other times not really so much. There might be more persistence on the teachers standing point or viewpoint. But I think, for the most part it’s just like, “You signed up to do this. You knew what it was.” So, Driver’s Ed. and Health, I realized that those were okay for me to do online, because it was just a bunch of worksheets basically. And then taking those courses I realized that maybe I could push myself farther and take a different class. So, kind of made me see where I was at with the online class.
Student Participant 9 said that school administrators were supportive with the in-district online program. This participant found the support of the in-district program with peers and teachers nearby or around helpful toward academic success. With the cyber charter school, the student participant had trouble understanding course content:

I found the administrators usually are pretty helpful; they’re not rushing. They’re trying to work with the students and make sure that they can get their work done on time and to the best of their ability. There can be a lot of anxiety for some kids with attending normal school to try going online, some people learn better that way. I found that I strive better and can have myself work harder when I am influenced with people around me and constantly being aware of everything. So I found that returning to school instead of cyber school helped me learn better. (refers to third party or cyber charter school not the in-district program). When I did it—when I was in cyber school—for a while, I was taking Algebra One online. And to me that had me return to the course at home school instead of continuing online just because I didn’t understand it—I couldn’t teach myself.

Student Participant 10 found that school administrators took the in-district program seriously, whereas some teachers were not necessarily in favor of it. The participant noted that teachers were clear in their instruction of classes. The participant also found the experience with the in-district program to be enjoyable, as it supported student responsibility. However, some students may still have been unclear about how the in-district program worked:

The administration here does take it very seriously. Some teachers are kind of skeptical about it, but usually the faculty does very well in explaining everything. A lot of that I know, people that I talk to, they don’t really understand it much. They think, “Cyber School, what is that? Are you taught by your parents? How would you explain it?” I personally have enjoyed it. I do enjoy the online classes, because when you go into college, you need to have a sense of time management skills. It made me responsible for my own errors in the way of scheduling, which is why I stuck with cyber school.

For the past two years, I’ve been doing cyber courses from this district. But our program is very well done in the way that I would never go back to the previous program, because it’s very—you have to be self-reliant.
Student Participant 11 found that whereas there were some difficulties with online learning, it ultimately helped students by allowing them to work at their own pace. Some components of online learning were easier, some were more challenging, from the student’s perspective:

I had a bit of trouble with English, but when I went onto the online course in 9th grade, it helped me learn a little bit more, because I could do it at my own pace. It’s a bit easier. Like anything, there are some parts online that are harder than in a classroom, and there are some parts in the classroom that’s harder than online. It’s just evening out.

Student Participant 12 noted that in-district online learning was difficult with regard to student-teacher discussions or meeting. The student must take the initiative. “Other than like grading, it’s hard to interact with the teacher unless you go off your own way.”

Summary. A wide variety of responses were found upon reviewing the participant perceptions theme. Participants noted that the initial discussion and implementation of the in-district cyber program was thought of as possibly inferior to the traditional classroom learning environment. Another participant stated that some members of the school community were unsure of the in-district program’s merits and how effective the program might be; others stated that online learning might not be a fit for everyone based upon the solitary nature of online learning. Parents expressed concerns about teacher feedback and questioned the quality of courses taught by nondistrict teachers. Several student participants said that further support and clarity was needed regarding online instruction as well as programmatic offerings. It appeared that some level of confusion existed among students as to what online learning entailed and
how one could prepare for this type of educational environment. Research by Barbour et al. (2012) found that some factors could be problematic for students and parents of online learners: “Students also feel that their online teachers are difficult to contact, and that the asynchronous course content is poorly designed” (p. 14). Research by Barbour et al. (2012) aligned with the findings that the researcher gathered from interviews with parents and students. Other students remarked that online course difficulty could vary throughout the program and that the lack of interaction with peers in cyber education could be challenging for some students. It should be noted, however, that many of the negative experiences that students and parents recalled were aligned with cyber charter experiences and not necessarily with the in-district online program. Additionally, other students found the program to be helpful as a viable option to traditional face-to-face classes to be problematic. Overall, participants provided a wide variety of responses pertaining to the in-district cyber program and other cyber experiences. The overarching finding pointed to the need for frequent teacher support for students who may have varying degrees of comfort with learning online.

**Support**

The next thematic section, support, includes 26 comments aligned with the topic of providing support services and assistance to in-district cyber learners. Parents, students, and school administrators agreed on the importance of setting up or receiving consistent course content and technology assistance for cyber learners. Relationship building and frequent contact with students was cited as a key factor in the development of student learning. According to school administrators, students, and teachers, support is
defined as continuous communication, feedback, engagement, program organization, and relationship development.

Administrator Participant 2 noted that relationship building is a key to programmatic success. A sense of caring with an emphasis on child development is an important key to a successful district and in-district cyber program:

For me it’s personal relationships. And something the school district has always done really well is establishing those personal relationships, making sure that the families and the students know that everyone here cares about them, and that is not just a machine of a school district that we are wholly interested in the growth of the child and the success of the child, so that’s the biggest point for me.

Administrator Participant 3 explained that communication between teachers, parents, students, and school administrators was very important to student success.

Parents needed to know exactly why in-district online learning works, and what students were to accomplish:

I just think ongoing communication, being clear initially as to what students can expect of their online experience. I think an area that we’ve gotten better at is doing an online orientation for students so they know. And the students, I found, are more quick to adapt to an online format, but parents need an orientation as to what they expect their children to be doing.

Parent Participant 2 said that students in an online class needed continuous reminders and help with engagement from teachers:

From my point of view, keeping the student on track. Speaking personally, that’s really critical. Keeping the student engaged, because there’s obviously a tendency to become disengaged if you don’t just show up in class. I think those are the critical factors.

Parent Participant 3 stated that very individualized daily support would have helped with his or her student’s experience. The parent participant explained that proactive support was needed:
I think that the best thing that I could say for us, would’ve been if we truly had someone at the school, who was for him, following him, and helping him. Like a teacher, but not dumping it on him or I to organize everything and know what the next step was. Someone that reached out to us—but consistently and regularly—not when was a problem, not when something was missing. Not when you are already behind but, like a teacher would every day. Even if it was email.

Parent Participant 5 remarked that feedback was a key component to online learning quality. Non-in-district cyber teachers did not provide quality feedback, from Parent Participant 5’s perspective:

I think with online learning, that is a huge factor—feedback. I’ve had two students come through this school district that are very successful. All of the them that my daughter participated in were classes that were not involved—did not involve (in-district) teachers (use of a third party provider).

Student Participant 1 thought that in-district cyber teachers contacted students via email but not as often or rigorously as if they had been in a traditional face-to-face class, “What I see them doing is emailing if anything is going not okay, and quite frankly, I don’t think they push students to be in online classes.”

Student Participant 3 found that in-district cyber teachers were available for extra instruction. Some in-district online teachers were very responsive with feedback and updates whereas others were not as consistent:

I think teachers have to put in a much effort as students are. For kids who might need a little extra instruction, the teacher needs to be around maybe after school or sometime during the day, during a study hall period in order to offer that little bit of extra instruction. They also have to be on top of keeping up weekly because I’ve had some teachers that weren’t as good at getting all the work posted weekly, say, on the online course, whereas, I’ve had other teachers that would be on there. Every couple of days, I’ll have new grades and it will be very, very quick, very fast response time.

Student Participant 4 explained that in-district cyber teachers were available at the school, it was easy to contact them, and they were quite involved in the online process:
I think it’s pretty good because it pretty easy to use. It’s nice that there is a teacher here in the building that you can go and ask questions, so you don’t wait from them to find an email to get back to you. It’s really easy like if you don’t understand something, you can actually have a conversation with the person. You don’t have to send 14,000 emails back and forth saying, I don’t understand this. I would say they’re pretty good because they have a big involvement with how you complete your assignments and when they’re due, and how they’re due.

Student Participant 5 said that teachers provided reminder emails about missing assignments and were available to meet in person:

[They] helped by making sure that I was staying on the top and sending emails when I wasn’t and it’s also possible to be with the teacher to check in to see what’s due that week and make sure that you have everything done that you need to.

Student Participant 6 mentioned the helpfulness of the cyber center as well as of the schedule flexibility that resulted from taking an in-district cyber course:

A place where I can focus on cyber being able to kind of connect to the internet and do my work for that class, and also hopefully kind of other stuff as well. And use it more like a more relaxing period than being in health class, because I feel like that kind of helps in senior year. But if you have success with it, then you definitely—I think you should return.

Student Participant 7 noted that email reminders, discussion boards, and teacher feedback were strengths of the in-district class experience. The student participant stated that individual tutoring would be helpful for those struggling with an online class:

I think it’s pretty well organized and I really like how you get emails and stuff, reminding you to do stuff. The discussion board is awesome too, because you get a perspective of what everyone else thinks and you get to interact with students even though it’s online. I think that teachers keep up with it very, very well, and they tell you like right on point what you’re supposed to do. But I think they could do better, maybe like one-on-one if you’re having a tough time they could come notice and see you and remind you.

Student Participant 8 found that in-person support from teachers was readily available and supportive of in-district online learning. “And also, the teachers always
offer help in person if you need it. So I feel like it’s online but it’s hands-on too with the personal experience.”

Student Participant 10 found the support from teachers in the in-district program to be rather strong with easy accessibility. Feedback from teachers was characterized as strong as well:

But I think our program is especially set up well. You can contact your teacher if need be. Sometimes there’s a teacher from here or another school. But usually the classes that I have been in, it has been a teacher from this specific school. I don’t know; you get help if you need it. It’s very, very easy to get in touch with them. They are always very helpful, they always provide feedback. They get back to you very very quickly which is very convenient, because of my schedule, especially.

Student Participant 11 noted that teachers and other staff members involved with the in-district cyber program were helpful and emphasized student success:

Even if you need help, you can contact somebody and they’ll walk you through the steps to learn what you need to learn. Everybody’s really determined to get you to do your best on online. I met a lot of great people, especially in the school district. They’re kind. They really do want you to succeed, to do your best.

**Summary.** The participant responses associated with the theme of support pointed toward the practice of maintaining continuous communication with online learners and their families. School administrators stated that personal connections and a sense of care regarding student success were key factors that allowed positive relationship building and student success. Keeping students engaged with the quality of the online course content as well as maintaining consistent feedback were considered important factors in creating a supportive environment for online learning. Participants also agreed that encouraging students who were falling behind in their coursework—with frequent reminders, providing flexibility, and holding accessible office hours or time after
school—was likely to engender a supportive atmosphere. Students found that having
online teachers physically present in the school building was extremely helpful when
seeking further feedback or clarification on a project or assignment. Email
communication was cited as being quite effective among students as they were able to
receive feedback or support during the day or after regular school hours. Several students
remarked that the email responsiveness of teachers associated with the in-district cyber
program was outstanding and allowed for very prompt explanations to questions or
problems. Research by Patrick and Powell (2009) explained, “Interaction is at the heart of
learning” (as cited Weiner, 2003, p.8). This statement clearly resembles the responses
provided by each participant group as they related to the theme support. Students and
parents sought consistent and clear feedback from online teachers in order to best
understand content being taught outside the traditional face-to-face setting. Rice (2006)
referenced research by Weiner (2003), stating “that a high degree of student-teacher
interaction, including feedback and summaries to students, are a necessity in the virtual
classroom, otherwise students felt ignored, lonely and lost in courses” (p. 436). Weiner’s
(2003) research further coincided with the findings of this study as students and parents
sought contact and consistent interaction with their respective online teachers in order to
maximize educational success.

**Flexibility**

Within this section, 24 references were made relating to flexibility and the various
options that were made available to students as they pertained to in-district cyber
coursework, with particular focus on schedule availability. Parents and students
frequently referenced how taking online learning courses with the in-district program
allowed for managing scheduling difficulties in order to open up time for college courses, work, extracurricular commitments, and various other obligations. Students and parents also found that the in-district cyber program allowed students to make up failed classes, graduate on time, earn extra credits, or participate in sports when they would otherwise be unable to do so.

Parent Participant 1 cited schedule flexibility as important for students and stated that it provided more options with the use of in-district cyber courses: “Because it helps clear up their schedules so that they can take courses they want to take. Just wanting to flesh out their schedules and their ability to get it in their own time.”

Parent Participant 2 said that although it may not be the best way to take a course, students were able to take courses that would otherwise not be available:

I think mostly the flexibility. I haven’t heard much favorable comment in terms of, well it’s a great way to do your course, but it certainly helps with getting the required course completed. Students, from what I’ve heard, appreciate the flexibility that it gives them with block programming to complete or fit in what they need to fit in. As you know, blocking programming creates a lot of inflexibility, so this is a good fit there.

Parent Participant 4 briefly noted that course flexibility created options for the participant’s daughter, “I think she looks at different options.”

Student Participant 1 noted that credit recovery was a benefit of the in-district online courses as students wanted to ensure that they graduated on time:

So taking the online classes made the process go a lot faster for making up credits and for me, it was just easier. If it was something that was going to help me, or help me progress getting credits, it would be something I could do.

Student Participant 2 said that it was a necessity to take an in-district cyber class due to his or her schedule being full, “I had to do it because my schedule was really full
and I had to take Health and pass. I had to take that online. There were not a lot of free periods.”

Student Participant 3 also pointed to schedule flexibility as an important component of in-district online learning:

From what I’ve seen and what I’ve experienced, I would say that kids especially like to have online classes because it enables them to earn credits while not taking up space during the school day. Also, whether or not I felt it would free up my schedule and it would allow me to take other courses. If I can manage it schedule-wise with my workload and just with my time management to see if I could actually handle or take an online course. Really it came down to courses I needed to take. There were some courses in my past years that I was not able to fit in with my schedule and they were courses that were required to graduate, so I needed to take a health course online, because there was no other way I could fit it in with my current class schedule.

Student Participant 4 found that class conflicts in student schedules could be ameliorated by taking online courses with the in-district cyber program:

Probably because you can get more classes in and they’re easier to schedule that way, because if the classes conflict each other, then you can go and take one class, and then you can also take a different class, even if they’re offered at the same time. Like class conflicts, I can take some classes and then if I took it online, then I could take another class that I wanted to take, and that I needed to take. And since they’re both offered and I needed them both, I had to take on online.

Student Participant 5 noted that it was important to take online English, otherwise this student would have had difficulty graduating on time:

It makes things easier because if you don’t have a schedule that fits with you can’t fit all the classes that you want, then you can take it online, do a cyber program like that. Forced to also by their schedule if it doesn’t allow. For me, I didn’t have the time to take a normal English so that’s the main reason I took online English. Whether they enjoy it or whether their schedule permits, but also they have the capability to do it. In my case it was a schedule limitation that I didn’t have time to fit a normal, standard English class in school. And so by being able to have the option to do a cyber course at home, I was able to take English this year since it was required to graduate.
Student Participant 7 also pointed to the flexibility in scheduling, particularly when students were taking challenging classes. Some of these more difficult classes were at colleges and universities, and online courses still allowed students to participate in this opportunity:

I think it makes it easier for us with overwhelming schedules. Just because new year, new schedule—still overwhelming, easier. Just makes it easier overall, my schedule. The quality not so much. It was more just based on my schedule.

Student Participant 8 stated that the schedule options were increased with online classes such as online driver’s ed. and health:

I think it offers an easy way to get some classes out of the way so that it doesn’t take up space on their schedule, like some of the required. I took it for Driver’s Ed. and Health and then I took it for another class too. But I remember taking those classes specifically just so I wouldn’t have to—they wouldn’t take up room in my schedule.

Student Participant 10 said that playing sports made scheduling difficult and that online learning redressed this problem, “It is very convenient if you wanted—especially because I, personally went into online courses because I play tennis. Whether it’s sports or health reasons, it’s just very convenient for them, time-wise.”

Student Participant 11 noted that scheduling and extra credits could be obtained through online classes with the in-district program:

I think it’s a great way to get extra credits on top of your other classes. You can even do an online course during your semester classes. For example, I need a history credit, so I can get my history credit online while continuing to do my current classes.

Student Participant 12 cited convenience and taking courses otherwise unavailable as a boon of the in-district cyber program:

I think it’s good if students have—if they can’t fit something in their schedule. I know for me personally, for online Environmental, I couldn’t fit it into my
schedule, so I took it as an online class I could take it without having to worry about it. It’s more convenient overall. I didn’t have any room in my schedule, that’s why I took it.

**Summary.** The theme of flexibility was found throughout various comments regarding schedules by both parents and students. The option to take courses that met the desires of students or met graduation requirements were noted as one of the most useful aspects of in-district online learning. Rice (2006) referenced research by Tunison and Noonan (2001) with the following:

> The most common response to the question of the benefits of a virtual school was their appreciation of the autonomy and freedom. Although most students identified the teacher as the ultimate source of information, many students enjoyed the opportunity to work on their own. (p. 436)

Online options certainly provided this freedom and responsibility for students when taking online courses, which was referenced many times by participants in the study. Some parents remarked that they were skeptical about the quality of online courses but that the flexibility offered in this format was beyond what the traditional learning environment could provide. Flexibility and student satisfaction with this option were likely aligned with student retention and recruitment when one considers reasons why students returned or remained with the in-district program.

**Social Interaction**

The importance of relationships and school-based interactions were deemed appropriate as 15 references to social interaction were found within this theme. Participants described that being able to interact with peers within the school environment while still taking online courses was an ideal situation or scenario. These students were offered course flexibility through in-district online courses while remaining
eligible for sports or other school-related activities. Parents, students, and school administrators repeatedly mentioned the importance of peer interactions and spending time with friends on a regular basis. Participants indicated that social growth was a key component to a student’s development prior to entering college, and the in-district program allowed for adequate social interactions. A few students remarked that cyber options with limited social interactions were best with students who had experience with bullying or other school-related issues.

Administrator Participant 2 stated that students who participated in the in-district cyber program were able to interact with peers within their home district:

There’s also a social component right, and students are obviously growing up as much socially as they are academically and being with friends, potentially having the opportunity to graduate with their friends and continue in the community where they are, feels like home.

Administrator Participant 3 stated that students participating in the in-district program had access to events and peer interactions that would be more difficult if a student took cyber charter courses:

Students enjoy having peer interactions which they weren’t experiencing when they were fully cyber and fully outside of the district. In the program they’re in now, they can spend part of their day with their peers, and peers are important to students.

Parent Participant 2 remarked that his student’s peers and friends attended classes with the in-district cyber program or the district’s regular face-to-face program, “His friends are here. His other classes are here, his other classes where he has a physical presence. His athletics are here, his social life is here.”

Parent Participant 3 explained that some students might find the cyber courses to be best if one has difficulty interacting with students in the traditional education setting:
I think that some kids feel alienated—or that they don’t fit in—and it’s easier for them to do cyber. From the few other kids that I have ever met, I think that it was a relief for them to not have the pressure of school. The social aspect of, his friends are still here, being in a play, or playing sports, or tech school, or whatever, can’t be done, unless you go through ____ (district) Cyber school so that was for him.

I still think there needs to be—we can’t forget the social. Kids need to—I think everything is always on the computer. There needs to be other ways you depend on knowledge like whether you read a book or going to.

It has become part of their growth. They don’t know any different so I think they would want to come back to it because every kid is like, I can’t live without my phone.

Socially, I was concerned about her not interacting with other kids before she walked out of here and went to college.

Student Participant 1 confirmed that online learning may provide relief for students that experienced bullying and allowed them to continue their education:

In the cases that I’ve seen, it’s been because of the in-school environment of the bullying or the harassment or just because for some kids it’s easier to do their learning online or they don’t feel comfortable in a classroom. I believe that they don’t feel comfortable in the environment, like the schooling system environment, and they feel more comfortable online where they’re not exactly involved or can’t communicate with as many students.

Student Participant 6 noted that it was both helpful and challenging to experience online learning due to the difference in social interactions compared to traditional face-to-face learning:

I’m definitely more of a social person, so it’s not really something that I’m looking for. But I definitely think that having that opportunity to be able to kind of take myself out of the situation and be able to be constantly surrounded by people, is nice.

Student Participant 11 stated that although online learning was not a first or preferred choice, it was a helpful option during past health concerns:
I enjoy being in a classroom and learning like that. But if I had to go back to cyber, like if I were to be injured again, I would definitely go back to cyber. It was a great help during that.

**Summary.** Upon review of each participant’s response, it is apparent that social interactions, a sense of community, extracurricular activities, and friendships are all elements that should be present within an in-district online program. Student participants remarked that many students need consistent social interaction with friends and the in-district program afforded students the chance to take cyber courses while still spending time with peers through a wide variety of school-related events. Some parent participants stated that if their child attended another cyber school, he or she would miss out on the social experiences present with the in-district program. Several students stated that the in-district online program could support students who were having difficulty due to bullying or another school-related issue. The in-district cyber program could serve as a way of gradually transitioning students back into the school setting if they desired to do so. Another student explained that the cyber program was quite helpful during a difficult time and that he or she would return to the program, if needed, due in part to the ability to interact with others in one’s home school. The ability for students to engage in socially relevant experiences while enrolled in the in-district cyber program is likely to increase or maintain the retention and recruitment goals for the district. When considering the social importance and the development of students as online learners, Angelino et al. (2007) explained that programs should “focus on learner’s needs; not just what is easy. Online students may have similar needs for assistance and resources as traditional students” (p. 10). Additionally, cyber students might need further support when compared to traditional face-to-face learners, as referenced by Berge and Huang (2004), who have
recommended “a customized model of student retention that takes into account personal, circumstantial, and institutional factors, as well as the interconnectedness of these factors” (p. 1). Overall, the participant and research findings pertaining to the social theme point toward a comprehensive approach with opportunities for peer interaction as a key element of student needs.

Cost and Financials

In this thematic section, seven references were made to the costs and financial considerations associated with the in-district cyber program. Several administrators noted that grants, purchasing practices, and the analysis of resources all played a role in determining how to keep the in-district cyber program fiscally viable. Developing and supporting district teachers through internal training opportunities was also a way to ensure that costs are reined in while simultaneously growing the in-district program.

Administrator Participant 1 discussed that hiring a school administrator to run the in-district program ultimately resulted in cost savings. Administrator Participant 1 also noted that grant funding could support the program:

We actually brought someone on full-time to run the program and used the savings that he was able to bring kids back into to sort of offset the cost for the whole program. We budget for just local donations or local grants, anything like that to run different programs. The state has some grants that are available.

Administrator Participant 2 described that analyzing district expenses and how online content was delivered were factors related to keeping costs down with the in-district online program:

The best way to address this, the best way to look at it is, look at the current purchasing practices, current expenditures; see where fixed assets are being purchased because fixed assets are a dead zone anymore, anyhow. Maybe eliminate some of those and come back to looking at dynamic resources, flexible
solutions, online solutions that grow overtime, online courses, online content, robotics programs, even things like remediation, I would consider certainly a blended solution.

Administrator Participant 3 also noted that grant funding was a way to support in-district cyber programming along with support from district education foundations.

Partnerships were also considered valuable according to Administrator Participant 3:

If you are able to use state grants, that’s great because you can open your budget and raise your expenditure and your revenues to the same. If there’s a federal grant that is available. Also working with your education foundation is another really great way. Training teachers and supporting administrators in a successful implementation of online learning, again, partnering with organizations that may be skilled in training. Not even having the money, but partner with your neighboring districts that have an online program to just learn from what your neighbor is doing.

**Summary.** Administrative participants noted that considerable planning was required to adequately analyze the financial considerations of an in-district cyber program. A full-time employee was designated to oversee program development along with student retention and recruitment. Starting an in-district cyber program and hiring a director of online learning, of course, was a cost consideration that required foresight and strategic planning. Participants stated that state and federal grants were options to support the in-district cyber program along with determining which assets were fixed and what creative alternatives could be implemented to save costs while supporting a high-quality program. Barbour (2010) found that grant funding might support in-district cyber programming but that state funding had been restricted in the past several years due to the budgetary crisis. Lastly, participant administrators explained that in-district online partnerships among nearby and neighboring districts could also be a source of cost savings through course sharing and collaborative trainings. Researchers have noted that
the per pupil costs of cyber and charter tuition reported by former Pennsylvania Auditor General Jack Wagner’s 2012 report. The rising per pupil tuition reimbursement costs were a constant reminder of the importance of retaining and recruiting students for the in-district cyber program.

**Artifact Analysis: Overall District Enrollment and Demographics**

This researcher consulted the most recent recorded demographic information for the 2013–2014 school year—found via the School Performance Profile (n.d.)—which was recorded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The School Performance Profile (n.d.) website provided information on all districts in the State of Pennsylvania and was designed with the purpose of analyzing school district data and performance while helping districts improve upon existing areas of growth. According to the Paschoolperformance.org website, the School Performance Profile (n.d.) “provides information used in determining federal accountability status for Title I schools as required by the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Action section 1111 (h)(1) and (h)2” (para. 2). The district has an enrollment of approximately 1,700 students, 94% of whom were identified as White (not Hispanic), 2.9% Hispanic, 1% Asian (not Hispanic), and 1% Black (not Hispanic); 18.24% were considered Economically Disadvantaged.

**Charter and Cyber Charter Enrollment and Per Pupil Costs**

The following data were found by analyzing current in-district cyber student records as tracked by the district’s central office administration. For the 2014–2015 school year, the district had 33 students attending a total of nine charter schools; 18 of the 33 students were attending cyber charter programs outside of the in-district program at a
cost to the district of $13,567.59 per regular education pupil and $29,113.50 per special education pupil. Fifteen regular education students and three special education students were attending cyber charter schools. The total district cost was approximately $290,854.35.

**Student Demographics: In-District Cyber Program**

The researcher also accessed district office records, which record the number of students enrolled in the in-district cyber program. The researcher accessed PowerSchool, a student record management system that contained demographic information and records on those within the district. The demographic codes and designations are determined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Twenty-six students were participating in the in-district cyber program that met the researcher’s criteria of cyber course experience in grades 11 through 12. Twenty-four students were identified White (not Hispanic) and numbered 5 in accordance with the Pennsylvania Race or Ethnicity Code. Two students were identified Asian (not Hispanic) and numbered 9 in accordance with Pennsylvania Race or Ethnicity Code. Five students were recorded as Economically Disadvantaged by the school district. Attendance records from this group displayed a relationship between academic achievement and days in school. Students who regularly attended school and had zero or few instances of being late to school were more inclined to earn grades in the B to A range. Conversely, those who earned grades at or below the C range were more likely to have more days missed from school. Behavior records from this group indicated minor infractions such as lateness to school or missed detentions from the group of students studied. The results did not show any patterns or provide any relationship
between in-district cyber program participation and increased or decreased disciplinary frequency or level of infraction.

Within the student interview participant group, which consisted of 12 students, five were male and seven were female; 11 students identified as White (not Hispanic) and numbered 5 in accordance with the Pennsylvania Race or Ethnicity Code. One student was identified as Asian (not Hispanic) and numbered 9 in accordance with the Pennsylvania Race or Ethnicity Code. Four students were recorded as economically disadvantaged by the school district. Attendance records from this group also displayed a relationship between academic achievement and days in school. Students who regularly attended school and had zero or few instances of being late to school were more inclined to earn grades within the B to A range. Conversely, those who earned grades at or below the C range were more likely to have more days missed from school. Additionally three or four students who were identified economically disadvantaged had a greater number of tardies to school compared to the other nine students in this particular grouping. Behavior records from this group reflected minor infractions such as detentions or Saturday detentions resulting from being tardy to school or cutting class. Four of the 12 students had minor behavioral records while the remaining eight had no record of disciplinary action or warnings given by the school administration.

Artifact: Strategic Planning Documents

During the 2010–2011 school year, the district compiled a proposal that delineated the current and past costs associated with charter schools and cyber charter schools. The financial records indicated a gradual rise in district costs associated with students choosing to attend charter and cyber charter schools. The chart below shows a
breakdown of costs of student attendance, number of students enrolled, and how many
were attending cyber charter schools. During the 2010–2011 school year, the per pupil
costs for students without an Individualized Education Program (IEP) were $11,185.27,
and $23,741.27 per student with an IEP. Forty-six students were without an IEP, whereas
four had IEPs. Table 8 displays charter and cyber charter school costs to the district from
the 2006-2007 school year through the 2010-2011 school year.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Student enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006–2007</td>
<td>$142,152 (actual)</td>
<td>Not recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>$225,492 (actual)</td>
<td>21 (7 cyber students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–2009</td>
<td>$290,183 (actual)</td>
<td>27 (9 cyber students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–2010</td>
<td>$466,269 (actual)</td>
<td>40 (26 cyber students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–2011</td>
<td>$527,700 (budget)</td>
<td>50 (36 cyber students)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The district then conducted a cyber charter survey inquiring about student interest
in an in-district cyber program; 13 of 17 respondents noted that if curricular needs were
met by the in-district cyber program and they could earn a diploma from the district, then
they would enroll in the in-district program. Therefore, the district proposed starting the
in-district cyber program for the 2011–2012 school year for 12th-grade students with
course offerings such as health, English, statistics, cultural diversity, environmental
science/earth and space, and contract gym. Additionally from the 2012–2013 through the 2014–2015 school year, the district planned to expand high school online course options as well as to begin elementary, middle school, and ultimately a full K–12 cyber program. This proposal also introduced a new administrator role initially titled the director of technology integration, which eventually became the current title, director of online learning.

The district also created a survey tool during the 2010–2011 school year to analyze the factors associated with students choosing to attend online learning at a cyber charter program. Items such as course options, class flexibility, choosing one’s own work pace, and having the ability to work from home were all cited as reasons that students and families were opting for online learning. It is also noteworthy that a number of students went from the home school environment to the cyber charter setting. Furthermore, the district created a PowerPoint presentation that summarized key elements in favor of creating its own in-district cyber program. A 354% increase in charter and cyber charter costs since 2005 with costs rising nearly $504,000, combined with student interest in returning to their home district, spurred the decisions to promptly implement the program for the 2011–2012 school year. In the spring of 2011, the district sent a welcome letter from the superintendent to district families detailing the offerings of the in-district program with an emphasis on flexibility, course options, and the ability to graduate with a diploma from the district. According to parents who took part in a district survey, a diploma from a highly regarded public school carried more weight than a cyber charter-only program or school. The district also created a cyber tracking form to record face-to-face and phone contacts with students and families who expressed interest in attending
the district’s in-district cyber program while reminding potential students about the opportunities to attend various school district functions, still attend the vocational technical school, and receive a district diploma as well as all the support and guidance to which traditional students have access. During the start of the 2012–2013 school year, the district and local teacher’s union convened and agreed upon the working conditions and expectations of online teachers and their respective teaching assignments. The district also noted in this memorandum that it would partner with a neighboring district and, at times, instruct students from each other’s district while staying in their home district. This practice was undertaken in an attempt to maintain course availability and flexibility for students. This memorandum was updated for the 2014–2015 school year to include the option of an online summer course in a blended format with online and face-to-face interactions.

In July of 2014, the district created an administrative regulation (AR) pertaining to the practice of ensuring that high-quality online in-district course content took place. This administrative document states that “curriculum, assessments, and instruction provided to students in online courses are consistent with that delivered in the traditional classroom environment” (District document, July 1, 2014, AR No. 107). References were also made regarding the importance of aligning course content with district objectives and state standards as well providing support to teachers via evaluations made by the director of online learning and the director of curriculum. Also, the district is presently using an evaluation tool and rubric from Quality Matters, which provides content to support the development of best practices in online learning.
Artifact: Teacher Survey Information

In 2014, the district also conducted a survey of in-district cyber teachers regarding perceptions of the third-party provider’s online content, course rigor, learning strategies employed, assessment techniques, face-to-face meeting time with students, and other probing questions pertaining to the online program quality and practice. A summary of key findings cited the following: 64% of teachers found the predesigned, third party provider courses to be of low quality when compared to district courses in the face-to-face setting; 87.5% noted that the administration of assessments differed online versus in the classroom; 93% reported that instructional strategies were different online and required adaptations as opposed to face-to-face learning; 56% stated that writing prompts and tasks differed when teaching an in-district cyber course; 91.25% felt comfortable with the quality of instruction they were providing their students; 80 to 87.5% of teachers utilized training sessions offered in-person or face to face by the third party provider of online content; 75% of teacher respondents noted that understanding how to help students collaborate online would be helpful; 81% of teachers stated that students have met with them during the scheduled office hours or cyber teacher time; 68.75% of teachers noted that students attended the in-district cyber lounge at the district’s on campus site. Additionally, various teachers provided remarks on how a new in-district cyber teacher should prepare to teach a class and the pitfalls to avoid.

Artifact: Financial Documents and Past Records

For the 2015–2016 school year, per pupil costs were expected to rise to $14,500 for a student without an IEP and $30,500 for a student with an IEP. Additional expense reports from the 2009–2010 school year through the 2013–2014 school year displayed a
substantial rise in costs associated with charter and cyber charter programming for which
the district must prepare in the years to come. Table 9 provides a brief history of the
expenditure format. The budget has expanded nearly every year, at times by hundreds of
thousands of dollars.

Table 9

In-District Budgetary Amounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Original budget</th>
<th>Current budget</th>
<th>Expended/received</th>
<th>Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>$455,000</td>
<td>$455,000</td>
<td>$457,332.96</td>
<td>$-2,332.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>$527,700</td>
<td>$527,700</td>
<td>$558,343.72</td>
<td>$-30,643.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>$646,000</td>
<td>$438,095</td>
<td>$346,970.56</td>
<td>$91,124.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>$577,600</td>
<td>$577,000</td>
<td>$390,903.47</td>
<td>$186,096.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>$697,898</td>
<td>$697,898</td>
<td>$398,266.25</td>
<td>$299,631.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>$923,400</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>$733,000</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis of the cyber/charter school documents indicated that special
education pupil enrollment and costs were projected to increase for the 2015–2016 school
year, with special education costs rising over $60,000 from the previous school year.

Financial and District Savings

Artifact review of documents prepared by the school district business
administrator displayed the following details regarding budgetary savings from charter
and cyber charter programming and the recruitment/retention of students (see Table 10).
Table 10

*In-District Budgetary Savings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Charter school budget</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Savings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>$466,269</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>$558,344</td>
<td>47 non-special education students</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>$646,000</td>
<td>51 non-special education students</td>
<td>$86,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>$749,000</td>
<td>44 non-special education students</td>
<td>$126,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(includes in-district cyber operational costs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>$865,957</td>
<td>46 non-special education students</td>
<td>$270,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The estimated budget for the 2014–2015 school year was approximately $855,675, with 44 non-special education students. According to records kept by the district business administrator, the number of students would have expanded to 63 at a cost of $950,000 if the in-district cyber program were not in place. Additionally, Table 10 shows tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings due to the in-district program implementation when considering the overall cost breakdown of charter and cyber funding allocations. The school district business administrator also noted in his report that it was extremely difficult to determine the exact number of students who decided to attend the in-district cyber program instead of a cyber charter option outside of the district. The school business administrator stated that since the inception of the in-district
cyber program, the addition of the director of online learning has completed an effort to
retain and recruit students, and the entire savings could be approximately $1,000,000.
Further detailing the function of the budget process, the business administrator noted, if
“We budget 44 students and we end up with 30 students, then we have achieved actual
savings that can be reinvested in the program or that money falls to Fund Balance”
(business administrator, personal communication, February, 2015).

**Results and Interpretations**

A review of the thematic elements that emerged from the one-on-one interviews,
student artifacts, financial documents, strategic planning information, and teacher surveys
made several commonalities apparent.

Reference to the seven themes—teacher quality, retention and recruitment,
program perception, support, flexibility, social interaction, and cost/financials—in
participant feedback via interviews allowed for detailed analysis of responses from three
administrators, five parents, and 12 students. Each participant group noted the importance
of having high quality and accessible teachers within an in-district cyber program. Based
upon participant responses, teachers were readily accessible online or face to face, which
was also an important factor when parents and students considered entering the in-district
cyber program or decided to use another cyber option outside of their home district.

Schedule flexibility was cited as an important factor that students considered
when participating in the in-district cyber program. Students repeatedly remarked that by
taking in-district cyber courses, they were able to create much higher levels of flexibility
within their schedules, which lessened stress and allowed for adding classes that fit their
interests and possibly their work schedules as well.
Program quality was also noted as a factor that supported student retention as students graduating from the in-district cyber program received the same diploma as face-to-face students. Some parents were mixed in their reviews of the in-district program’s quality, particularly if the in-district program did not provide classes taught by district teachers. Concern was noted pertaining to purchased courses that resulted in poor teacher feedback and limited contact with teachers by students and parents. However, when discussing in-district courses taught by teachers those students knew and who were employees of the district, the results were overwhelmingly in favor of this format, and teacher quality and responsiveness were again mentioned as positive components of the program.

Social interaction was cited as an important factor, as the in-district cyber program allowed face-to-face student–teacher interactions as needed, particularly when questions emerged. Some teachers and parents also noted that students might use the in-district cyber program as a way to achieve educational goals they would otherwise be unable to accomplish due to medical concerns, stress, bullying, or other concerns that could impede learning for some students. The in-district cyber program provided this flexibility and opportunity to learn without the possible stresses and distractions of in-class learning.

The discussion of cost and financial considerations during the interview process indicated that alternative funding sources such as grants and foundation support can support the continuation or expansion of in-district cyber programming. Cost-saving measures and budget analysis were also key components that school administrators must assess when seeking optimal program functionality.
One concept continually repeated during the interviews with the three groups of participants was improving the advertising of the in-district cyber program. Several parents and students stated that some individuals within the district community were not entirely sure what the program entailed, what courses were available, and how to become a part of the program. Parents and students both explained that improving advertising and generating discussion about why taking cyber classes was a good option would be a worthwhile practice for the school district. Specifically, this modification was mentioned as a key way to increase recruiting and retention within the program.

With the artifact review process, the research findings indicated that several students from the group of 12 were designated economically disadvantaged; gender was also noted along with attendance and behavioral records. Students with a higher number of late arrivals to school were possibly more likely to have C grades; those with few or no late arrivals to school were more likely to have A or B grades. Based upon review of the artifacts and interviews, there was not a strong relationship between student race, gender, academics, behavioral or attendance information, and one’s decision to attend the in-district cyber program. Review of district documents regarding strategic planning and financial documents point toward the importance of retaining or recruiting back students as the costs of regular education and special education continually increase—especially when considering that allocations must be given to cyber charter schools at a per pupil tuition rate. Lastly, when reflecting upon teacher survey responses, several key areas such as student–teacher interaction and course quality were revealed as key elements to the overall effectiveness of an in-district cyber program.
Summary

Overall, this chapter discussed the information gathered via interviews with 20 participants from groupings such as students, parents, and school administrators. Various school district artifacts pertaining to in-district cyber school strategic planning, financials and budgeting, student demographics, and teacher surveys were analyzed to determine recommendations and understand the background of the online program. The resultant information gleaned from the aforementioned artifacts and interviews point toward the importance of—and suggestions for—having in-district teachers involved in the program; ensuring quality feedback from teacher to student both online and face to face, which is important in supporting student success; increasing program understanding through advertising as it could further support retention and recruitment; promoting course and schedule flexibility as an excellent byproduct of the in-district program; paying close attention to costs associated with students leaving the district for cyber charter programs, as they can be extremely high; and keeping in mind the district’s current in-district model and support from district administrators, which has led to considerable cost savings.
CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors associated with the district’s recruitment and retention of students as they related to cyber learning. The study sought to understand the experiences of school administrators, students, and parents with the in-district cyber program while further exploring the associated fiscal conditions. The study consisted of interviews with three school administrators, 12 students, and five parents. The study participants were asked semistructured questions by the researcher. The researcher also analyzed school district artifacts pertaining to in-district cyber student demographics, per pupil costs, and enrollment as well as documents regarding strategic planning, teacher surveys, financial costs, and district savings. The researcher analyzed participant responses utilizing qualitative coding, which resulted in the emergence of seven themes. The themes are noted in order from most frequently mentioned by the participants, to least frequently mentioned but still of note: teacher quality, retention and recruitment, program perception, support, flexibility, social interaction, and cost/financials. These themes are noted in Chapter 4, which is a detailed analysis of participant responses and opinions concerning the research questions and probing questions noted in Appendices B and C.

Conclusion

The research questions posed in this descriptive case study sought to determine and understand the experiences of school administrators, students, and parents regarding the in-district cyber program. The primary question and subquestions are noted below.
**Primary question.** What are the experiences of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district cyber program?

Among the participant group, a wide range of responses emerged that helped shape the outcomes of the study. School administrators reported satisfaction with the program and sought to continue to develop course offerings for students, analyze financial considerations, evaluate strategic partnerships, and support the sustained use of in-district teachers to maintain programmatic excellence. Students noted that they were pleased with the responsiveness of teacher feedback and availability, enjoyed the flexibility that online courses afforded them, and found the overall experience to be positive. Students stated that the district could improve in-district cyber program advertising so that more potential students and parents would be aware of options with online learning. Students further noted that in comparison to cyber charter programs or other cyber options, the in-district cyber program had much more responsive teachers and frequently had more rigorous course content. Lastly, parents explained that the program was productive with regard to schedule flexibility, and most were pleased with teacher feedback. Some parents noted that they were somewhat unsure about the quality of the course content and how beneficial it might be for students to take courses online in general. Furthermore, parents noted that the responsiveness of teachers within the in-district program was superior to their experiences with cyber charter programs or courses that they had purchased through the district.

**Subquestions.**

*Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program?*
Responses from participants indicated that the program’s quality was largely the result of support from highly regarded teachers, which was a significant reason why students stayed with the in-district program. Schedule flexibility was cited as another likely indicator of student retention. Parents and students both remarked that social factors such as the ability to interact with friends and participate in extracurricular activities at the school site while still taking online courses was an attractive component of the program. Parents and student added that they were pleased with the responsiveness of in-district teachers—a factor that played a role in their choice to stay with the program analyzed in this study. Other students stated that they were unaware of the other online options beyond the in-district program.

*Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program?*

School administrators explained that students may return to the in-district program from another cyber program due to dissatisfaction with the feedback or the lack of individualization of course content. Several students stated that they were concerned with the limited amount of direction they received in their cyber charter school experience. Students reported that there were several week-long gaps between the submission of assignments and responses from the online teacher. Students also reported that they enjoyed the ability to interact with peers as a partial cyber student with the in-district program. Parents cited knowing that the school district had a strong reputation overall, which brought credibility to the in-district cyber program compared to other options.
What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program?

Factors most frequently cited as influential in a student’s decision to remain or return to the district’s cyber program aligned with several of the themes noted during the qualitative coding analysis. Schedule flexibility was a very attractive component of the program—to both parents and students—as it allowed students to increase their workload, reduce stress, and meet graduation requirements in a timely fashion. Teacher quality was also noted by school administrators, students, and parents as a significant factor in making online program choices. Support from teachers and other district staff was determined to be a key reason why students and parents felt comfortable returning to or remaining with the in-district cyber program. Social interaction was very important for students, so that if they were taking a number of in-district cyber courses, they felt comfortable knowing that their peers and activities were readily accessible.

What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?

Student responses to this question were mostly aligned with the concept of quality teacher feedback, consistent communication regarding assignments, and missing work, as well as the opportunity to meet with teachers face to face as needed. Students also noted that teachers were very consistent with providing reminders about assignments and clarifying questions. School administrators stated several times that having district teachers provide instruction for online classes was very helpful as it allowed for adherence to high standards and easy communication among teachers and students. Parents were somewhat mixed with their feedback, as certain respondents noted that
students should be responsible for their own work as high school students, whereas others felt that teachers who were available and willing to support students were extremely important. Nearly all negative comments regarding teacher feedback pertained to experience with cyber charter programs, not to the in-district online courses or staff.

**Recommendations**

Based upon analysis of participant feedback and artifact review, the following areas should be explored going forward as possible areas of growth or improvement for the in-district cyber program.

**Advertising**

A number of students and parents remarked that to expand the in-district program, more advertising should be distributed throughout the district. Some explained parents and students noted that it appears as if in-district online courses are a credit recovery option of sorts offered by guidance. Students stated that other students were largely unaware of the program and what courses were available. A few parents noted that the program seemed akin to a last resort for students trying to graduate on time and not as a primary offering. The district should look for ways to reach a larger percentage of the school and district population, perhaps via social media or assemblies during the course of the school year. A reasonable number of students and parents were somewhat unclear as to what the in-district program entailed and offered for students. Other students were aware of the in-district cyber program but were a bit unclear as to what courses were available and how to go about taking these classes. Increasing clarity and improving advertising was the general recommendation among these respondent groups as a possible area for growth.
Research by Angelino et al. (2007) concluded that seeking to attract and establish relationships with potential students and current students would be an appropriate way to communicate with as many students as possible. Angelino et al. (2007) recommended that districts “initiate contact with students via phone call,” “conduct pre-course orientation,” and “facilitate informal online chats throughout the course website” (p. 10). Whereas some of these strategies would be helpful to currently enrolled students, contacting potential students with personal phone calls would likely develop overall social relationships and promote the concept of individualized learning.

When school leaders are considering the implementation of an in-district online program it would be wise to carefully utilize some of the expertise offered by organizational theorists such as Scharmer (2009), Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley (2008), and Heifetz and Linsky (2002). Concepts that these thought leaders posited as leading to the development of a successful in-district cyber program included navigating change, building enduring programs that last far beyond the designer, and understanding the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

The change process is unavoidable when developing a new in-district cyber program and would necessitate the use of Scharmer’s (2009) concept of “social complexity” (p. 61). Scharmer (2009) has stated, “Social complexity is a product of diverse interests and worldviews among stakeholders” (p. 61). It is apparent that school administrators, students, and parents hold quite varied perspectives, which impact program development such as that of an in-district cyber program. Any district seeking to replicate this study’s in-district online model would be wise to adhere to Scharmer’s advice and seek that “all of the relevant stakeholders’ voices be employed” (p. 61).
Utilizing a collaborative model through a change process such as the development and expansion of online learning is vital to ensure a smooth transition.

Senge et al. (2008) noted the importance of sustaining environments and resources in organizations as well as in the world as a whole. As Senge et al. (2008) have explained, “There is no viable path forward that does not take into account the needs of future generations” (p. 9). Clearly, cyber education meets the needs of future generations as instruction becomes more and more individualized and able to support a wider variety of learning goals and outcomes. Building a sustainable program that continues to build toward future student achievement and success is one of the primary objectives of an in-district online option.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) have addressed the role of effective leadership by suggesting that organizers “move back and forth between the dance floor and the balcony, making interventions, observing their impact in real time, and then returning to the action” (p. 53). This analysis points toward the necessity to continually take action while assessing the overall health of an organizational plan or program. The “balcony and dance floor” approach discussed by Heifetz and Linsky (2002) applies to an in-district cyber program as leaders seek to continually monitor progress, suggest alterations, and evaluate feedback from stakeholders while simultaneously seeking to maintain the viability of the system for future learners.

Ultimately, school leaders must be willing to adapt to the uncertainty of change, and adeptly analyze and monitor progress with the ultimate goal of creating and developing a sustainable in-district cyber program that affords significant learning opportunities for all participants.
Quality of Purchased Courses

An area that was cause for concern among several parents and students was the poor quality of purchased courses. The purchased courses were not taught by district teachers and were generally criticized by parents and students as too easy, vague, or upsetting, as students were unable to adequately interact with the designated teacher or instructor. Although these courses were offered as a way of providing further flexibility and options for students, perhaps the district needs to evaluate other course delivery methods that still have a high level of student–teacher engagement. One solution may lie with the continued expansion of the in-district cyber program, which would allow for more in-district teacher-taught classes. An analysis of the provider of these purchased courses should also take place given the documented dissatisfaction on the part of the students and parents. An investigation into the district’s current contract status with the provider of the purchased courses would be necessary to determine if other options were feasible.

When considering the quality of purchased courses, it was apparent that a number of parents and students were not necessarily satisfied with the product and responsiveness of non-school district cyber teachers. Further analysis would be required regarding the contract the district had with the provider of the purchasable courses and whether alternative providers were available. School leaders will have to continually think of creative solutions that still allow the district to be competitive with a wide variety of course offerings but also to seek a possible expansion of the number of courses that in-district teachers are able to teach, and to find other providers of online content in an effort to enhance parent and student online learning experiences.
Overall Retention and Recruitment Practices

Although the district was currently successful in retaining students and bringing in new students to some degree, increased focus on advertising may support programmatic growth. The review of financial documents made apparent that the per pupil costs for regular education and special education students climb on a yearly basis. Therefore, it is worth considering and evaluating the present in-district recruitment practices in order to maximize efforts for enhanced district savings. Retention and recruitment practices may simply be a byproduct of higher quality purchased courses, an increased advertising presence, and greater awareness of the in-district cyber program—but this area is worth examining from a holistic perspective. Davis (2012) has remarked that course content should be focused on the individual needs of students and on meeting the needs or criteria that families deem important for cyber coursework. Research by the Rogers Family Foundation (2011) has stated that “small group instruction, integration of digital content, differentiated instruction, use of data, self-efficacy and increased satisfaction” (p. 5) influence students and families when making a decision about an online learning program. Furthermore, research by Cavanaugh et al. (2004) supported the continued use of various forms of communication as a way to meet student needs and possibly increase retention and recruitment outcomes.

Possible Action Steps

Advertising. The school district should seek to review the current advertising procedures in place for the in-district cyber program. Additionally, the district should seek feedback from students and parents regarding advertising practices and awareness of
the in-district cyber program and what it has to offer. This feedback can be acquired with a survey tool deemed appropriate by the district.

**Communication.** The school district should seek to utilize social media outreach or face-to-face assemblies or meetings to provide further information about courses and options. The director of online learning can conduct social media outreach. Through such venues, online teachers can share their experiences and answer questions from prospective students regarding the format, content, and pacing of classes. Guidance counselors and building administrators provide online informational sessions as needed as well as social media participation. They also determine how advertising and communication best meet the needs of students and parents. It is likely that social media, updated websites, email, and phone calls would be inclusive of all stakeholder groups.

**Program clarity, quality, and promotion.** School leadership should evaluate steps to improve the understanding of the courses and the program throughout the entire district community. Such efforts should make clear that the quality of the in-district program courses is superior to other cyber charter programming, and emphasize the availability of ready and frequent interaction and feedback from a district teacher.

**Retention and recruitment.** School district leadership should examine retention and recruitment practices, and identify gaps and develop a strategic plan for target goals for the coming school year. As previously noted, analysis of present advertising strategies and the quality of purchased courses is worthwhile and needed. Advertising and the value of courses associated with the in-district program are vital to the long-term success of the program and the district.
**Recommendations for Further Research**

When considering further research, it is essential to track the successes and areas of improvement within the program on a yearly basis. One specific area of research pertains to the effectiveness of online learning within the district for students with an IEP. The relatively new implementation of online learning in the K–12 setting raises a wide variety of questions for all types of learners. Research into what kinds of regulations, requirements, and instructional strategies might best meet the needs of students with an IEP may elicit much-needed information, as online learning will likely expand as part of blended curriculum and a move to more one-to-one technology device options.

Other research within the district would seek to determine how interested the general student population is in learning via some sort of online platform. Creating a survey that asks for student feedback on blended learning options, partial cyber, full cyber, or other styles of education strongly supported by technology would provide valuable feedback that could direct the future of the in-district cyber program.

The researcher would also like to expand the study beyond this district into other rural, suburban, and urban school districts and to determine how receptive students, parents, and school administrators would be to in-district cyber programs and courses—specifically courses and programs taught and managed by school district teachers and administrators, as opposed to partnerships with other providers of online content. Cost savings will likely be a focus in public education for years to come, and the in-district cyber options will need further development by all types of districts throughout Pennsylvania. It would be useful to compare themes across different public school
districts and how varying communities might confirm the researcher’s current findings or bring forth additional areas of exploration and further questions.

**Summary**

This descriptive case study analyzed the perspectives of various school administrators, students, and parents while also reviewing numerous in-district cyber program artifacts in an effort to determine the most effective means of maintaining and improving retention and recruitment practices. The resulting outcome brought forth seven themes that indicated the most important factors associated with current programmatic success along with areas in need of further study and possible development. Themes delineated in this research point to a high quality in-district teaching staff as a major contributor to program success. School administrators, students, and parents all referenced the importance of quality teachers providing substantive feedback in a timely manner as a way to create a positive reputation for the district’s online learning program. The next theme pointed to the importance of striving for continued retention and recruitment of students. Students and parents remarked that increased advertising would likely lead to further expansion of the in-district cyber school. Program perception was mostly positive and considered to be of high quality, although some parents and students had negative opinions about cyber courses provided by the in-district cyber academy that were fee based and not taught by regular district teachers. School administrators, students, and parents lauded the support system in place for the in-district cyber courses and found teacher interactions and availability to be quite strong. By contrast, somewhat harsh criticism was levied against cyber charter programs, as student and parent experiences with responsive feedback was absent, inconsistent, and/or at times
frustrating. Flexibility was also considered a strength of the cyber program and said to ameliorate stress for students trying to manage and meet schedule requirements prior to graduation. Parents and students were pleased with the availability of social interaction and extracurricular activities while taking in-district cyber courses. Still, cost considerations continue to be a significant point of interest for school administrators, and some parents remain aware of the savings associated with retaining and recruiting students for the in-district cyber program.

In-district cyber programming is a relatively new approach meant to stem the rising per pupil tuition costs as more and more students opt for educational options online. The district evaluated in this study displayed considerable planning and foresight regarding the importance of establishing an in-district program several years ago and, as a result, saved hundreds of thousands of dollars. While the in-district program had areas of strength such as teacher quality, student support, social interaction opportunities, and a rigorous curriculum in place, there was still room for growth regarding program advertising and the course quality of purchasable online classes. The district would be wise to continue analyzing its retention and recruitment strategies, as competition is likely to be fierce from myriad cyber charter programs in the years to come.
LIST OF REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: STUDY APPROVAL LETTER

Drexel University
Office of Research
3201 Arch Street
Suite 100
Philadelphia, PA 19104-2875

RE: School District Approval of Dissertation Study

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter to inform you that John Christopher Hardin has approval from the Palisades School District to conduct his dissertation study in our district.

Mr. Hardin will be required to follow all IRB policies and procedures as the protection of students, parents and school personnel participants is of the utmost importance.

Thank you for your review of this letter and if you need any further information or clarification, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Bridget Connell
Superintendent
Palisades School District
(610) 847-5131 ext. 4030
## APPENDIX B: ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DELIMITATIONS

Table 11

*B1. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
<th>Delimitations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most school districts are in need of in-district cyber education programs.</td>
<td>A sample size of one school district and a total of 3 school administrators, 5 parents, and 12 students may have been too small.</td>
<td>The researcher did not interview elementary students who had or were currently participating in the in-district cyber program, as the experiences may be difficult accurately to record and analyze.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most school districts do not have an understanding of experiences of administrators regarding the best practices of in-district cyber/online programming.</td>
<td>The study site was one rural district in southeastern Pennsylvania.</td>
<td>The researcher did not study large urban and suburban districts due to the vast differences in program design, as they would not find the data in this research to be useful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most public school districts are losing considerable funds due to the per pupil reimbursement costs required by cyber charter schools.</td>
<td>By using a semistructured interview process, specific data measures relating to financial problems associated with losing students to cyber charter programs may not have been adequately addressed.</td>
<td>The researcher did not specifically study cyber charter schools and their programs because the researcher’s goal was to analyze public in-district cyber programming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding in-district cyber programs is sometimes too expensive for school districts.</td>
<td>The district cyber program in this study had only been in existence for 5 years, which may have skewed the results regarding programmatic successes and failures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional course offerings in public schools cannot compete with the thousands of potential online/cyber charter school options.</td>
<td>This in-district program may not have had access to such a wide variety of online courses due to cost considerations associated with the district or parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: ALIGNMENT WITH RESEARCH QUESTIONS, RESEARCH METHODS, AND DATA SOURCES

Table 12

*C1. Alignment With Research Questions, Research Methods, and Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the experiences and perceptions of administrators, students, and parents involved with the in-district program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators/students/parents</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participant’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are students remaining with the district’s cyber program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators/student</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participant’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are students returning to the district’s cyber program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrator/students</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participant’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the factors that influence a student to either remain or return to the district’s cyber program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators/parents/students</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participant’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role do teachers have regarding student persistence and student retention?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators/parents/students</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insight to the participant’s experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX D: PROBING QUESTIONS

Table 13

*D1. Probing Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of programs can school districts put into place that addresses the financial implications of expanding cyber charter programs throughout Pennsylvania? What kinds of cyber/online programs can be put into place that attract students back to their home district and retain current students considering cyber/online educational options?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can school districts raise additional funding to support the implementation of K–12 cyber programs (fully cyber &amp; blended)?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with school administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors are most influential regarding the retention and recruitment of students in their K–12 district cyber school program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>School administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What decision-making process led you to return to your home school for cyber/online coursework?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Student/Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can the in-district cyber program improve the retention/recruitment of students within school community?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Student/Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the course offerings of your in-district cyber program influence your decision to remain/return to that particular program?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Student/Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the cyber course quality of home district programming versus cyber charter courses a factor in the decision-making process?</td>
<td>Semistructured interviews</td>
<td>Student/Parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX E: THEMES AND PARTICIPANT GROUPS’ KEY POINTS AND PHRASES

Table 14

_E1. Themes and Participant Groups’ Key Points and Phrases_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>School administrators</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td>“Allow us to use our teachers that knew were good that would deliver a cyber program, that there was a need for students to have”</td>
<td>“When we signed-up, we were told someone would talk to you all the time, there would be-- that I wouldn’t be the one having to guide and prompt. And it wasn’t, we were kind of set up, promised things and then left and I think if you’re a good self-motivator-it’s great”</td>
<td>“I believe teacher involvement is good here at this school, and I also believe that the parent involvement is also good due to the system that is set up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think quality speaks to a lot of parents and I think they know that they’re getting the same teachers that they would get if the student were here in school”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“It’s a very solid program. And all of the students -- at least in my experience and from what I’ve heard, all the teachers who have cyber courses that they teach along with the actual in-school curriculum, they all do a very good job of managing their online courses and providing help for students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think that’s what keeps the people here. The quality”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“We would say they’re pretty high because they have a big involvement with how you complete your assignments and when they’re due, and how they’re due.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There’s 1700 kids that are getting an education here with those teachers and they get that experience and those teachers are proven.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We want them to get our education from our teachers delivered with our standards, as opposed to any state cyber school that may or may not have the same standards.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“They want to maintain or return, stay in the district or return to the district because of the quality of the instruction.”

“We take a lot of pride in our teaching staff and we expect that our online teachers are teaching with the same strategies, with the same remediation approaches, with the same level of support that they do in their face to face classes.”

“The other piece that was important was the interaction with their teachers, so having students access their instruction in-house.”

“They’re being taught by teachers that they’ve known for quite some time, they can visit those teachers.”

“A teacher recognizes where students are finding success and struggling in some aspects.”

in other programs, and we don’t.”

“I came here because I knew I wanted her to have the rigor. I wanted her to be challenged. So if I knew at the time when I came here that it wasn’t so—there weren’t a lot of classes being taught by school district teachers, I probably would’ve made the decision to look into another school.”

(reference to cyber classes not taught by in-district teachers)

“I would say that the in-district schooling is a lot easier to use and a lot easier to understand the concept because there is a teacher that I can go and ask and I didn’t have to wait two weeks for them to get back and email me.”

“Well, it is easier because it’s right there and I know the teachers who are teaching the course.”

“But I think that they’re pretty good at being patient with the kids and understanding where they’re coming from, that they’re teaching themselves and that they need to learn at their own pace.”

“Overall it’s a very positive feedback. You always get feedback on general things from other people.” “So I think that’s why I wouldn’t go back to a charter program, because I like it much more. It’s more professional.”

“When I came into school to talk to one of the teachers, it was...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retention and recruitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I feel our reputation here is one factor that would get parents to keep their kids here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think that should be another reason that parents would want their kids through a cyber program offered by a public school district, is that degree that has a little more status than the other degree.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’d like to think students are remaining with the district cyber program because of the way we’ve built it with onsite support, taught by our teachers, so that a local educator is there to support the students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Let’s not just create cyber programs that are just for kids that are choosing cyber, but let’s give other kids in the district the same opportunities to have flexible scheduling, maybe overload their schedule to graduate early, or maybe remediate to recover credits.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “We created our program

| “Make sure that all courses are available. I know one of my children wanted to take Latin II and it was not available. I still don’t understand why a cyber course can’t be available.” |
| “I don't think it’s publicized well. My sense is that it’s put out there as, “Well, if you can’t fit something in, we can if we can offer you this.” I don’t know if it’s presented as a favorable option.” |
| “So sheer nervousness brought me back to this school, and I’m glad I did it. Now that I look back, there’s all the reasons.” |
| “I think, most importantly, is to get across that it’s a quality program.” |
| “For the next coming year and this current year, the classes that they provide for us online, I really couldn’t get in this school district.” |
| “I wanted to stay here and because of the fact that the school did supply us with an online learning system, I think that’s what made my decision is, meanwhile, my friends are still able to still do my classes here.” |
| “Just increase the technology, I guess. More and more people have computers than before when we didn’t have as much.” |
| “For me, the factors were whether or not I felt the course was manageable to have online because there are definitely some courses I could never see myself taking...” |
to tailor student needs and parent needs.” “I would say that students are identifying this program as really tailoring and meeting their individual needs.”

“It’s recognizing that students have different interests inside school and out of school and this is a way for parents and students to tailor their own instructional program.”

“But parents, I think, is where I would want to go next as far as the recruitment and retention. Because if parents aren’t buying into the experience their sons or daughters are having, that may be the reason why students chose not to take an online course.”

online, such as maybe math courses.”

“I would say advertise it more and maybe at the beginning of the year or even during the summer when schedules are still more open to changes, they could just talk a bit more with parents and students, and let them know the advantages and possible disadvantages. And just kind of market it a little better, I had to do—not necessarily, a bit of digging but I kind of had to go and talk to my counselor and learn more about it before and I felt comfortable taking an online course.”

“Definitely just like advertising it more, then more students hear about it, and make it more hands-on.”

“Most definitely by providing a really nice work environment and resources, and also people that will be able to help them if they have questions.”

“I think they could maybe put it out there
and be like—"it’s a great opportunity for you. It’s a different way of learning."

“Maybe offering a more variety of courses of even advertising more and presenting the benefits of them.”

“So most students return back to it because they found that they’re more comfortable working that way, and you adapt to the environment you’re in. And I found that it was more comfortable to be able to work in my own pace.”

“I just think it needs to be described better.”

“I think that if they advertised more classes available”

“So, I feel like to recruit more people into the cyber program, just advertising those specifically would gain it more of positive outlook on it.”

“I feel like they should talk to students more about it, because I know a
lot of students know about the cyber program, but they don’t know what it is exactly.”

“I don’t know if it’s possible, but possibly administering like once a week like an in-class thing where they just comment and they talk about what they learned.”

“When first learning about the program, the interpretation where the feeling about the program is that it may be potentially inferior because it’s what people are not used to.”

“I think initially there is some trepidation before adoption and seeing it as a valuable entity.”

“I know there was a lot of work that needed to be done in those early years, why we were doing it.”

“Parents are almost universally unimpressed from what I’ve heard, which is not to say they’re against the program, or they have strong--- but they’re just not impressed, or at this point they’re not sold.”

“I think that the administration and teachers, think that it works better than it does.”

“Our experience was not” (regarding a good fit for the parent’s child). Our experience was, we were catching up from having done it.”

“I think they should be more clear with their instructions, because a lot of them are vague. And have examples, because some of the projects, they don’t have any examples and you don’t know how to do it.”

“And I think a lot of kids think it’s just easier to do on the computer rather than to do face to face conversation.”

“I didn’t really know anything about it, but a lot of students thought that it was just an easy way out of taking a normal class. But once you take it, you realize it’s a lot more in-depth and a lot more work than most of the students perceive it to be.”
bad in it.”

“For my parents, they thought that it would actually be more difficult than a normal class, because you have everything on your own to stay caught up.”

“I didn’t really have any preparation for being in an environment like that. I was left alone to do all my own stuff and it was kind of just...I didn’t have anyone to check in on me.”

“It’s frustrating for administrators when we have to purchase our online classes through other organizations, because feedback is a major issue.”

“It’s a great thing--for people that are easily distracted and what not.”

“In my experience the students and sometimes even the teachers of the online classes just think of it as an extra burden or just a class. They still think of it as a serious class, where some administrators even think that it’s much harder because it is online, which is true in some cases, but in other times not really so much.”

“There can be a lot of anxiety for some kids with attending normal school to try going online, some people learn better
“I think that the most important thing is that you’re delivering a quality product.”

“I found that I strive better and can have myself work harder when I am influenced with people around me and constantly being aware of everything. So I found that returning to school instead of cyber school helped me learn better.” (refers to a third party or cyber charter school not the in-district program).

“A lot of people that I know, people that I talk to, the don’t really understand it much. They think, “cyber school, what is that? Are you taught by your parents? How would you explain it? I personally have enjoyed it.”

“For the past two years, I’ve been doing cyber courses from this district. But our program is very well done in the way that I would never go back to the previous program, because it’s very- you have to be self-reliant.”

“I had a bit of trouble with English, but when I went into the online course in 9th
Support

“From my point of view, keeping students on track. Speaking personally, that’s really critical. Keeping the student engaged, because there’s obviously a tendency to become disengaged if you don’t just show up in class. I think those are the critical factors.”

“I see them doing is emailing if anything is going not okay, and quite frankly, I don’t think they push students to be in online classes.”

“I think that the best thing that I could say for us, would’ve have been if we truly had someone at the school, who was for him, following him, and helping him. Like a teacher but not dumping it on him or I had to organize everything and know what the next step was.”

“I think online learning, that is a huge factor-feedback.”

grade, it helped me learn a little bit more, because I could do it at my own pace.”

“Other than like grading, it’s hard to interact with the teacher unless you let go off your own way.”

“For me it’s personal relationships. And something the in-district program has always done well is establishing those personal relationships, making sure that the families and the students know that everyone here cares about them, and that is not just a machine of a school district; that we are wholly interested in the growth of the child and the success of the child, so that’s the biggest point for me.”

“I think just ongoing communication, being clear initially as to what students can expect of their online experience.”

“I think teachers have to put in as much effort as students are. For kids who might need a little extra instruction, the teacher needs to be around maybe after school or sometime during the day, during a study hall period in order to offer that little bit of extra instruction.”

“I’ve had other teachers that would be on there. Every couple of days, I’ll have new grades and it will be very, very quick, very fast response time.”

“It’s really easy like if you don’t understand something, you can

“And the students, I found, are more quick to adapt to an online form, but parents need an orientation as to why they expect them to be doing.”
actually have a conversation with the person."

“Helping to make sure you stay on the top and sending emails when I wasn’t and it’s also possible to be with the teacher to check in to see what’s due that week and make sure that you have everything done that you need to.”

“A place where I can focus on cyber being able to kind of connect to the internet and do my work for that class, and also hopefully kind of other stuff as well.”

“I think it’s pretty well organized and I really like how you get emails and stuff, reminding you to do stuff. The discussion board is awesome too, because you get a perspective of what everyone else thinks and you get to interact with students even though it’s online.”

“And also, the teachers always offer help in person if you need it. So I feel like it’s online but it’s hands-on too with the
personal experience.”

“But I think our program is especially set up well. You can contact your teacher if need be.”

“It’s very, very easy to get in touch with them. They are always very helpful, they always provide feedback. They back to you very very quickly, which convenient, because of my schedule, especially.”

“Even if you need help, you can contact somebody and they’ll walk you through the steps to learn what you need to learn.”

“Everybody’s really determined to get you to do your best on online. I met a lot of good people, especially in the school district. They’re kind. They really do want you to succeed, to do your best.”

“Because it helps clear up their schedules so that they can take courses they want to take.”

“So taking online classes made the process go a lot faster for making up credits and for me, it was just easier.”

“If it was something that was going to
gives them with block programming to complete or fit in what they need to fit in.”

help me or help me progress getting credits, it would be something I could do.”

“I had to do it because my schedule was really full and I had to take Health and pass, I had to take that online.”

“From what I’ve seen and what I’ve experienced, I would say that kids especially like to have online classes because it enables them to earn credits while not taking up space during the school day.”

“There were some courses in my past years that I was not able to fit in with my schedule and they were courses that were required graduate, so I needed to take a Health course online, because there was no other way I could fit it in with my current class schedule.”

“Probably because you get more classes in and they’re easier to schedule that way, because if the classes conflict each other, then you can go and take one class, and
then you can also take a different class, even if they’re offered at the same time.”

“It makes things easier because if you don’t have a schedule that fits with you can’t fit all the classes that you want, then you can take it online, do a cyber program like that.”

“I think it makes it easier for us with overwhelming schedules.”

“I think it offers an easy way to get some classes out of the way so that it doesn’t take up space on their schedule, like some of the required classes.”

“It is very convenient if you wanted-- especially because I, personally went into online courses because I play tennis. Whether it’s sports or health reasons, it’s just very convenient for them, time-wise.”

“It’s a great way to get extra credits on top of your other classes. You can even do an online course during your semester classes, for example,
I need a history credit, so I can get my history credit online while continuing to do my current classes.”

“Think it’s good if students have-- if they can’t fit something in their schedule.”

“It’s more convenient overall. I didn’t have any room in my schedule, that’s why I took it.”

Social interaction

“There’s a social component right, and students are obviously growing up as much socially as they are academically and being with friends, potentially having the opportunity to graduate with their friends and continue in the community where they are, feels like home.”

“His friends are here. His other classes are here, his other classes where he has a physical presence. His athletics are here, his social life is here.”

“I think that some kids feel alienated or that they don’t fit in-- and it’s easier for them to do cyber. From the few other kids that I have ever met, I think that it was a relief for them to not have the pressure of school.”

“The social aspect of, his friends are still here, being in a play, or playing sports, or tech school, or whatever, can’t be done, unless you go

“In the cases that I’ve seen, it’s been because of the in-school environment of the bullying or the harassment or just because for some kids it’s easier to do their learning online or they don’t feel comfortable in a classroom.”

“I’m definitely more of a social person, so it’s not really something that I’m looking for. But I definitely think that having that opportunity to be able to kind of take myself out of the situation and be able to be constantly surrounded by people, is nice.”

“Students enjoy having peer interaction which they weren’t experiencing when they were fully cyber and fully outside of the district. In the program they’re in now, they can spend part of their day with their peers, and peers are important to students.”
through the in-district cyber school, so that was for him.”

“I still think there needs to be-- we can’t forget the social. Kids need to-- I think everything is always on the computer. There needs to be other ways you depend for knowledge like whether you read a book or going to.”

“Socially, I was concerned about her not interacting with other kids before she walked out of here and went to college.”

“I enjoy being in a classroom and learning like that. But if I had to go back to cyber, like if I were to be injured again, I would definitely go back to cyber. It was a great help during that.”

Cost/Financials  “We actually brought someone on full-time to run the program and used the savings that he was able to bring kids back into sort of offset the cost for the whole program.”

“We budget for just local donations or local grants, anything like that to run different programs.”

“The state has some grants that are available.”

“The best way to address this, the best way to look at it is look at the current purchasing practices, current expenditures, see where fixed assets are
being purchased because fixed assets are a dead zone anymore.”

“Maybe eliminate some of those and come back to looking at dynamic resources, flexible solutions, online solutions that grow overtime, online courses, online content, robotics programs, even things like remediation, I would consider a blended solution.”

“If you’re able to use state grants, that’s great because you can open your budget and raise your expenditure and your revenue to the same.”

“Also working with your education foundation is another really great way.”

“Training teachers and supporting administrators in a successful implementation of online learning, again, partnering with organizations that may be skilled in training.”

“Not even having the money, but partner with your neighboring districts that have an online program to just learn from what your neighbor is doing.”
APPENDIX F: WORD WEBS

Most Common Themes

Administration Responses
Parent Responses
Student Responses

Combined Responses From all Participants
VITA

John Christopher Hardin
2609 Wister Court
Lansdale, PA 19446
johnchardin2013@gmail.com
610-509-6008

Education & Certifications

Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA
Ed.D. Education Leadership & Management
June 2015
GPA: 3.93

Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
PA Certification: K-12 Principal
May 2013
GPA: 4.0

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA
M.Ed. Curriculum and Instruction
December 2008
GPA: 3.81

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA
B.A. Speech Communication; Minor, Public Relations
December 2002
GPA: 3.41

Administrative Experience

- Interim Dean of Students: Palisades High School
  March 2015 to May 2015

- K-12 Principal/Superintendent Internship & Curriculum & Instruction Internship:
  Palisades School District
  May 2012 to November 2014

Teaching Experience

- English Teacher
  Palisades School District, Palisades High School, Kintnersville, PA
  August 2008 to Present

- English Teacher
  Allentown School District
  CIS: Success Academy Fairgrounds, Allentown, PA
  Feb. 2007 to Aug. 2008

Professional Experience

- Site Coordinator
  Communities In Schools of the Lehigh Valley, Inc.,
  Francis D. Raub & South Mountain Middle Schools, Alternative Learning Center
  Allentown School District, Allentown, PA
  Jan. 2005 to Feb. 2007