

**A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Equity-centered High School Graduation and Entrance  
into Post-secondary Program Strategies Among Urban Public High School Educators**

**Doctoral Digital Portfolio**

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## EQUITY FACTORS IN URBAN EDUCATION

### **Contextualization**

The concept of equity in society has been a hotly debated topic as it pertains to many aspects of society such as the workforce, the justice system, politics, government, advertising, the military, etc. For example, if you examine some of the most recent U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS) findings from June 2023 you might wonder about the state of equity in the United States. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023, SCOTUS ruled that voting policies that dilute voter strength based on race are prohibited. Then three weeks later on June 29<sup>th</sup>, SCOTUS struck down race-conscious admissions policies at Harvard and the University of North Carolina (UNC) (SCOTUS, 2023). As Americans we are left wondering if equity will ever be found in education. If the highest court in our country strikes down policies that seek to provide equitable admission into some of the most prestigious universities, the conclusion could be made that equity is not of importance in education. Considering this context, it may seem that our country is in a quagmire in the equity debate for education. If the highest court does not believe there is still a need for policies like Affirmative Action, then is there a need for equity policies within secondary and elementary education?

A recent poll demonstrated that Americans do feel that there is a need for more equity within education. In a survey conducted by Gallup (2023), 55% of Americans responded that they are dissatisfied with the quality of education students receive in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Gallup, 2023). When asked what the reasons are for their dissatisfaction the largest reasons given were, “poor/outdated curriculum” “poor quality education/outranked by other countries”, and “lack of teaching basic subjects (reading, writing, arithmetic)” (Gallup, 2023). Americans are aware that there are problems in education. The survey also asked how to improve education, and the top three responses were, “quality teachers/better educated/more

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involvement/caring,” “back to the basic curriculum (reading, writing, arithmetic),” and “improve school funding” (Gallup, 2023). This would indicate that Americans are not only aware of the problems in our education system, but they also believe that at some level the government should be involved in improving the system. If Americans are both aware of the problems and can suggest possible solutions than why is it that American society has not found ways to improve the system?

Throughout this study there is an endeavor to understand how over thirty years of research has been conducted on how to improve urban graduation rates, yet there is still evidence that urban education systems are still not equitable when compared to the suburban systems. Therefore, the studies examined in the literature review will be put in context with what was happening in American politics and American society. The correlation of each study with the time period will hopefully demonstrate that education systems and research in education systems are a reflection of politics and society.

Further, with over twenty years of experience in education working with majority Black and Brown students, refugee students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, I can say that the link between past research, politics, American society and how they all impact urban education is especially important to the students affected by the inequities. I feel a daily urgency to find solutions to these inequities that assuredly still exist and prevent some of our most vulnerable youth from accessing their equitable entrance into society. This study seeks to determine what factors can provide a more equitable system of education for some of the most vulnerable students in our country, students in urban education.

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### **Statement of the Problem**

When considering the components at play in American society it becomes clear that there are problems with equity within our education system. It could also be concluded that because of student population in urban education systems these problems become even more meaningful. This study seeks to determine a set of factors that lead to equity within urban education based on research conducted over the past thirty years up to the present-day. There is a significant amount of research done on equity within urban education, however, the findings from these research studies once applied do not lead to equity within the system. Therefore, even with a significant amount of research there is still a lack of understanding of how to create equity within urban education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The central purpose of this study was to determine a set of factors that once applied to urban school districts would increase the equity of the system. To accomplish this purpose, the study also had to consider what makes an education system equitable and then compare that to urban education systems. Finally, this study sought to understand the opinions of urban educators in the secondary setting on how to increase graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study represents the next step in research on equity within urban education. This is due in part to a number of elements. First, my personal experience of over twenty years in urban education and experience with how research done on equity within urban education was implemented at the building level and the results of that implementation. Second, a strength-based perspective on urban education and the impact that it has on research into equity factors

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for students. Third, the resulting equity factors from the study when implemented will increase graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary education for urban students. Fourth, the exciting possibility that with more urban students graduating from post-secondary education they will have a positive impact on their chosen career fields and increase equity for all within American society.

### Definition of Terms

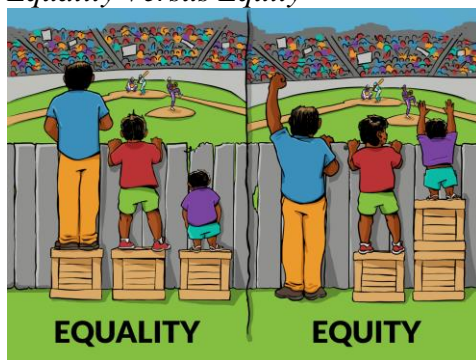
There are many definitions for some of the terms used throughout this study, therefore it is important to distinguish how the terms are used for the purposes of this study.

#### *What is equity in American society?*

The illustration by the artist Angus Maguire depicting three people trying to watch a baseball game does an excellent job explaining the difference between equality and equity. In American society we sometimes get trapped into believing that if supports are equally given then all people are able to participate; however, we know from experience that even when the same supports are given access is still not guaranteed.

### Figure 1

#### *Equality Versus Equity*



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### ***What is equity within American education?***

If the purpose of an education system is to prepare students for post-secondary experiences, then a school system is equitable when its students graduate and go on to their chosen post-secondary experiences including college, trade schools, internships, apprenticeships, and the workforce. In essence, the school system has provided the necessary resources to students so that they can graduate and pursue their chosen career path.

### ***What is urban education?***

Urban education is the collection of public schools, “inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more” (NCES, 2006). It does not include school systems that are considered “suburban” or outside of the inner city and majority middle-class.

### ***What are equity factors?***

This study examined multiple research studies to determine a list of factors researchers claimed would increase graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary education in urban public schools. This set of factors was referred to as equity factors, or factors that increase the overall equity of the system.

### ***What is the difference between a strength-based and deficit-based perspective in research?***

In the course of researching for this study, I found that a majority of the research done on urban graduation rates focused on the problems within the system. For example, the title for a study done by J. Freeman and B. Simonsen in 2015 reads, “Examining the impact of policy and practice interventions on high school dropout and school completion rates...” This title is written from a deficit-based perspective. Whereas Denten in their dissertation has the title, “Does trust really matter? A comparison of urban schools with high, middle and low graduation rates.” The difference is subtle, but in one the research is examining the students that “dropped out,” and

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compared to the other researcher that examines the students that graduated. When the majority of research on a topic examines the deficits of the topic there is a negative perspective that forms. When those that are not as familiar with a topic start to examine this deficit-based perspective research the likely opinion that will be reached will also be deficit-based. As a strength-based researcher I want to move away from the deficit-based perspective and focus on how the topic of urban education is changing and growing in a more positive trajectory.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study seeks to change ways of understanding equity within urban education in the broader context of education, politics, society, and in research. It would not be enough to seek to change just one aspect of urban education knowledge because each of these components is connected. With this goal, Critical Race Theory is the theoretical framework that guides the research and how the information gathered is analyzed. Paulo Freire states, "Praxis is reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970). I am interested in positive change in my research topic and generating, "a new understanding of what constitutes legitimate knowledge" (Davis and Harrison, 2013). Ultimately, I will utilize CRT as a theoretical framework because it seeks to, "include a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure...and should be democratic participatory, inclusive, and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change" (Bell, 2007).

The primary theory that will guide my research is Critical Race Theory. In this section I will focus on a critique of CRT including a discussion of my positionality and intersectionality, defining the purpose of CRT in my research, a discussion of the pros and cons of the theory, and

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finally how my research will contribute to furthering the academic discussion of CRT in the field of education.

### **Positionality and Intersectionality**

To begin my discussion of CRT and how it forms the basis for my research, it would be appropriate to discuss my positionality and intersectionality not just on how it pertains to my career, but also my place in society. Kimberlé Crenshaw explains what intersectionality is by saying that it is a metaphor for how multiple forms of inequality will compound and create obstacles that are not understood even by those within a marginalized group. Therefore, understanding a person's intersectionality helps to understand their problems in society and move toward a socially just society (NAIS, 2018). My positionality or my world view and my intersectionality help to explain why I chose CRT as the theory that guides my research.

I am forty-six years old, Caucasian, lesbian, mother, wife, and Christian. I have lived in the city of St. Louis for half of my life with my wife. The first half of my life I lived with my parents who are still together in the suburbs of St. Louis. Although the people around me were upper middle class growing up, my family was on the edge of lower middle class. Growing up I remember my parents struggling to keep the heat turned on, needing to use food stamps, and buying clothes from Goodwill. I think this impacted me in ways that I am still unpacking today. My parents never sat down and explained things to me, but I could tell that we were different from the other families in the neighborhood. I think I gained a perspective of feeling less than those around me. When I was very young, I wanted to have what my peers had; however, as I got older, I met other people who were like me and started to rebel against the idea of consumerism and gained a mistrust of wealth. My parents raised me to treat all people with love and respect and to believe that God created all of us with equity. Even if the world did not

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treat people with equity, we should. The relationships that I cultivated were with people who were like me and many of those relationships were with African Americans and kids who lived in the city. I felt accepted and understood by these friends.

When I went to college I did the same thing, I met people who were like me and wanted to change the world. I also met other lesbians for the first time. This was something I had known about myself for a long time but had never expressed to anyone. Eventually, I met my wife through some of the friends I had made at college. She and I clicked right away and have been together now for twenty-five years. She is my perfect life partner. After all this time we are practically the same person. Our relationship has always been wonderful, but the stress of being in a gay relationship from outside entities has not been wonderful. When I told my parents I was in a gay relationship, they called me foul names and kicked me out of the house. After years of me trying to rebuild our relationship, my parents refused to support my marriage, and my family turned their back on us. I had to work so hard to rebuild those relationships over the years and I do not think that things will ever be like they would if I were married to a man. When I told my family that I was pregnant with our son, everything changed. They started to support us and wanted to be involved in our lives. They had a baby shower for us where my eldest uncle made a speech about how excited he was for our son Oskar to come into the family.

All these experiences with my family have shaped who I am and propel me to make the world more equitable. I fully believe that these experiences in my childhood and young adulthood made me well suited to teaching in an urban setting. I have not had the same life experiences as my students, but the life experiences I have had allow me to empathize and understand the need for social justice in our world. I would also say that the intersectionality of growing up lower middle-class in an upper middle-class community and the combination of

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homophobia in my family and in society created a person that fights for the rights of those that are disenfranchised.

Even though my school district has never had a policy discriminating against gay people, I have always been wary of telling people about myself. I had been teaching for over ten years before I told the people I worked with. I did not tell my students until after I had been teaching for thirteen years. I finally decided that it was not fair to myself or my students that I continue to hide who I am. Just as CRT would argue, it is important to have visibility. I came out to my students on the first day of school and was surprised that most did not react at all. Some had questions, but mostly they accepted me and wanted to know what kind of teacher I was going to be. I believe that being part of a marginalized group and part of the majority group gave me a unique intersectionality and perspective on society and specifically education. Ultimately, this perspective has helped me to become a self-reflective person and a patient person. I will continue to fight for change in my world and society.

### **Defining the Purpose of Critical Race Theory in my Research**

CRT was born during the 1960s and 1970s from the minds of many legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, Charles R. Lawrence III, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia J Williams (Ansell, 2008). Their collective interest in eroding racism in American society started in the field of law, but has transcended to help all fields, including education, to use critical theory to identify the impact of racism on systems in our society. Within the context of education and for my research, I will utilize the definitions from Delgado (2023) and Ladson-Billings (1998). Delgado (2023) states:

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The

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movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious. (3)

In my research I will demonstrate that past research on the topic of high school graduation and entry into post-secondary programs has a negative deficit-based approach ultimately impacting the ability of urban education to provide equitable opportunities to its students. The impact of many different entities across society has also contributed to the racist policies created around support of urban schools which are primarily students in minority groups such as African Americans and immigrants. Racism is so embedded in our society that only a CRT perspective will help to uncover the pathway to equity and social justice.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) states in her paper on CRT in education:

Beyond equal treatment was the need to redress past inequities. Thus, there was a move toward affirmative action and the creation of African Americans and other marginalized groups as “protected classes” to ensure that they were not systematically screened out of opportunities in employment, college admission, and housing. If we look at the way that public education is currently configured, it is possible to see the ways that CRT can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience. (18)

This quote defines the reason why CRT is integral in the discussion of equity in urban education. The entrenched racism within the education system has created such an inequitable situation that the only way to pull us out of this racist perspective is with a CRT lens otherwise the argument will always be that there are laws in place that prohibit the need for further

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discussion of inequity in the system. In our current political climate, there are even more threats to equity in education and the need to continue to critically examine the ways that the field of education needs CRT to understand how we as an American society are still failing to support our most vulnerable students in urban education.

### **Pros and Cons of Critical Race Theory**

#### *Pros*

There are so many ways that CRT is pro for the field of education. For this paper I will focus on three, the focus on social justice at its core, the positive impact on feelings about yourself as a marginalized student, and the connection to uplifting the “voice” of marginalized people. These are just three of the countless opportunities that CRT offers to the academic discussion of equity in education.

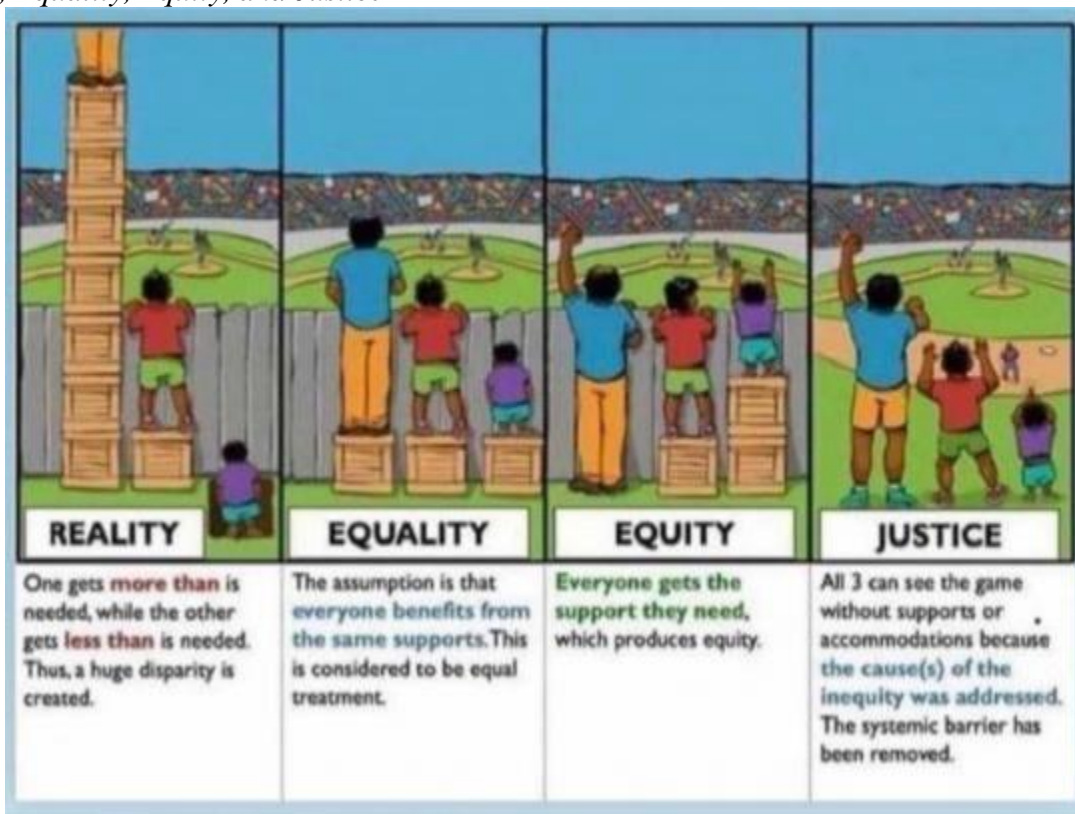
In the quote from Gladson-Billings discussed earlier we see the focus in CRT on equity for students in their pursuit of employment, admission into college, and equal access to housing. This speaks to the heart of the movement which is social justice through education. The theory supports the rationale that through equitable access to high quality education a student can move on to their preferred post-secondary options. With more African American and Latinx students entering their preferred careers there could be a shift in the overall social justice of American society. Very often we see the graphic below, created by Restoring Racial Justice, used to explain equity and social justice which stems from the academic discussion of CRT. This picture demonstrates the concepts of CRT in that we see there are barriers (the fence) in the way for people being able to see the game. I would argue that our current systems within education are the fence. The inequities start at the earliest stages of education and continue through till post-secondary. CRT offers a perspective for those in

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education to first acknowledge and then examine all the ways that education acts as a barrier to social justice. In the last panel of the picture, we see all three people watching the game without a fence in the way. I would suggest that education, although it has been the fence in the past, could now be the green grass the people stand on to view the game. As educators we need to support our students in the most natural/authentic way that meets their needs and encourages them to find the path that enriches their lives and those in their communities.

**Figure 2**

*Reality, Equality, Equity, and Justice*



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Another pro for CRT in education is the impact it can have on how marginalized students conceptualize their ideas of self. I have many students that do go on and pursue their post-secondary dreams, but I also have students that believe these dreams are not attainable for

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them. One of my students discussed “stepping off the porch,” and what that means for him. He stated that there is constant pressure to join a gang in his neighborhood. He has tried to keep away from these influences, but as a result he does not feel safe and decides to not associate with those in the neighborhood. In our talks about this feeling he has, I asked if he sees himself going on to college. He said that he wants to be a lawyer in the future so that he can support his community. His response demonstrates that with the support of educators that admire him, and understand his perspective on the world, he can conceptualize a life outside of his neighborhood. In the quote from Delgado (2023) he emphasizes the focus on changing emotions and the unconscious in society. I would add that the change needs to happen for all people in America. For my students they need to know that they are valued and their contributions to society are important. They do not need to fit into the stereotypes that American society has portrayed for so many years. CRT starts the conversation about how pervasive racism is and then continues by stating we need to find ways to hold up a metaphorical mirror to all people. Caucasian people need to recognize the historical trauma of slavery and that we still benefit from white supremacy and white privilege. All marginalized groups like African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and those who are differently abled need to see that they are beautiful and worthy of inclusion into American society and guaranteed the same rights and privileges as Caucasians.

The Black Panther movies do such an excellent job of portraying this concept of CRT. The concept of positive self-image and all that idea contains can be seen in the movies. Due to racism and bias in the film making world there had never been a stand-alone movie depicting Black superheroes before Black Panther. The movies do such a wonderful job demonstrating the power of Black culture and community. (Jiaxi & Changsong, 2023) In

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addition, the movies demonstrate the power of storytelling. In my school we took our students to see the second Black Panther movie. It was amazing to sit in the audience with students that had grown up with this image and could also internalize the message of positive self-image. CRT seeks to change the message that has been historically given to marginalized groups and create a positive self-image for students to use as they decide who they will be in American society.

A final pro of CRT is the focus on “voice.” Ladson-Billings (1998) states, “the ‘voice’ component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed.” In my research I will give “voice” to the educators in urban education that are passionate about the success of their students. CRT asserts that through this uplifting of “voice” through academic research the realities of urban students will be understood and acknowledged. I hope to highlight the ways that adding the “voice” of urban educators adds to the overall understanding of education in America. CRT also provides a structure for academic discussions about equity in education. From my research on equity in urban education there is a negative bias when discussing urban students, who are primarily from marginalized/oppressed groups. When the American education system is evaluated using a CRT lens racism and biases become apparent. What is seen in research is that there are problems with the teachers, problems with the students and problems with the schools. This is not where the problems lie. The problems lie in the system itself. I believe that the only way to change the system is to add more voices to the discussion that understand the inequity in our society. By using a CRT lens, the reality of the education system in America can be changed.

### *Cons*

It is difficult in the context of equity in education to determine cons to using CRT to guide the discussion. Therefore, when determining the possible cons to using CRT they all come

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back to pervasiveness of racism in American society. The cons that I will focus on are the controversy attributed to CRT, educators threatened if they discuss CRT with students, and lack of other marginalized groups being included.

The first con comes from the controversy associated with CRT. A few years ago, some colleagues and I went to a conference on equity in education. Before we left, we were told by our network superintendent to not discuss CRT due to the controversy surrounding it. At the time I did not understand the weight of what he said. I understood that he did not want any headlines like, “Teachers thrown out of conference for discussing CRT,” however in retrospect a person who was influential in our district did not want to discuss something that is at the heart of academic discourse in our field because it could be considered too controversial. I recognize that there are others in the field of education that are scared to discuss racism and the tenets of CRT, but that fear cannot stop the discussion.

My district does not have a policy on CRT, but there are many states around the country that have banned any discussion of CRT and have also banned any books that may discuss it as well. I started my career as a social studies teacher and part of my curriculum was early American history. I did my best using the textbooks I had available to me to teach, with integrity, the story of the slave trade. The material in the books was so whitewashed and completely diminished the trauma of slavery and the strength of those that endured it. There was nothing available except articles I had found, but nothing at the level an eighth grader could understand. If CRT had not been deemed controversial by those in power in the field of education, perhaps I would have been able to properly teach slavery to students that needed to understand this period of history and strength their ancestors possessed to not only survive but

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also thrive. At a certain point we must agree that the controversy surrounding CRT comes from racism and a fear of losing white supremacy/white privilege.

The second con is a result of the political controversy surrounding CRT and that is the threat of losing your job as an educator in certain states if you discuss CRT with your students. As I stated earlier, I am fortunate to work in a district that does not have any policies against discussing CRT with my students, but that is not true for many other urban educators across the country. In the state of Florida, it is now against the law to teach any tenet of CRT. Florida's Freedom Bill signed into law by Gov. DeSantis states, "The bill defines individual freedoms based on the fundamental truth that all individuals are equal before the law and have inalienable rights. Accordingly, required instruction, instructional materials, and professional development in public schools must be consistent with the principles of individual freedom" (Individual Freedom, 2022). For those that teach under laws like this one, I can see that CRT would be a scary topic.

A year ago, I had a parent that wanted to meet with me to discuss some of their concerns about entering our school. The student had just moved from Florida and her mother and grandmother were concerned about the curriculum in our school district. They asked me if we taught CRT. I said that honestly, we have no set curriculum, but there is also no policy in the district against teachers teaching CRT. They asked about specific topics in our curriculum, and I stated that it would be up to the teacher on how they teach those topics. I suggested they speak with the teacher, but that the district has no official policy stating that teachers cannot teach the tenets of CRT. The student really struggled in school both academically and socially. I had many interactions with her mom and grandmother. There were so many concerns about this

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student that were not brought up in that first meeting that made the whole encounter an opportunity lost.

The final con in this critique is concerned with how my topic relates to CRT. At the heart of CRT is the concept of race and the impact of racism in education. I would argue that race is only one of the ways urban students are marginalized that they are also discriminated against because of immigrant status. One of the internal criticisms of CRT according to Delgado (2023) is that the CRT movement has been reluctant to include other marginalized groups like immigrants, LGBTQ+, Jews, and Muslims. In my discussion of urban students there will be the assumption that all these marginalized groups are included. The argument against this type of research is that it dilutes the purpose of CRT and the focus on race. Race does need to be at the forefront of my research, but so does the discrimination against many other marginalized groups that find themselves in urban public schools. For example, we have a large Congolese population at my school. My students were placed, by the International Institute, in Hodiament, which is St. Louis Housing Authority, housing that is in poor condition. They must ride the bus to my school on the south side of St. Louis so that they can receive ESOL support. There are two ESOL teachers with over one hundred students. The district, the state, and the federal government still expect these students to read, write, and do math at grade level after a year of being in the country. Even though many of these students had been living in refugee camps prior to coming to the US and more than likely did not attend a formal school. The marginalized students of this country are more often found in urban education. Even though CRT does not include these groups of people, I will use the theory to help those who are not in urban education better understand the reality of urban education.

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**Furthering the Discussion of CRT in the Field of Education**

The diagram below demonstrates the connections between the tenets of CRT and the goals of my research.

**Figure 3**

*Circle Comparison Chart of the Tenets of CRT and the Goals of my research*

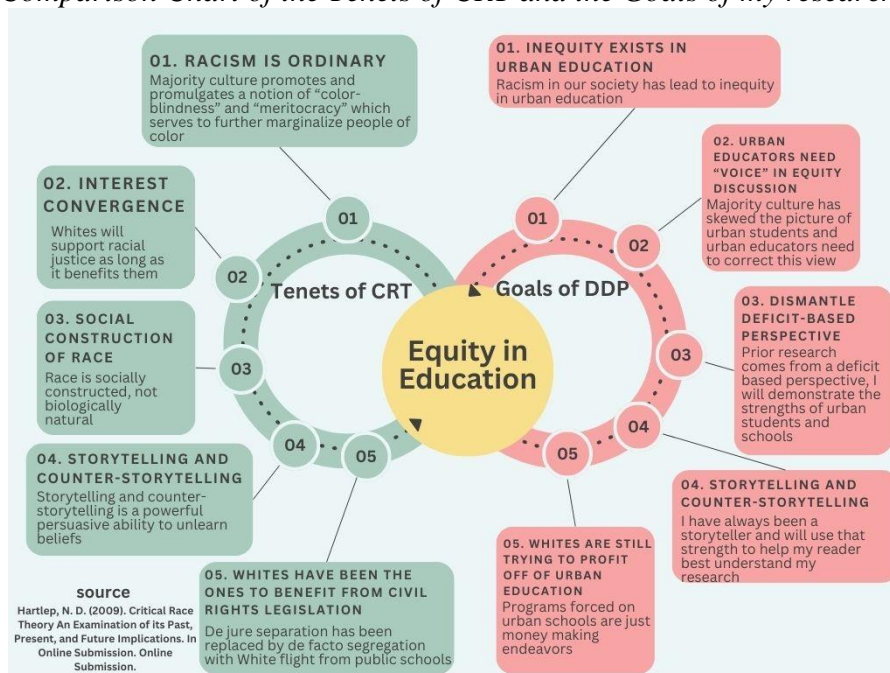


Chart created by researcher Erika Starr-Hunter

The first tenet of CRT is that “Racism is Ordinary.” (Hartlep, 2009) This means that racism is so pervasive in our society that some people do not even notice it. Delgado (2023) discusses microaggressions and how Caucasian people treat African Americans differently without even knowing it. For this project, I will assume the historical neglect of urban school systems is connected to this pervasive racism in our society. When considering the needs of urban students, the bare minimum has been provided. I used to substitute teach for a wealthy school district in the county of St. Louis and in each of the schools there was a teacher work room where there was paper of all colors, multiple copy machines, and laminators. At my school

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I had to purchase my own paper. In fact, multiple times I put a project on Donorschoose.org to get paper donated to my classroom.

The second tenet of CRT is “Interest Convergence” (Hartlep, 2009). This tenet asserts that White people will only support racial justice if it benefits them. Speaking as a White person, I would say that this is not always true, but for a large group of White people it is. I also believe that most people in the world will not offer to extend their hand unless it somehow benefits them. This is why one of the goals of my research project is to give “voice” to the urban educator. Some urban educators are African American, but many are also Caucasian. The thought process is that urban educators will have a louder and more passionate “voice” for ideas that will help support their students. In addition, if the ideas come from urban educators, other urban educators might be more likely to listen.

The third tenet of CRT is that “Race is a Social Construction” (Hartlep, 2009). The concept of race having anything to do with who a person is, is a social construction that comes from a fear of losing supremacy and privilege. This concept is so evident when I speak with my son about his friends at school. My son comes home and tells me about his best friend at school. He talks about the games they like to play, the drawings he does, and the secrets they share. He never mentions the child’s race. I then asked if he would show his picture on the class photo and the child is African American. I love that Oskar does not consider race at all when describing his friend. In my research, I want to dismantle some of the preconceived notions of urban education. One of the most pervasive I found was that urban students are drop-outs. Using the term “drop-out” in the title of the paper automatically gives a negative bias and a deficit-based perspective on urban education. The problem with urban education is the racism and discrimination coming in from outside. I would like to demonstrate a strength-based

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insider's perspective on urban education in my research, so that the narrative about urban education can start to change.

The fourth tenet of CRT is “storytelling and counter-storytelling” (Hartlep, 2009). CRT academics use storytelling and counter-storytelling to best illuminate the issues of racism in our country. When you read any CRT paper you will read stories from the author to illuminate their topic. One of the most interesting came from Kimberlé Crenshaw in her Ted Talk about intersectionality (Russo, 2018). She speaks about a woman named Emma D. who filed a lawsuit against a car company for discrimination. She speaks about how Emma's intersectionality is what caused the court to throw the suit out. Crenshaw speaks about how the frame of the problem was the issue, and this is how she developed intersectionality. This story perfectly explains the topic and makes it accessible to the audience. I will also use storytelling in this project to help the reader better understand the state of equity in urban education. Even before CRT I used storytelling to help get an idea across to my students. I used to tell my students the story of how my wife, and I started dating. I used this story to teach the parts of plot. I also hoped that this story would be interesting to them and then help them remember the topic I was teaching. Of course, I would really get into it and add lots of drama to help them remember. I think that storytelling will help my readers understand that first I am authentic in my passion for equity in education and I hope that my storytelling helps my readers to sort of get a front row seat to see what is happening in urban education.

The final tenet of CRT is, “Whites have been the ones to benefit from civil rights legislation” (Hartlep, 2009). Hartlep describes how *Brown v Board of Education* attempted to desegregate public schools, but what happened was White people moved away from schools that had Black students causing another form of segregation. I saw this at my school. Many students

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at my school are African American, but when you look at the racial makeup of the city, you will see there are more Caucasians that live in the city. Many Caucasian families will put their students into religious schools or into other private schools. Then these parents argue about wanting funding from the government for the private religious schools, causing a dilemma that many states are facing about separation of church and state, all from racism. I will discuss this topic further by examining some of the programs listed by past researchers that were supposed to correct the problem of low graduation rates. One example from the research and from my own experience is the program AVID. My school district spent millions of dollars buying all the materials for middle and high schools and taking teachers on training trips. We used AVID for two years and then the program was abandoned. I could give many more examples of outside groups coming into urban schools and selling programs that are research-based, but when applied to the schools does not have any real impact on graduation rates.

By aligning the goals of my project with the tenets of CRT I will help to further the discussion surrounding CRT in the field of education. I hope to also demonstrate through my research the validity CRT has in the discussion of urban education. Urban students have been neglected long enough because of racist systems. It is time to face the reality of urban education and demand that change happen so that there can be equity in education.

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### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study of equity within urban education systems.

1. What factors are urban education systems using to create equity within their system?
2. What factors lead to increased graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?
3. What factors have little impact on graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?

### **Limitations**

The study has the following limitations:

1. All data was publicly available on state, district, and school websites. This relies on these entities reporting their data accurately.
2. There could be thousands of factors that contribute to equity within urban education systems, but this study will only examine the factors most widely researched and utilized by urban districts.
3. A small sample size.

### **Assumptions**

This study included the following assumptions.

1. The equity factors could positively impact graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education.
2. A strength-based perspective in research will yield results that will have a positive impact on the topic of urban education.
3. The experiences of the researcher in urban education will have a positive impact on research conducted.

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### **Current Status and Gaps**

To determine the basis for current equity factors in urban education a review of research studies conducted over the past thirty years on graduation rates and the introduction of certain factors deemed by researchers to provide equity to urban education were examined. There were over thirty-five research studies on high school graduation rates that suggested a specific factor or factors that would positively impact the success of students on their road toward graduation and entry into post-secondary education.

There are multiple gaps in the research. The first gap can be found in the fact that there is still a huge discrepancy between the graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs between urban school districts and the overall graduation rate for the state. For the state of Missouri, the overall high school graduation rate is 92%, but one of the major urban school districts, St. Louis Public Schools, only has a 73% graduation rate. This discrepancy demonstrates the disconnect between graduation rate research and application of the interventions/equity factors that would make the most difference for urban students. The second gap can be found in the perspective of the researchers. When we examine the history of research on urban education and graduation rates a trend in deficit-perspective of urban students. In many of the studies that I reviewed, the researchers shared a common perspective of urban education, that students are failing and low socioeconomic status bias. A further discussion of this can be found in the review of literature. This bias impacts the research and ultimately determines the outcome of the study. Once the research is disseminated the bias is also disseminated, although it could also be that the bias already exists in our society.

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### **Review of Literature**

To determine the basis for current equity factors in urban education a review of research studies conducted over the past thirty years on graduation rates and the introduction of certain factors deemed by researchers to provide equity to urban education were examined. There were over thirty-five research studies on high school graduation rates that suggested a specific factor or factors that would positively impact the success of students on their road toward graduation and entry into post-secondary education.

The review of research studies is organized chronologically to provide context into possible influences on the researcher. Therefore, the research study was aligned with the current political initiatives and the perspectives of American society on the importance of graduation and entrance into post-secondary education. Finally, the discussion of each study reveals the equity factor or factors determined by each researcher.

#### **The 1990s**

The first research study I examined was conducted in 1995 by Jack Frymeir in conjunction with Phi Delta Kappa, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the Council of Great City Schools, to study high school graduation rates in large cities and the factors that contributed to students graduating within four years. This study was supported by a national push, started in 1989, to increase graduation rates to 90 percent by the year 2000 (Frymeir, 1995). In this study, Frymeir determined four factors that affect school completion, 1. parental involvement 2. student abilities and attitudes 3. peer influence and 4. school curriculum (Frymeir, 1995).

Frymeir studied schools in Seattle, Nashville, Long Beach, San Diego, Boston, Memphis, Milwaukee, and Toledo, then gathered data on graduating cohorts for a 2-year period. Frymeir

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discusses that up to this research study very little data had been gathered about graduation rates in urban schools. Therefore, gathering the information took two years to speak with principals and see their final approved graduate lists. He also stated that schools were not following the students as they moved schools. Each year a new record was created for each student. His hope was that future researchers would find a way to make a national database with this information and there would be a national study of all urban schools (Frymeir, 1995).

In addition, Frymeir comments that, “Within some districts, one school may have a dropout rate of less than 5 percent while another school in that same district has a dropout rate of 60 percent. In every instance in which such discrepancies were identified, it was determined that the discrepancies were actually the result of policies designed to create what might be described as ‘islands of excellence’ within the districts to make a few schools, at least, especially attractive to parents as a way to discourage movement out of the city to the suburbs” (Frymeir, 1995).

In conclusion, Frymeir states, “What is needed? Four things: commitment, good information, extra resources, and special incentives that will encourage teachers and principals to assume responsibility for the demanding job of working with potential dropouts and stick with it until those students finish school” (Frymeir, 1995). Based on this conclusion, it appears that Frymeir puts the majority of the problem at the school level. He indicates that schools with proper incentives would be more inclined to help students graduate and that it would be naïve to believe that teachers and principals would want to do this work on their own. Therefore, the major equity factor determined by this study is the motivation of the school staff to ensure that students graduate.

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### **Early 2000s and No Child Left Behind**

The next decade of research is heavily influenced by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Based on the research conducted during the eighties and nineties and the lack of progress seen, NCLB was the national initiative to boost overall performance of all students in the country, but most impacted by this initiative were the urban public schools. As Frymeir indicated in his study, teachers and administrators needed to be properly incentivized to improve graduation rates and college and career readiness. Under NCLB accreditation for schools was now determined by how a district performed on their state assessments. Districts would lose their accreditation if they had too many years without making average yearly progress (AYP).

Having taught during this time in an urban school, I remember the shift to data and “moving kids” to perform better on their assessments. This was also the decade of educational programs. There were also so many programs that were brought into the schools to try to boost the performance of students. Essentially, these were businesses that were selling a product to districts stating that their product would help to “close the gap.” The problem was that there were so many of these programs and they were never utilized to their true potential, so they were abandoned after a short time. Further, the majority of these programs were created by people outside of the urban education system, so they did not have the needs of the urban student in mind.

One research study that highlights this was conducted by Corinne M. Herlihy and Janet Quint of MDRC (2006). MDRC is a non-profit and nonpartisan research firm. In this study they examined four programs to see if they helped overall graduation rates. The four programs were “Career Academies”, “First Things First,” “Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (Project GRAD),” and “Talent Development.” These programs were implemented in over 2,700 high

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schools across the country. The equity factor indicated in these programs focuses solely on the actions of the school staff. The researchers indicate that “instructional improvement and personalization are the twin pillars of high school reform” (Herlihy and Quint, 2006). They state that the research indicates that extended class periods, special catch-up courses, high quality curricula can improve student achievement.

In two other studies conducted during this decade of NCLB, the researchers explored two other programs. The first study conducted by Briana Mezuk, Irina Bondarenko, Suzanne Smith, and Eric Tucker (2010), examined the program “Competitive Policy Debate.” The researchers wanted to study whether participants in the program were more likely to graduate and meet college readiness benchmarks. In their research study they found that, “debaters were 25% more likely to graduate than comparable students” (Mezuk et al., 2010). The researchers also comment that despite NCLB initiatives and programs there has not been any significant change within the urban education setting (Mezuk et al., 2010). However, they do point out that although, “These disparities in school-based resources suggest school-based solution to the achievement gap problem...the socioeconomic achievement gap appears to be primarily due to inequities in household resources, indicating that policies that only address inequities in school performance will fail to address this gap” (Mezuk et al., 2010).

In a study titled, “The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis” the researcher, W.H. Jeynes wanted to discover the effect of parental involvement on student rates of graduation. They found that for all demographic groups there was a significant (.5 to .55 standard deviation unit) correlation between high parental involvement and student success in high school (Jeynes, 2007). The

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question then becomes, “How do we increase parental involvement in high school, a time when many parents tend to lessen their involvement?”

In another study conducted by Kyle M. McCallumore and Ervin F. Sparapani (2010), the researchers examined the impact of “Freshman Academies,” and found that students that experience success in 9<sup>th</sup> grade tend to be more likely to graduate in four years (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). However, the authors state that, “Reform programs, such as freshman academies, have helped alleviate some of the concerns, but the problems do not just involve the ninth grade. It is important to consider what can be done before high school begins to better prepare students for new challenges...” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The researchers from both of the studies conducted during this time pointed to the fact that although these programs demonstrated moderate success, they were not the overall answer to changing the problem of low graduation rates in urban high schools.

### **Pre-pandemic and Obama Era Education Reform**

The next period of research was conducted during the years of the Obama administration. After years under NCLB it became clear that there were unintended consequences of this reform strategy. Many states lowered their expectations in state tests to achieve AYP. In addition, teachers were “teaching to the test,” and many subjects like social studies, science, and fine arts were abandoned in urban education systems. Obama attempted to start a new initiative that would replace NCLB but only succeeded in creating Common Core an initiative to hold all states accountable for teaching all the standards including social studies and science (obamawhitehouse.archives.gov, 2016).

I remember when my building abandoned our social studies program. I saw that this was coming and got certified in English Language Arts. My principal came to me and asked if I

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would switch to ELA and incorporate social studies where I could. It was a really difficult time in my career because I saw this as another way that our children were becoming even more disadvantaged. Their counterparts in suburban schools continued to have all of the subject areas whereas our students were forced into 90-minute blocks of math and ELA. Then they had an additional math and ELA class.

With Obama's new initiative each state had the option of adopting the national Common Core. Missouri did not adopt but created instead Missouri Learning Standards which were very similar to what we had before. Other than that, very little changed in how we taught our students and the number of resources available to teach subjects that were not tested regularly on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP).

In this section I will examine research studies impacted by the Obama administration during the years 2011-2019. There are ten research studies during this time that I will highlight. Most of the research conducted during this time focused again on education programs and their impact on graduation rates, but there was also a new trend to focus on factors outside of the school such as parent support, student mobility, segregation, and societal changes. I believe that researchers were starting to see that there was no magic program that would change graduation rates, there were issues going on in society that greatly impacted urban high school graduation rates.

The first set of studies that I will examine are those that focused on programs and initiatives that sought to change how curriculum was taught. The first study was conducted by Lydia Bartlett, Lori Kupczynski, and Glenda Holland (2011). In their study they wanted to explore the impact of the "School Within a School," model on graduation rates (Bartlett et al., 2011). The researchers studied one urban high school in Texas and found that the "School

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Within a School” model positively impacted graduation rates at the school. It is interesting to note that in their introduction they mention, “To an unprecedented degree, this is the era of big business in educational entrepreneurship” (Bartlett et al., 2011). In a study conducted by Mac Iver and Messel (2012) in Baltimore Public Schools they wanted to learn why graduation rates in Baltimore Public Schools were lower than many schools in the suburbs. The researchers found that students who had low attendance rates in 9<sup>th</sup> grade graduated at much lower rates than their peers with higher attendance rates (Mac Iver and Messel, 2012). They suggest that intervention at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year would help to increase graduation rates. They also found a predictor in 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who had lower math and reading scores on standardized tests (Mac Iver and Messel, 2012). When examined in conjunction the researchers felt that the majority of intervention still needed to be implemented in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

In another study by Mark Brandon Greene (2013), they explored the impact relationships with staff made on graduation rates. They interviewed ten African American males to determine what factors supported them on their path to graduation. Greene found that although there were significant similarities between each of the participants socioeconomic status and family background the biggest difference was whether they had formed a supportive relationship with teachers or counselors at their school (Greene, 2013). Greene’s study found that, “critical supportive relationships with teachers and counselors allowed some African American male students to successfully recover from slow starts in their 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade years, while similar African American male students failed to make the supportive connections with school staff and were unsuccessful in reaching graduation” (Greene, 2013). Greene also mentions that the intersection of race and gender has a significant impact on graduation rates but does not explore

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the reasons behind why some African American male students did not make supportive relationships.

Another study conducted during the same year examined how transcendental meditation impacted graduation rates. Robert D. Colbert studied the impact of the “Quiet Time/Transcendental Meditation” program at an urban high school. Colbert’s hypothesis was that training in a stress reduction program would positively impact overall graduation rates (Colbert, 2013). They found that, “Overall the percentage of graduating meditating students was 87.1% and the percentage of graduating non-meditating students was 66.7%” (Colbert, 2013). These results indicate that meditation, if it is the only factor contributing to graduation, is successful.

I remember a program that came to my school during the 2008-2009 school year called “Restorative Justice in Schools.” I had a class of about 27 students, and we were instructed to sit in a circle and then go around the circle and answer fairly personal questions. The leader of the circle came from the program and my role was to keep the students engaged during the process. After “circle time” students were lead through a guided meditation. Needless to say, it was a stressful moment for me every day. I also did not see the benefit to my students since they struggled to be that vulnerable around their peers, as most middle schoolers are.

A study that came out two years later by Ernestina M. Briones, Don Jones, and Linda Chaloo (2015), explored how the use of multiple programs impacted graduation rates in urban school districts in Texas. The programs they studied were, “AVID, Communities in Schools (CIS), Diplomas Now and Gear Up” (Briones et al., 2015). AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. The researchers found that when there were multiple programs used there was a significant impact on graduation rates at that particular school. They did note that,

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“There are many contributing factors in determining whether an urban high school with intervention programs will likely obtain higher graduation rates. Some contributing factors may include socioeconomic status of the students' family, the parents' marital status, the student's discipline and legal record” (Briones et al., 2015). We used AVID extensively at my school. I remember thinking that AVID had many great qualities, but the program was out of the building within a couple of years.

That same year researchers Jennifer Freeman and Brandi Simonsen (2015) examined the impact of intervention programs, in general, on graduation rates. What they found was that “Despite research highlighting the need to address multiple risk factors and the need for early intervention, the bulk of current empirical research is focused on single-component, individual, or small group interventions delivered at the high school level” (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). In their literature review the researchers highlight the fact that whether there is one or multiple intervention programs the results are basically the same, graduation rates do not change significantly across all urban schools.

The next research study is by Vaughn Denton (2017). Denton explored the impact of “Trust” on graduation rates in urban high schools. They wanted to see if the relationship between the principal and the teachers impacted graduation rates. Denton found that although not the major predictor of graduation rates there was a small correlation between teacher trust in their principal and graduation rates at particular schools. Denton does note that SES demographic indicators also impacted whether teachers trusted their principals. In schools with populations with low SES there was significantly less trust in the principal. I feel this aspect of the study would need further research in order to truly determine what the relationship was.

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The next group of research studies discussed focuses on the connections between factors outside of the school building and their impact on graduation rates. The first study conducted by Jeffrey L. Jordan, Genti Kostandini and Elton Mykerezi (2012) examined the connections between urban and rural school systems and their graduation rates. The researchers found that when family factors like, SES, presence of biological parents, and maternal attributes are considered there are no significant differences between urban and rural graduation rates (Jordan et al., 2012). These researchers tried to correct biases against the urban education system by discussing the impact of low SES on a student's overall ability to participate in school. They point out equity factors like financial needs within the family, the job market in their area is limited to careers that do not require high levels of education, and whether a GED is considered graduating.

This study seems pivotal because they explore the factor of community job market on graduation. In a lot of urban areas there are a majority of low paying jobs available. For example, down the street from my school there is a Family Dollar which employs a large number of parents who have students at my school. My specific school location is surrounded by a majority low-income jobs, buildings that sit vacant, restaurants that cater to the community population, and fast-food restaurants. The conclusion could be made based on the research study that my students cannot see in their own communities a future for themselves outside of those options.

In a research study from 2013, Richard J. Murnane examined graduation rates between the years 1970-2010 across the country and determined that the most beneficial way to increase equity among urban school districts was to increase, "the variety of high school options for students, including ones that provide significant experiences in workplace settings and clear

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connections between the skills students are asked to master and access to jobs that make use of these skills” (Murnane, 2013). This equity factor is very similar to how high schools in St. Louis were created. SLPS has a high number of magnet high schools that offer job training for students. Over the years the number of magnet schools has increased and is now decreasing. However, many parents still see the magnet school program as the best option for their children.

A monumental study of 50 urban school districts was conducted in 2015 by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) with the lead researcher Michael DeArmond. This study found four themes, “Inequity in public education, though widespread, is not inevitable, but performance in most cities is still flat. Poor and minority students still face staggering academic inequities, and the picture is especially bleak for black students” (DeArmond et al., 2015).

Based on these themes the researchers offered up places among the 50 cities that were able to correct some of the inequities. For example, they point out that in cities like Memphis and Chicago Black students participate in advanced courses and the SAT at high rates and in Baton Rouge, where Black students are not suspended at higher rates than white students (DeArmond et al., 2015). The authors suggest that city leaders take a closer look at the education system in their city to determine what the major issues are and then look at this report to find examples of cities that have been able to correct that inequity. It is interesting to see specifically how certain cities are able to provide at least aspects of equity within their system.

Another study by Kristy Cooper (2016) took a look at the experiences of students during their time in high school and determine if too many negative experiences impacted their decision to not graduate. Cooper argues that the accumulation of negative experiences in urban high schools is what ultimately decides whether a student will want to stay in school. These negative experiences could be found in interactions with staff, peer relationships, and rigor of the

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curriculum. The fact that many urban students have more negative experiences in high school leads to lower graduation rates (Cooper, 2016).

A study by Bryan, Farmer-Hinton, Rawls and Woods (2017) examines the connection between social capital and college entrance. The researchers define social capital as the network that any of us have as we move through society. They argue that the network developed by students attending Caucasian dominant schools in upper-middle class communities has more connections that facilitate entrance into post-secondary programs primarily college (Bryan et al., 2017). The researchers found that having college-expectations and talking about college with school staff had an impact on whether a student attended college (Bryan et al., 2017) They found that staff who specifically discuss and create a “college culture” in their buildings had higher rates of students attending college within 2 years of graduating high school.

The next study, conducted by Richard O. Welsh (2018), examines the impact of student mobility and segregation on graduation rates. The author points to the landmark case of Brown v Board and that even though schools were desegregated over the past sixty years there has been a “persistent resegregation” of our urban schools (Welsh, 2018). The author hypothesizes that student mobility among schools may be linked to school segregation. They state, “The resegregation of American schools coupled with the growth of school choice policies nationwide make it important to learn more about the relationship between educational inequality, student mobility, and school segregation” (Welsh, 2018). Welsh examines how school choice and student mobility are directly linked to societal and community factors that have nothing to do with school. In this study Welsh found that schools with highly segregated populations had higher rates of mobility and were less resourced (Welsh, 2018).

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This study rings so true to what I experienced at my school. We have many “new” students each year and a low number of students that return. We are also one of the only neighborhood schools left in the district at the middle school level. We have been historically under-resourced and have a large minority population.

The final study in this section is very similar to the one conducted by CRPE in 2015. This study from 2019, conducted by Marcus Winters and the Manhattan Institute, focuses on the variation of school quality within a district and then compares that variation against other cities. The study examined the impact of student mobility on school quality. Parents in some cities feel like the school they enroll in does not matter because the quality of the schools does not vary much; however, in other cities the variation is quite vast leaving parents with little choice but to seek out better quality schools. Winters states, “The variation in the quality of a city’s schools has important implications for parents seeking access to an appropriate school for their child, and it speaks directly to whether a city is providing equitable access to educational quality for residents” (Winters, 2019). Winters found that on average schools that are more concentrated with low SES and non-white students there was a “larger variation in quality” (Winters, 2019). This study seems to correlate with the previous study that also suggested the same conclusions.

### **Post-pandemic 2020**

This section will focus on research happening during and directly after the COVID-19 Pandemic. No matter who you are in this world you were impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The world of education was truly hit the hardest and the inequities that were already present became even more apparent. As an educator, I was terrified about the loss my students would experience as they tried to learn from home. We were a district that was lucky enough to provide technology to our students, but years of having no technology available made the

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transfer to virtual very difficult. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the impacts of the pandemic on education, but it should be noted that the education system is still recovering in some respects and experiencing growing pains in others.

The first research study that I will discuss explores graduation rates in Mexico. This study was conducted in 2020 by Andrew Dustan. Dustan found that like the United States many Mexican students leave school to help support their families. Given that the current economic state in Mexico is tenuous, many of the students go into illegal activities to support the family (Dustan, 2020). Based on prior research I have completed in this area it is very true that many Mexican students leave school prior to graduation because the family simply needs the support of the older children to maintain their living expenditures. One or two family members are not able to provide enough financially to support all of the other members of the family.

The Mexican government has made high school compulsory, but as of this research study there were still very low graduation rates in urban areas. Dustan studies whether conditional cash transfers (CCT) would help support more students graduating from high school. The program in Mexico is called, Prepa Sí, pays students monthly for being enrolled in a public high school (Dustan, 2020). The study finds that even with the cash transfers to students there is no significant impact on graduation rates. This could be due to the amount that was offered. Even at the highest-grade point average a student could only earn about \$65 a month (Dustan, 2020).

In the United States we tried something like this during the pandemic with EBT cards for students that attended school right after we returned to in-person. If that program continued it would be interesting to see the impact. My experience has shown that parents of students that do not attend school face being called into court and getting fines each time their student drops below a certain attendance percentage.

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Another study involving Mexican immigrant students was conducted in the same year in the United States. In this study the researchers, Bryant G. Valencia, Juvenal Caporale, and Andrea J. Romero (2020), studied 16 Mexican descent youth from low-income backgrounds and discussed why they felt “pushed” out of high school (Valencia et al., 2020). During the interviews the researchers discovered that many of the 16 students felt that the schools did not care if they graduated or not, that they were blamed for not making academic progress, and family stressors (Valencia et al., 2020). The researchers go into the fact that the students not only felt that the school did not care if they graduated, that they felt discrimination from the school staff toward them and their ability to succeed academically (Valencia et al., 2020). One goal of this study that seems to speak to a more equitable notion of why urban students struggle to graduate was stated by the authors as, “One goal of this study is to debunk deficit models about youth who leave school by examining their understanding of how contextual factors influenced their academic experiences” (Valencia et al., 2020).

Another study during this period comes from Julia Duncheon (2020). In this study Duncheon researched the impact of Early College High Schools (ECHS) had on graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs at urban high schools in Texas. They state that exposure to college courses during high school increased the likelihood of students graduating and entering college. Ultimately, Duncheon (2020) concluded that more socialization on college campuses would lead to an even larger increase of students completing their college coursework. A study similar to Duncheon comes from Edmunds, Unlu, Furey, Glennie and Arshavsky out of North Carolina (2020). In their study they also examined the impact of ECHS on graduation rates and completion of post-secondary studies. The researchers found that students who were

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exposed to ECHS were more likely to complete their degrees within six years of graduating high school (Edmunds et al., 2020).

Another study on ECHS by Song, Zeiser, Atchinson, and Brodziak de los Reyes (2021) examined the impact of Early College High Schools on long-term success of urban students. They wanted to determine if exposure to early college experiences in high school indicated higher rates of college degree attainment. The researchers found that early college students were more likely to enroll in two- and four-year colleges and to also attain a degree within six years of graduating high school (Song et al., 2021).

In a study conducted by Mireles-Rios, Rios, and Reyes (2020) they studied the impact of school truancy on high school graduation. The researchers found several reasons why students run into attendance issues such as mental health and trauma, transportation, physical health, helping the family financially, relationships with staff, fear of deportation, and standardized tests (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). The researchers suggest a three-tier system that best supports students including: home visits, leadership that understands the community of the school, parental efficacy, focused mentoring programs, fix transportation issues, truancy courts, and interagency housing and case management (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). These factors would then help students to boost their attendance and mitigate students leaving school.

A study conducted by Glennie, Ottem, and Lauff (2021) examined the impact of earning an industry certification while in high school on post-secondary degree attainment. The researchers found that students who earned the certification were more likely to attain some kind of post-secondary degree such as an associate degree (Glennie et al., 2021). The state of Florida enacted the Career and Professional Education Act (CAPE), wherein schools receive funding to support students who want to earn their industry certificate in high school. The research shows

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that this act has helped to increase graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs (Glennie et al., 2021).

In a study by Lustick (2021) titled “‘Restorative Justice’ or restoring order? Restorative school discipline practices in urban public schools” discusses the impact of restorative practices in discipline and its impact on student success in high school. Lustick found that using “restorative practices” did not change the status quo in the buildings that were being studied. This seems odd because in my experience using restorative practices can prevent students from going into in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension. However, in this study those responsible for conducting the restorative practices essentially established rapport, but did not repair the harm (Lustick, 2021). This meant that students were kept out of classrooms but were never encouraged to correct the mistake made to cause them to leave the classroom. At this point we can start to see that researchers are starting to focus on not just what is going on in the school, but also what is happening in the communities that prevent students from graduating. It is not that they do not have the appropriate skill sets, it is that societal factors get in the way.

The next study by Daniel L. Duke and Bryan A. Vangronigen (2021), examines the differences between small and large city school systems and the struggle for educational equity. The researchers believe that the issues with graduation rates in the larger urban areas can also be found in the smaller cities. They state that it is common knowledge that poverty impacts academic success, and that poverty exists in the smaller cities as well. They point out that one of the equity factors that could support students in both areas is if there were higher rates of teacher retention and higher quality principals in each of the schools (Duke & Vangronigen, 2021). I wonder why the researchers pointed out that poverty plays a large role in academic achievement but then point to teacher retention and quality leadership as the equity factor.

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A final research study that contributes to this discussion comes from June Moore titled *African American Males' Views on the Role Their Teachers Played in Their College Matriculation*. This dissertation was presented to the faculty of the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in March 2021 (Moore, 2021). I feel that the overall strength of this study can be found in the discussion of the participants and their experiences with their teachers. As I read, I kept thinking to myself that this would be an excellent study for pre-service or first year teachers to read to help them gain insight into how their attitudes and behaviors impact their students. Many participants noted that their teachers did not demonstrate a belief in them as a student or their ability to matriculate to post-secondary education. I have heard repeatedly from my students about teachers that made them feel less than and I get the feeling that no matter what I say to them it will not erase that experience they had with that teacher. So much about whether a student is successful in education is whether they believe they can be successful. If a teacher shakes a student's confidence in themselves, it is difficult to regain that confidence. If teachers read this study maybe they would better understand that concept.

### **Present-day**

The question is now "Where do we go from here?" The landscape of modern urban education systems was dramatically changed by the pandemic. The number of opportunities for our students is changing and the direction they can go with their education is also changing. From what I currently see in my district educational leaders are seeking input from the community more than ever before, incorporating a more social justice approach as they work with families and trying to explore the best next steps for urban education during this pivotal time.

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A study that explores these ideas is the “Report on the Condition of Education 2022” created by the Institute of Education Sciences and the National Center for Education Statistics with Veronique Irwin and Josue De La Rosa as lead researchers. This study examined all schools in the nation and focused on the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on how schools are doing in multiple factors. The study indicates that since this data started to be collected nationally in 2010, the nation saw the biggest change in graduation rates during the 2020-2021 school year (Irwin & De La Rosa, 2022). There was a 5.3% increase in students dropping out of school as compared to rates in 2010 (Irwin & De La Rosa, 2022). In addition, of the graduates in 2020 there was also a dramatic decrease in the number of students that enrolled in post-secondary programs to about 63% (Irwin & De La Rosa, 2022). In the study they also point out that across the country there was a significant decrease in assessment scores from the previous decade of growth in sciences and math (Irwin & De La Rosa, 2022). Based on these national trends it explains how many urban school systems would struggle with building back to pre-pandemic levels. In addition, it could be concluded from this data that this is a perfect time to re-examine the factors that we as educators need to focus on as we provide equitable opportunities for all students.

In a recent study conducted in Mexico by Hoyos, Attanasio and Meghir (2024) they found that offering financial scholarships to students from low SES families did not have a very large impact on high school graduation rates. The researchers studied the program PROBEMS that was enacted in 2007. They wanted to see if parents who could not afford to send their children to school would be more likely to allow them to attend if they had a scholarship. Many students did use the program, but the researchers found that those who benefitted from the program were not the intended families. Families that kept their students home to help support

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the family continued to do so even with the offer of a scholarship due to such tremendous financial hardship (Hoyos et al., 2024).

In a study from (2023) by Jabbari and Johnson they examined the impact of high rates of in-school suspensions on math achievement and college entrance. Due to high teacher/student ratios in many urban schools there is also a higher rate of in-school suspensions. When the researchers began to study the impact, they found that students that experienced a high number of in-school suspensions had lower math achievement and lower rates of attending college, while students that did not experience this type of discipline had higher rates. This would indicate that placing students in exclusionary types of settings greatly impacts their ability to learn and graduate (Jabbari and Johnson, 2023).

In a study titled, “A multisite randomized study of an online learning approach to high school credit recovery: Effects on student experiences and proximal outcomes” authors Rickels, Clements, Brodziak de los Reys, Lachowicz, Lin, and Heppen (2024) examine effects of taking an online credit recovery class versus and traditional teacher-lead class. The researchers found that there was no significant difference between the two types of credit recovery. Meaning students still learned about the same amount and performed about the same (Rickels et al., 2024). This would indicate that online credit recovery options might be a valuable option for students that struggle to attend school.

The final study in this literature review comes from Kate Barrington (2023). In this study, Barrington surveyed high school students that dropped out for various reasons. They indicated that, “Getting held back a grade, needing to work to support the family, using drugs, becoming pregnant, joining a gang, missed too many days of school and couldn’t keep up,” as the main reasons for dropping out (Barrington, 2023). Barrington offers many ways to improve

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graduation rates and improve overall equity within urban education, “Identify and keep track of early warning signs when students are struggling, keep track of attendance, improve teachers’ responsibility, raise the bar for academic success, create and foster positive relationships with teachers and staff, and adjust disciplinary practices as needed” (Barrington, 2023). It does seem that previous research would support each of these suggestions but based on the previous years of lower graduation rates there seems to be the need for additional strategies to help support urban students as they work toward graduation.

### **Conclusion**

The research conducted over the past thirty years provides us with a list of factors that are believed to prepare students for graduation and moving into post-secondary work. In the 1990s the main factor was staff (teachers and administration) attitudes toward student ability to succeed. During the early 2000s the focus shifted to packaged programs that would boost curriculum and teacher effectiveness. In the Obama era the focus split into two groups, one being packaged programs that will boost student success and the other on societal factors such as student mobility that impact student success. The last section of the research I explored was conducted during the post-pandemic era. During this time researchers are going back and forth as to what the next step should be in urban education reform. The results are inconclusive mostly because the urban education system is in a period of change. Students having so much access to technology now will have a tremendous impact on equity. Based on the information gathered in the literature review, a set of equity factors can be determined to guide further research in urban education equity.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to hear the voices of urban educators in the hopes that their voice could determine the best strategies to support urban students on their path toward high school graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs. As seen in the review of literature there have been many studies on the topic of urban student matriculation from high school to post-secondary and each study claimed that their strategy best supported urban students; however, the rates of urban students graduating from high school and entering post-secondary programs is well below state averages. Therefore, this section will discuss why I chose a mixed-methods approach and a parallel design, the instrument used to collect urban educators' voice, the process for how responses were collected and analyzed, and the validity and reliability of the study.

### **Research Paradigm and Approach**

This study utilized a mixed methods research design. During phase one of my research, I determined my research questions. After deciding on my research questions, I determined that each of my questions could be answered using a quantitative approach, but I wanted to validate the data I collected by asking participants to give their opinions about strategies implemented in their own buildings. My first research question, "What factors are urban education systems using to create equity within their system?" could be answered by asking yes, no, and maybe questions. My next two research questions, "What factors lead to increased graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?" and "What factors have little impact on graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?" would require participants to give their opinion using a Likert scale (1 not effective – 5 very effective). In addition, I asked participants to respond to two short answer questions about what strategies were utilized in their buildings to help support

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high school graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs. Participants also offered their opinions about the effectiveness of the strategies. I employed a parallel design for my data collection and analysis. I collected both sets of data on the same survey, but the data was kept separate until ready for convergence for the study write-up.

### **Instrumentation**

During phase two of my study, I created a survey, based on a survey created by Irena Pietrzyk, et al. from 2019, designed to answer my research questions. The title for my survey was, “What strategies best support urban students on their pathway toward graduation and beyond?” The survey consisted of 49 questions. Question one asked for consent to participate in the study. Participants were provided with the informed consent and then asked to click either, “I consent to participate in this research study,” or “I do not consent to participate in this research study.” Those that consented to participate in this research were able to continue with the rest of the survey. The survey took no more than 10-20 minutes. There was no anticipated risk, aside from what they might encounter in their everyday life. Participants were asked not to add any personal information apart from their opinions about the effectiveness of the support given to students. Their response to the survey was assigned an identification number. In the discussion of the collected data, no identifiable characteristics, such as name or title, will be shared. As a safeguard put in place to protect participants’ privacy, I did not collect any personal data (i.e. names, emails, building names etc.).

The survey from Pietrzyk et al (2019) formed the jumping off point for how I would create the survey for my project. The Pietrzyk survey titled, “Future and career plans before high school graduation (ZuBAb): Background, research questions and research design,” focused on the opinions of students about their preparedness for their future career. The survey consisted of

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thirteen sections. This survey was used as a model for mine because it utilized a variety of question types. For example, open ended questions, yes and no questions, and Likert scaled questions were utilized. I decided that this type of survey would allow me to ask the questions I needed in order to gather the information that would answer my research questions.

Participants were informed that taking part in this project will help researchers better understand the ways to support urban students on their pathway to graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs. Taking part in the project was entirely up to their discretion, and no one would hold it against them if they decided not to do it. If they did take part, they could also stop at any time without penalty. In addition, they can ask to have their data withdrawn from the study after the research has been conducted.

The next section of the survey asked for information about the type of high school they work in, the role they play in the building, how many years they worked in urban education, and how many years they had worked in their current position. These questions were asked to see any correlations between the number of years, the type of building, and position in the building and their responses. Questions six and seven asked for participant observations about the strategies their building uses to support students on their path toward graduation and entrance into post-secondary education. The participants offered their opinions about how these strategies supported their students. Questions 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, and 48 asked about the strategies researchers over the past thirty years believe will help to improve graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs. These strategies were pulled directly from the research discussed in the review of literature. There were 21 studies that were highlighted in the survey from question 8, "Does your school use

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‘college talk’ a system of intentional conversations with students about college?” to question 48 “Does your school offer industry certifications?”

Finally, questions 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43, 45, 47, and 49 asked participants to give their opinions about each of the strategies and whether they thought the strategy would support urban students on their path toward graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs. The questions ranged from question 9, “How effective do you think ‘college talk’ would be with urban students to help them graduate and move onto post-secondary programs?” to question 49 “Do you think offering the opportunity to attain an industry certification would help urban students graduate and move onto post-secondary programs?”

### **Data Collection**

During the third phase of the study, I published the survey and collected responses. The survey was created using Microsoft Forms due to the ease of collecting responses. I made the decision to collect responses using various public websites namely Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and the American School Counselor Open Forum. I created a link for the survey and posted it in urban educator groups on Facebook and Instagram. I also posted the link in urban educator forums on Reddit. Finally, I posted in the Open Forum of the monthly newsletter produced by ASCA. I continually posted on these sites over four months. In addition, I reached out to urban educator colleagues.

### **Selection of Participants**

I wanted to collect more than 30 responses for correlational research. After four months of collecting responses, I had 32 participants that provided responses. I asked that participants be urban educators that worked at the secondary level. I invited principals, assistant principals, school counselors, family and community specialists, graduation coaches, social workers, and

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teachers to respond. Of the 32 responses 3 were principals, 5 were assistant principals, 7 were school counselors, 5 were family and community specialists, 0 graduation coaches, 3 social workers, and 9 teachers. A majority, 47%, had more than 10 years of experience in urban education, 28% had 6-10 years of experience, 19% had 3-5 years of experience, and 6% had 0-2 years of experience. The number of years in their current position varied, 31% had 6-10 years, 28% had more than 10 years, 22% had 3-5 years, and 19% had 0-2 years. It could be concluded that during their career some participants moved from one position to another.

**Table 1***Demographic Information from Survey*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>
1	Type of public high school	Neighborhood = 16 Specialty = 16 Charter = 0 Other = 0
2	Role in Building	Principal = 3 Assistant Principal = 3 School Counselor = 7 Family and Community Specialist = 5 Graduation Coach = 0 Social Worker = 3 Other (Teacher) = 9
3	Years in urban education	0-2 = 2 3-5 = 6 6-10 = 9 More than 10 = 15

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4	Years in current position	0-2 = 6 3-5 = 7 6-10 = 10 More than 10 = 9
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**Data Analysis**

This section will analyze the collected data. The first discussion is on the quantitative data collected, since this was the majority of data collected on the survey. In addition to examining the data from each question, I will also utilize JASP software to complete a descriptive statistical analysis on the reliability and validity of the data. Specifically, JASP version 0.18.1 (0.18.1; JASP Team, 2023). Next, discussion is on the qualitative data collected. I will discuss the predominant themes present in the responses indicated in the Microsoft Forms software and then analyze these themes using NVivo software to identify trends in the themes.

***Quantitative Data Analysis***

The following tables provide a question-by-question analysis of the responses given. Table 2 gives the response data for the questions about the use of the strategy in urban high schools and Table 3 gives response data for the questions about the effectiveness of each strategy according to the urban educator.

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**Table 2***Survey Items for Quantitative Analysis (Use of the strategy in urban high schools)*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Highest Response (Yes, No, Maybe)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
8	College Talk	Yes (13)	41%
10	Survey students about negative experiences	Yes (19)	59%
12	Survey students about peer influences	Yes (18)	56%
14	Early College	Yes (19)	59%
16	Scholarships to families to mitigate cost	No (31)	97%
18	Restorative Practices with discipline	Yes (31)	97%
20	Prioritize parental involvement	Yes (22)	69%
22	Attendance intervention in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	Yes (29)	91%
24	Online school for credit recovery	Yes (29)	91%
26	School Within a School model	No (29)	91%
28	Graduation programs (like Project Grad)	No (23)	72%
30	Academic support programs (like AVID)	Yes (22)	69%
32	Debate Club	Yes (19)	59%
34	Freshman Academies	No (20)	63%
36	Mentorship program	Yes (28)	88%
38	Transcendental Meditation	No (31)	97%
40	Trust between teachers and administration	Yes (21)	66%
42	Visit local businesses	Yes (29)	91%
44	Staff visit other schools that have improved	No (22)	69%
46	Prioritize social capital and student networks	Yes (22)	69%
48	Industry certifications	Yes (22)	69%

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**Table 3**

*Survey Items for Quantitative Analysis (Effectiveness of each strategy according to urban educators)*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Highest Likert Level (#) (1 not effective – 5 very effective)</b>	<b>Average Rating</b>
9	College Talk	5 (23)	4.38
11	Survey students about negative experiences	5 (24)	4.5
13	Survey students about peer influences	5 (25)	4.5
15	Early College	5 (27)	4.78
17	Scholarships to families to mitigate cost	5 (16)	3.81
19	Restorative Practices with discipline	5 (27)	4.69
21	Prioritize parental involvement	5 (20)	4.34
23	Attendance intervention in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	5 (27)	4.81
25	Online school for credit recovery	5 (30)	4.88
27	School Within a School model	1 (16)	2.03
29	Graduation programs (like Project Grad)	1 (19)	1.94
31	Academic support programs (like AVID)	3 (13)	2.28
33	Debate Club	3 (18)	2.69
35	Freshman Academies	3 (11) and 1 (11)	2.69
37	Mentorship program	5 (28)	4.78
39	Transcendental Meditation	1 (13)	2.38
41	Trust between teachers and administration	5 (31)	4.97
43	Visit local businesses	5 (22)	4.47
45	Staff visit other schools that have improved	5 (12) and 3 (12)	3.47
47	Prioritize social capital and student networks	5 (28)	4.78
49	Industry certifications	5 (30)	4.84

The following tables (Table 4-11) provide descriptive statistical analysis for each question. The questions are grouped again by use in urban high schools and urban educator opinion about the effectiveness of the strategy. Tables 4-7 give descriptive statistical information for questions on use of the strategy and Tables 8-11 give descriptive statistical information on perceived effectiveness of each strategy.

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**Table 4***Descriptive Statistics for use of strategy in urban high schools*

	<b>V8</b>	<b>V10</b>	<b>V12</b>	<b>V14</b>	<b>V16</b>
Valid	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.844	1.438	1.469	1.656	1.969
Std. Deviation	0.808	0.564	0.567	0.865	0.177
Skewness	0.300	0.834	0.695	0.756	-5.657
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	-1.391	-0.282	-0.511	-1.242	32.000
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.790	0.687	0.699	0.688	0.172
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	3.000	3.000	3.000	3.000	2.000

**Table 5***Descriptive Statistics for use of strategy in urban high schools*

	<b>V18</b>	<b>V20</b>	<b>V22</b>	<b>V24</b>	<b>V26</b>
Valid	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.063	1.531	1.094	1.125	2.031
Std. Deviation	0.354	0.842	0.296	0.421	0.309
Skewness	5.657	1.107	2.926	3.626	0.837
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	32.000	-0.626	6.999	13.527	9.035
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.172	0.616	0.334	0.337	0.417
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	3.000	3.000	2.000	3.000	3.000

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**Table 6***Descriptive Statistics for use of strategy in urban high schools*

	<b>V28</b>	<b>V30</b>	<b>V32</b>	<b>V34</b>	<b>V36</b>	<b>V38</b>
Valid	32	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.969	1.438	1.406	1.688	1.188	2.031
Std. Deviation	0.538	0.716	0.499	0.535	0.535	0.177
Skewness	-0.035	1.360	0.401	-0.158	2.874	5.657
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	0.862	0.456	-1.967	-0.631	7.430	32.000
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.713	0.635	0.625	0.700	0.395	0.172
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	2.000
Maximum	3.000	3.000	2.000	3.000	3.000	3.000

**Table 7***Descriptive Statistics for use of strategy in urban high schools*

	<b>V40</b>	<b>V42</b>	<b>V44</b>	<b>V46</b>	<b>V48</b>
Valid	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.688	1.156	1.938	1.469	1.344
Std. Deviation	0.965	0.515	0.564	0.761	0.545
Skewness	0.691	3.283	-0.027	1.281	1.314
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	-1.629	9.853	0.442	0.060	0.893
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.602	0.334	0.736	0.630	0.632
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	3.000	3.000	3.000	3.000	3.000

Descriptive statistics were computed for the variables of interest, namely Questions 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, and 48, based on the cleaned dataset (Table 4-7). The dataset consisted of 32 participants ( $N = 32$ ). The mean response of the participants ranged from 2.031 (Questions 26 and 38) to 1.063 (Question 18). This indicates that

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although there is some skew in each of these questions, they fall within an acceptable range indicating that the responses stayed close to a normal distribution and there is no need to throw out any responses. Therefore, the responses from this question set are all within acceptable range.

**Table 8**

*Descriptive Statistics for effectiveness of each strategy according to urban educators*

	<b>V9</b>	<b>V11</b>	<b>V13</b>	<b>V15</b>	<b>V17</b>
Valid	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.375	4.500	4.500	4.781	3.813
Std. Deviation	1.100	0.950	0.984	0.553	1.306
Skewness	-1.600	-1.684	-1.626	-2.538	-0.557
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	1.678	1.486	1.076	5.631	-0.840
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.620	0.580	0.547	0.450	0.773
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	1.000	2.000	2.000	3.000	1.000
Maximum	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000

**Table 9**

*Descriptive Statistics for effectiveness of each strategy according to urban educators*

	<b>V19</b>	<b>V21</b>	<b>V23</b>	<b>V25</b>	<b>V27</b>
Valid	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.688	4.344	4.813	4.875	2.031
Std. Deviation	0.780	1.004	0.471	0.554	1.204
Skewness	-2.414	-1.583	-2.610	-4.944	0.882
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	4.816	2.414	6.692	25.418	0.094
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.457	0.688	0.454	0.243	0.765
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	2.000	1.000	3.000	2.000	1.000
Maximum	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000



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Descriptive statistics were computed for the variables of interest, namely Questions 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43, 45, 47, and 49, based on the cleaned dataset (Table 8-11). The dataset consisted of 32 participants ( $N = 32$ ). The mean response of the participants ranged from Question 41 at 4.69 to Question 29 at 1.93. This indicates that although there is some skewness in each of these questions, they fall within an acceptable range indicating that the responses stayed close to a normal distribution and there is no need to throw out any responses. Therefore, the responses from this question set are all within acceptable range.

Even though each question falls within an acceptable range there are a set of five questions (16, 18, 37, 38, and 41) that will need to be examined further. This section presents the results of the normality tests conducted on the selected survey items. Various tests were employed to assess the normality of the survey items, including examinations of skewness and kurtosis, utilization of the Shapiro-Wilk test, scrutiny of histograms and curve lines, examination of box plots, and analysis of Q-Q plots. Each of these tests provides valuable insights into the distributional properties of the data, aiding in determining the appropriateness of employing parametric statistical analyses for subsequent examinations. JASP software was utilized for conducting the normality tests and analyzing the data (0.18.1, JASP Team, 2023).

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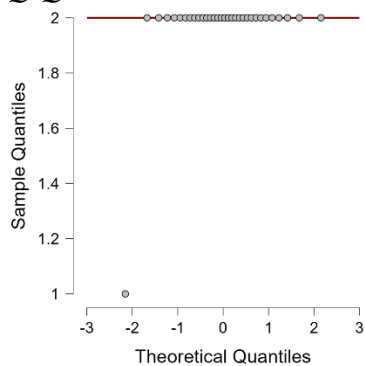
**Table 12**

*Descriptive Statistics on Specific Items that demonstrate skewness*

	V16	V18	V37	V38	V41
Valid	32	32	32	32	32
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.969	1.063	4.781	2.031	4.969
Std. Deviation	0.177	0.354	0.608	0.177	0.177
Skewness	-5.657	5.657	-2.621	5.657	-5.657
Std. Error of Skewness	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414	0.414
Kurtosis	32.000	32.000	5.451	32.000	32.000
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809	0.809
Shapiro-Wilk	0.172	0.172	0.393	0.172	0.172
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Minimum	1.000	1.000	3.000	2.000	4.000
Maximum	2.000	3.000	5.000	3.000	5.000

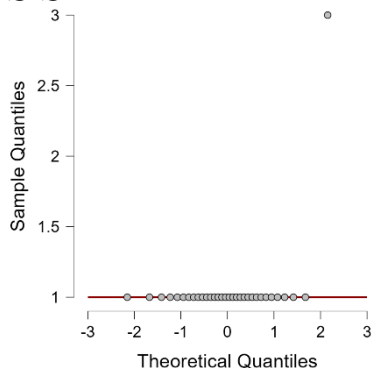
**Figure 4**

*Q-Q Plot V16*



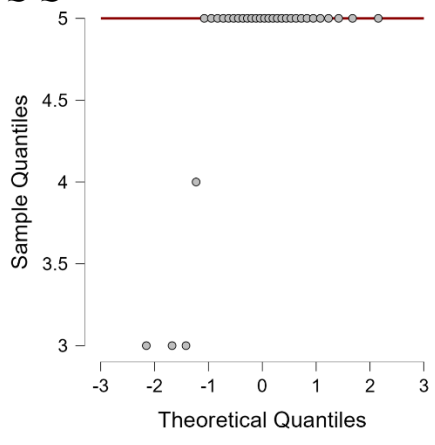
**Figure 5**

*Q-Q Plot V18*

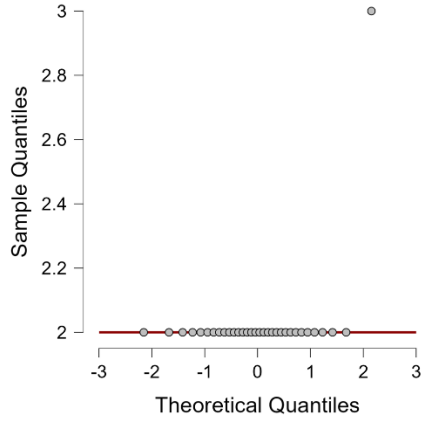


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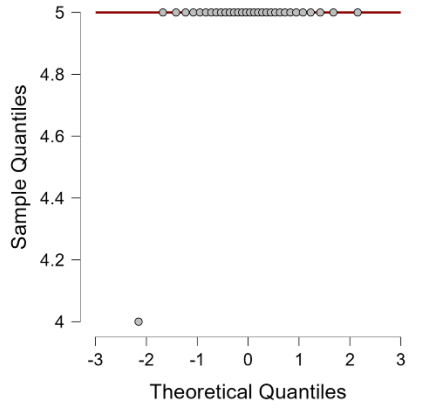
**Figure 6**  
*Q-Q Plot V37*



**Figure 7**  
*Q-Q Plot V38*



**Figure 8**  
*Q-Q Plot V41*



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### **Skewness and Kurtosis Analyses**

To begin with, skewness and kurtosis were computed for all five questions (V16, V18, V37, V38, and V41) to gauge the departure from a normal distribution. Skewness measures the asymmetry of the distribution, while kurtosis assesses the peakedness or flatness of the distribution.

Table 12 presents the skewness and kurtosis values for each item. The results indicate that only V37 falls within the normal range for skewness (-3 to +3) and kurtosis (-10 to +10), based on the criteria proposed by Kline (2000) and Brown (2006), thereby suggesting a normal distribution. However, V16, V18, V38 and V41 display a skewness greater than +3 and kurtosis greater than +10, indicating a positively skewed and leptokurtic distribution. Consequently, V16, V18, V38, and V41 do not conform to the assumptions of a normal distribution.

### **Shapiro-Wilk Tests**

The Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to examine its adherence to the normality assumption. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test for all questions indicated a  $p$ -value less than 0.05 (0.18.1; JASP Team, 2023). Consequently, the null hypothesis of normality was rejected, suggesting that the distribution of these questions is not normal. Hence, these questions can be reasonably assumed to not follow a normal distribution. An explanation for this could be that participants are all in urban education and may have similar points of view on certain strategies (see Tables 2 and 3 for specific strategies).

### **Q-Q Plots**

Q-Q plots were employed to further evaluate the normality assumption for V16, V18, V37, V38, and V41. These plots assess the agreement of data points with a 45-degree straight line, with deviations indicating departures from normality. Figure 4- Figure 8 illustrate the Q-Q

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plots for these questions. The plots for each question suggest significant adherence to the non-45-degree line, indicating non-normality. These plots demonstrate what was observed in the pervious descriptive statistics, but an explanation can still be found for this based on the demographics of the participants in that they all have similar experiences in urban education making it possible they would each identify with similar answers.

### Summary of Normality Tests

Based on the results of the normality tests conducted on the selected survey items, it can be concluded that the majority of questions demonstrate characteristics consistent with a normal distribution. However, V16, V18, V37, V38, and V41 display significant deviations from normality, indicating a departure from the assumption of a normal distribution. Even though these questions have significant deviations from normality their data will still be considered in this study due to the assumption that the participants all have similar experiences within urban education which will impact their responses to the survey. The data will still give quality information about urban educator opinions about the strategies. Further, these questions may indicate a universal opinion about certain strategies, considering that there is a potential that the participants came from all parts of the country from the fact that the survey was posted on various social media platforms.

**Table 13**

*Reliability Test using Cronbach's alpha (effectiveness of strategies in urban education)*

Estimate	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Point estimate	0.353
95% CI lower bound	-0.063
95% CI upper bound	0.630

*Note.* The following items correlated negatively with the scale: V27, V29, V31, V45, V33, V35.

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**Table 14***Reliability Test using Cronbach's alpha (use of strategies in urban education)*

Estimate	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Point estimate	0.301
95% CI lower bound	-0.115
95% CI upper bound	0.589

*Note.* The following items correlated negatively with the scale: V8, V14, V16, V24, V42, V44, V28, V30, V32, V34.

**Table 15***Confirmatory Factor Analysis on use of strategy questions*

Chi-square test			
Model	X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
Baseline model	4.120	6	
Factor model	2.870	2	0.238

*Note.* The estimator is ML.

**Table 16***Confirmatory Factor Analysis of effectiveness of strategy questions*

Chi-square test			
Model	X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
Baseline model	56.502	6	
Factor model	56.125	2	< .001

*Note.* The estimator is ML.

**Table 17***Additional Fit indices for effectiveness of strategy questions*

Index	Value
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.000
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	-2.215
Bentler-Bonett Non-normed Fit Index (NNFI)	-2.215
Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.007
Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI)	0.002
Bollen's Relative Fit Index (RFI)	1.000
Bollen's Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.007
Relative Noncentrality Index (RNI)	-0.072

**Table 18***Additional Fit indices for use of strategy questions*

Index	Value
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.000
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	-2.507
Bentler-Bonett Non-normed Fit Index (NNFI)	-2.507
Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.004
Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI)	0.001
Bollen's Relative Fit Index (RFI)	1.000
Bollen's Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.004
Relative Noncentrality Index (RNI)	-0.169

### **Reliability and Validity**

In this section, the focus is on examining the reliability and validity of questions from the survey conducted during this study (See Table 2 and Table 3). The survey aims to determine uses and effectiveness of strategies found in the research on urban education that help to support urban students on their path toward graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs. The reliability of the survey is assessed using Cronbach's alpha, while its validity is evaluated through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). This section presents the findings of the reliability and validity analyses.

### **Reliability Analysis**

To assess the internal consistency of the survey, Cronbach's alpha was calculated based on the Likert items from Table 3 and the scaled items on Table 2 (yes=1, no=2, maybe=3). The questions representing urban educator opinions about various strategies found in the research, were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Table 13 presents the results of the reliability analysis. The initial calculation of Cronbach's alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.353 for the survey construct. This value indicates relatively low internal consistency, suggesting that the survey items may not be effectively measuring a single underlying construct ( $\alpha = .353$ ). The questions

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representing urban educator observation of use in their buildings were measured on a 3-point scale yes=1, no=2, maybe=3. Table 14 presents the results of the reliability analysis. The initial calculation of Cronbach's alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.301 for the survey construct. This value indicates relatively low internal consistency, suggesting that the survey items may not be effectively measuring a single underlying construct. However, in both surveys, the assumption must be held that due to similar experiences there may be some issues with reliability due to internal bias from the participants. In this situation that bias may indicate a particular strategy that would be more appropriate for the support of urban students over another strategy.

### **Validity Analysis**

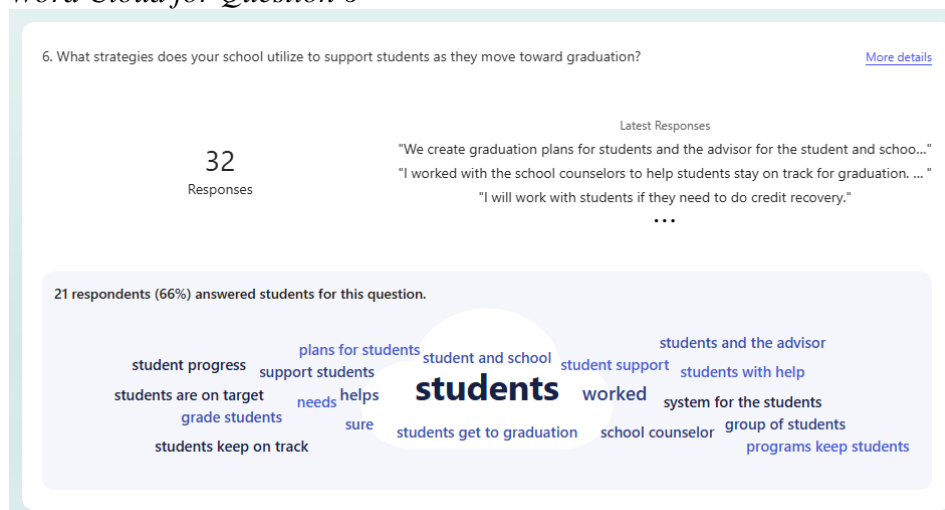
To further investigate the validity of the survey, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using the indices presented in Table 15, 16, 17, and 18. These indices provide essential information about the fit of the proposed model and aid in evaluating its validity. The results of the CFA indicate that the initial model (see Table 15) has a  $\chi^2$  value of 4.120 with 6 degrees of freedom (*df*), resulting in a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio of 0.238. Additionally, the Comparative Fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (See Table 18) were found to be 0.000 and -2.215, respectively. For questions on the effectiveness of the strategies the results of the CFA indicate that the initial model (see Table 16) has a  $\chi^2$  value of 56.502 with 6 degrees of freedom (*df*), resulting in a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio of  $<.001$ . Additionally, the Comparative Fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (See Table 17) were found to be 0.000 and -2.215, respectively (0.18.1; JASP Team, 2023). These indices suggest that the initial model may not adequately fit the data, raising concerns about validity. However, when considering earlier assumptions about the participants these factors can be attributed to similar experiences.

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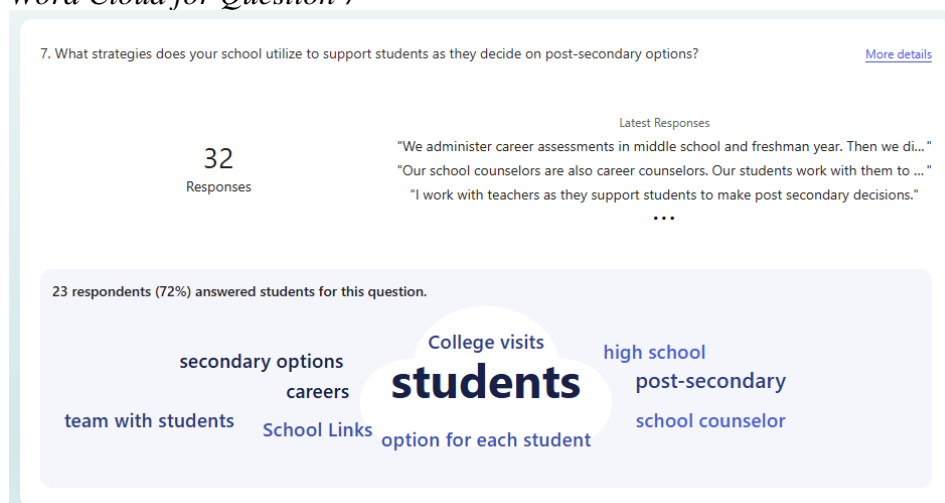
*Qualitative Data Analysis*

The following figures come from the Microsoft Forms software and give a quick snapshot of the responses given to the short answer questions from the survey (Microsoft Forms (Microsoft 365); Microsoft Corporation, 2025).

**Figure 9**  
*Word Cloud for Question 6*



**Figure 10**  
*Word Cloud for Question 7*



In Figure 9 we can see the word cloud for short answer question six. Question six asked “What strategies does your school utilize to support students as they move toward graduation?”

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We can see that at the heart of every response is the word students. Some of the most common phrases that participants used were, “students keep on track,” “school counselors,” “students and the advisor,” “student support,” and “students are on target.” We can see just from a cursory glance that the participants wanted to highlight the ways their schools support students as they move toward graduation.

We see a similar trend in question seven-word cloud demonstrated in Figure 10. Question seven asked “What strategies does your school utilize to support students as they decide on post-secondary options?” At the center of each of the responses we see the word students. Around this word we see, “college visits,” “team with students,” “Schoolinks,” and “option for each student.” From this word cloud we see that participants recognized that programs such as Schoolinks can help support students as they make decisions about post-secondary options and that college visits are another way to help support students make future decisions about post-secondary options.

**Table 19**

*Themes from Question Six (Strategies for graduation)*

Theme	Prevalence in Responses
Mentoring	10
Credit Recovery	5
Package Programs	3
School Counselor Interactions	14
Extracurricular Activities	1
Wrap Around Services	5
Online Courses (credit recovery?)	1

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**Table 20***Themes from Question Seven (Strategies for post-secondary)*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Prevalence in Responses</b>
Career Assessment	4
School Counselor Interactions	14
College Visits	4
Schoolinks	7
Student Support Networks	2
Career Days	2
Create a Resume	1
Internship	1
Dual Credit	1
College Advising Classes	1

Table 19 represents the analysis of data from question six of the survey. Using NVivo I analyzed the data from these questions (NVivo (version 14); Lumivero, 2023). First, I took the responses from the survey and converted them into a text document. Next, I read through the responses and started coding for different themes in the responses. After completing the coding, I examined the prevalence of the themes. As seen in the table there were a total of seven themes found in the responses. In question six we see that the theme of school counselor interactions was the most prevalent response along with mentoring. In Table 20 a similar process was used. All responses from the survey were converted into a text document and then I started coding for different themes. As we can see from the table there were a total of 10 themes present in the seven responses. The most prevalent theme in question seven was school counselor interactions, very similar to the responses in question 6, followed using the online platform Schoolinks.

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### *Results*

#### Research Questions

1. What factors are urban education systems using to create equity within their system?
2. What factors lead to increased graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?
3. What factors have little impact on graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?

This section of the write-up will focus on the results of the survey. The results from quantitative and qualitative questions will now be converged to answer the research questions. Finally, I will reflect on each research question and determine if the data collected in the survey answers the question and what the answer might be.

#### **Research Question 1 – What factors are urban education systems using to create equity within their system?**

As discussed earlier, equity within urban education is determined by graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs. Therefore, the factors would be the supports urban education systems have in place to move students toward graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs. To answer this research question, I asked urban educators about the types of strategies they currently use in their building and about researched strategies determined to specifically support urban students. I asked this question two ways. First, I asked two questions using a short answer format. Participants were asked to discuss the strategies used in their buildings to support graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs and they were also free to offer an opinion about the effectiveness of the strategy. Second, I asked participants to answer a scaled question about each researched strategy from the review of literature.

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I will begin with a discussion of the results from Table 2 on the specific strategies from the research that are being used in urban high schools. We see from Table 2 that there were four strategies that were most used: Restorative Practices in discipline at 97% from Lustick (2021) and Jabbari and Johnson (2023), attendance interventions in 9<sup>th</sup> grade at 91% from MacIver and Messel (2012), online school for credit recovery at 91% from Rickels et al (2014) and mentorship programs at 88% from Green (2013) and Moore (2021). These are the most frequently used programs in urban high schools.

From my own experience in urban education, I can say that restorative practice discipline has become increasingly more popular in my district. In my own school we use restorative practices as much as possible. This concept started in the prison system with the concept of Restorative Justice or a reconciliation or mediation strategy between the victim and the perpetrator. Although I would try at all costs to distance urban education practices from those of criminal justice or prison systems, I do see the benefit of the practices in schools. Prior to restorative practices there was the concept of Zero Tolerance which was a purely punitive practice. Many students were immediately punished with consequences like in-school suspension or out of school suspension, where the student is kept from the classroom environment. This type of discipline will usually cause the student to fall behind. Whereas the restorative practice concept asks students and staff to reflect on the behaviors of the student. Students are often asked to have conversations with another student or a teacher that they may have had a conflict with. We give the student the opportunity to correct the behavior before giving a consequence like in school suspension or out of school suspension. For example, in my school students are assigned lunch detention if a teacher writes a referral about their behavior in class. If a student has multiple referrals they have multiple weeks of lunch detention. The time

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during lunch is a great time for students to relax and prepare themselves for the remainder of the day. When this time is continuously taken away, they do not have the opportunity to reset.

Therefore, in our school we have an Intervention program where students create SMART goals to help them reflect and modify their behaviors. The teachers decide if the student has accomplished their SMART goal and can leave lunch detention. This policy is still punitive but also helps students to grow and eventually no longer receive referrals in class. In addition, this policy keeps more students in the classroom learning.

Online school for credit recovery (Rickels et al, 2024) is the next strategy I would like to highlight from the survey results. This type of support could greatly help students who might struggle to complete all their course work each year due to circumstances beyond their control. We have so many students that struggle to keep their attendance over 90%. After over twenty years in urban education, I have seen this trend over and over. When I became a school counselor and started to work on increasing attendance, I started to understand why so many of our students have issues with attendance. One of the main reasons I have seen that students do not come to school is because of transportation issues. For example, a student will have their bus not show up, which is something that happens quite frequently especially since the bus driver shortages after the pandemic. Many parents in urban areas do not have their own vehicles, so school transportation is vital to their students coming to school. People might argue that parents could hire a cab or take public transportation, but many parents do not feel safe putting their children in these situations. I have an eight-year-old son, and I would not feel comfortable putting him on a Metro bus or in a cab with a stranger. Transportation is just one reason that students miss school but having an easy way for them to catch up on the material they missed,

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such as taking online credit recovery classes would be a wonderful way to help urban students to graduate.

The next strategy, attendance intervention in 9<sup>th</sup> grade researched by MacIver and Messel (2012) goes along with the previous strategy. Although I discussed transportation with the previous strategy there are still many other reasons that our urban students often struggle to maintain good attendance. Many of these reasons relate to the fact that many urban students come from low SES families, and it may require each family member to contribute so that the family can survive. Working in urban education means that we push for children to come to school, but we also find compassion and help find ways to support our families that may be struggling. With this strategy it can be tricky to say that the intervention should only happen in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In my experience the intervention needs to continue each year. There needs to also be staff in place that can check in on students that have missed many days of school and follow up with the support and resources the family might need. If attendance at school is a barrier, urban educators need to develop ways to make school the place where students find the resources to overcome the barrier.

The next strategy that urban educators see in their buildings that support graduation is mentorship programs. This strategy can be found in the research of Green, 2013 and Song et al, 2021. When I think about the profession of teacher or school counselor or principal, we are all mentors. We teach a subject, but we also teach good character. Through our interactions with students, we build a rapport that at times will feel like family bonds. I know I have had students that I took more time with to support and encourage. In the research done by Green (2013) and Song (2021) they comment on the fact that many students did not feel like they were even wanted at school, that they felt their teachers did not care about them, and that no one cared if

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they even graduated. I know there are urban educators out there who are like this because I have seen them. Urban education is a field that requires a person to love children, to be open to other cultures, and to be resilient. However, there are many people who go into this field without those qualities. Especially now with the huge teacher shortage we have so many people in classrooms that lack so many of those skills. It can be frustrating to see people who should not be working in urban classrooms but are and there is not much we can do to stop it. I think that a mentorship program with a teacher in the building is a wonderful strategy, but the fact is we may need to pull in mentors from the community who are passionate about working with urban students to make this strategy work for our students. Last year I had the opportunity to host a group of twenty students from Howard University for the day at my school. The students were there to support the building in any way they could. I asked if they would be willing to go to each of the classrooms and give a brief presentation about what life is like at Howard and then to allow the students to ask them questions. The Howard students started off nervous about what they were going to say, but eventually all of them were able to relax and just have rich conversations with the students. I thought to myself, if even one of my students gets inspired from this meeting, then it was worth it. I wish more community members would take part in our urban schools. Urban areas are so rich with people who have all kinds of experience they could share with students.

From the responses to the short answer questions there were four strategies that were the most discussed: working with the school counselor, mentoring, credit recovery options, and more wrap-around services (see Table 19). At first it seems that these strategies may not be aligned with the strategies from the research but if we examine the responses we can see how they suggest some of the same strategies from the research.

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The first and most prevalent was interactions with the school counselor which was at the top of strategies to support students on their path toward graduation. One response said, “The school provides social and emotional support through counseling and peer mentoring. Addressing these needs helps students stay focused and motivated toward graduation.” Another response was, “Teachers work with the school counselor to help with making sure students stay on track for graduation.” These were among the fourteen references to working with the school counselor on graduation. I am a school counselor and so I can closely identify with these responses. I feel that historically it has been seen as the responsibility of the school counselor to help students graduate and move into post-secondary programs. We can see in the research that the trend is now for a more wholistic approach. However, I would also argue that having more school counselors in the building to support students would also be very beneficial. Often the school counselors at the high school level will have over three hundred students on their caseload. It would not be possible for one school counselor to support all three hundred students to graduate. School counselors need the support of the entire staff and maybe additional school counselors to make the dream happen.

Another strategy from this section of the survey that was not discussed much in the research is wrap around services. Some quotes from the survey on this strategy were, “We work closely with families to determine the best way to support the student as they move toward graduation,” “We help with attendance and speaking with families to make sure their needs are met,” and “I help students by providing wrap around services so that students can focus on getting to graduation.” These quotes demonstrate the concept that urban educators understand the situations their students come from and know that there is more involved in supporting students besides teaching the content. In my school there is a Fresh Thyme food market for

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parents to shop for free. Each week parents can get boxes and boxes of fresh food and packaged food to support their family. This could easily make a difference in the survival of a family.

There are food banks all over the city, but having an additional resource easily accessible through the school is a wonderful way to support our families. The only issue with this strategy is that there needs to be staff available to manage the market and often times programs like these are abandoned when there is no staff available to run it. Urban schools need to have additional staff to help support students as they work on graduating.

We will now transition to a discussion of post-secondary strategy use in urban high schools. The most used strategies to support students on their path toward entrance into post-secondary programs in urban education were: visiting local businesses at 91% researched by Jordan in 2012, packaged programs such as Talent Development and Career Academies at 72% researched by Herlihy and Quint in 2006, industry certifications at 69% researched by Glennie et al in 2021, and Early College High Schools with 59% researched by Duncheon in 2020. One pattern I see in the responses is that the percentage of participants that use a program for post-secondary support strategies are far lower than for graduation strategies. There could be a number of explanations for this pattern. One might be that urban high schools are so focused on increasing their graduation rates that not as much attention is paid to post-secondary programs. I would argue that graduation and entrance into post-secondary programs should have equal attention or should be combined. As a middle school counselor, I am tasked with helping students complete their Individual Career and Academic Plan, which is a requirement for all 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the state of Missouri. I try to coincide our completion of the ICAP with students' applications to high school. I hope that they apply to high schools that also match their career interests. I also discuss with them at the same time they apply to high school the pathway they

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will need to take to get to their dream career. I do this to encourage them to start thinking about their post-secondary plans.

The strategy that had the highest percentage was visiting local businesses also seen in the research of Jordan in 2012. In Jordan's research there is a discussion about the communities that surround many of the urban schools. In the community that surrounds my school there are bars and fast-food restaurants, a Family Dollar, a tire shop, and a bank. I will start off by saying that careers in any of these businesses is wonderful if that is your chosen profession, but if all you are exposed to on a daily basis are fast food restaurants, bars, and a Family Dollar, then your outlook on a future career could become limited. When I was young my parents would take me to work with them. My dad worked for Vocational Rehab with the State of Missouri. I could see his office and the work he did. I could also see how he interacted with the people he worked with. I also went to college with my dad. He took me to some of his classes when he did not have a babysitter. I would sit at a desk and read or draw, but I also soaked in my surroundings. Our urban students may not have these same opportunities. Many come from families where they would be the first generation to go to college, they have parents that might be working a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> shift so they cannot go to work and observe, and they see all around them in their communities other businesses that only offer minimum wage careers. Therefore, it has become important for the schools to provide opportunities for our students to gain exposure to different pathways. Each exposure a student has increases the likelihood they will pick a career that inspires them rather than something that is convenient.

The next highest percentage was for graduation and post-secondary packaged programs. 72% of the respondents said they have used these programs in their school. This is not surprising since so many of these programs have been sold all over the country. Urban

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education is big business in some ways. When there are so many deficiencies and someone presents a program to you that has research behind it that states they can increase the percentage of students that graduate and go onto post-secondary education, it is difficult to pass by. One of the programs researched by Herlihy and Quint in 2006 was called Talent Development. This program started around 2004 and is still around today. They are found in 12 states. They have been around for over twenty years and are only in twelve states and there is still a huge gap between rates of urban students entering post-secondary programs, so my conclusion is that they are not very effective in what they promise. I only say this because at the middle school level I saw so many packaged programs come through my classroom. Some had wonderful ideas that I thought would really benefit my students, but then the next year the program would be gone, and no more resources were available to continue. Building a system for supporting students on their path toward post-secondary programs needs to be solid and consistent and unfortunately many of these programs are not mainly due to the inhibitive cost.

The next strategy with the highest percentage was industry certifications with 69% of respondents saying they use this strategy in their building. In the research done by Glennie et al in 2021, we see that schools that offer industry certifications are more likely to have students that gain post-secondary degrees or certifications. In my school district I know of at least one school that offers industry certification for Emergency Medical Services. When a student shows interest in medicine, I tell them about this program that will help them get the education they need to get that career. The city used to have a charter school called Construction Careers but has since closed. As a school counselor I get information from the state about different career fields that are in high demand, and one of the pathways that is in really high demand are skilled laborer jobs like construction, HVAC, and electrical. When I speak with students during the ICAP I tell them

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about these career fields and the pathway to get into them. I can see that there are a number of students that want this type of career. I had a student that had just completed their career assessment, and it said that he should become a mechanic. At first, he was upset that this was the career path that he had gotten. I asked him why he was upset, and he said that he wanted to be a football player, not a mechanic. We talked about this, and I explained that he would need to go to college and get onto the college football team to play professionally. His attitude started to change because he told me he did not want to go to college. I said, “Well is there anything about being a mechanic that you like?”, and he said that he really likes to work on his uncle’s motorcycle with him. We started talking about that and I could see that his attitude changed once we looked up the training he would need, about one year, and the salary, about 60,000. He was very happy that this could be his career someday. We must recognize that not all students want to go to college and that is good, because there are so many jobs out there that do not require a four-year college degree, and we need students to enter those careers.

Early College High School is the next strategy in this section, having 59% of respondents saying that they have this program in their schools. Early College High Schools, researched by Duncheon in 2020, is a program that has students taking college courses while still in high school. There are other programs like this one across the country. In our state the program is called Dual Credit. Many high schools partner with a university or college that will allow students to take classes on their campus while still enrolled in high school. This program is also paid for by the school district, so it is a free way to go to college. Over the years I have had many students that have taken advantage of this program. I had one student that came back to tell me that she had graduated high school with a whole year completed of her college education. There are other programs as well such as AP courses that will allow you to get some college

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credit from your high school course. However, I think the act of going to a college campus and taking classes can be inspiring to a student. Some students are so mature and advanced in their academic abilities that entering college courses while in high school is a wonderful fit for them and a great way to mitigate the cost. However, with only 59% of respondents saying they have this program at their school, I wonder how pervasive programs like this are in urban education.

From the short answer responses, we see that participants identified three strategies that they use most often to support students move on to post-secondary programs. As we can see in Table 20, these strategies were: interactions with the school counselor (14 responses), use of Schoollinks/career assessments (11), and college visits (4).

The first strategy of interactions with the school counselor is very similar to the results from the graduation strategies. I believe this coincidence comes from the fact that school counselors are traditionally seen as the individual responsible for helping students keep track of their credits for graduation and the person that assists with completing college applications and financial aid packets. However, as previously discussed this strategy is not completely attainable with the large caseloads many urban school counselors have. I am not a school counselor at the high school level, but I have a caseload of 370 students. This number is typical for many school counselors even at the high school level. During professional developments I meet with my colleagues at the high school level, and they discuss some of these realities with me. Most school counselors have a group that they work with and help support. In one of our biggest high schools the students are divided by last name, so a counselor will have all students with the last name A-J for example. In a high school that usually has over 1,000 students that means they could have over 300 students to support. With that many students it would not be possible to give consistent one-on-one support. I would argue that around 100 students would be ideal for

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helping students at the high school level. I would suggest that to make this a more viable strategy urban high schools need to decrease the number of students on school counselors' caseloads in order to best meet the needs of their students. Some of the responses were, "Counselors and college advisors provide information about different careers and internships that align with students' interests and abilities," "Students meet with school counselors to determine the best post-secondary option for each student," "I personally discuss college options with students to encourage them to make plans for post-secondary," and "Our counseling department does a great job working with students to secure their path after they graduate from us." We can see that the school counselors play a vital role in supporting urban students. We just also need to make sure that the school counselors are also given a task that is possible to complete.

The next strategy from this section was the use of Schoollinks/career assessments with 11 responses (see Table 20). Some of the responses were, "We use Schoollinks," "We use an online career program to help students align their interests with post-secondary options," and "We use Schoollinks, a website that students can use to explore post-secondary options." I am familiar with Schoollinks. It is a college and career database that students can access and identify possible career options and colleges that would support that option. Schoollinks is used all over the country, but my district just started using it this year. In the past we used a program called Missouri Connections. I believe the district switched to Schoollinks because it is a program used across the country. My first experience with it was good. I see that students can easily understand how the website functions and can identify colleges and other programs that match their interests. In our training we also learned that the program can still be accessed by students after they graduate so they can continue to use it to create resumes when they are ready to apply for their careers. This could make applying for jobs much easier for urban students.

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In the past I would see this strategy as a barrier for urban students, but now that we have one-to-one devices in our schools it may be more feasible. Prior to the pandemic I had about eight computers in my room that were all in various states of disrepair. I would not encourage students to use a lot of different websites because I could not support it with the technology, I had available to me. During the pandemic the federal government gave funding to all schools so that we could purchase iPads and laptops for each student. In addition, staff were given both an iPad and a laptop. I would say now our students could easily utilize this program and continue to utilize it as they move on to post-secondary programs.

The final strategy in this discussion is college visits with 4 occurrences in the responses. Some of the participants stated, “We help by setting up college visits and talking with parents about the process of getting into college or trade school,” and “We have the Trio program that helps students with tutoring and college visits.” This strategy is like the research done by Jordan in 2012. Students need exposure to college campuses in order to see themselves in this environment. I would also argue that repeated exposure to college and trade school campuses would increase the likelihood of a student applying. As discussed, many urban students come from low SES families that may not have attended college or a trade school. Therefore, families may struggle to support their children as they decide on their post-secondary pathway. This is not to say that families who have low SES are unable to support their children, but rather that they are not sure how to support this aspect of their child’s education. It then becomes the role of the school to provide this support.

My son has one mom who has six degrees, almost seven, and another mom who did not finish college. I want him to know that he can pick any path he would like for his post-secondary as long as the path leads to a career that will make him happy. I want the same for my

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students and all urban students. In the next section I will discuss the strategies that urban educators believe are effective in supporting urban students on their path toward graduation and entrance into post-secondary education.

**Table 21**

*Effectiveness of Strategies According to Urban Educators*

<b>Effective Versus Ineffective</b>			
<b>Effective</b>		<b>Ineffective</b>	
Strategy	Average Rating	Strategy	Average Rating
Trust between administrators and teachers	4.97	Graduation Package Programs	1.94
Online School for Credit Recovery	4.88	School Within a School	2.03
Industry Certifications	4.84	Academic Support Package Programs	2.28
Attendance Intervention @ 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	4.81	Transcendental Meditation	2.38
Social Capital and Social Networks	4.78	Freshman Academies	2.69
Mentorship	4.78	Debate Club	2.69
Early College	4.78		
Restorative Practices	4.69		

**Research Question 2 - What factors lead to increased graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?**

This section of the write up will discuss the effectiveness of the researched strategies for urban students on their path toward graduation and post-secondary enrollment according to urban educators. This is the section that I am most interested in personally. One of the purposes of this research study was to emphasize the voices of urban educators and what they believe would best support urban students. The reason this is important is because I noticed a biased view of urban students and urban education among many of the researchers on urban education. This biased view has impacted the way that American society views urban education, but their point of view

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is negatively biased. I feel that there is an untapped knowledge held by urban educators that could hold some of the answers to how to best support urban students on their path toward graduation and entrance into post-secondary education. I will begin this discussion with the factors or strategies that urban educators feel increase graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary education. As we can see in Table 21 the information that was in Table 3 has been reconfigured to rank the most effective strategies from the highest average to the lowest. I will discuss the top eight strategies indicated in the survey.

The top strategy is trust between administrators and teachers at 4.97 average rating. This strategy comes from the research of Denton in 2017. In the research Denton comments about the importance of a trusting relationship because without that trust teachers are probably not going to implement strategies coming from the principal to their fidelity. This strategy did not have a high response rate for being used as a strategy in urban schools, but I can see how educators believe that it would be very effective. In my experience as an urban educator, turnover is so prevalent. It is very rare to see any staff stay in urban education for more than a few years. As a dedicated urban educator, it is very frustrating because the momentum you gather when you work with the same group of passionate individuals is amazing. When teachers and administrators work well together and trust each other so much can be accomplished, but that comes with time or can be lost in time. The leader of the building has a huge responsibility to make sure that the school is equitable and that programs are being implemented correctly and consistently. This strategy is extremely effective but also very difficult to accomplish. I believe one of the best ways to establish trust is to make sure that teachers feel fully supported in their classrooms to do the jobs they were hired to do. When teachers feel overwhelmed by all of the responsibilities of being an urban educator, they need to know that the principal will support

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them. This also creates a situation where teachers are more willing to stay in urban education. It means a lot of work for administrators, it means being visible all over the building, and responding to situations as they come up, and making sure that all feel validated. This also means more support for principals from the district office to make sure that principals can effectively do their jobs.

The next three strategies were online school for credit recovery with a 4.88 average, industry certifications with 4.84 average, and attendance intervention at 9<sup>th</sup> grade with 4.81 average ratings. We have already discussed these strategies, but it is important to add that each of these most used strategies are also seen as very effective, therefore we see a congruence between what urban educators are doing in their buildings and what they see as effective. As previously discussed, there are issues with each of them that need to be addressed before I believe they can become true strategies that provide equity within the system.

The next strategy is social capital and social networks with a rating of 4.78. This strategy comes from the research of Mireles-Rios et al in 2020 and also seen in the research of Bryan et al in 2017. Participants did not indicate that they see this strategy very often in their buildings, but they do believe that this strategy would be highly effective. Essentially, Mireles-Rios et al and Bryan et al indicated that students come to school with certain connections within the community. Students that come from more affluent areas have more affluent networks and connections. Therefore, students that come from lower SES communities would also have similar networks and connections. This type of system perpetuates on itself. Schools need to provide students with opportunities to gain more social capital and social networks. In the previous section we discussed the importance of students going on college visits and visiting businesses in the community and having community members taking a larger role in the schools

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to support students. This strategy combines all those strategies into this single concept that students need to have the exposure to understand the opportunities available to them.

I feel this could be a strategy developed at the district level. Most districts have people that work on community engagement and facilitating experiences for students. This needs to be expanded for urban students. In my district there is one person in charge of setting up college and career field experiences for every level. She does an amazing job, but to implement this strategy with fidelity we need to see more, “boots on the ground” to truly accomplish this. There should be certain experiences that kids have each year such as trips to visit colleges and trade schools each year in middle school and high school. We should see students going on multiple trips a year to visit various businesses in the community. We should see community members coming into the schools volunteering and supporting our students. To accomplish this there needs to be a cultural shift wherein community members and businesses see the importance of meeting with students and encouraging them. Organizations that have their headquarters in major urban areas should give back to the community by volunteering with the schools or providing resources to the schools. This might be a utopian or naive view of the world, but if it happened, we could see more urban students gaining social capital and networks and utilizing those relationships to pursue post-secondary programs that best match their interests.

The final three strategies ranked as most effective are mentorship with a 4.78 average, Early College High Schools with a 4.78 average, and restorative practices with a 4.69 average. In our previous discussion we saw that mentorship is a wonderful strategy that will support students, but that not every urban educator is capable of being a quality mentor, we may need community members to help with mentoring. Early College High Schools is a wonderful strategy that could be implemented with the right partnerships with colleges and trade schools.

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Finally restorative practices are an ideal strategy for supporting urban students. There needs to be specific training given to all urban educators on how to best implement restorative practices effectively.

It is exciting to think about the implementation of each of these strategies in urban high schools and what the effect would be. If we had increased trust between teachers and administrators teachers would be freed up to teach more and better, students could recover credits easily and gain industry certifications before they even graduate, our families would have wrap around services so that students could solely focus on getting their education and not worry about their family's survival, our students would increase their social capital and social networks through positive interactions with community members and they would have more opportunities to build relationships with adults that would support them instead of punish them when they make mistakes like all students do.

### **Research Question 3 - What factors have little impact on graduation rates and entry into post-secondary education?**

My final research question asked about the factors that have little impact on graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs. From the survey participants indicated that graduation packaged programs (1.94 average), School Within a School (2.03 average), academic support packaged programs (2.28 average), transcendental meditation (2.38 average), Freshman Academies (2.69 average), and debate clubs (2.69 average) were the least effective strategies to support urban students.

As previously discussed, packaged programs that support academics or graduation have been very prevalent in urban education over the past twenty years. I have seen many programs come through my building that although they might support for a short while are eventually

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abandoned due to the cost of the program or the lack of support in implementation. This is not to say that the programs are at fault, it is the implementation that becomes the problem. If urban school districts discontinue the funds allotted to the program, then the resources go away. These programs are not like hiring a staff person to give support but training the current staff to implement a different program. I would agree that these programs are not effective and what would actually be effective would be to use the money previously allotted to these programs to hire new staff that would support urban students.

School Within a School model researched by Bartlett et in 2011 is very similar to the packaged programs previously discussed; however, instead of implementing a new program or curriculum change School Within a School advocates for a shift in how the building is configured. Students would be placed in groups and tracked by their abilities, and they would stay within that group to get the specific support they need. This model seems like it could support urban students, but placing students on a certain track could also pigeonhole students into a certain pathway. If a school is broken into groups of students by their abilities, then more resources could be funneled away from students that struggle academically and funneled to those that are academically successful. This does not seem like an equitable system. I can see a student that excels in math and struggles in ELA finding it difficult to fit into a system like this as well. Honestly, most students have one or two subjects they really shine in but then struggle in others. This model does not support the whole student and can lead to inequity between the different groups of students.

Freshman Academies was another strategy that participants felt was ineffective. Freshman Academies were researched by McCallumore and Sparapani in 2010. In their research they found that tracking a class of students by placing them in cohorts would be an effective way

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to support urban students. This strategy seems to have some similar aspects to School Within a School model in that students are placed into groups that they stay with until they graduate.

Aside from the fact that this strategy does not address the realities of life for urban students, it also seeks to put students into groups that may give support to them, or they may hold them back. The reality is that students will learn better in different groups. Even at the middle school level we try to not put students into cohorts because their cohort may not support them academically or socially. Sometimes I will equate this idea to brothers and sisters. If you spend too much time with the same group, you eventually get tired of each other, but as a student you do not have the option to change your classes in a closed system like Freshman Academies and School Within a School.

The final two strategies that I will discuss are transcendental meditation at 2.38 average rating researched by Cobert in 2013 and debate club with a 2.69 average rating researched by Mezuk et al in 2010. I would like to combine the discussion of these two strategies because they both seem to only speak to a small segment of a very large population. When thinking about strategies that increase the equity of the entire system it is important to consider the individual student and their needs but also effort put into the strategy and the impact it will have on the entire system. In the survey questions about debate club and transcendental meditation many participants acknowledged that these strategies are used within their buildings, but when asked how effective the strategies are at increasing graduation and post-secondary entrance rates there is a decrease in the effectiveness. I believe this is due to the fact that each strategy only applies to a small group of students. There will probably be debate clubs in many urban high schools, but the members of the club will probably only number 10 to 20 students. For the 10 to 20 students, they will get increased social capital and networks, mentorship from the club leader,

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and possible exposure to a college campus, but this opportunity only exists for the 10 to 20 students that join the club. Not every urban student will want to be in the debate club. I would agree that having extracurricular activities is important as we support our urban students, but they need to be varied enough that every student feels they can participate. The same could be said about transcendental meditation. This strategy would be a good coping skill or strategy for dealing with trauma, but again there are students that will not feel comfortable using this strategy. I gave the example in the review of literature that at one point I had a group come to my classroom to do meditation with the students. This process was stressful for all concerned. I struggled to have the students participate and cooperate with the facilitator and the students struggled with feeling comfortable with using the strategy. Many students deal with trauma on a daily basis and do need coping skills to manage it, but not every student will feel comfortable with every strategy. I have students that need to yell and scream, take a walk, listen to music, write in a journal, play a sport, talk to their friends, talk to a trusted adult. In fact, in my twenty years, I have never had a student that used meditation to cope with their trauma. This is not to say that there might not be a group of students that would benefit from this strategy, but the group would probably be very small.

### **Conclusion**

In this section we examined how shared experiences among urban educators could skew the results of the survey, but I believe that skewness is what makes the voices of urban educators so powerful. We are skewed because we see what is needed for our students to succeed but get frustrated when our voices are not heard. It is clear from the survey that urban educators know what works best for their students and it becomes the responsibility of all of us in the field of Education to help support the strategies that increase the overall equity of urban education. I

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believe that the mixed methods approach to my research helped to ensure that I got the most valid data and one of the biggest components to this approach is a well-rounded understanding of the research that has come before in this field of inquiry.

### **Discussion and Impact in the Field of Education**

My greatest desire is to move urban education, even if only a little bit, into the positive direction of social justice. I always think back to the graphic of the three people trying to watch the baseball game (see Figure 1). I see my students trying to see their opportunities, but there is so much in their way. I want to change the whole game so that my students and all students in urban education can grow and succeed in any field they choose. I have the perspective of someone that has worked in urban education for over twenty years. I also have the perspective of someone that loves urban students. If you allow your students to learn how they want and need to learn and let them be their true authentic selves, you will see that this is not a biased statement. I want to show this perspective of love for urban students and urban schools in my research. They say food tastes better when the person making it, “puts love into it,” I hope that my research shows my love of urban students and urban education. From the research I have read on this topic from a strength-based perspective like *Ratchetdemic* by Christopher Emdin when you put love into your topic the point comes across much more effectively. Emdin states, “To be ratchetdemic is to get to a place where we unapologetically love ourselves as educators, to love and accept young people however they show up to school, and to get young people to fully love themselves.” (Emdin, 2021) I believe that the strategies that came forward in my research will allow urban students to be themselves and get the support they need to become anything that inspires them.

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### **Summary of the Study**

One of my favorite aspects of my job is when former students come back and tell me what they are doing. I have former students that are teachers, mechanics, college students, youth ministers, working for non-profit organizations, and many other really fulfilling careers. I also have students that have not been able to follow their dreams. I sadly say that way too many of my students did not graduate, did not go on to college or any other program. One of my students who I worked with this year spoke with me about “stepping off the porch.” He said that in his neighborhood there is so much pressure to join a gang and do illegal things to make money. Many students in urban public schools understand this way of thinking because this is their reality. This would indicate that the problem is not necessarily with urban education, but with our society as a whole. It must be considered that it is not possible to change society as a whole without first changing urban education. As discussed in the review of literature, so much of the research done on urban education is biased against urban students and urban education systems. I argued that this bias impacted policies developed around urban education. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that packaged education programs became so prevalent in research. This demonstrates the biased perspective on urban education in that researchers felt the answer to reform had to come from outside of urban education not from within. The problem is that thirty years of research on urban education has yielded no significant change in equity within the education system as a whole.

In this project I wanted to shift the focus from an outside perspective to an inside perspective. To do this, I utilized a CRT perspective to 1. put a spotlight on the fact that inequity does exist in urban education, 2. urban educators need to have a voice in the discussion of equity, 3. dismantle the deficit-based perspective in research conducted on urban education, 4. use

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storytelling and counter-storytelling to enhance the readers' understanding of my research, and 5. to highlight the fact that most of the researched package programs sold to urban education systems come from an outsider perspective. I asked questions that would lead to answers about what would support our urban students as they move toward graduation and post-secondary work from the perspective of an urban educator listening to the voices of other urban educators. If we can find answers to these questions, I believe our society will be headed on a pathway toward true social justice.

In the book *American Education* by Joel Spring (2018), he states, "I propose that school policies be evaluated on their contribution to the social conditions that provide the conditions for human happiness and longevity rather than being judged by their contribution to economic growth and income." In my utopian society, every school would have the ability to create programs that best support their students on their academic journey to post-secondary work or the workforce. We realize as educators that to get this utopia, we must have the freedom to see what works for our students and then put those supports into practice. My project's purpose is to find the factors urban educators use that are successful and then discuss what makes them successful. If the factor helps to support urban students on their path toward graduation and entry into post-secondary programs, then the factor supports the overall equity of the system and can lead to increased social justice in American society. I believe that through my research I have come upon factors that urban educators feel best support their students on their journey. If we start implementing the strategies indicated, we could see an increase in equity within urban education systems and hopefully also in our urban communities.

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### **Discussion of Findings and Implications for Practice**

In my first research question, “What factors are urban education systems using to create equity within their system?” I asked urban educators to discuss the strategies they see being utilized in their buildings and whether they see the researched strategies from the review of literature being utilized. Urban educators stated that there were four strategies that were most used: Restorative Practices in discipline at 97% from Lustick (2021) and Jabbari and Johnson (2023), attendance interventions in 9<sup>th</sup> grade at 91% from MacIver and Messel (2012), online school for credit recovery at 91% from Rickels et al (2014) and mentorship programs at 88% from Green (2013) and Moore (2021). These are the most frequently used programs in urban high schools. My second and third research questions spoke to effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the programs. Urban educators felt that trust between administrators and teachers, online school for credit recovery, industry certifications, and attendance intervention at 9<sup>th</sup> grade, etc. (refer to Table 21) would be the most effective ways to support urban students move toward graduation and post-secondary programs. They also felt that graduation packaged programs, School Within a School, academic support packaged programs, and transcendental meditation would be the least effective in helping students move toward graduation and post-secondary programs.

The first strategy that I believe could effect a positive change and equity within urban education would be to increase trust between administration and teachers. This would indicate that as urban school district leaders decide on where to spend their resources, they need to consider the relationships between teachers and building leaders very carefully. I believe this could equate to more time spent on allowing building principals to build relationships with their staff, asking principals to survey their staff either formally or informally about their opinions

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about how things are going and to make sure principals demonstrate that the thoughts of their teachers are present in each decision they make. Principals need to feel free to take the time needed to build strong relationships with their staff. I have had many different types of principals over the years and I would say that not one did everything perfectly, but above all, the principals that would listen to my ideas and then demonstrate how they utilized those ideas made me feel the most appreciated and made me feel like I could trust them. Teachers, by nature, are a caring group of people, but they also need to feel like they are cared for, listened to, and supported. The principal needs to utilize their position of power and share it with the teachers. The support for this type of strategy could be included at the training stage or during the professional development principals have throughout the year. Further, when the district leadership sees that a principal struggles to build relationships with staff, they need to decide whether that principal is well suited to the role and provide additional support. This could look like someone from the district office working closely with the principal at the building level to help guide them as they run the building. It could also mean that the principal surveys the staff to see what they believe needs to be done to make the building run more efficiently. I have had principals in the past who would ask staff to complete a survey and then never use the results. Teachers need to see evidence that their thoughts are important to the principal for there to be trust.

Another strategy that I would like to highlight is the use of online schools for credit recovery. I strongly believe that this is going to be even more widely utilized as we move toward the future of all education systems. During the COVID-19 pandemic all education systems across the world were asked to pivot to a virtual model of education. For urban education systems this was very challenging because so many school districts lacked the one-to-

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one technology. In addition, after urban districts acquired the one-to-one there was still a large gap in students who did not know how to use the technology for education purposes. Since this process started in 2020, urban students have come a long way. I see in my students their ease of using the iPad and Chromebook. I can also see how technology has evolved to better meet the needs of our students. There were so many growing pains to start off with, but now I feel there is no going back. Technology usage is here to stay, and we will only utilize it even more.

Therefore, when considering the needs of our urban students, it is common sense that they would be allowed to use online credit recovery. Our students have lives that only a few in urban education truly understand. It is difficult for those outside of urban education to really understand the stressors that our urban students face on a daily basis. Some may not even believe the truth if faced with it, but those who do understand find it amazing the strength these students have to come to school and do their best every day. Due to some of these stressors, students may have their education disrupted, which is out of their control. I have a student right now who is enrolled in virtual school because of a tremendous number of stressors in her life. This student's mom is facing stage four cancer, her family does not have permanent housing, and her father lost custody because of abuse. The stress of these factors led to her exhibiting self-harming behaviors. Her mother called the school for help on what to do. I presented the idea of doing virtual school for the remainder of the school year and returning next year because it would allow her to focus on family life first and social pressures second. Mom decided to try this because she was so afraid of what would happen next if she continued going to school in person. The good news is that at this time the student is doing well in virtual school and will return to in-person next semester. If we did not have the option of virtual school, there is a

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strong possibility that she would continue to get in trouble at school, continue to self-harm, and ultimately stop going to school.

Online schools need to expand and also become more flexible. We need to provide two options for parents and students moving forward. If we want to see more students graduate and move into post-secondary programs, then urban districts need to offer an online school option and an in-person option. Students can continue their education and have a job to support their family. Further, where a student lives does not determine their ability to access their education, they could even stay enrolled while they are in transition. Homelessness greatly impacts our urban students, and online school is a viable solution to keep the continuity of their education going and allow the student to keep pace with their peers.

A final strategy that I would like to highlight as something I see as a great support to urban students is restorative practices. This strategy is among the most effective in the opinion of urban educators. Restorative practices as a concept grew out of the prison systems with the idea of restorative justice. As I stated earlier, I want to disassociate anything prison related with urban education, but the concept of restorative practice I believe is integral in changing how urban education systems function. Restorative practices are practices that seek to restore the child rather than tear them down. It is the idea that consequences need to teach the student how to improve their behavior at school and become more successful. Almost across the board the education system has done away with corporal punishment. That is to say that the education system believes that consequences should not physically harm students. We now need to consider the harm that other types of exclusionary punishments have on students and their ability to learn. Restorative practices seek to find ways to provide consequences for students that also cause no harm and lead to a student growing in a positive way. You may have seen memes out

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there about parents struggling with “gentle parenting.” American society is trying to move away from harmful disciplinary practices and teach our children the positive way to do things. This is a choice that many parents are making and should also be a choice that urban schools make.

Urban school districts need to invest in training staff and leadership on how to run a program with little to no punitive punishment. The goal should always be to have the student return to the classroom, but also with the knowledge of what they did wrong and how to correct the behavior. As I mentioned before, I have a principal that is good at listening to his staff and adjusting based on their ideas. We have a program at our school where a student has lunch detention if a teacher writes up a referral on their behavior in class. This means that for one week the student misses out on socializing with friends during lunch and sits in detention instead. I asked my principal if we could add a SMART goal component to this program. He said that was fine so now when a student gets a referral, they need to create a goal that addresses the reason they got the referral. I share that goal with the teacher and then the teacher and the student work together to accomplish the goal. When the teacher feels the goal is accomplished the student can exit lunch detention. This system can be flexible and modified for each student to meet their needs and the needs of the teacher. There are also times when the goal writing does not work and there needs to be a restorative conversation between the student and the teacher before we can go back to the goal writing phase.

Restorative practice leads to students and staff understanding each other better and being able to work together in a more positive way. Not every teacher knows how to rebuild a relationship with a student after an incident happens in class and a process of restorative practice helps to restore the relationship. While I was in school to be a teacher I did my internship at an urban high school. I did not know I wanted to be an urban educator at the time, but this

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experience helped me in so many ways throughout the years. My cooperating teacher, who herself had been an urban educator for almost thirty years said to me, “Respect is something that is earned not given.” From that moment on this was how I approached my relationships with my students. This basic concept is also at the heart of restorative practices. We need to understand that the relationship between the educator and student needs to be strong and built on respect otherwise it will easily disintegrate which can lead to students feeling like they are not wanted at school. There are already so many stressors that urban students face that as a school system we need to be aware of that and find ways to make school a place they feel appreciated and supported.

### **Recommendations for Further Research and Conclusion**

The central purpose of this study was to determine a set of factors that once applied to urban school districts would increase the equity of the system. To accomplish this purpose, the study also had to consider what makes an education system equitable and then compare that to urban education systems. This study sought to understand the opinions of urban educators in the secondary setting on how to increase graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary programs. Finally, the purpose of this study was to give voice to urban educators so that they might add to the discussion about what is best for their students. This is not to say that urban educators are the only group to have an opinion about the direction of equity within urban education, but their voice has been minimized or left out of the discussion to the point where it seems that it is unworthy of consideration. It might even be possible that the voice of urban educators has been left out of the discussion for so long because of bias towards urban education.

There is something very special about urban educators because they teach even though they are seen as less than their counterparts, they teach even though they are given fewer

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resources than their counterparts, they teach even though they are paid far less than their counterparts, and they teach even though they are often overlooked by their peers in higher education. They have a strength that can only be matched by their students. Therefore, the final purpose of this paper is to change the trajectory of research being done on urban education from a deficit-based to a strengths-based perspective. I believe that for policymakers to actually change policies they have to see a new kind of research being done on urban education. They need to see that there is much to be learned from urban educators and how they have accomplished all they have. Policymakers need to see research that shines a positive light on urban students so that they can see the strength they possess and bring to the education system. Ideally, we could see future policymakers in education make decisions that speak to the needs of urban students specifically rather than tangentially. For equity to exist in education this would have to be the case. In addition, I would like to see the next generation of researchers study the remarkable strengths of urban education and how things are already being done that can benefit all of education. If the next generation of researchers takes the time to listen to and appreciate the wisdom of urban educators and urban students, then policymakers will change their perspective on urban education, and then true equity can begin in urban education.

In addition to the next generation of researchers examining urban education from a strength-based perspective, I believe that further research could be done on the strategies that urban educators felt would be the most effective namely trust between administrators and teachers at 4.97 average rating, online school for credit recovery with a 4.88 average, industry certifications with 4.84 average, attendance intervention at 9<sup>th</sup> grade with 4.81 average, social capital and social networks with a rating of 4.78, mentorship with a 4.78 average, Early College High Schools with a 4.78 average, and restorative practices with a 4.69 average. These strategies

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either individually or in conjunction with another could support our urban students as they embark on their next journey in life and our society's path toward equity.

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