Virtual Early College High Schools: An Exploratory Case Study

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A Dissertation submitted To

The Faculty of
The Graduate School of Education and Human Development
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education

May 15, 2016

Dissertation directed by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all of the passionate educators in my life, who work tirelessly every day to support and challenge students to meet and exceed their potential, and who have walked beside me through this journey.

Acknowledgements

I did not complete this dissertation or degree alone. There have been many people who have supported me and I recognize them below.

I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Howard, for his unwavering support and positive attitude. Also Dr. Robinson for serving as methodologist, and my friend and colleague Dr. Denning, the ultimate policy advisor. I am grateful to Dr. Clayton for lending her time and expertise, and to Dr. Hoffman who was a willing last minute substitute, and a delightful addition to this academic endeavor. Special thanks to the stakeholders at the heart of this study. This work would certainly not have been possible without you.

I must acknowledge the contributions made by many friends and colleagues, who have been my biggest advocates and fanatics since day one. To the six am babysitters, the all night and all weekend baby sitters, the counselors and consolers, the finger-waggers and cajolers, the proofreaders, and the huggers, this is as much your work as it is mine.

The care and encouragement of the members of Cohort 16 has been steadfast. I am honored to have learned with and from such dedicated individuals. Additionally, the support offered by my co-workers has been immeasurable. I am thankful to have worked in an organization that values learning beyond the walls of classrooms and offices.

Finally, I acknowledge here the love and unending support of my family. My parents and siblings, in-laws and out-laws – thank you seems inadequate somehow. And to John and our little ones, who were and continue to be my inspiration, thank you for your infinite patience, understanding, and encouragement.

Abstract

Virtual early college high schools: An exploratory case study

There are only six virtual early college high schools in North Carolina. This exploratory case study examined one of these for the purpose of highlighting this unique school model. The study was guided by one research question: how do stakeholders experience a virtual early college high school?

Using Eisner's (2002) research design of educational criticism and connoisseurship, sub questions probed the stakeholders for their description, interpretation and evaluation of the virtual early college high school. Themes were drawn from the findings, and recommendations for further study are presented.

The data in this single case study were collected by way of interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using a three-tiered coding system. The structural codes were assigned, then in vivo coding was completed. Finally, focused coding was used to support the development of the themes, the last of Eisner's dimensions. After the data were coded within stakeholder groups, the same three-level coding process took place across stakeholder groups. Analytical tools were also used throughout the study.

Generally, the findings suggest that while the experiences of the stakeholders within this virtual early college high school are beneficial to the students, families, and the broader community, there are nonetheless barriers to this particular school model. While minimal, and managed within this context, the barriers suggest there is still much to be learned about virtual early college high schools, and progress to be made in relationships between K-12 school districts and institutions of higher education.

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Chapter One: Overview

Educational reform has explored many approaches to schooling, each iteration a solution to identified problems. Of particular interest is high school reform, which has included growing the size of schools to large comprehensive high schools, and then reducing them to smaller, more personalized learning communities; allowing students to access college level classes during high school; and the use of technologies of various kinds to support teaching and learning. While school models have been studied, little is known about how the local community context, particularly the rural context, impacts the effectiveness of the school model. Of particular interest is the early college high school, and the use of distance education to access college courses in a rural context.

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to describe an example of the reform initiative that combines early college high school with distance education, specifically within the context of rural North Carolina. Upon completion, this case study acts as the beginning of further inquiry into the school model given the local community context.

Chapter one introduces the study. It includes a brief overview of the relevant topics situated in the North Carolina context, as well as a statement of the problem being addressed. Additionally, the research questions will be highlighted, the study's methodology explained including the research design, limitations and delimitations. The chapter closes with definitions for key terms contained within the study.

High School Reform

There is a moral imperative embedded within schools that can supersede the day to day of the formal school experience. Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggest, "Americans have used discourse about education to articulate and instill a sense of the common good"

(p. 3). Concurring with this opinion, Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008) posited, "it is widely accepted that education creates improved citizens and helps to upgrade the general standard of living in society" (p. 479). More widely known as the Human Capital Theory (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008), and sometimes the Social Capital theory (Lee & Friedrich, 2007), the need for improvements in education come not just because high school students are failing their individual classes, but more so because an educated citizenry leads to a higher standard of living for all. Rodriguez and Loomis (2009) argued, "…every major reform effort in education over the past 100 years has been proceeded on the belief that expanding access to education would increase social welfare" (p. 509). The 1983 report, entitled A Nation at Risk, presented by the presidential National Commission on Excellence in Education, stated:

> …a system of education … affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes. Such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life…. (p. 13-14).

There have been several waves of educational reform in American schooling, dating back to the 1930s (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Each reform had a specific purpose and audience, but collectively they were centered on students' access to the education system; therefore, producing a more educated citizenry. Cuban (2000) concurred that much of the education reform efforts across the decades were spurred by the need for equity as the establishment known as school progressed from "…serving less than one percent of the American population …to cope with all youth…" (p. 105), "…underscoring the fact that the American high school has moved from an elite to a mass institution…" (p. 105). One

of the suggestions made in the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1983 report included the consideration of education for all students, regardless of "race, class, or economic status" (p. 6). As the first sentence in the report, this particular statement sent a very powerful message about the importance of addressing inequities in the education system. Small schools and early college high schools, as well as a focus in rural education, were viewed as a solution to address these inequities.

Small Schools

Part of the national high school reform movement, small schools were opened to replace large, comprehensive high schools failing to produce results for students. Small schools models included creating academies or magnet programs within larger high schools (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). Others were a redesign of larger comprehensive high schools into small, autonomous schools on the same campus with themes or special programs to attract a targeted population (Bloom & Unterman, 2014). Another of these small school models was the early college high school (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009).

Early College High Schools

Present on the campus of a two- or four-year institution of higher education, early college high schools offer the opportunity to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008). The primary goal of these schools, when first envisioned, was to offer the opportunity for college access to underserved students (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014) and to prepare students to be successful at the post-secondary level (Brewer, Stern, & Ahn, 2007).

The early college high schools in North Carolina targeted a specific population of students that included first generation college-goers, students at risk of dropping out, and students who were traditionally underrepresented in the college population including students of color and those from an economically disadvantaged background (NCNS, nd). Kisker (2006) argued that early college high schools remove some of the barriers traditionally preventing the target population from entering post-secondary education, and that early college high schools may provide the academic preparation necessary for students to be successful in college. Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos (2009) concurred, and suggested "…providing college-level work in high school is one promising way to better prepare a wide range of young people for college success" (p. 43). By design, early college high schools are located on the campus of an institution of higher education, enabling students to experience both high school and college opportunities on one campus.

Early college high schools now make up 3% of the total number of high schools in North Carolina (NCDPI, nd), representing at least one high school in almost eighty of the one hundred counties in the state. Students were increasingly offered the opportunity to participate as early college high schools were opened across North Carolina; however, students who did not have ready access to an institution of post-secondary education were being excluded.

Rural Schools

Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) completed a review of comparative research conducted in rural schools. Their purpose was to analyze research already completed and to set a research agenda for rural schools, specifying that "rural schools

face a unique set of challenges largely due to their geographic isolation" (p. 1). They found research about rural schools either compared rural with non-rural or was a study that could have been completed anywhere, and it just happened the research was a study of a rural school. Arnold et al., (2005), argued the need to better define rural schools, education and context. Across the literature, there is not a common definition given, but rather a different definition for each study. Interestingly, the authors did not offer a definition of rural, but did set forth a research agenda to "…capture the nuances…" of rural education (p. 20).

Across the literature reviewed, there was a belief that rural schools faced challenges that their non-rural counterparts did not, just as non-rural districts have their own nuanced challenges. Rural challenges include the struggle to recruit, retain and train quality teachers, the ability to meet the needs of all students, and the poverty in which many of the students find themselves (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Strange, Johnson, Shlowalter, & Klein, 2012). Additionally, other factors that influence the achievement of students in a rural school include their own perceptions about education, parents' aspirations for their children, community resources (Byun et al., 2012), and the proximity to opportunities for higher education (Turley, 2009).

For the purposes of this study, the definition of rural aligns with the locale codes used by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Though updated in 2005, the old codes are still used by the federal government for the purposes of allocation of funding for rural schools. The site selected for this study has a code of 7, which designates the site as "outside a consolidated metropolitan statistical area (CMSA) or metropolitan statistical area (MSA) of a large or mid-sized city and designated as rural"

(http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural_locales.asp; para. 18). This definition was chosen for this study because it is the definition of rural most commonly held in the education arena in North Carolina.

Rural Education in the North Carolina Context

More than half of the schools in North Carolina are rural and the number of students these schools serve is growing (Johnson & Strange, 2012). Additionally, North Carolina ranks ninth nationally in the percent of rural minority students. As a new high school model in North Carolina, early college high schools were designed originally to be housed on the campus of a two- or four-year institution of higher education. The early college high school was an opportunity to serve a target population of students, but in North Carolina, many of these students lived in remote areas and did not have access to an institution of higher education.

In 2006, Governor Easley requested an early college high school be created in every county, but of the one hundred counties in North Carolina, only seventy-six have a community college campus, leaving students in the remaining counties in North Carolina without physical access to a college campus. In order to remove this barrier for students, a new model of early college high school was conceptualized: the virtual model. The virtual early college high school (VECHS) offered the same opportunities as the other early college high schools, with the exception of the proximity to the campus of an institute of higher education. The VECHS is a brick and mortar establishment that students attend for high school classes, but instead of walking across campus for college classes, the students access their college experience using different forms of distance

education. This is the only fundamental design difference between the cohort of VECHS and the other early college high schools in the state.

Distance Education

The first virtual early college high school in North Carolina began operation in the fall of 2008, but distance education traces its roots back much further (Sumner, 2000). Credited with operating the first distance education classes, Sir Isaac Pitman began teaching via correspondence course in England in the late 1800s. The description of correspondence was given because the method of delivery of instruction was via correspondence through the postal system. Correspondence teaching is also the name given to the first of three generations of distance education (Nipper, 1989). Correspondence teaching, to date the longest of the three generations, was disrupted by new technologies in the late 1960s that allowed instructors to send not only print material but also broadcast via radio and television, and send cassettes to their students. Soon new forms of media such as CDs and videos began to be used (Anderson & Dron, 2011). This second generation of distance education, also known as multi-media distance teaching (Nipper, 1989), did not replace the first, but existed in harmony with the former (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Sumner, 2000).

Researchers noted that a shift in pedagogy was often the result of a disruptive innovation such as new technology (Horn, 2010; Moe, Cuban, & Chubb, 2009) and that was true for the shift from second to third generation distance education. The development of the World Wide Web allowed teachers to think differently about instructional design (Sumner, 2000), and to bring the promise of synchronous interaction between teacher and student into harmony with the ongoing possibility of asynchronous

teaching and learning. As with previous generations, the beginning of the third did not mean the end of the second. All three generations are still in use (Anderson & Dron, 2011) to fulfill different distance learning needs. Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, and Vashaw, (2014) predict the third generation of distance education is not the end of the technological advances that enhance student-learning opportunities. Ferdig and Cavanaugh (2011) concurred that changes in technology "…challenge the limitations of traditional teaching and learning…" (p. 1). As editors of a report published by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), they brought together lessons learned from distance education across the country, including North Carolina, which are discussed next.

Distance Education in the North Carolina Context

The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) began in 2006 as a supplemental service for public high schools, offering students the opportunity to have access to courses otherwise not available at their school (Setser, 2011). Governor Perdue announced a "…desire for geography not to be a limit on access to high-quality education…" (p. 208) and so the enrollment priorities for NCVPS were students living in rural or low-wealth school districts (Setser, 2011). Since the 2006-2007 school year, enrollment at NCVPS increased from fewer than 7,000 to almost 50,000 in 2012-2013 (NCVPS, 2013). It now offers courses to all public school students K-12, as well as a growing number of home school students. The North Carolina State Board of Education approved a pilot for two virtual charter schools to begin operation in the fall of 2015 (Stone, 2015). One of these, the North Carolina Connections Academy, will seek to

serve, among others, "…students who…live in rural communities…" (Stone, 2015, para. 5).

Statement of Problem

Much has been written about early college high schools; however, no published empirical research about the particular model of early college high school in which students access their college experience through distance education exists. The lack of published research suggests an incomplete exploration of the virtual early college high school model and its organizational constructs, which offers an opportunity for continued investigation and examination of this particular model of high school. An exploratory case study of one of only six virtual early college high schools in the country describes the characteristics of a virtual early college model yet undiscovered because of the lack of investigation into this model. While one case study is not generalizable to scale, it can provide evidence to support further exploration of this educational opportunity.

Additionally, this study investigates a school that is a part of the reform efforts in North Carolina. As the only high school in the county, this school is solely responsible for producing the next generation of citizens for the one town within the county. With its graduation rate rising from 55.8% in 2006 to more than 88% in 2014, (NCDPI, nd) this school reimagined itself to better serve the needs of its students, and its community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to understand the experience of students enrolled in a virtual early college high school and that of other stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, administrators, and staff) who work within and interact with the school. It is not the intent of this study to evaluate the worth of the virtual early college high school. Instead, it is to

discover the characteristics of the school that make it unique, thus understanding the experiences of the stakeholders.

Initial findings on early college high schools, both at the state and national levels, show increased graduation rates and lower dropout rates than other high schools (Edmunds et al., 2012). It also suggests that students who encounter distance education during high school are more likely to continue into higher education, and those who experience distance education early in college are more likely to complete a degree than their peers who miss these opportunities (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Additionally, studies conducted on rural schools suggest students can be successful in the distance education arena, given the appropriate support structures (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Rice, 2006).

Knowing more about the experience of the stakeholders of a virtual early college high school will allow a critical lens (Eisner, 2012) to be applied to this model. A review of the literature, and an in-depth study of the virtual early college high school, will enable educators to design learning environments that support student success, regardless of location, and level of education.

Designing the study to be exploratory in nature, the overarching purpose of the case is to be informative to a broader audience, which in turn welcomes further study into this VECHS phenomenon. Highlighting the apex of secondary education, higher education, and distance education within a rural context forms a base for a deeper understanding of school models that are created in response to a need.

Research Questions

This case study centered on one particular research question: "How do stakeholders experience a virtual early college high school?" In this case, stakeholders

are defined as students, teachers and staff, and parents. Additional sub-questions are also explored:

a) How do stakeholders describe a virtual early college high school?
b) How do stakeholders describe and understand the college experience at a virtual early college high school?
c) How do stakeholders explore college options at and beyond the virtual early college high school?

In this case, the term college experience is used to describe not only access to college while in high school, but also the culture and climate of college expectations, including college-ready skills such as forming study groups and self-advocating skills (Conley, 2005).

Potential Significance of Study

This study is useful to the education field at large in four ways. The first, and most obvious, is that it will begin to fill a void in the literature about this type of high school. While there has been research published about small schools, early college high schools, rural education, and distance education, none of those studies speak directly to a virtual early college high school and the unique experience it offers stakeholders.

Secondly, because this study is the first of its kind, it has the potential to have an impact on high school and higher education collaboration. Maeroff, Callan, and Usdan (2001) cite a "long-neglected relationship between elementary-secondary (K-12) and postsecondary education" (p. 1), while Hunt, Levine, and Renier (2001) describe a "chasm" between the two (cited in Maeroff, Callan, & Usdan, 2001, p.vii;).

Additionally, the study adds to the discussion centered on the success of high school students engaged in distance education, both at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Because of the findings, the potential exists to explore further the conditions within which students can be successful in distance education.

Finally, because this site is located in a county eligible for federal support under the Rural Educational Achievement Program (REAP), this is an opportunity to study the opportunities and barriers for rural schools and particularly for distance education in those settings. Researchers have shown that rural schools face unique challenges (Byun et al., 2012; Strange et al., 2012; Turley, 2009) and this study could highlight possible solutions to those.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this overview, and the critical review of the literature that follows, is based on the waves of school reform, and factors that influenced this school's design, and may be visualized initially as a funnel that leads to the purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) of the site for this study. Beginning with high school reform, and moving to small schools, and then early college high schools, the essence of this school model begins to appear. Geographic barriers to college access lead the reformer to rural, remote possibilities, and distance education provides the solution needed for equity of access for all students. The virtual early college high school is the result of a funneling of reform strategies to get to an appropriate school model for the location and resources of that location. High school reform could have stopped at the early college high school, but in order to serve the needs of all students, there had to be an iteration of the early college high school that focused on students who did not have

physical access to the campus of an institution of higher education. The virtual early college high school enables all students, regardless of location, to access college.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the unique characteristics of a school that was the result of several iterations of reform. As such, it was a single, unique example, and so a case study methodology was chosen. Creswell (2007) describes a case study as research "…that involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system … over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…" (p. 73). It is important to note that a case study is both the methodology, the research itself, as well as the product of the research. This methodology was chosen because this study looked critically at one particular case, bound by location and time.

According to Merriam (2009), the "single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of the study, the case" (p. 40). For this research study, the case was delimited by the unit of a school. The research did not extend beyond the people directly associated with the school, known as the stakeholders, or beyond the physical boundaries of the school site itself.

Research Design

This is the first documented research of this particular virtual early college high school model, and as such, the case study is exploratory in nature; its sole purpose acting to bring attention to this school model. In addition, recognizing this virtual early college high school as having characteristics that have potential for replicability, this exploratory case study should be considered a prelude to further investigation.

The nature of a case study lends itself to be inductive, in that information and evidence is gathered during the study itself; however, it is important to have a research design (Yin, 2009) "…to guide the investigator in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting observations" (p26). One of the purposes in having a research design is to ensure the data collected answer the research questions. In this case, the sub-questions were mapped specifically to Eisner's (2002) framework of educational connoisseurship and criticism (discussed in detail below). The framework outlines an approach to research that both measures and explains an understanding of educational programs. In his own words, Eisner explained his rationale for the framework in a speech given at the American Educational Research Association's annual conference (1975): "The range, richness and complexity of educational phenomena occurring within the classrooms are wider than can be measured. Some phenomena can only be rendered" (p. 10).

There are negative connotations to the words *connoisseurship* and *criticism,* which Eisner acknowledges and explains (2002). He defines connoisseurship as the art of appreciation, and criticism as the public art of disclosure of that appreciation:

> Criticism is the art of disclosing the qualities of events or objects that connoisseurs perceive. Criticism is the public side of connoisseurship. One can be a connoisseur without being a critic, but one cannot be a critic without the skills of connoisseurship. (p. 219)

Eisner (2002) further explains criticism as "…the illumination of something's qualities so that an appraisal of its value can be made" (p. 214). This is the crux that was used to frame the data collection of this case: little was known about the virtual early college high school and so a critique illuminated its qualities in order to make a rendering.

Knowing that criticism is the public side of connoisseurship, Eisner (2002) offered four dimensions through which critics can illuminate qualities: descriptive, interpretive, evaluative, and thematic. A summary of their definitions is given below.

Descriptive: an identification of characteristics, which are then rendered in language.

Interpretive: similar to descriptive, but with the further task of asking: what does this characteristic mean to those involved?

Evaluative: a judgment made about the characteristics using a set of criteria, including a consideration of which qualities are valuable, and which are not, assessing their significance or importance.

Thematic: the distillation of the major ideas or conclusions derived from the data collected, which may include identifying recurring messages, pervasive qualities, or looking for larger lessons that can be learned from a collection of qualities.

This study was centered on one particular research question: "How do stakeholders experience a virtual early college high school?" Additional sub-questions, informed by Eisner's framework, were explored. These were:

a) Descriptive: how do stakeholders describe a virtual early college high school?
b) Interpretive: how do stakeholders understand the college experience at a virtual early college high school?
c) Evaluative: how do stakeholders explore college options at and beyond the virtual early college high school?

There is not a sub-question connected Eisner's thematic dimension because themes emerged as the study progressed and these highlighted the major ideas or conclusions

suggested by the data. Questions were asked, such as: What lesson was learned by this criticism? What does it all add up to in the analysis? (Eisner, 2002) and these answers were used to inform and frame later considerations, such as opportunities for further study of virtual early college high schools.

Eisner's (2002) framework has been used in a range of educational research. For example, in an international context, Trotman (2006) and Locke and Riley (2009) supported their research in classrooms, specifically how teachers make sense of student's use of their own imagination, by referring to the dimensions of the connoisseurship and criticism framework. Nationally, Magolda and Ebben (2007) and Moroye (2005) also applied the dimensions to their research studies on program evaluations. Additionally, Kuzel (2010) used Eisner's "triple aim of coherence, insight and utility" which was also a part of the framework. When listing the features of qualitative studies, Eisner stated "…qualitative research becomes believable because of its coherence, insight, and utility…" (1998, p. 39). Eisner believed these three criteria to be a frame for judging the success of qualitative research as there is no "…statistical test to see if the results *count*..." (p. 39) in qualitative research.

There was one alternative conceptual framework considered for the foundation of this study. Corry and Stella (2012) offered a framework for research in online K12 distance education. The framework appears to be comprehensive, including nine components that collectively describe an online K12 distance education program: learners, teachers, materials, delivery, methodology, evaluation, administration, international, and history.

The Corry and Stella (2012) framework was considered most specifically for its comprehensive approach to evaluating a program; however, it was discarded in favor of Eisner's framework for three reasons. First, no other studies could be found that had used the framework for its research and so there was no precedent for its use. Second, the authors described the framework as a tool for assessing distance education, which is not the primary focus of this study. Finally, the framework specifically referenced K-12 distance education without mention of higher education and the research pursued in this study encompasses both K12 and higher education.

Limitations

Because this is an exploratory case study, the collected data is not intended to be generalizable to the larger population of high schools. Rather, the data collected act as a starting point for further investigation into the identification of strategies used in schools situated in the rural context. Information gathered relating to the implementation of early college strategies in this particular small, rural setting may be applied to other schools eligible for the federal Small, Rural School Achievement program (SRSA), a part of the Title VI section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (www2.ed.gov/programs/reapsrsa/eligible14/indew.html). This is also true for strategies for implementing distance education in a rural setting.

Also limiting this case study were factors determined by the host site. These include limited access to the stakeholders for interviews and observations and an internal filter of which documents to share with an outside researcher. In addition, the consent process for participants proved to have its own limitations due to forms not being returned.

Delimitations

One of the design decisions made for this case study included defining the term stakeholders. This decision was made in order to define the case boundary clearly. In itself, this decision meant that there were stakeholders whose voice would not be heard in the data presented. These stakeholders included personnel from the community college that collaborated with this school, local community members, local business owners, and others affected by the graduates of this school. This defined the case more clearly because it concentrated the data collection on the stakeholders who experienced the virtual early college high school daily, and directly, that is, the teachers, students, parents, and administrators on site.

It was also a design decision to use the researcher as the only data collection and analysis tool for this study. Using the researcher as a tool for data collection (Brown, Steven, Troiano, and Schneider, 2002) can be a delimitation as the first filter of any data belongs solely to the researcher. In an attempt to counter this, the data was triangulated. Further explanation of the triangulation is given in chapter three.

Definition of Key Terms

In order to engage fully in these findings, it was important to define several key terms used throughout. In alphabetical order, these are:

Asynchronous Learning: Communication exchanges that occur in elapsed time between two or more people. Examples are email, online discussion forums, message boards, blogs, podcasts, etc. (iNACOL, 2011).

Blended Learning: The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) defines this as any time a student learns in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location

away from home and in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; often used synonymously with Hybrid Learning (Horn & Staker, 2011).

Distance Education: Defined by Volery and Lord (2000) as "…any approach to education delivery that replaces the same-time, same-place, face-to-face environment of a traditional classroom" (p. 219).

Dual Credit: A program through which high school students are enrolled in college courses, taught at their high school, that fulfill high school graduation requirements and may earn the student college credits (Kisker, 2006).

Dual Enrollment: A program through which high school students may enroll in college courses while still enrolled in high school. Students are not required to apply for admission to the college in order to participate (Kisker, 2006).

Early College High School: A small, autonomous institution that combines high school and the first two years of college into a coherent educational program. These are usually housed on the campus of a two- or four-year institute of higher education (Kisker, 2006).

Middle College: The National Consortium of Middle Colleges (NCMC) defines middle college as community collaborations between school districts and colleges, parents, and business representatives. These cross-institutional collaborations make college attainable, reduce repetition in the curriculum, yield coordinated student services, and eliminate the need for remediation.

Online Learning: According to iNACOL's (2011), online learning is education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the Internet. The term does not include print-based correspondence education, broadcast television or radio,

videocassettes, or stand-alone educational software programs that do not have a significant Internet-based instructional component. This term may be used interchangeably with Virtual learning, Cyber learning, and e-learning; however, that is not the case in this study.

Synchronous Learning: Online learning in which the participants interact at the same time and in the same space (iNACOL, 2011).

Virtual Early College High School: a brick and mortar high school that meets the definition of an early college, with the exception of location. These schools are not located on the campus of a higher education partner. Students access college courses through distance education.

Summary

Chapter one gave an overview of the case study, and included a brief history of the small school reform efforts both nationwide and in North Carolina specifically. Beginning with the creation of small schools, including early college high schools, chapter one also offered an overview of distance education, particularly in rural settings, that is explored more in the following chapter. Additionally, chapter one outlined the conceptual framework that guides the critical review of the research that follows in chapter two.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter one introduced the study and an overview of its specific context. Chapter two offers a critical review of the literature most pertinent to this study, including school size, school models, urbanity, and instructional delivery. The literature review is informed and organized by the conceptual framework presented in chapter one. The purpose of a critical literature review is to synthesize the available literature (Pan, 2008) and to find gaps in previous knowledge or thought. Providing a detailed critical analysis of that which already exists demonstrates the current research offers something new to the area of study (Hart, 1998).

The search for literature was conducted between the summer of 2011 and the spring of 2016, primarily through online resources, specifically electronic databases available to students of The George Washington University, including ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Literature was considered if published since 1970, regardless of international origin. Peer-reviewed journals were searched first, followed by online sources including websites of organizations and newspapers, which allowed for a targeted search of current resources not yet published in journals. Additionally, the reference pages of previously published dissertations were used as a resource to locate articles not found by the parameters used to search online resources. This provided a more expansive search and revealed sources not previously discovered.

Initially, the search terms included combinations of distance education, secondary education, and higher education. These searches did not produce literature specific to early college high schools, and online learning, so the search terms were expanded to

include variations on early college, early college high school, online learning, virtual learning, college access, and early college access. In addition to looking for literature on the school model, the searches also included terms connected to rural education, such as rural schools, rural high schools, and rural access. Finally, searches were conducted that combined two or more of the listed terms together.

High School Reform

The nature of the American melting pot of nationalities, cultures, and languages, education is "one of the few common experiences that most Americans share" (Jennings, 2015, p. 13). To this end, education has been called upon to not only provide a citizenry ready to engage in social issues, but also to support citizens in the role of contributing towards the greater good by being prepared to provide for themselves, family, and community.

By way of the Tenth Amendment, the responsibility for providing education was left to the states and, as such, the federal government was historically the "junior partner to the states and localities" (Usdan, 2015, p. 1) in this particular arena. The 'urgent social goals' (Kaestle & Smith, 1982) brought forward by the Civil Rights Movement, as well as scientific advancement by other countries, moved the junior partner to center stage to ensure national and global competitiveness for all students. Beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, followed by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the federal government gradually became more involved in the daily operations of schools, particularly in classroom activities. This involvement was increased with the passing of the Bilingual Education Act in 1968 and the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, originally in 1975.

The 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence again reiterated the need for educational reform, and this was the basis for President Clinton's Goals 2000, and another iteration of the ESEA. However, it really was not until the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorization of the ESEA, when particular attention was again placed on social goals, that the high school reform movement highlighted the need for differentiated, smaller schools that could address specific issues for subsets of students. It was after NCLB that the small school movement really took off and early colleges in their current model were created.

Philanthropic role in reform. Philanthropic organizations have increasingly supported school reform, with the trend of this support growing most notably since 2000. In her book, Follow the Money. How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics, Reckhow (2013) suggested the reasons for this essentially boil down to the federal role in education. Reckhow claims the growing role of the federal government in education has opened the door for market-based solutions to school reform, namely competition, choice, and privatization. These opportunities for school reform have opened the doors to philanthropic foundations to pledge their financial support behind various modes of reform, including the small schools movement. These foundations are able to support widespread reform by using their networks and knowledge, as well as political weight (Ferris, Hentschke, & Harmssen, 2008). The goals of the foundations have broadly supported school reform under the guise of improving schools to improve society. Not usually engaging directly in the politics of education (Reckhow, 2013), the foundations seek opportunities to fund interest groups or intermediaries. For example, the Ford Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Annenberg Institute, the

Carnegie Corporation, the Wallace Foundation, and the Broad Foundation have all offered support for widespread change, but also fund targeted programs and opportunities by schools and districts. One of these targeted opportunities for high schools included the small schools initiative, started in North Carolina in 2002 with seed money from the Gates Foundation (Wherry, 2003).

High school reform in the North Carolina context. During the late 1990s, North Carolina was creating a statewide system of accountability for its schools. While not directly focused on high school, this accountability movement was a step towards addressing the state's low high school graduation rate and increasing dropout rate (NCDPI, nd). A crucial decision by the state's Supreme Court in 2001 was the catalyst for directly addressing high school reform across North Carolina (Coltrane, Silberman & Garcia, 2009). Five rural school districts sued the state, claiming they had insufficient resources to serve their students and therefore were not able to offer an equitable education as promised by the state constitution. While the court did not find for the counties, it did find that the state had a responsibility to provide for all students "a sound and basic education" (Leandro v. State, 1996) regardless of location, socio-economic background, or ethnicity. The decision in the case of Leandro vs. State, referred to as "the Leandro decision" (Coltrane et al., 2009) in North Carolina, intensified the state's reform efforts, and placed a spotlight on high schools in particular.

The North Carolina Education Cabinet was created by General Statute 116C-1 in 1992. In addition to the state governor, it was made up of the following education leaders: president of the state university system; president of the state community college system; president of the association of private colleges and universities; superintendent of

the Department of Public Instruction; and the chairperson of the state Board of Education. This committee was the first convening of its kind in the state and signaled collaboration between education entities. The cabinet met annually to discuss education in the state, the budget, and the continuum of educational experience for students from kindergarten through college. The cabinet has been used as a springboard to launch several reform efforts in North Carolina, including policies connected to early learning and teacher evaluation (Education Commission of the States (ECS), 2008). This cabinet is one of only three of the 38 established state councils that has authority over other agencies and is one of only eight regularly chaired by the governor (ECS, 2008). This gives the impression that the cabinet has the authority to set policy over the entire K-12 and higher education systems in North Carolina, when in fact it does not have any such legislative power. What it does have is each of these heads of systems working together, to the extent that collaboration exists between them, and the power that each of these has individually over his or her own system and board.

In 2002, as a direct result of the Leandro decision, Governor Easley used this cabinet as the base from which to launch a statewide high school reform initiative. In an undated document entitled *High School Diplomas that Count, and High Schools that Deliver Them,* (NCDPI, nd), the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction outlined the need for high school reform across the state, and the policies and strategies that would be put in place to deliver that reform. The reform began with creating an education intermediary in 2003, the North Carolina New Schools Project, with seed money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Wherry, 2003). The North Carolina New Schools Project was responsible for redesigning large, traditional high schools into

smaller schools on the same campus. Next, Easley launched *Learn and Earn*, an initiative that created the first early college high schools in North Carolina, which also were supported by the North Carolina New Schools Project (Center for Teaching Quality, 2007).

The North Carolina New Schools Project was charged with creating new small schools and redesigning large high schools into smaller, more personalized environments. These two school designs were in keeping with the goals of the national small schools movement: improved student achievement, personalized learning, and equality of opportunity for all students (Lee & Friedrich, 2007), expressed more succinctly as "…rigor, relevance, and relationships – the small schools mantra…" (Oxley & Luers, 2010, p. 62).

Small Schools

Citing data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core Data set, Bloom and Unterman (2014) suggested the small schools initiative was born from the notion that large, comprehensive high schools were failing their students and that a small, more personalized environment would offer students the support necessary to be successful. Comprehensive high schools of the 1960s successfully contributed to the mass production of citizens ready to work in an industrialized nation. However, the new economy of the 21st century required a different kind of graduate in critical mass to meet the needs of a changing world (Toch, 2003). Small schools were a possible solution to failing schools and new demands.

Small schools were defined as having "…no more than 100 students per grade level…" (Vander Ark, 2002, p. 57). This goal was met in two ways. Either, a large comprehensive high school was broken down into small learning communities (Lee & Friedrich, 2007) or into small separate schools, or, new small schools were created from nothing. Of the 29 new schools studied within their research, Shear et al. (2008) found that many new small schools "…often had a palpably distinctive character…" usually a theme or specific program that targeted a certain population (p.1994).

Part of the reason for the push for small schools was so that students would enjoy a more personalized learning experience – "one of the three R's of the small schools' mantra was relationships" (Oxley & Luers, 2011, p.62). As early as 1964, reformers thought that targeting a specific population in a smaller environment would lead to improved student achievement and graduation rates, as well as more underrepresented students attending college, because of the more personalized environment (Barker & Gump, 1960, cited in Lee, Ready, & Welner, 2002, p. 29).

Large-scale, longitudinal research conducted using naturally occurring randomized lotteries estimated the effect of the success of the small schools movement in the city of New York (Bloom & Unterman, 2014). Particularly, the study looked at graduation rates, sub-group data, and the cost associated with operating small schools as opposed to the traditionally large comprehensive high schools. Results indicated "…small schools can markedly and consistently increase high school graduation rates for a large population of educationally and emotionally disadvantaged students of color…" (Bloom & Unterman, 2014, p. 290). Specifically, Bloom and Unterman (2014) posited the graduation rates for students in the small schools increased by 9.5% to 70.4%, higher

than the control group's rate of 60.9%. In addition, their study of more than 12,000 participants found more high-level diplomas awarded, and there was an increase in English college readiness, as measured by the New York Regents exam, of the small school graduates as compared to their control group peers. These data also showed a marked improvement over the control group of students, particularly when disaggregated by subgroup. For example, graduation rates for non-English speakers and for students with disabilities showed a marked increase as compared with control group peers.

As highlighted by the data for graduation rates, particularly for certain sub groups, Bloom and Unterman (2014) conclude that this particular small school reform "…markedly improves graduation rates for a large population of low-income, disadvantaged students of color…" (p. 315). While these results presented an overall picture of the student body, there were also smaller subgroups to consider. The study found an estimated effect on graduation rates specifically for students who were eligible for free or reduced lunch (11.2 with a significance level of 1%). Additionally, graduation rates were impacted in the small schools for students from underrepresented populations (black males, 13.5; Hispanic females, 10.3; both with a significance level of 1%) than for their peers in the control group (Bloom & Unterman, 2014). An early study of small schools (Howley, 2000) found that ethnic minority students were reaching high levels of academic achievement and another (Cotton, 2001) suggested that the achievement gap between white and minority students had been reduced in smaller schools.

In keeping with the notion of relationships serving a purpose in small schools, research conducted by Lee and Friedrich (2007) suggested the importance of having a caring adult as the catalyst for improving student achievement. A study conducted whose

sample of 193 large comprehensive high schools that had implemented small learning communities, suggested "…the existence of caring adults is significantly related to student achievement…" (Lee & Friedrich, 2007, p. 272), because the authors noted that schools in the sample that had adopted teacher advisory and adult advocacy systems showed higher student achievement. A secondary reason, behind student achievement, offered for the creation of small schools was that students felt a more personal connection to school. Arguing that large comprehensive schools were impersonal and that students got lost in the crowd, small schools were created with no more than 400 students. The research conducted by Lee and Friedrich (2007) posited that, in this area, the small learning communities had a positive effect. The "…effectiveness could very well be manifest in the students' lived experiences in ways that exceed the measurement capabilities of the standardized tests…the meaning of social supports students can be provided in small learning environments can be profound…" (p. 277).

The positive effect of a small school is highlighted by further findings from this 2007 study that indicate an increase in student achievement for Hispanic students in a small school when the majority of the study body is Hispanic. The authors speculated that the reason for this is the sense of community: the authors suggested that it is likely a largely Hispanic school attracts and retains Hispanic teachers and assistants who serve as models for the Hispanic students, thus creating a new vision for the future among the students, rather than perhaps the culture outside school less focused on education.

These individual studies reviewed above concentrate on one of the small school models. A five-year national mixed methods study of small schools initially supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, conducted by Shear et al. (2008) looked across

school models to determine the best course of action in creating a small school, deciding between starting from scratch or redesign an existing comprehensive. From the outset, the two models of small schools shared the same goals of improving student achievement and providing a supportive environment for students. The data from Shear et al. (2008) indicated that new small schools were likely to be successful more quickly in meeting the goals of small schools. The authors suggested this is because the small schools created a culture from scratch and grew it over time, rather than trying to change an existing culture. Measurements were based on AIR's seven attributes of effective schooling, and three attributes of powerful teaching and learning. Additionally, the data presented suggested the startup schools were more successful overall in areas such as increased academic rigor, student achievement, and student attendance than the schools redesigned into smaller learning communities. Given the nature of their comparison between models of school, Shear et al. "…judge the experiences of [this sample] of startup schools as grounds for optimism…" (p. 2024) for high schools in America.

The conversion schools had some barriers that the startups did not have to deal with: a long standing culture, a historical community context that often included parents and grandparents hesitant to see change in the school from which they graduated, and sometimes a top-down mandate for reform that was received with mixed feelings by a long-standing high school community. Coltrane, Silberman, and Garcia (2008) concurred, stating "…staunch resistance from community leaders, parents, teachers, and administrators…" (p. 187) as a barrier to redesigning the schools in North Carolina.

Early College High Schools

Born of the small schools movement, early college high schools were designed to integrate the last two years of high school with the first two years of post-secondary education. This notion is not new (Kisker, 2006). Noting that "…educational ideas are rarely new; they simply re-emerge at different times under different circumstances…" (p. 68), Kisker explained the history of the early college high school as an attempt to achieve several goals including smoothing the transition from high school to college, accelerating students into college coursework, and reducing the number of dropouts between high school and college. There was also an idea that having these two separate systems of secondary and post-secondary education work together would lead to more collaboration and integration of the respective curricula.

Allowing students to accelerate their learning by taking college classes in high school has been an option for some time, even before early college high schools. Commonly known as dual enrollment, or dual credit, gifted and academically advanced students were encouraged to accelerate their curriculum. Andrews (2004) noted that this opportunity for accelerated learning existed in some form in all fifty states for a certain section of the population. However, the small schools movement enabled the rebirth of the early college strategies, in the new model of early college high schools. Calling it "…perhaps the most ambitious attempt yet…" (p. 81) to integrate high school and college, Kisker (2006) noted the purpose of an early college high school is to prepare *all* students for college work, and offer access to that work. Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos (2008) noted that college expectations are a part of the culture of early college high

school from ninth grade orientation, so that college begins for all students long before high school ends.

Despite Shear et al.'s (2007) optimism, early conclusions on the success of early college high schools is anecdotal and offers little in the way of rigorous data (Andrews, 2004; Born, 2006; Boswell, 2001). In North Carolina, there have been several examples of case studies of early college high schools that offered qualitative data on the success of the school, (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011) and others that offered a small but robust look at the data from one school (Fischetti, MacKain, & Smith, 2011; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).

To date, the quantitative data for early college high schools has been limited to two reports: one national and the other local to North Carolina. Jobs for the Future, the education intermediary responsible for overseeing the national early college high school initiative, and the American Institutes for Research, (AIR; Berger et al., 2014) completed a national impact study of early college high schools. Using data from the National Student Clearing House, the AIR looked retrospectively at early college high schools whose data included students who enrolled between 2005 and 2011, and whose schools had used a lottery at least once during those years. This data set enabled a lottery-based, random experimental design, in which the AIR found that early college high school students were more likely to graduate (86%) than the control group (81%) and upon graduation, were more likely to enroll in college (81%) than comparison students (71%). No significant differences were found between subgroups [noted in the study as: "gender, race/ethnicity, family income, first-generation college-going status, or pre-high school achievement" (p. v)] in the early college high school or the control group. The authors

noted "…the findings in this study are applicable only to the 10 early colleges included in the sample study…" (Berger et al., 2014, p. v). The study does not report how many early college high schools were open at that time, or why a sample size of ten was chosen, or if the sample of ten is representative of the remaining early college high schools.

In a similarly designed experimental study, researchers from The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, (Edmunds et al., 2012) used a longitudinal lens on ninth graders to examine the impact of the early college high school, but limited their data collection to North Carolina. Participants in the study total 1,607 students in 18 cohorts from 12 schools. Edmunds et al. (2012) found the early college high school had a statistically significant effect on the courses taken and successfully passed for mathematics; however, this was not true for English classes for ninth grade students. Citing earlier studies completed by the SERVE Center, (Arshavsky, Edmunds, Miller, & Corritore, 2011; Edmunds & Arshavsky, 2011), the researchers suggested this had more to do with the traditional pathway and sequencing of math and English courses in North Carolina than the schools themselves. In addition to the academic readiness, this study also looked at student attitude and behaviors. Early college high school students were more likely to attend school than their control group peers and less likely to be suspended from school.

The research on these early college high schools in North Carolina continues and now incorporates graduation rates and success in dual enrollment and credit classes, but data are yet unavailable. Of the schools in the sample for the ongoing research, none of them represents the six virtual early colleges in North Carolina. While the school that is the subject of this case study is not able to provide longitudinal data such as that from the

SERVE center, it does highlight the historical data trends of the school including high school graduation rates, and student enrollment in college classes.

Rural Education

The nature of the rural district demands a different approach to the early college high school model of reform and the virtual early college high school was a solution. The virtual early college high schools were specifically designed to serve remote geographic districts. For the purposes of this study, the definition of rural aligns with the locale codes used by the NCES.

Students in rural schools often face barriers that their non-rural counterparts do not. Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, and Hutchins (2012) found not one single barrier to the students' success, but rather several depending on the student's family situation. In a survey administered to more than 7,000 9^{th} – 12^{th} grade students in rural schools, participants assessed their perception of barriers to education. Part of a broader national study, the students surveyed attended more than 70 schools across the country, in varying federal rural code locales. The response rate is not noted for these data. Results indicated that parent's educational attainment was predictive of educational success, as was socio-economic status and ethnicity. Additionally, a rural student's need to take care of family was cited as a barrier, as was the student's need to stay close to home upon high school graduation. Also, the research noted possible solutions for these barriers, indicating the need for counseling early in the student's high school career. Other solutions offered engaged the students in more activities while in high school that were not academically related, such as community associations, church, and sports.

Using a specific data set extracted from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988-2000 (NELS:88-00), Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) made predictions about rural students' attainment of a bachelor's degree. The sample group included students who participated in the 1992 and 2000 follow up surveys, who had ever attended a four-year institution, and who had a complete transcript record. This sample included approximately 6,000 students out of the original set of 12,100 students. The sample excluded multiracial and American Indian or Alaska Native students due to small sample sizes, and the authors excluded any students whose data was missing, ending with a final sample set of approximately 4,880 students. The data showed that rural students are more likely to be the first in their family to attend college than their urban peers. Further, rural students who attend college are more likely than their urban peers to be white. Additionally, rural students as a group are less likely to attend college than their non-rural peers; however, when controlling for all variables – including race, gender, socio economic status, and family structure - other than the location of their high school, rural students are as likely to attain a four-year degree as their non-rural counterparts (Byun et al., 2012). Rural students who delayed their college entry were less likely to graduate than students who went straight to college after high school. Once in college, rural students who participated in social clubs or sports were more likely to earn a degree than students who did not. Finally, this study offered conclusions as to rural students' college attendance and achievement. Byun et al. posited that family and communities play an important role in degree completion, citing students who are encouraged by their family to attend school, and who participate in campus related social activities, as more likely to graduate.

Chance and Segura (2009) studied the reform of a rural high school, and noted the strategies needed for sustained change leading to improved outcomes for students. Their case study of one rural high school raised many of the same themes already discussed here, and specifically highlighted three commonalities among rural schools found in the research. First, the need for a visionary leader (Farmer, 2009); next, a focus on collaboration among stakeholders (Austin, 2010); and finally, a focus on student outcomes (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005).

Consideration for opportunities beyond high school can also be affected by the family's economic and geographic context. Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), gave the location of all institutions of higher education. A sample of 12th graders, along with their addresses, was gathered from the 1992 population of the 1998 NELS. Analyzing these data, Turley (2009) used a "customized software program … that generated a measure of college proximity that was based on the number of colleges that were located within a specified radius of each student" (p.132). Turley suggested rural students in economically disadvantaged families are more likely to go to college if there is one close to where they live because of the considerable cost savings of being able to live at home and continue employment, as well as being able to take advantage of cheaper in-state tuition rates. Additionally, rural students who do pursue post-secondary opportunities are more likely to attend a college closer to home so that they can live at home while attending higher education, thus keeping strong family ties for support, as well as being available to support family care for siblings or elderly relatives.

The Rural School and Community Trust released the latest in a series of biennial reports outlining the data surrounding rural education (Strange et al., 2012). In this report, the data specific to North Carolina K-12 schools showed a growing population of rural students, ranking the state third in the nation for increase in number of K-12 rural student enrollment. Additionally, the report identified North Carolina as 4th in the country for the percent of rural students, and highlights a statewide rural graduation rate (75.1%) as lower than that of the national rural average (77.5%). While there is yet to be any research specific to rural North Carolina, an issue this study addresses, there is a body of literature that focuses on the challenges generally faced by rural schools and their stakeholders.

Distance Education

Long before early college high schools were created in North Carolina, distance education was being used as a means to alleviate issues of equity and access (Horn, 2010). Studies have shown that the use of distance education is rising (Rice, 2006) with a pattern that has continued over the past several years (Ferdig & Cavanaugh, 2011). Additionally, the annual *Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning* report cites an "ever-increasing amount" (p. 4) of students enrolling in online courses (Watson et al., 2014), and the number of students enrolled in distance education at the post-secondary level nationally has increased from 9.6% of the total enrollments in 2002 to more than 33% in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Considering that more than half of all high schools in North Carolina are considered rural as defined by federal local codes (Strange et al., 2012), and community context matters such that rural schools face challenges that their non-rural counterparts do

not (Byun et al., 2012; Strange et al., 2012), it is vital that rural districts find ways to provide the "…sound and basic…" (Manning, 2001, cited in Lange & Wood, 2006, p. 67) education to which every child in the state has a constitutional right. Governor Easley understood this, which is why he called for an early college high school in every county. Distance education was the only way to make that happen for schools that did not have ready access to the campus of a two- or four-year institution of higher education.

In a study comparing the academic achievement of distance education students with that of their face-to-face counterparts using state mandated tests as a measure, Barbour and Mulcahy (2008) used data from provincial departments of education to compare cohorts of students. Citing descriptive statistics, the authors found that for any given subject, distance education students did as well as, and in some cases better than, their comparable peers. In their three-year longitudinal study, the data were consistent over that time. The authors posited the fact that distance education students compared favorably to their peers "…was probably due to a greater degree of student selectivity found in most distance education programs." (p. 71). The authors also recognized that if student selectivity was not the case, then further research must be done to determine why students were successful in distance education.

Shea and Bidjerano (2014) also published a study using data collected by the NCES. The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 04/09) tracked students from when they first enrolled in higher education through their sixth year after initial enrollment. This data showed students who took online courses early in their college career had a better chance of completing their degree than their counterparts. Currently the community college six-year completion rate of an associate's degree is

20%. Higher enrollments (online), but lower graduation rates led to the theory that distance education was a barrier to completion, which the study by Shea and Bidjerano (2014) contradicted. These authors asserted "colleges must become social institutions sensitive to the unique goals and needs of individual students" (p. 105). It is not just the student that has to adapt – the college must adapt as well.

Also included in this study by Shea and Bidjerano (2014) were mentions of Washington and Virginia state level investigations, where the reverse was true: distance education did indicate likelihood for non-completion. Contrary to the two state studies cited, the larger one found nationally that students were more likely to complete if they were enrolled in distance education early in their community college career. This was especially true for students who entered the community college less prepared for college study. The authors suggested that the advancement of online teaching and learning between the two studies may account for the difference in results. Current practices are more advanced, and have adapted to support online learners more readily than those of the past.

The target population for the early college high schools in North Carolina is very specific: first generation college-goers, students at risk of dropping out, as well as those students traditionally underrepresented in the college population including students of color and those from an economically disadvantaged background (NCNS, nd, para. 1). An analysis of data from the NCES was completed by Pontes and Pontes (2012). Specifically, they used data from the 2008 National Postsecondary Aid Study (NPSAS: 08) that collected data on student achievement, financial aid awarded, and student demographic and enrollment data. Their analysis showed that first generation, low-

income students were less likely to enroll in distance education due to several social and emotional conditions, but when they did, they were more likely to complete a degree than their peers who enrolled only in live classes.

Distance Education in the Rural Context

Established in 2004, the National Research Center on Rural Education Support reports the unique challenges and opportunities of rural education. It has released several studies highlighting the dilemmas faced by rural students and educators, and additionally has addressed the use of distance education in rural locations. Much of the research from the National Research Center on Rural Education Support was specific to a particular aspect of rural education; however, one study published in 2009 asked general questions about the use of distance education in rural districts. Creating a survey specifically for this study, Hannum, Irvin, Banks, and Farmer (2009) contacted a person in a random sample of 417 rural districts nationwide and asked if they had ever used distance education in their district. The authors used the website for the district to find a person with whom to make the initial contact. Of the initial districts contacted, people in 394 of them completed the survey, for a response rate of 95%. Eighty-five percent of the district staff surveyed said they had used distance education in the past. Reasons given by districts who were currently using, or had used distance education in the past, included fulfillment of advanced and specialty courses, and enrichment opportunities for students. This research did not specify if college courses were offered to students as a part of the distance learning opportunities.

Other research conducted to study rural students' study habits in distance education included a qualitative study of time in courses that have both a synchronous

and an asynchronous component. Barbour and Hill (2011) used an inductive analysis approach to a case study of a Canadian virtual school. They found that students were more likely to use their peers and on-campus teachers for support than they were to contact their distance education teacher when seeking assistance during the asynchronous time. The authors suggested two reasons for these findings. First, rural students are used to a small, close-knit community atmosphere, and so they rely on the people closest to them for support. Students asked each other questions and formed study groups to complete tasks assigned collaboratively rather than send a question via email or call a distance-learning teacher. The second reason given is that students were not experienced with making the most of the assigned asynchronous time and, as a result, procrastinated to the point that there was no time to wait for a reply from their instructor if a question arose. Participants reported talking with their friends and being off task as reasons for the procrastination.

Barbour and Hill (2011) suggested that students needed to experience an orientation to distance education that would help them understand the expectations for students during synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. Further, they suggested that facilitators of distance education needed to develop methods for their classes to form online communities, similar to those close-knit communities found in rural areas, so that students had other resources for support in addition to those found on their own campus.

Summary

The number of early college high schools in the United States exceeds 240 (http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-designs/schools), and close to one third of

these are located in North Carolina (http://ncnewschools.org/community-business-leaders/what-we-do/early-college/). There has been some research published about the success of early colleges (Edmunds et al., 2012) and some anecdotal papers that speak to the value of the early college to the students (Born, 2006); however, a search of online databases between the fall of 2011 and the fall of 2015 found no research based on the model of virtual early college high school found in North Carolina that is investigated in this case study. As is illustrated in Figure 1 (below), the apex of distance education, secondary education, and higher education is as yet unresearched, but is surely the future of innovation in education.

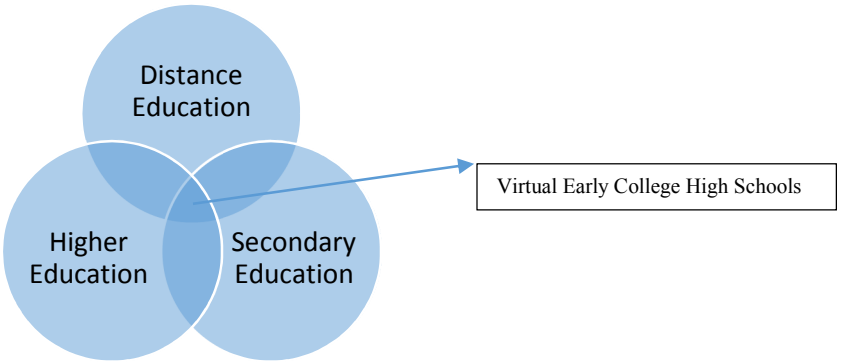

Figure 1. A visual representation of the gap in the literature about virtual early college high schools.

Using the conceptual framework for the virtual early college high school model, chapter two offered a discourse centered on the literature about small schools, early college high schools, distance education, and rural education. This discourse will be used in the following chapters to understand and inform the research. Chapter three gives a detailed

account of the methodology used in the study, including the research design used as an anchor for the data collection and analysis, as well as themes derived from these.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Chapter two gave a detailed review of the available literature about early college high schools, distance education, and the overlap of these models of teaching and learning in the rural setting. Chapter three describes the methodology used to conduct this research, the research design, the framework on which the case study rests, and the reason for each. The chapter also discusses the collection and analysis of data as well as how human participants were protected.

Restatement of Problem to be Addressed

Much has been written about early college high schools (Edmunds et al., 2012); however, there is no published empirical research about the particular model of early college high school in which students access their college experience through distance education. The lack of empirical research suggested an incomplete exploration of the virtual early college high school and its organizational constructs, which offered an opportunity for investigation and examination of this particular model of high school. An exploratory case study of one of only six virtual high schools in the country begins to answer questions posed by the literature, as well as those yet invisible because of the lack of rigorous investigation into this model of high school. Interviewing stakeholders, observing them in their environment, and looking at the documented history of the school with a critical eye (Eisner, 2002) led to answers, as well as highlighted other qualities not yet discovered. While one case study is not generalizable to scale, it does provide evidence to support further exploration of this educational opportunity.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, one single guiding research question was used: "*How do stakeholders experience a virtual early college high school?"* In this case, stakeholders were defined as students, teachers and administrators, and parents. The original principal and interim principal made up the group of administrators. Additional sub-questions were explored, and were informed by the study's methodological framework discussed below. These additional sub-questions were:

a) How do stakeholders describe a virtual early college high school?
b) How do stakeholders describe and understand the college experience at the virtual early college?
c) How do stakeholders explore college options at and beyond the virtual early college high school?

Epistemology

Each individual has a unique perspective on the world. How each person gains knowledge and ideas about their reality is described as their epistemology (Maxwell, 2013). This study was approached from a constructivist stance, which is to say that I believe each person makes their own meaning from their experiences, and so "…there is not one observable reality" (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). The process used to conduct this research called on the experiences of the participants. The research questions called for "…an inductive process; that is, the researcher gathers data to build concepts, hypotheses and theories…" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). The framework was used to make sense of these data, and they are presented in such a way as to "…show how people [participants] make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

Methodology

According to Yilmaz (2013), there are "…two major approaches to research that can be used in the study of the social and individual world. These are quantitative and qualitative research" (p. 311). At their most basic definition, quantitative research offers explanations using numbers, while qualitative research findings are not numerically quantifiable, nor are they represented in a statistical manner. Much of the educational research completed in the early part of the twentieth century was done so using quantitative methods (Donmoyer, 2014); however, there were a few social scientists looking for other ways to describe education and educational experiences. Most notable for the proposed study is Eliot Eisner, who sought alternative, non-quantitative methods to evaluate elements of the educational arena. He wanted to understand, not just evaluate, the qualities of an educational program (Eisner, 1998), and argued that qualitative studies "…can provide the double advantage of learning about the schools and classrooms in ways that are useful for understanding other schools and classrooms *and* learning about individual classrooms and particular teachers in ways that are useful to them" (p. 12).

Eisner outlined six features of a qualitative study (1998):

> the studies tend to be field-focused; the self is used a data collection instrument; it is interpretive in character; it uses voice of participants in the text; there is direct attention paid to particulars; and, they are judged by their "cohere, insight, and instrument utility. (p. 39)

Informed by these tenants, this study focused on a particular school and sought to understand how stakeholders experienced the school.

Creswell (2007) describes a case study as research "…that involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system … over time,

through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…" (p. 73). Case study is the methodology, the research itself, as well as the product of the research. According to Merriam (2009), the "single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of the study, the case" (p. 40). For this research study, the case was delimited by the unit of a school. The research did not extend beyond the people directly associated with the school, known as the stakeholders, or beyond the physical boundaries of the school site itself.

Site Selection

There are only six virtual early college high schools in North Carolina. Any one of these could have been chosen to highlight this particular model of high school, as each was created with a specific objective and purpose (see discussion in Chapter One), and, all six met the following criteria:

- a small school,
- an early college high school,
- in a rural area, and
- students access college courses via distance education.

One of the schools opened in the fall of 2007, the remaining in 2008. Each serves the same population as outlined by the North Carolina New Schools website - first-generation college-goers, those at-risk of dropping out, or other historically underserved populations - and in each school, the students access their college work through one of the various distance education methods. At first glance, all of the schools were the same; however, there was one significant difference that led to the site of choice for this study: only one still had the original principal.

Using Patton's guidance (2002), and being purposeful about which of these six schools to choose, one was selected as it was the only one of the six that had retained the original principal. As Patton suggested, "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 273). Using purposeful sampling, one site was selected for study based on the longevity of the original principal. This selection criterion was most important for this exploratory case study because the original principal with longevity was more likely to possess historical and institutional knowledge that proved instructive in understanding virtual early high schools and their evolution within North Carolina than a principal with a shorter tenure, thus "…yield insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (p. 273). As it turned out, the initial interview with the original principal was on her penultimate day of employment with the school district. At her suggestion, a follow up interview was conducted with the interim principal, who also had longevity with the school, as she was appointed as the early college high school director during the school's planning phase. As a result, the administrators interviewed both had the *information rich* criteria described by Patton (2002).

Research Design

The nature of a case study lends itself to be inductive, in that information and evidence is gathered during the study itself; however, it is important to have an anchor from which to begin looking for those data. The research design acts as the anchor "…to guide the investigator in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting

observations" (Yin, 2009, p26). Accordingly, a framework is used as an anchor for the research questions to begin the study and as a filter for the analysis of data.

The anchor for this case study was Eisner's framework of educational connoisseurship and criticism. Eisner (2002) defines connoisseurship as the art of appreciation and criticism as the public art of disclosure of that appreciation:

> Criticism is the art of disclosing the qualities of events or objects that connoisseurs perceive. Criticism is the public side of connoisseurship. One can be a connoisseur without being a critic, but one cannot be a critic without the skills of connoisseurship. (p. 219)

Using Eisner's framework, the experiences of the stakeholders at the virtual early college were appreciated first. Taking a constructivist stance, data were collected from the participants' perspective (Merriam, 2009) as their own truth and so their reality was appreciated without being quantified. Next, as the data were analyzed, the researcher became the critic, illuminating and disclosing qualities so as "to create a rendering of a situation, event, or object" (Eisner, 2002, p. 219). The four dimensions of Eisner's frame served as ways to categorize and code data initially, and then as ways to present the data, highlighting the significance of the data, and their application to other school models. These dimensions are:

Descriptive: an identification of characteristics, which are then rendered in language.

Interpretive: similar to descriptive, but with the further task of asking: what does this characteristic mean to those involved.

Evaluative: a judgment made about the characteristics using a set of criteria, including a consideration of which qualities are valuable and which are not, thereby assessing their significance or importance.

Thematic: the distillation of the major ideas or conclusions derived from the data collected, which may include identifying recurring messages, pervasive qualities, or looking for larger lessons that can be learned from a collection of qualities.

Methods of Data Collection

In order to ensure a broad and rigorous description of the case, three methods of data collection were used: interviews, document analysis, and observations. Each of these could be used individually, but by using all three simultaneously, data were verified and explained from multiple lenses. Yin (2009) describes this triangulation as "converging lines of inquiry" (p. 115); a process of collaboration that ensures data are accurately describing a case.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2007) was conducted with the original principal and the parents, as well as the interim principal. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a professional agency. Additionally, notes were taken during the interview for two purposes: first, to note any changes in body language that may help the interviewer both during the interview and while analyzing the data; and second, to note keywords or phrases spoken by the interviewee. In this way, I was able to refer back specifically to words or phrases when asking for clarification, or probing for further understanding. Once the transcripts were returned, the recording of the interview was

played while the transcript was read to ensure accuracy of transcription and to add notes about body language and word choice emphasis made by the participant.

The initial interview was held with the original principal before the study began and it lasted two hours. The agenda for these two hours included both the initial introductory interview (Appendix A) and the plan for the remaining study. This interview was scheduled at the original principal's convenience and held in her office. Making use of the original principal's longevity, the focus of the interview was to gather information about the school and its development. The questions focused on the original principal and her reasons for becoming involved with the school, as well as her experiences as the school grew and developed.

It was during the initial interview that the original principal revealed she had resigned her position. Rather than cancel the study, she suggested any follow up to the interview, as well as the coordination of the research, could be managed through the interim principal. The interim principal agreed to be interviewed. Her credentials as a participant in the study were self-evident: having served as the director of the early college high school since the planning year prior to opening, the interim principal mirrored the longevity of the original principal. She was also intimately familiar with the students and their families, and so was able to provide the connections needed for the student focus groups and parent interviews. Thus, the purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was safeguarded, and the study continued as designed.

Document Analysis

A request was made of the original principal during the initial interview to provide documents about the school. She was prompted to look specifically for

documentation of the school's history and development, and policies or guidelines that govern its operation. A definition of documentation was given such that artifacts were included, as well as just the paper documentation traditionally associated with the word document. Given that she was leaving, the original principal made available all documents that she had amassed during her tenure at the school. In addition, the interim principal provided more than one hundred items, including legislative bills, state board of education minutes, and local school board minutes, as well as white papers and documents produced by other organizations. The documents included videos of student interviews, newspaper clippings, videos of parent interviews, transcripts of speeches given by students, programs of events attended which included student speakers, the memorandum of understanding between the school and community college, and the agreement between the school and North Carolina New Schools Project. Documents included the paper trail traditionally found in schools, as well as movies, photographs, texts, videos, emails, and flyers created by stakeholders. These documents referred to both the site itself, as well as the evolution of early college high schools in North Carolina, and specifically this virtual early college high school. This helped place this particular site within the context of the state at large. This documentation was historical in nature, and therefore was accessible to be reviewed at any time during the study.

These documents provided a rich history of the school and were collected over the duration of the study. Stake (1995) reminds the researcher that "common sense is working for us…but does not take us far enough" (p. 107). By using multiple sources of data, the researcher can make connections, verify or nullify assumptions and facts, and "minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding" (Stake, 1995, p. 109). The analysis

of documents was a secondary data collection tool that supported the interviews and observations, and unlike interviews and observations, they were not created directly to address the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Instead, data were mined from documents that helped the researcher learn more about the case, its history, and context.

Using documents as a source of data does not affect the natural environment like the physical presence of a researcher in an interview or classroom. This is the biggest advantage to using documents to verify what is known and discover unknowns. The documents were used just like interviews and observations (Merriam, 2009) and had a starting point and then were followed to where the data led.

Yin (2009) describes a "data collection plan" (p. 101) to assist with the analysis of documentation. The documents were sorted into type and then numbered within each type. Appendix B shows how each document and its contents were recorded as it was reviewed. When documents are cited in the subsequent chapters, they are referred to by an abbreviation for the type and a number, so for example "V2" indicates video number two, "F5" indicates folder number five. In addition, many folders held several documents. In these cases, the documents are referred to as "F6(d)" to indicate the fourth document in folder number six. For sources that were found as single documents, these are referred to as "D6" indicating single document number six. Appendix C lists all the documents reviewed, capturing the names and numbers of each document for reference. Transcriptions of interviews and focus groups, as well as pages of field observation notes, were added to this compilation for ease of reference during the presentation of findings in the next chapter.

Following the initial interview, and the document analysis which continued for the duration of the study, observations of students and teachers took place. Informed by the conversation with the original principal and the continuing review of the documents, the observations served two purposes. First, to confirm the information already gathered and next to inform the evidence collected during the student focus groups and parent interviews.

Observations

All observations took place on the high school campus. Observations of the teachers and students, and interim principal, were conducted over a two-week period in the fall of 2015. These observations occurred in their natural environments, that is, in activities that would usually occur including the classroom context and faculty or staff meetings, as well as during breaks from instruction such as lunch and break times, class change, and school dismissal.

The observations in the classrooms focused on the students, centered on their activity and interactions with each other, and their interactions with the adult in the room. Sometimes this adult was the classroom teacher and other times a college professor. In the college classes observed, the adult was the room facilitator who supported the students in accessing the college classes remotely. She had no teaching responsibilities, but rather monitored student behavior, and ensured the technology was working. Observations of students were also made less obtrusively from a window overlooking the courtyard at lunch on several days. These observations inform the description of the site presented in chapter four. In order to present a full picture of the school, observations were made using all senses and report as much in the following chapter.

Observations of the students were made while they were engaged in their college experience, which means they were observed in their distance education environment on the high school campus. The students accessed their college experience in three ways: fully online, blended with some synchronous and some asynchronous experiences, and face-to-face with a college instructor. It should be noted the face-to-face experience is through live-feed broadcast of a class, rather than the professor and students being in the same room. In these distance education situations, the researcher's role was simply that of observer rather than participant.

All observations were conducted using a protocol. Eisner's description of a traditional observation schedule (2002) as "…a tool that can guide one's attention, but their mechanical use can blind one to what is significant" (p. 216), illustrated the need for a modification to a traditional schedule. As shown in Appendix D, the tool used in this study had two columns rather than one. On the left, the observer noted what actually happened, and on the right placed personal notes and reactions to the events. By separating the observation from the researcher's reactions, the investigator was able to record clearly what happened and the interpretation of it at the time. The column on the right was used to record questions raised during the observation. These questions were used during the interviews and focus groups for a deeper understanding of student and adult activity. This distinction between these two columns was necessary to avoid bias in the data analysis, as well as to align data analysis with the four dimensions of Eisner's framework being used to structure this study. A total of 340 minutes were spent observing stakeholders, which produced fifteen pages of notes using the observation protocol described above. When these are cited as a source in chapter four, the notation

O(p3) is used. In this example, the information can be found on page three of the observation notes.

While conducting observations was an important way to see how stakeholders experienced a virtual early college high school, interviewing stakeholders gave a glimpse into their understanding. Patton (1990) offers the purpose of interviews as discovering things that cannot be observed, "…what is in and on someone's mind…" (p. 278). Observations occurred before the student focus groups and parent interviews in order to allow particular events or actions that were observed to be used as tools for prompting during that time.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a gathering of participants who share their thoughts and feelings on a topic with each other (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). This form of group interview "capitalizes on the communication between the research participants" (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299) that often brings to the surface information that would have taken several one on one interviews. Additionally, the discussion within a focus group is centered on the topic chosen by the researcher (Morgan, 1997) and so the data surfaced and collected is all relevant to the study at hand.

In keeping with the constructivist epistemological stance of this study, focus groups also "…have a need to make collective sense of their individual experiences and beliefs…" (Wilkinson, 1998, p.338) causing some members to confirm their beliefs and others to shift their view during the course of the group discussion. This sense making is central to the research question and sub-questions upon which this study is based.

In deciding who will be selected to participate in the focus group, it was important to consider the rules of thumb that have evolved throughout the history of focus group research (Morgan, 1997). These included the demographics of the participants, their prior interaction with each other, the number of participants in a group, and the length of time the discussion should last. Three of these four are within the control of this study. The fourth, participants' prior interaction, was not. Morgan (1997) recommended that the participants be strangers. Given the small size of this high school, that was not possible, as most of these families have been attending the same schools since kindergarten. Students and parents have a history so instead of trying to find strangers, the interim principal suggested groups that intentionally avoided any disagreements that were already in place, which prevented potentially hostile relationships that could disrupt the process. This also prevented a hierarchy within the group (Kitzinger, 1995) that also had the potential to affect the data by inhibiting the opinion and interaction of some members.

The strategy for the focus groups was to have the participants engage in their own discussion, with little guidance from the facilitator (Morgan, 1997) who acted more as a "structured eavesdropper" (Kitzinger, 1995). There were four broad questions to encourage discussion, each directly connected to one of the research questions, with follow up and probing questions asked by the facilitator when the discussion seemed to be dwindling. These can be found in Appendices E (student focus groups), F (new teacher focus group), and G (teachers with more than three years' experience at the school).

During the initial interview, the original principal was asked to identify students for two focus groups. The students were representative of grade, socio-economic status,

achievement level, gender, and ethnicity. A time and location for the two focus groups was decided upon at this time. The focus groups lasted no more than forty minutes each so that they could be completed during one class period. One focus group engaged four students, and the other three. The two groups engaged students in similar grades only, thus avoiding the issues of hierarchy (Kitzinger, 1995). More students were invited to participate; however, consent forms were not returned for some students and so those students could not participate.

The teachers were interviewed using two focus groups. First, three of the six teachers who have been at the school for more than three years were selected randomly to join one focus group, and then a second group of four teachers, who had not been at the school for as long, were grouped together for a second focus group. In this way, some history of the school was tracked, as well as any change in culture noted. Additionally, the original principal was asked if there were any particular teachers or staff members who should be interviewed separately – for example, the teacher who led the virtual early college high school from the classroom, or a member of staff who was a key influencer. In the interview, the original principal named the interim principal, as well as the two classroom assistants who support the students directly. The interim principal and one of the two classroom assistants were interviewed separately, at a time and location convenient for them. The other classroom assistant moved work positions within the county and was unavailable for interview.

Each focus group and interview was recorded and then transcribed by a professional agency. In addition, notes taken during the focus groups served three purposes: first, to note any changes in body language to help the facilitator both during

the focus group and while analyzing the data; and second, to note keywords or phrases spoken by the members of the group. In this way, the facilitator was able to refer back specifically to words or phrases when asking for clarification or probing for further understanding. Finally, the notes enabled the facilitator to ensure all members of the group spoke so that all voices on the panel were heard.

Also during the initial principal interview, arrangements were made to invite a group of parents to participate in a focus group. A selection of parents who were representative of the student body was requested, including grade level, gender, and race. Recognizing that parents may be working during school hours, or have other siblings at home to care for, the time and location was arranged to meet these individual needs, and the duration was fixed at one hour. After several phone calls and emails, which collectively failed to fix a place and time convenient for the parents, it was decided to proceed with individual interviews instead of a focus group. Appropriate IRB procedures were followed for individual interviews, such that each parent gave consent to participate, and for their conversation to be recorded. Three parents declined the phone interview, citing competing family commitments. Initially planned as a focus group of six parents, three of the parents were individually interviewed, producing 56 minutes of conversation. This met the target of an hour for a focus group, but lacked some of the advantages of focus groups cited above.

The purpose of these particular interviews was to engage the participants in reflection about why they chose the virtual early college experience for their children, and the implications of that decision for their family. The questions listed in Appendix H offered a semi-structured interview protocol. The information gathered during these

interviews was supplemented by the video interviews of parents discovered during the document analysis, who were asked similar questions about their experiences with the VECHS, for a total set of seven parent interviews.

In order to protect the anonymity of each participant individually, each was asked to choose a card with his or her role and a number on it before each interview or focus group. The participant was asked to refer to that card before each response for the purposes of the audio recording. The direct correlation between a participant and the number they chose was not recorded anywhere and the participant kept the card upon conclusion of the interview or focus group. The researcher has no written or electronic record of a name associated with a number. In order to maintain this anonymity, the participants are quoted in the following chapters as role and then the number that was randomly assigned. For example, teacher 1, administrator 2, parent 3, and so on. Additionally, the pronoun 'she' will be used to refer to all participants regardless of gender in an attempt to further support the anonymity of the participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process through which meaning is generated from the data. This is a complex process that involves moving between the data itself, abstract concepts, description, interpretation, and reasoning (L. Howard, personal communication, July 11, 2014). Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe this process as "…making comparisons and asking questions…" (p. 87).

As data were collected, it was important to have a system by which it could be easily accessed for analysis. Appendix I illustrates how the methods of data collections were made visible within this system of analysis using a crosswalk matrix. A three-level

system of coding enabled a description and analysis of the data based on the four dimensions of Eisner's framework. The findings are also reported in alignment with the framework.

First, the coding began with a single word or phrase as a structural code as data were collected to label chunks of data that could be readily accessed later (Saldana, 2013). These structural codes were the names of first three dimensions of Eisner's theory: descriptive, informative, and evaluative. Next, the data were coded within stakeholder groups to look for patterns or themes. This was done using *in vivo* coding (Saldana, 2013) because the voice of the participants was vital when researching the experiences and understanding of the stakeholders of the virtual early college high school, thus directly related to answering the research question, and inductive coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) that allowed for flexibility instead of forcing the data to fit a predetermined code.

These first two levels of codes were completed by hand on the paper transcripts and by using sticky notes on other documents. These were then transferred to electronic coding software, Atlas Ti, (www.atlasti.com) for the final step of analysis. The third and final step in the process made use of focused coding (Saldana, 2013) that allowed the *in vivo* and inductive codes to be grouped together to form themes, the last of Eisner's constructs. After the data were coded within stakeholder groups, the same three-level coding process took place across stakeholder groups. The two layers of coding allowed the data to be conveyed as "…threads that can be woven together to tell a story…" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 171), which was the purpose of the study: to tell the story of this virtual early college high school from the perspective of the stakeholders.

The process of data analysis was supported by the use of analytic tools, which helped the researcher in several ways. Already mentioned, the use of questions and comparisons (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and, in addition, the researcher used analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013; Saldana, 2013). Saldana (2013) suggests writing a memo immediately "…whenever anything related to and significant about the coding or analysis of data comes to mind…" (p. 42). Maxwell expounds on this, positing the purpose of memo generation is not only to capture thoughts, "…but also facilitate thinking, stimulating analytic insights…" (p. 105). There are several different types of memos, and reasons why they would be written. Throughout the data collection and analysis phases, several reflective memos were written. These allowed the researcher to reflect on events, as well as process and reflect privately on some research barriers. While these particular memos were not coded, they did include questions for consideration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that added to the data collected in subsequent interviews and observations. Immediately, they served the need for personal reflection and later were categorized to not only support the data but also became a part of it, thereby generating new codes (Saldana, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) offers six ways a researcher can increase the trustworthiness of their work: triangulation, member checks, long-term observations, peer examination, participatory or collaborative modes or research, and researchers' bias being described in reflexivity journals. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, three measures of trustworthiness were used to triangulate the data for accuracy (Yin, 2009).

First, the truth-value was member-checked. This took place when the participants reviewed transcribed interviews. The original principal and members of the teacher focus groups were asked to verify the accuracy of the transcripts after they were verified simultaneously with the recordings by the researcher. Some edits were made based on the comments from teachers. Additionally, participants were asked to respond to descriptions of experiences observed. Sandelowski (1986, cited in Krefting, 1991) states that "a qualitative study is credible when it presents such accurate descriptions or interpretation of human experience that people who also share that experience would immediately recognize the descriptions" (p.174). This particular triangulation was completed by the original principal and interim principal, who were asked to review the site description offered in chapter four.

Finally, peer examinations (Krefting, 1991) were used as a third strategy to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The data collected were shared and discussed with peers who are also undertaking research at this time. Each set of examinations viewed the data from different lenses, which allowed the researcher to discover new themes, as well as question the authenticity of assumed themes within the data.

In addition to triangulating these three measures of trustworthiness, reflexivity journals were used to check for research bias. Reflexivity journals are just one method for a researcher to recognize researcher bias, while simultaneously attempting to eliminate it from a study. Recognizing its existence and giving it a voice in a formal journal, the bias was then eliminated from the data collection process, and the analysis that took place. The following subjectivity statement is the first step in this researcher's reflexivity journal.

Subjectivity Statement

Personal Background

The stakeholders in this study reflect those who can be found in my childhood, and the experiences of the students in this school resemble mine as a student. Both of my parents came from rural, low-income families. They both left school at the age of sixteen, the legal age of graduation at the time, and left their homes in pursuit of employment, moving to another country to be with family who could support them until they found their feet. My parents met at seventeen, were married at nineteen, and proceeded to raise five children, each parent often working two or three jobs simultaneously to provide for our family.

No one in either of my parents' families attended college. As the fourth of five siblings, I was the first to attend in my family. Two of my elder siblings entered the military after high school and the third went straight into a career apprenticeship. My younger sister soon followed me to attend college and recently my eldest sister graduated from college as a non-traditional student. Of my first cousins on both sides of a very large family, my two sisters and I are the only college graduates.

While technology was not prevalent when I was in school, I was afforded the opportunity to take college classes while in high school. I had to pay the tuition, purchase my own books, and find my own transportation to the community college campus. My parents were supportive of this opportunity, and helped by providing me with financial assistance when possible. Upon successful completion of the courses, I was awarded non-transferable college credit, but no high school credit.

As a first-generation college-going student, I am very sensitive to the equity of opportunity for all students, regardless of background. I am also mindful of students whose families have moved to a different country in order to provide better opportunities for them. I understand from first-hand experience the emphasis on education being a tool for a better future and I appreciate the struggle parents often face when supporting their children in moving away to college while simultaneously wishing there were opportunities that would enable them to stay at home.

Professional Background

Many years ago I worked at this school site as a coach to the teachers and principal. This role was non-evaluative in nature and instead was one of support. I was a thought-partner with teachers and the original principal, helping them reflect on classroom and school data to support design decisions in the best interests of students. It has been several years since my last visit and while the original principal has remained constant, the majority of the staff have come and gone during that time. The original principal and I have remained in contact over the years and have spoken with each other at professional learning events. When I approached the original principal about the possibility of studying her school, she was very excited. She entered the study in the spirit of learning more about her school and was of the opinion that anything discovered would be useful to her and the staff to enhance or make changes to improve the learning opportunities for students.

There was a danger that my past experiences of the school could cloud the data collection and analysis. Using a reflective journal, I recalled and wrote what I could remember about the school particularly focusing on the research questions. I used that

document as a way to compare current data and as a way to ensure new data were free from previously held assumptions.

One major assumption I held centered on the original principal. When I coached in the school, she was a dynamic leader who made decisions based on the interest of students. I held her in high regard as a professional and often mentioned her as an example that other principals should follow. My interactions with her continue to be influenced by these experiences and I needed to manage these opinions during my interactions with her. It is important to pay attention to what I know, or have known, but more so to pay attention to what is new that I can learn, even if contradictory to my current beliefs.

The next sets of assumptions I have were about the students and their families. In my role as coach, I interviewed both students and parents about their experiences with the virtual early college high school. The school was in its infancy and the community was very excited by the notion of college without leaving home. Those interviews occurred several years ago and those students have now graduated (another assumption). The students and parents I was in contact with for this study may or may not hold similar opinions to the families I met in the past. I recognized that and began each conversation as a new interaction and relationship.

Finally, during my experiences with the teachers at the school, I found that while some supported the notion of an early college experience, many did not believe in preparing all students for college. The memory of some of these conversations still resonates with me. Turnover in staff at the school has been incremental each year and so like the relationships with the families, I needed to begin each interaction with staff as a

fresh start in a new relationship, while tempering what I remembered about those who remain.

It was important to me that I set a tone with the study wherein the participants felt comfortable in an environment of honesty. Because I work for an organization that directly supports the development of this school, I needed to ensure that participants understood that the research conducted was, in no way, a part of my professional responsibilities. I started from the assumption that they believed it was and worked towards fostering an environment in which they believed it was not.

Human Participants and Ethics Precautions

This study was conducted under the established guidelines of the Institutional Review Board at The George Washington University. These guidelines include signed consent forms from the adult participants, and signed consent and ascent forms for the students. These were sent home with the student, and returned to me the morning of their focus groups. Any student that did not bring in both forms was unable to participate. Additionally, the school and district each sent authorization letters before the study began. All documents reviewed during the study are housed in a secure location, per the guidelines. The district and school will not be named to ensure confidentiality.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to discover how stakeholders experienced a virtual early college high school (VECHS). Chapter three outlined the reason for the case study methodology, as well as the design followed to complete the study. The findings are shared in this chapter, by each of the dimensions in Eisner's (2002) framework, predominately using participant voice as the vehicle. These are triangulated using documents found at the site and observations of the participants in their natural settings.

This case study is centered on one particular research question: "How do stakeholders experience an early college high school?" In this case, stakeholders are defined as school administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Additional sub-questions were explored and were informed by the study's design. The findings are presented accordingly, and are addressed with each sub-question individually. The sub-questions are:

a) How do stakeholders describe a virtual early college high school?
b) How do stakeholders describe and understand the college experience at a virtual early college high school?
c) How do stakeholders explore college options at and beyond the virtual early college high school?

Before the discussion of findings is presented, a description of the school site is offered to provide context for the findings. This description was created by synthesizing the data found during the document review and within the observations that occurred as a part of the study, as well as within the participants' interview and focus group data. Additional information was garnered from state and national census data and is cited as such.

Site Description

Location and Community Context

The research site is a comprehensive high school in a small, rural county on the eastern seaboard of North Carolina. There is no dominant industry in the county and the major employer is the school system. The median household income in 1999 was $25,684 and this has risen to more than $32,000 in 2014. Additionally, the median home value in 2014 was $115,870, which has risen from less than $50,000 in 2000 (local census data).

Physical School Site

There is one high school and one middle school in the county that both share the same campus, and one elementary school located across the street. The middle and high schools share facilities including the gym, bus transportation, and the main parking lot. They each have separate cafeteria and lunchroom space, as well as separate media centers. The total number of students enrolled in the three schools is 450. At the time of this study, there were 162 students enrolled in the high school, and of these, more than 150 were enrolled in the VECHS. The graduation rate of the district has risen from 55.8% in 2006 (which is when North Carolina began recording and publishing graduation data) to more than 88% in 2014 (NCDPI, nd).

School Inception

In 2007, the district was asked by the education intermediary North Carolina New Schools Project to consider opening an early college high school (I(a1)). The original principal reported the superintendent was hesitant at first because of location (distance to the campus of an institution of higher education), and given that it would be the only high

school in the county, the superintendent agreed on the condition that the students be given the choice of attendance or not. The district spent a year planning the opening, realizing early that the early college high school model would look very different from the early colleges already opened across the state, given the remote, rural nature of the county. The district designed the virtual early college high school model (VECHS) to facilitate students being able to access their college experience remotely. Students enrolled in the VECHS represent a subset of the total enrolled high school students. As a result, there are two high school experiences concurrently operating on campus: that which could be referred to as a traditional high school experience, and that which could be described as a VECHS experience. It should be noted here that this case study is not a comparison of these two high school experiences, but that there are two experiences possible on one campus. This defining characteristic is unique to the case under study.

Higher Education Partners

The VECHS originally partnered with a four-year university in the state university system that offered college credit to all high school students. These credits were transferrable within the state university system as elective credits. This partnership lasted for two years, after which the state legislative funding for the program ended (I(a1)). The VECHS then investigated a relationship with the local community college. The state community college system has allocated service areas for each of its 58 campuses and so the VECHS was limited to a partnership only with the community college within whose catchment area it was located (I(a1)).

The original Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the VECHS and the community college (D14) indicated that students would have access to community

college classes, but did not say how. Given the distance between the high school and college campuses, the students access their college classes through distance education (I(a1)). The interim principal shared that there are four distance education methods that have been used to date for this college access to occur: the class is accessed online; the class is broadcast live from a room on the college campus to a room on the high school campus; a community college faculty member drives to the high school campus to teach; or, a high school teacher is certified as a college instructor and teaches the college class on the high school campus. Staff at the community college initially decided that high school students could not take college classes online, so for a few years the only classes to which the students had access were those taught on the high school campus by high school and community college teachers, and those broadcast live directly from the community college. High school staff who taught community college classes had to apply and be appointed as adjunct faculty in the same manner as all other community college staff (I(a1)).

The funding structure for community colleges in North Carolina is such that each college receives some of its funding from the state, depending on how many students are enrolled on a daily basis, known as Average Daily Membership (ADM). This number is used to allocate Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff to the college (I(a1)). Thus, high school students enrolled in college courses at the community college count towards ADM and so the community college receives FTE as a result. High school teachers taught college classes on the high school campus for two years, until the community college stopped that practice because it did not receive FTE funding for those students enrolled in classes that originated away from the community college campus.

Stopping the adjunct staff teaching meant that the number of courses to which the VECHS students had access was cut significantly. The school administrators petitioned the community college to allow students to access the college via online classes (I(a1)). At first, the community college did not allow this to happen, citing the immaturity of high school students as the main reason. Again, the school staff appealed, citing the supports that were in place for online learning on the high school campus. The community college relented, initially letting only fifth year students in the VECHS enroll. Each year, the students have proved themselves to the college by passing the classes with transferable credit, and now third, fourth, and fifth year students in the VECHS have access to online college classes (I(a1)).

The funding for all of the early college high schools in this state, including the VECHS is appropriated legislatively, which means each budget year the state legislature allocates operating costs to these schools. Within these operating costs is the money for staff positions, including administrative support, and a liaison between the school and the higher education partner. When the virtual early colleges were being designed, it was decided that because the schools would not be located on the college campus there was no need for a college liaison (I(a1)). The VECHS has long argued this not be the case, but it is still operating without this position. As a result, this school site has used local money to fund a part time position. One of the documents reviewed was the job description for this position (D4). This person is a community college employee, so the school district sends money to the community college to contribute towards the salary. The liaison is responsible for facilitating the community college placements tests, registering students in classes, and teaching two college classes on the VECHS campus.

School Structure

There are currently two high school models at work simultaneously on the same campus. During their eighth-grade year, students attend an information session with parents to introduce them to the VECHS. Staff and students at the VECHS describe the experience and encourage students to apply (FG(s3)). The number of students who apply each year varies depending on the class dynamics (I(a1)). The original principal shared structure of school in the county, such that each grade level has one entering class. The students are with each other from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Each class has its own personality and is at different levels of academic performance. Historical data shows that some years as many as 85% of eight graders have applied and other years the number has been as low as 65%. This means that while the majority of the high school population follows a VECHS schedule, there are still a number of students who do not. These proportions vary from year to year, depending on the choices made by the rising ninth grade students.

The application process for the students includes a short application form containing the usual name and demographic data, and a short essay in which the students explain why they would like to apply to the VECHS. The students' previous academic and disciplinary information is not included nor is a consideration for acceptance. The application form is available in the two languages mostly prominently spoken in the community: English and Spanish (I(a2)). All students who apply, and successfully graduate eighth grade, are accepted. Documentation showed (D12) that while some students successfully graduated eighth grade, they were not at eighth grade reading and math levels upon entry into the VECHS, but were still accepted.

Student Population

Of the 37 students who entered the VECHS as its inaugural ninth graders in the fall of 2008, 33% were first generation college-going students (D12(a)). This number has risen steadily over the past six years and of the students enrolled in the VECHS at the time of this study, 85% are first generation (D12(b)). Documentation at the school indicates its definition of first-generation college changed from neither parent attended college, to neither parent graduated college. The shift came because some parents thought that if they had attended community college for an interest class such as baking or gardening that they had attended college (I(a1)).

The racial makeup of the students generally reflects that of the school, with about half of the students being white, and the other half African American, Hispanic, and Asian (D12(b)). De-identified student demographic data showed that some years the makeup varied such that more minority students were enrolled than white students. The enrollments in the VECHS those years were reflective of the demographics of that particular grade-level cohort of students (F15).

Research Findings

The findings are presented within the context of the four dimensions of Eisner's framework. For each of the first three dimensions, findings are presented as a whole, which means across stakeholder groups, and are grounded in the data collected. It is this exploration of the data that highlighted the fourth dimension of Eisner's framework, the themes, described as,

> …the distillation of the major ideas or conclusions that are to be derived from the material that preceded…The identification of the themes not only summarizes the

> essential points of the criticism, but it also enables one to use the criticism as a way of understanding other educational situations. (Eisner, 2002, p. 233)

These themes are identified at the end of chapter four. Before the findings are presented in each of the dimensions, a definition of that particular dimension is given to clarify the kinds of data to be found within that section.

Briefly, the three dimensions can be characterized by the questions what, how, and why. The descriptive dimension includes the what, the physical aspects of the school site that can be highlighted using the senses. In the voice of the participants, it also illuminates the definition of the school model, and includes some organizational and structural facts. Within the interpretative dimension, the participants' experiences of the descriptive are found, and these highlight the how of the VECHS. There is some overlap of the first two dimensions here as the participants voice their own definition of structure and organization; however, the distinctive element of the interpretative dimension is the participants' own sense making of the qualities of the VECHS and their understanding of this school model. Finally, the third dimension, evaluative, generally measures the educational setting being studied against a pre-conceived criteria or rubric. In this case, the VECHS is measured against participant expectations. This dimension can be categorized as the why of the VECHS, because the stakeholders measure the experience of college at and beyond the school site by highlighting why they pursued the VECHS as an option and the effect it has had on themselves and their families.

Descriptive

According to Eisner's framework, the descriptive dimension is "…essentially an attempt to identify and characterize, portray, or render in language the relevant qualities

of educational life" (Eisner, 2002, p. 226). It should be noted here that "qualities" does not refer to the first definition usually associated with that word, that is, how good or bad something is, but rather it refers to the secondary definition: a characteristic or feature of something. The following description of the VECHS is a presentation of the qualities of the VECHS, which is, its characteristics and features, the what of the study site. When asked to describe their school, the stakeholders most often named three characteristics: the physical location and structure of the site, the people connected to the school, and the manner in which students access their college courses. The former characteristic is based largely on field observation notes, while the latter two characteristics are based on all of the data sources noted in Chapter Three and are referenced as appropriate.

Physical Location and Structure

Almost every participant mentioned the rural and remote location of the school site. Some noted the single highway that goes through town, while others commented on the absence of business and industry. One student noted that the only grocery store in town did not open until he was nine, and another described her hometown as "pretty quiet" (student three; refer to Appendix I for designation demographic information). One of the parents describe the remoteness of the school site by saying, "we are in a rural setting…many of these kids have never been to the movies" (parent one).

The high school campus consists of six buildings. The main building, the oldest, is home to the school office, principal's office, the guidance office, science labs, and classrooms for math, Spanish, and social studies. Like any high school with a storied tradition, the front hall of the main building is adorned with the obligatory trophy cabinet with cups and plaques outlining the school's long and distinguished athletic prowess.

Next to this is a smaller, less noticeable cabinet with a few certificates and plaques awarded to students for academic achievement (OFN).

The main building is separated from the others by a covered walkway that surrounds a grass-filled quadrant that is home to several large trees that shade scattered picnic tables. The cafeteria is not large enough for all students to sit and eat together, so it is here on the quad that the students can choose to eat lunch or gather during breaks. Surrounding the quad is the media center, cafeteria, vocational building, English building, and VECHS building.

The halls of each of the buildings that make up the school campus are lined with posters that advertise colleges and institutions of further education, as well as billboards focused on the branches of the military. There are also inspirational quotes such as "the tassel is worth the hassle" and "2.3 or take a knee," the latter from the NCAA inviting student athletes to maintain their grade point average. Outside each classroom is a piece of paper that reads "ask me about" located next to a pendant of the school from which that teacher graduated, in some cases more than one.

Two classrooms are inside the VECHS building. These two classrooms are decorated with student work, evidence of college experiences and field trips, and pendants from colleges all over the country. One of these classrooms is used for freshmen to take their first two college classes. It is also the office and classroom of the lead teacher of the VECHS. The other is for students to use as a study hall when they have a break in their schedule or need support from one of the two assistants who monitor the students. Students can be found working individually on their online college classes and

huddled in self-appointed study groups working through some homework for their broadcast college classes (I(t8)).

In the building that houses the English classrooms and media center, there is a room identified as the broadcast room. It is in here that the students engage with college courses through a medium known as the information highway. The college professor sends a live stream of the class from the college campus and similarly a live stream of the broadcast room is beamed to the college. It is a live, two-way communication between teacher and student, and is the medium through which most of the college access is experienced. “We do take the students to campus once a semester so that they can experience the classroom live” (teacher eight).

The original principal described how the school operates on two separate calendars because it has both the VECHS and the comprehensive high school calendars running simultaneously. The VECHS and comprehensive high school semesters do not begin at the same time, so the VECHS students have to make their own way to the high school campus in the fall before the transportation provided by the district begins for the semester. Additionally, once both schedules are in session, there are times during the day when the start and end time for the high school classes and the college classes do not align. Consequently, there are occasions when the two schedules collide such that a college class is being broadcast during a high school class, and there are students enrolled in both. During these times, the students’ college classes take precedent over the high school classes (I(a1)). The students are responsible for completing any work that is missed in the high school class.

The People

Walking the halls of the school was a pleasant experience. During class time, when the halls were mostly empty, I was greeted by each student I encountered with an appropriate salutation and sometimes a polite but territorial question about my presence. I was often asked if I was lost or if I could be escorted somewhere. During class change, the students were talkative but not loud as they transitioned to their next experience. They walked carefully on the right hand side of the hallways, and I observed many apologize to each other for an accidental bump. I heard laughter and talk of sports and the weekend, the usual high school hallway noise and activity. Missing from this high school experience for me was aggression and foul language, two elements I have often found in other high school hallways.

There are seventeen full time teachers. Of these, five remain from my first visit in 2009; all of the other faces were new to me, and mine to them. Many of the new, younger teachers were drawn to the school by the beach located about an hour away. One teacher said she "…worked out here while I was in college and decided I really liked it…I liked the small school" (teacher six). Another described how she looked deliberately for a school with specific demographics: "I chose this school because of the students it serves. I was in Teach for America prior to this. I really wanted to stay with that mantra, that your zip code should not really dictate your high school education" (teacher seven). Others came because of family ties. There are three teachers who were born and raised in this town, went away to college, and came back to teach at the high school from which they graduated. One of the teachers mentioned she "…came back to give back to the community who helped me" (teacher five). When asked if there were any differences

between then and now, another teacher replied, "it looks and feels the same," (teacher four) "…I see the same kids from year to year, and I can yell at them, 'I know who you are' and that's a really good atmosphere for kids."

During the first interview, the original principal described the students and families of the school:

> …the population we serve is very rural, very diverse, underrepresented populations in college, a high percentage of first generation college. Many of their parents do not have college knowledge…they did not understand what college credit was. If you said 'you are taking a three-credit course,' they don't know what that means…so this [VECHS] was to provide students with opportunity that they literally would not have otherwise had.

The other administrator added to the list of characteristics of the students, "we really tried to focus on those students who were first-generation college, or were minorities, or who were in the low income areas." Teacher three added,

> …a lot of people who are not from this region…they don't understand. A lot of these kids, if they don't do it while they are in high school, the likelihood of them going outside of it [the county] is not going to be possible.

The students are formally invited to apply to the VECHS at a parent night while they are in eighth grade, though conversations about the experience start much earlier (I(p2)). "I found out about it because the teachers would come down to our middle school and tell us about it. And then we would sign up for it and we were put in it in our ninth grade class" (student two). This application deliberately mirrors a college application, designed that way by the school personnel. "We wanted them to have a choice, (admin two) and it had to feel like college." Almost every student who applies is accepted, the exceptions were noted "…because either their parents were college educated, or they

made a lot of money; they just didn't fit out criteria. And some had major issues beyond that" (admin two). College-educated parents are not an automatic barrier to entry, but priority is given to students who are first generation college goers (I(a2).

Students who did not apply in eighth grade were encouraged to apply at the end of ninth grade. "If you don't apply as an eighth grader, or we denied your acceptance, or we gave you a tentative acceptance, then based on how you perform in the ninth grade we let you apply at the end of the ninth grade year" (admin two). In addition, "…there are inevitably those students who do not stay with the VECHS, they are not as committed. We have also seen if the parent isn't committed and the going gets tough, then they [the student] just give up." There have also been instances where the parent requested the student be removed from the VECHS. The interim principal reported that "[they] make [the student and family] jump through hoops" if they want to leave. Reasons cited for students choosing to leave include feeling overwhelmed with the college level work and just not wanting to do that much work in high school. One teacher said, "there are some who don't want to do the VECHS…they couldn't seem to make it there [to class] on time and do what they were supposed to do, so they're not in it anymore" (teacher four).

Teachers spoke candidly about the differences between the students in the VECHS, and those in the parallel comprehensive high school. A teacher offered, "…the difference is with the engagement of the student. I think for the most part, the VECHS students are a lot more engaged in school" (teacher seven), while another believed, "…the VECHS kids are more of your highfliers, your kids who are going to always score higher than some of the other kids" (teacher five). Another teacher stated, "…I do know we have some students who have to work hard in their traditional high school classes as

well to get by and they're still challenging themselves with the college classes" (teacher seven).

When asked to describe the VECHS, many of the participants used the same two qualities, with differing words: high school, and college. "I am a college student and a high school student at the same time" (Student Four), and, "I describe our high school as being half college and half high school" (Student One). Similarly, teacher four stated, "our students have the opportunity to take college classes in order to get an associate's degree before leaving high school." In addition to high school and college being named, a third quality was highlighted, particularly by the adult stakeholders: money. "Our kids are blessed," said teacher eight, "they have the opportunity to have an associate's degree for free." Another stakeholder told the story of a graduate who, upon entering the military after graduation, was placed at a higher pay scale because he had already amassed some college credit. "Because he had college credit, he went in at a higher pay grade. He was excited about that" (admin two).

Several of the parents who had participated in video interviews in 2010 also mentioned the financial aspect of the early college: "my student would not have a chance to go to college without it because of the cost (V3(d)), and "my son is in the VECHS. He's my third child. I am putting the first two through school now and I know it's not cheap. This will give him a jump start on the cost, especially in a low income community such as we are" (V3(f)).

Access to College Classes

The original principal described the evolution of the relationship of the VECHS with its higher education partners (note, institution names are pseudonyms).

> The state university was just launching their virtual program…and we initially entered a memorandum of understanding with them. Our students took a few classes there, then we also entered a memorandum of understanding with our local community college…As we entered years two and three there were a lot of changes in the college courses offered. The state withdrew funding from the university so those classes stopped…and at the time the economy was in disarray so the community college was overflowing with adults who failed all of their online courses, so our students were not allowed to take the online courses in the early years. We really struggled to find enough courses for our students to take.

Creativity in the way in which those struggles were faced focused on the mode of course delivery. Added to this dilemma was the transportation issue. "We said we would not be successful if we bused our kids to campus, because that would take them out of the community too much" (admin two). Collaboratively, the community college and the VECHS came up with four ways to provide access to college classes for the students (I(a2)) with a first model that blended online content with some face-to-face delivery. In this case, the professors drove from the community college campus to the VECHS once a week for classes specific to freshmen. Second, a fully online delivery method is used, usually with Blackboard as the learning management system. The third method involves professors broadcasting their classes live to the students at the VECHS campus. The students sit in what the stakeholders (I(t8)) refer to as the broadcast room and the professor is able to see and hear them. This synchronous model is the most common form of college access for students at this VECHS. Finally, a fourth method that was successful for a time, but is no longer allowed by the community college due to accreditation regulations (I(a1)) provided a system whereby high school teachers who met all of the appropriate qualifications and guidelines were hired as adjunct faculty by the community college, and these adjuncts taught the community college classes on the

high school campus. Sometimes these were broadcast; with the VECHS broadcast room as the host, to other high schools in the area, as well as to students on the community college campus.

Asking the participants to describe their school offered them the opportunity to share the qualities or characteristics in their own words. When asked to describe their school, the stakeholders most often named three characteristics: the physical location and structure of the site, the people connected to the school, and the manner in which students access their college courses. In the next section, the interpretative dimension, the participants are asked to make sense of their experiences as they relate to the VECHS.

Interpretative

The descriptive and interpretative dimensions are very similar, in that they both describe an educational situation. The participants see the difference in the interpretative dimension as it focuses on the understanding of the educational situation. Essentially, what does the situation mean to those involved? The interpretative dimension "…puts what has been described into context…" (Eisner, 1998, p. 95). The findings from the research sub-question addressed here, how do stakeholders describe and understand the college experience at a virtual early college high school -- highlight examples of what it means to the stakeholders to be a part of the VECHS, not what it is, or how they interact with it, but how they understand it and what it means to them.

During the focus groups, the students were asked how they felt about being college students while in high school, starting in their freshman year. Student Six admitted, "I was pretty nervous for my first class. I did not know what to expect." Quietly, nodding heads in the group agreed. In response to the follow up question, "do

you think you are more comfortable now in college classes than you were as a freshman?" student three readily shared, "I feel like I can take more on now…college does not scare me as much as it did back then."

Having observed the pendants on the walls outside the classroom doors, I asked the teachers how they talk about college with their students. Teacher Seven shared a past conversation in which she asked her students if they imagined they would be beginning college at the age of 14. For the students in that class, it was to expected that they would enroll in the VECHS because it was what the several classes before them had done. However, that was not always the case, as teacher seven pointed out, "…it's [VECHS] giving a lot of students the opportunity to go to college that would never have the opportunity any other way."

Within the stakeholder group, there was disagreement about the relative difficulty of high school and college classes. Student two believed "…high school classes are a lot easier that college classes." Similarly, student four reported

> when I first entered I was really nervous. I thought it was going to be hard, you know, college work, but they gave you classes on your level, they wouldn't be like a senior class in college when you are a high school freshman. They kind of gave you small steps, easy classes and every year they build up the difficulty.

Noting that the broadcast room where college classes are held is on the same hallway as the high school English classes, the students were asked if they felt any differently in the two classrooms or in attending the two levels of classes. Student four replied,

> yes, I feel a lot different in the college class because in the high school setting you can relax, you're around other high school students, I guess you could say…but when you step into the VECHS classroom you have to be on your p's and q's. You got to pay attention and listen to the teacher since it's broadcast and not face

> to face, you actually have to listen and take notes faster and be able to decipher what they are saying.

Student three concurred, offering

> …you have to be more formal. If it is a broadcast class and your teacher is at the location with you then you feel more obligated to talk, but if you're not, and the teacher is not there, then you're not. And you want to say something, but you just wait for someone else to say it.

Field observation notes concur with the students' responses. In the college classes, the students took notes on what the professor was saying without prompting, while in the high school classes, the teacher provided the notes, or students copied them from the board.

When talking about the differences in the ways in which they access college, the students appeared honest about challenges they faced. "With the online class, there's nobody there to keep you in check. You have to be responsible and stay caught up. You're responsible for your assignments, nobody's there to help you out" (student six). Student one added, "…we have to upload documents that they send us and answer the questions on it and we do review…and it's all online." When comparing those experiences to a broadcast class, student four said,

> it's hard [a broadcast class] at times because sometimes the teachers are more like a high school teacher where they explain it step-by-step,and some teachers expect you to know it already and just breeze through the content and they give you a book and say 'okay, read the chapter, study the notes' and that's the class.

Additionally, student four took pains to share that it was not the method of delivery that was the issue. "You're basically still there [on campus with the professor]. You're seeing the teacher and hearing the teacher's voice and you still get the same work."

Students were given the opportunity to share their successes and challenges in college classes. Mostly, they told stories of how challenges became successes through hard work and determination, but there were challenges over which the students had no control. Student two shared her first challenge: college expectations.

> Last year was my first college class. I did not do too well. This year I am really trying to get everything done, and make sure it is up to the college standard. Last year in class he didn't make us do much. We would have to read and write stuff down, that was easy, but when they would make us do papers, we aren't as used to writing at the college level…the way college professors like them. I did not do too well in that class because I did not know how to do it.

She continued: "…the high school classes you take do not ask for as rigorous papers as they need in college, so I'm not used to going and doing everything the way they [the college] want you to do it." Student three agreed,

> We all had the same paper and it was very difficult to write. I went to our history teacher for help but that's when things became more challenging because the history teacher would say one thing like 'oh yeah, that's really good' and then the college professor would say 'oh no, take this out, take out that.' So it was a little confusing even when you try to understand and get help, it seemed to make things a little bit worse.

A challenge for students in the broadcast class was not so much the content, but rather the technology in the room. "When you broadcast with the VECHS there is always feedback and you always have some technical issues going on. Either the board won't display right, so that can be a real disadvantage" (student one). I witnessed this when observing one of the college classes. The community college professor could not hear the students in the broadcast room where I was sitting. After disconnecting and reconnecting several times, she was finally able to hear. This process took almost fifteen minutes within a fifty-minute class. The professor stopped class so that she could be sure that she and everyone could hear, but the students in the class assured me that usually the

professor keeps right on going and they have to catch up the missed information. Teacher eight explained,

> all of the classes are videotaped which is great. If we do have connection problems or anything, all the classes are videoed, there's a link the kids go to, they have their own user name and password, and they can watch the class. Or if their teacher's lecturing and they miss something, they can go back and watch all of that…. It is like the internet at your house, or cable at your house, bad weather, rain, it buffers, it goes in and out. It's the same way in the information highway room.

The conflicting schedules were cited as a challenge because the school operates on two separate calendars: the students' college classes take precedence over the high school classes, which means that students either leave the high school class early, or arrive late, so as to accommodate the college schedule. Every classroom teacher I spoke with, both those in the focus groups and a couple who approached me in the hallways of the school, complained bitterly about the college classes taking precedence over the high school classes. Teacher two "vehemently opposed" the notion that the high school class should be overshadowed by the college class. Teacher seven described it as

> frustrating…they are missing out, I am missing out, and their peers are missing out, because they could be students that are offering a different perspective, especially when it comes to history classes. That's what it's all about, perspective, interpretation, and making your own judgments and sharing those. I do think I lose some of that.

The two administrators and the person who supports the students in the broadcast room made light of the colliding schedules. One of the three shared,

> some of the time for the college classes, some of the kids have to leave the high school classes to go to the college classes and they are either, they're leaving early or showing up late to a lot of their high school classes, but it is their responsibility to make up the work, and so far they have all managed to do that and it has not been an issue, thank goodness. The counselor really tries not to overlap their schedule if at all possible, especially the ones [students] with core classes. Sometimes it just happens.

A similar scheduling challenge involves the choices that students want to make but feel they cannot. Student six stated,

> I feel like since we started the VECHS they try to push more college classes on you and put high school classes under that. They'll only give you the mandatory classes and then they'll fill you up with college classes. It feels like they are taking away from the high school experience.

The student goes on to give an example: "…with Spanish, once you take your two years of Spanish to get into a four-year university they really try to dissuade you from taking Spanish 3 so that you can take another college class." Similarly, student four shared,

> I have not taken a gym class since sophomore year, which can be fairly fun classes, where you actually do things with other people instead of just crashing the books all the time…they kind of tell you, 'you don't need this class, you need this class,' they kind of force you into taking it.

This sentiment was echoed by student six, "you're still allowed to make a choice because they can't tell you that you have to take it, but they really make you feel bad if you don't."

The particular experience of being dissuaded from enrolling in particular classes also resonated with the teachers. During two informal hallway conversations with elective teachers (subject areas not named here as there is only one of each of these teachers at the school) shared similar displeasure at the manner in which students are discouraged from taking their higher-level classes in favor of another college class. (Each gave verbal permission for me to share our conversations anonymously). One teacher said she felt that her classes did not matter anymore and she had considered moving schools. The other said it just made her sad to think the students no longer had a choice in their classes, stating, "they [the students] were being forced by the early college teachers

to take college classes instead of the ones they wanted to take." Teacher six shared, "sometimes it can get a little bit frustrating because it feels like you are fighting a battle with the early college." Both teacher's nine and six used the term *the early college* to denote the staff who primarily support the students in the VECHS schedule rather than the comprehensive high school schedule.

All of the challenges cited here essentially position the VECHS schedule as adversarial to the comprehensive high school schedule, and suggest that the staff of the VECHS and the administrators favor the VECHS schedule over the comprehensive high school schedule, while the reverse favoritism is true for the teachers. In response to the teachers claiming to support the VECHS model and concept, but complaining about the scheduling issues of students coming and going from their classrooms or not being allowed to take certain elective classes, one of the administrators summed it up by saying: "intellectually, they [the teachers] agree with us. Emotionally, they are losing students, and it disrupts their day."

Both the teachers and the students cited barriers to being enrolled in college classes at the VECHS; however, students shared how having been a part of the VECHS, they felt more prepared for college after graduation. When asked if they had any advice for the incoming freshman class, Student Two suggested, "take it very seriously," while Student One said, "you realize it isn't just fun and games." Student Three concurred, positing "you need to be prepared and don't just take it all so lightly. They're saying [the eighth grade teachers] they are preparing you for high school but it does not really feel like it, it's very different." One of the administrators shared stories of students and how their lives had been affected by their participation in the VECHS college classes. One of

the perhaps initially unintended consequences of students attending some particular college classes was their discovery of careers for which they were not meant:

> to me, this is a part of what we do at the VECHS. We give them the opportunity to see what it is that you don't like. Not that we do it intentionally, but you spend a year wanting to be a nurse and when you get there and start classes and look at what's involved and you say, 'oh my gosh I don't want this' that's ok…I spend a lot of time talking with students trying to make them feel like, you're not a failure because you did not like this and you made a D. When you find out what you want to do, you'll stick with it a lot more.

Described above in the interpretative section is the stakeholders' understanding of the VECHS, and the way in which they experience it. Learning how to navigate college classes as a high school freshman, and learning how to deal with technological barriers to college access highlight the unique characteristics of the VECHS. Also included in the interpretations is the sense-making around colliding schedules, which raised different priorities for different groups of stakeholders. These priorities are examined further in the evaluative section, as stakeholders share why they chose the VECHS (particularly students and parents), and the impact it has had on their family.

Evaluative

The methodological framework used to support the organization of this case study was used originally as an evaluative tool in educational settings and there was usually a rubric or criteria against which the educational setting would be measured. Within Eisner's framework, the evaluation of the qualities of an educational setting are measured as they relate to each individual, such that the value "…may differ from student to student" (Eisner, 1998, p. 100), or in the circumstances of this case study, from participant to participant. Because the nature of this case study is exploratory and not evaluative, the third dimension describes meaning and impact as expressed by the study

participants rather than assigning a quantitative value, as is typically done when using Eisner's framework.

The research sub-question addressed "how do stakeholders explore college options at and beyond the virtual early college high school?" This question, and the prompting questions that followed, sought to understand the meaning and impact of the VECHS for the stakeholders, their families, and the community, rather than asking them to say if the VECHS can be described as 'good' or 'bad.' At its core, the evaluative dimension asked the participants to assess the value or worth of the educational experience. The prompting questions included, "given what you know now about the virtual early college high school, would you make the same decision again?" for each stakeholder group, and then different follow up questions were asked of the participants, depending on their role. These questions can be found in the focus group and interview protocols in Appendix A (for the administrators), E (students), F and G (teachers), and H (parents). Stakeholders evaluative responses focused on opportunity and access, cost, and impact associated with the VECHS; and, included recommended changes to enhance the reform initiative. These responses as addressed in turn below.

Opportunity and Access

From its inception, the notion of a VECHS in this community was focused on giving students the opportunity for, and access to, a college education. Because of the remote and rural nature of the case study site, these two things had been almost non-existent. The original principal explained that the superintendent at the time of planning the school "…wanted to give our students the same opportunities that other students had in the state." Several early college high schools were already open across the state,

situated on the campus of two and four-year institutions, and he felt this would level the playing field for the students. “We were going to provide our students with opportunities they would not otherwise get…to give our students the opportunity to get as many college credits as they could before graduation” (admin one).

As the administrators each described the student and community population, they spoke to why the VECHS was important in the community. Administrator One stated:

> …we were looking to provide some economic benefit to our students [tuition free college courses] and to the population that we serve, very rural, very diverse, underrepresented populations of college, a high percentage of first generation college

Similarly, the interim principal expressed that “the VECHS has given the community a gift they don’t quite know they have yet.” The administrator was referencing the fact that 2016 will be the first year VECHS graduates will be graduating college, so the long-term effects of the school in the community have only just begun to be realized. She continued, “the VECHS has opened up avenues for students that we have never had available before.”

In talking with the parents, it became clear that they realized the value of their student having college access, more importantly, having college access so conveniently on the same campus. Parent three said, “kids might not attend college if they don’t get that early experience.” This same parent discussed the hour journey from the high school to the college campus and stated, “I do not believe he [my son] would have thought about college were it not for the VECHS.” Teacher six concurred: “…a lot of people don’t understand this region…if these kids don’t do it while they are in high school, the likelihood of them going outside to get it [college credit], it’s just not possible.” When I

asked her to clarify her statement she said, “the college feels too far away to them [potential students]” referencing the physical location of the campus.

Cost of Attending College

For many of the stakeholders, the implications stretched beyond the physical access to college at the high school campus. Teacher Eight commented that the VECHS “… had one student last year who graduated from college in just two and a half years because she had done so much [college credit] here, which helped her financially.” A parent also shared that her student attending the VECHS “had cut down on costs” incurred when he got to the four-year institution (Parent One). Similarly, a parent expressed the expense associated with pursuing a career in cosmetology how the VECHS absorbed some of those costs for her child: “the cosmetology kit alone is more than $400. The school paid that, and it saved us a lot of money” (Parent Two).

Although stakeholders reported the expense associated with attending college, evidence uncovered in the document analysis (F4(a), D14) indicated that the state legislature made monetary provisions for payment of college tuition and purchasing of textbooks. Such provisions were awarded with fiscal oversight. For example, on one occasion, a local state representative visited the school (F4(e)) to see just what the funding was supporting. On that day, he met with parents and students and some of the parents were interviewed. One parent stated in an interview recorded during the legislator’s visit that he had already supported two of his children through school so he knew how much it would cost. “The VECHS has given us a jump-start for my son. Help with the cost is important especially in a low-income community such as we are (V(3b)).”

When asked what was the best thing about the VECHS experience for her family, parent two said,

> beyond a shadow of a doubt, the financial help. People in this county struggle and live from paycheck to paycheck. Knowing that your kid is going to graduate with a degree you did not have to pay for, with books you did not have to purchase, that's a huge, huge financial gain for the family.

The examples outlined above illustrate ways in which the VECHS had effected the stakeholders in a very practical way: the cost involved. Next, the stakeholders discuss other impacts of the VECHS on themselves and their families in other ways.

Impact of the VECHS

Each participating teacher was asked if they would choose to work in a VECHS again, and each said yes. Similarly, each participating student agreed that he or she would make the same decision again to attend the VECHS. One parent admitted, "I was a little skeptical when it started…but I am very pleased with the education my sons have received," (parent one). Additionally, each of the parents interviewed for this study concurred they would make the decision again to send their child to the VECHS, with Parent Three adding, "all in all it was an excellent experience…and I recommend it to other people all the time." Parent one added,

> my older son, who is now at Rosewood (pseudonym for a highly-regarded four-year institution), was able to transfer in twenty-one credits, which is fantastic. He completed one semester as a freshman and will be a sophomore status next year…which is a huge benefit at a large institution. There's just benefit after benefit that I am so grateful for.

Contrastingly, students described the impact of the VECHS in terms of how they now see college rather than the tangible benefit if cost-savings and quality of education received. For example, Student Three shared, "I feel like I can take on more now"

whereas Student One reported "… feeling like I have a handle on how the whole [college] system works." Some students also talked about the implications for their preparedness and professional aspirations. Student Six stated, "…taking college classes has just made me feel better that I am going to be prepared [for college upon graduation]" (student six). Student five agreed, and goes further stating, "it [the college opportunity] has made me more prepared and look more into the field of study that I want to be in."

Suggested Changes to the VECHS Model

Participants were encouraged to share qualities of the VECHS that they would change. These qualities included scheduling and class type and format. In some cases, the feelings associated with these quality changes conflicted. For example, the parents wanted their students to be able to take more college classes earlier in the VECHS experience (parent one), while the students asked that they be able to take less to experience high school more fully (student four).

A difference in the type of classes offered was also suggested. Parent three noted,

> I think the only thing that could be done differently would just be have more classes available to the students…for your students that are not your academic students, like your technical students. Maybe like a diesel mechanic class or those kinds of things. Some students, we already know that they're just not going to be college material based upon their family circumstances…but they are going to need some kind of career, some kind of trade…if the VECHS offered more of the trade or credential it would be easier for those students.

Parents expressed not only the importance of access to traditional post-secondary schooling, but also vocational education and experiences that would be appealing to students for whom college is not the chose path. In addition to various types of classes, parents also expressed concern about the timing of access to virtual college classes. For example, parent two suggested the students be allowed to take online classes earlier than

they currently are – which is eleventh grade. She offered that online classes allowed the students more flexibility in schedule than the broadcast classes.

In addition to the suggested changes raised by parents, school personnel identified particular VECHS structures and systems in need of further consideration to better facilitate student engagement and participation in the VECHS. Several comments were made by school personnel aimed at the clash of the two schedules that centered on students missing time in high school classes in order to attend a college class, and students not being allowed to enroll in certain high school classes so that they could take more college classes. While the school personnel opposed both of these notions, there were two teachers who understand the rationale. "It has to do with the college scheduling' (admin two). "…our high school has changed its schedule to try to work to the college class times" (teacher three). "No matter how hard we tried, we could not match the college schedule to ours" (admin two).

> We tried. And every year we would try, and then they [the community college] would come up to us and say 'we can't do psych' or 'the psych teacher wants 12 till 1 instead of 11 till 12.' Or suddenly they'll move the class back to an hour and a half class. Those kinds of things; we solve some of our issues and then something will happen. (admin two)

The evaluative dimension of Eisner's framework highlighted some of the ways in which stakeholders measured the impact of the VECHS. Opening the opportunity for access to college, taking care of some of the cost of college education, and the impact the experience has had on students in preparing them for the next step in their educational career, are three of the highlighted criteria these stakeholders used to evaluate the impact of the VECHS. While offering suggestions for modifications to the design of the school

model, each participant asked agreed that she would make the same decision again, to participate in the VECHS experience.

Themes

Within each of the three dimensions discussed above, there are many opportunities to recognize themes. The fourth dimension of Eisner's framework suggests these themes be "the distillation of the major ideas or conclusions that are to be derived from the material that preceded it" (2002, p.233), therefore, the themes recognized here are found across the dimensions, not just within each. Eisner describes the themes formed after a critique of an educational setting as "…the recurring messages that pervade the situation… pervasive qualities that tend to permeate and unify situations and objects…" (1998, p.104).

In order to name the themes, further analysis of the analysis already completed on the data had to be performed. This second level analysis included looking across the interview and focus group transcripts, observations, and documents for patterns – not just patterns of recurrence, but also patterns of strength of occurrence. For example, that one feature of the VECHS was mentioned more than another did not necessarily make it a theme, but the way in which it was mentioned, or the lack of appearance of it, could have made it a theme. The themes that follow – school model, purpose, and people – are the overarching categories for many themes that emerged in the second layer of analysis and interpretation of the data.

School Model: Development and Execution of the VECHS

At this school site, there are two schools operating simultaneously, which is an unusual model of an early college high school, or a VECHS. The organizational

framework outlined in chapter one, which supported the critical literature review found in chapter two, showed how the model of a VECHS came to be, and it also illustrated how local circumstances dictated a modification to the traditional early college high school model found in North Carolina. The notion of running two parallel schools fits this small, rural community. The stakeholders have a choice, and there are options for all students.

More broadly than this example, early college high schools were created to offer opportunities to students to differentiate their learning. Some early colleges opened for high-achieving students who could be accelerated into a fast track for college. Others aligned with a theme specifically to attract students bound for a particular career. This particular early college high school, like all of those in North Carolina, opened specifically to enable access to college to populations of students who otherwise may not have had access to college credit while in high school, as well as for those who may not have thought about college as an option after high school were it not for their VECHS experience. Specifically, the nature of this rural site inhibited ready college access before the notion of leveraging distance education as a tool was introduced.

The administrators, students, and teachers spoke to the various ways distance education was used to enable college access, and negate the rural aspect of this site. The parents and teachers applauded the access, saying that without the opportunity during high school, students likely would not have thought about college beyond graduation.

None of the participants in this study used the words school model to describe the use of distance education. The title for this theme is offered as a descriptor for the access and opportunity that were recurring words heard in interviews and focus groups, and

activities observed. That's not to say the description offered by participants, or the observations, were always positive.

The particular school model investigated in this study is not at all representative of high schools across the country. It is one of only six virtual early college high schools in North Carolina, and the only one that runs parallel a high school schedule, as well as a virtual early college high school schedule, simultaneously. It is also the only one located on the campus of a comprehensive high school. All of these attributes create its unique climate, such that stakeholders appear to have ambivalent feelings towards the VECHS. Students and teachers expressed concern about the classes offered, when they were offered, and sometimes how they were offered. There were tensions between the theory behind access and opportunity, and the actualization of that theory. Ultimately, what appears to be behind each decision made by administrators and parents is that having the VECHS is better than not, as is described in the next theme.

Purpose of the VECHS

More so than any other message from the voice of the stakeholders, that of the purpose of the VECHS was clear: because it is the right thing to do for students. The stakeholders each named several reasons for the VECHS, and each leads to the path of student outcomes: college access, academic rigor, opportunities beyond the high school, and a level playing field upon entry into higher education. Loud and clear across the findings is the notion of access to college, a previously untapped resource due to the location of the study site. The model of the VECHS is such that location is negated, and access is equal despite the rural location through distance education.

Embedded in college access is a question related to college readiness. Both the teachers and parents mentioned an immediate concern as students who were not ready to embark upon college-level curriculum immediately in ninth grade. This concern manifested itself in various disguises, but essentially boiled down to the students learning how to be a high school student, a college student, and a distance education student simultaneously. As was illustrated in figure one (chapter two), this intersection describes perfectly the location of the VECHS within the secondary educational arena.

The students' message about purpose was twofold. First, in keeping with the administrators and parents, the students voiced the early access to college curriculum as a positive step towards helping them think about what they would do upon graduation. In addition, the second message from the students about purpose was voiced as an affirmation that now they were prepared to 'do' college, as well as go to college, that they were able to visual and experience what being in college might be like – the classroom experiences, the schedule conflicts, the need to understand the different expectations of college teachers.

The purpose of the school was also disguised in the many conversations about cost. Teachers and parents particularly mentioned the positive financial impact of the school on families, both currently and the students who had already graduated and had benefitted from the school. While this purpose is not unique to the VECHS, as it certainly is a purpose of many early college high schools across the country, this financial objective would not be possible without the use of distance education in this particular location.

Finally, the purpose of the school was found in the stories told about how the school had impacted not just the students, but also their families. A story told to me by one of the teachers during the study involved a single mother of four, who was a high school dropout. Her eldest son had dropped out of high school, and her second child, a daughter, failed every class in eighth grade. The mother enrolled her daughter in the VECHS. Within a year, the student had grown academically and passed her ninth grade classes. By tenth grade, she had blossomed into an ambassador for the school, someone who spoke with legislators and business people to advocate for her school. By her eleventh grade, she had inspired her mother to go back to school and get her GED, and, by the time the student graduated after her fifth year at the VECHS, her mother had graduated from the community college, with her certificate in medical terminology. The purpose of this school is not only to support the students but also to change the lives of the community in which it rests.

People: Human Capital Supporting the VECHS

During the study, individuals recognized the contribution of others to the success of the school. The original principal noted the founding superintendent; the interim principal honored the outgoing principal; the teachers spoke to the dedication of the students; and, the families respected and admired the work of the school staff. At this particular school site, the participants firmly believe in the adage of the village raising the child. It was evident in the conversations with all of the stakeholders, especially the students, who pointed to all members of the school community as people they could rely on for help and support. This theme is supported by data in the study completed by Chance and Segura (2009) – also referenced in chapter two – where they found

"…significant themes that arose in the study were the characteristics of small schools, and the closeness of a rural community" (p.8).

Particularly evident was the influence of the school leader in all aspects of the VECHS. Though not born and raised in this town like many of her colleagues, the original principal had gained the respect and trust of the community (I(a2), not an easy thing to do with no family ties (admin two), and within a rural community (Farmer, 2009). There was no data collected to suggest that the original principal had any specific training that supported their leadership role in a rural setting; however, the role of the original principal in increasing the graduation rate, as well as increasing access to and successful completion of college credit at the study site, cannot be overstated.

Stakeholders investigated in the study were those whose location was the school site, and included students, teachers, administrators and parents. There are several stakeholders directly connected to the school who were not a part of this study by design, but who certainly had an impact the school. These stakeholders included, for example, members of the community college faculty and administration, the local superintendent, members of the school board, and local community residents who do not have children in the school.

Even though their voices are notably absent from the data, their presence in the school is not. Further, their perspective may be reflected in the documents collected, thus passively contributing to a rich descriptive account of VECHS in rural North Carolina.

Summary

Chapter four offered a description of the site through a synthesis of the data collected using focus groups, interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Additionally, Eisner's framework of education evaluation using the connoisseurship and critical stances was used as an anchor to share the research findings. The final dimension of Eisner's framework, the thematic dimension, offered an opportunity to highlight big ideas that arose because of the critical look at the qualities of the VECHS.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this case study was to investigate how stakeholders experience a virtual early college high school. Stakeholders included students, teachers, parents, and administrators at the school. The primary research question, how do stakeholders experience a VECHS, was investigated using observations, interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. Using the first three of Eisner's (2002) dimensions as a guide, this study supported the primary research question with three sub-questions:

a) How do stakeholders describe a virtual early college high school?
b) How do stakeholders describe and understand the college experience at a virtual early college high school?
c) How do stakeholders explore college options at and beyond the virtual early college high school?

The fourth dimension, thematic, brought all of the findings together, as "the distillation of the major ideas or conclusions that are to be derived from the material that preceded it" (Eisner, 2002, p.233). Eisner further explained that themes are the "dominant features of the situation or person, those qualities of place, person, or object that define or describe identity. In a sense, a theme is a pervasive quality. Pervasive qualities tend to permeate and unify situations and objects" (p.104). While there were many themes that could have been identified, three were chosen to represent the study and its findings: school model, purpose, and people. These themes influenced the upcoming discussion of findings from the case, as well as recommendations moving forward.

This chapter is separated into five sections. First, consideration is given to the findings of the study, and conclusions are drawn. Next, proposals for made for

recommendations for future research. Policy implications are then discussed, and then implications for practice are considered. The chapter ends with personal reflections and lessons learned.

Findings and Initial Conclusions

Generally, the findings in the case study suggest that there are many more similarities than differences between a virtual early college high school, and what we know about early college high schools in general: students have early access to college; some stakeholders support the notion of early college while others do not; some students graduate high school with college credit and others do not; some students graduate high school with a community college degree or a career credential and others do not. But what makes the VECHS unique is the manner in which students access their college experience. The primary mode of college access as a student at the VECHS is distance education, which is not the case for students enrolled in a traditional early college high school.

The one fundamental difference between the VECHS studied and what we know to be true about other early college high schools is location: early college high schools were originally designed to be located on the campus of a two- or four- year institution of higher education, and this one is not. The VECHS does not have the place-based characteristics that its not-virtual counterparts do. Instead, it has a broadcast room, and a study hall room, and a first day of ninth grade orientation that involves learning how to be a high school student, a college student, and a distance education student simultaneously. Instead of a campus tour, the students at the VECHS experience a classroom-based lesson in how to use Blackboard, the learning management system

utilized by the community college partner. Instead of locating a professor's office and looking up office hours, the students at the VECHS learn how to compose a professional email in which they advocate for themselves, ask questions, and arrange for a phone call or Skype session in order to access support from their teacher. Office hours take place in a virtual chat room rather than a brick and mortar office.

Not having physical access to the campus also has implications beyond the teaching and learning environment. Students in rural communities meet different barriers than those met by their counterparts in urban and suburban settings. The barriers encountered at this VECHS caused by the mode of college access can be overcome. For example, college classes are recorded and so accessible when the internet comes back on after a storm. Work missed in the high school class may be caught up once the college class is over. These obstacles pale when compared with the social and economic barriers to higher education found in rural communities: "…rural students are less likely to attend private, selective, or four-year colleges, are more likely to rely on government food assistance, and are more likely to deal with health issues like obesity…" (Mader, J. 2016). Rural students are less likely to attend college than their non-rural peers (Byun et al., 2012). Additionally, non-white rural students are less likely to attend college than their white, rural peers (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). Thus access to college in a rural setting becomes more important than ever for the students and their families.

Overall, the findings suggest the structural characteristics of a virtual early college high school are not very different than those found in an early college high school based on a campus of an institution of higher education, though there are important nuances. These are closely related to the community context of the school, the connectedness

visible during the study, and then supported in the research (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, and Hutchins, 2012).

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research have two origins. The first set is born of the limitations and delimitations of this case study. The second set results from the investigation and findings.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are three areas within the limitations and delimitations that highlight recommendations for further study.

1. The data from this single case study may not be generalizable to other high schools, early college high schools, or virtual early college high schools. Hence, the first recommendation is that further research be done, perhaps in the form of a comparative case study, to compare this study site with schools with similar characteristics. These could be qualities of an early college high school, a small school, a rural school, or a school that relies on distance education for some of its high school course offerings, or college access.
2. The stakeholders were deliberately confined to those located on this school site. The VECHS has a partnership with the local community college, and that relationship had an impact on several characteristics of the VECHS, including scheduling conflicts and therefore the often negative attitude towards the college classes, as well as the manner in which many of the classes were offered, and, if they were offered at all.

Further study of the relationship between the school and the community college might highlight areas in which the VECHS could be positively impacted, and also offers other considerations for collaboration that would be new to both parties.

3. Other stakeholders missing from this case study include community members, and the superintendent and school board in the local district. Listening to the perspectives of the organization that supports the school, as well as people who are potentially impacted by it, may highlight other qualities of the school not revealed in this study.

Investigation and Findings

There are five areas within the investigations and findings that highlight recommendations for further study.

1. The VECHS model evolved over time. It is the result of a convergence of need and solution: the rural high school students needed access to college credit, and distance education provided the solution, as illustrated by Figure 1. Further research could investigate school models created from need and solution, which could then offer possible resolutions or clarifications of nuances unique to this school. For example, how have other schools blended two schedules?
2. There has been a national call to action (Kisker, 2006) in favor of offering students access to college at a younger age than has been the case traditionally. Supported by national, state, and local policies, college access is a hot-button issue that deserves some attention. In addition,

research is required that will show not only how students access college credit while in high school, but also how they are supported to continue that quest for further education, and the persistence rates of students from schools such as the VECHS.

3. During the data gathering for this case study, it became clear that the third sub-question lacked precision in its focus. As stakeholders responded to the impact of the VECHS and its value in the community, the responses leaned towards the purpose of the school. These stakeholders included reasons why the VECHS existed rather than a ranking of its quality. Future research should focus on the why of this particular model of high school, to include its structures as well as reasons for existing beyond the tangibility of college access.
4. The one deciding factor for choosing this school site was the longevity of the original principal, who was able to provide some valuable insight that was not observable or quantifiable when looking at documents. Further research is needed on the role of the original principal in this particular school, as well as across school models so as to support the appointment of leaders to schools where they can bring about the best outcomes for students.
5. During the study, data collected revealed many tensions on the high school campus. These tensions are alluded to in the presentation of the findings in chapter four, but are not further investigated here as they were beyond the parameters of the purpose of the study. Future research could

further investigate these tensions to ascertain their origin and possible solution, as well as to determine if they are characteristics of this particular VECHS, or early college high schools generally. Examples of the tensions include:

a. The high school calendar not aligning with the college calendar, and so students had to find their own way to school to attend college classes before the buses run each semester.
b. The misalignment of the high school and college schedules such that students had to miss high school classes to attend college classes. Teachers were particularly disturbed by this tension, though students and administrators did not appear to be adversely affected.
c. Students wanted the opportunity to choose high school elective credits rather than college classes, but the VECHS teachers and administrators advised them differently. The students felt that was unfair, and the high school teachers also voiced their disappointment at the lack of student choice.

All of the recommendations for future study, those highlighted by the limitations and delimitations of this case, as well as those brought forward as a result of the case, offer opportunity for new knowledge about early college access for high school students. While having this knowledge and putting research into action are in the best interest of students, there are usually barriers to new and different ways to imagine school. These barriers, as evidenced by this case study, often come in the form of policies at the local,

district, and state levels, as well as from policies instituted by the tertiary education system. These policy considerations will be discussed in the next section.

Policy Implications

The model of early college high school that is located in a rural area, and that only uses distance education as a tool to access college is unusual, and currently rare. This is not to say that qualities of this school could not be found in other places. As Eisner (1998) noted,

> what one learns about one school can raise one's consciousness to features that might be found in other schools. The [case] study does not claim that other schools will share identical or even similar features, but rather that these are features one might look for in other schools. (p. 103)

The policy implications, then, are for consideration given the broad array of school models currently operating across the United States. Individual qualities highlighted by this study, and therefore individual policy considerations, could serve other schools and students when adapted for implementation in another setting.

The overarching policies connected to the early college high school movement center on college access. This broad term - college access - makes way for high school students to be able to enroll at a two- or four-year institution while concurrently enrolled in high school. There has been a national call to action (Kisker, 2006) in favor of offering students access to college at a younger age than has been the case traditionally. This shift in thinking has required some shifts in policy.

Historically in North Carolina, there have been several ways a student could access college while in high school. As a principal a decade ago I had to sign a permission slip for a student, who would then produce that at the local community

college, so that she could enroll on her own time, and at her own expense. There was no articulated rationale for course selection or enrollment beyond individual preference and interest. Further, there was no clear pathway to a degree or credential. At the district and state levels, there was no alignment of programs, and no funding cohesion (E. Wallace, personal communication, February 23, 2016).

A recognition of this lack of alignment led to a collaboration between the state superintendent for education, and the president of the community college system. Together, the State Board of Education and the North Carolina Community College System created Career and College Promise (CCP), which was written into legislation in 2011, which enabled high school juniors and seniors to access prescribed community college courses that led towards a career credential or articulated college credit at the state university system schools (SL2011-0145, section 7.1A). Additionally, in this legislation was a funding structure such that students did not have to pay tuition for the classes – that cost is paid by the state legislature.

It appears at first glance that free community college for all high school students is landmark in nature, and should be upheld as a solution to the call to arms; however, further review suggests students in schools in remote, rural corners of the state are still disadvantaged because of physical access to the campus, funding issues, staffing policies, and graduation requirements. Distance education would appear to be the resolution, unless the high education partner policy dictates that high school students are not allowed to enroll in online classes.

Having teachers become adjunct professors who teach on the high school campus could be a solution, if the accreditation organization would allow those classes to be

funded at the community college. Additionally, Career and College Promise, and all of the benefits that accompany it, dictates a partnership between the K-12 system and the community college system. There is no such official partnership between the K-12 system and the state university system. While there is a comprehensive articulation agreement between the North Carolina Community College System and the University of North Carolina General Administration, CCP does not pay for access to college courses at the four-year institutions.

CCP does not supply funding for the support staff needed at the high school to accommodate students' academic and affective needs while they are in college classes. Additionally, consideration has to be given to the teachers who would have been teaching the students if the college classes were not an option. Are they now redundant? Or paid to teach fewer students?

On the ground implementation of CCP has some challenges. Community colleges in North Carolina have catchment areas, which means that each campus serves a specific geographical region. If a student lives in the geographical catchment area of a community college that does not offer a particular course, the student is denied that course. While technically the student could attend a different community college to access the course, and transfer that credit to their local institution, community colleges are very territorial. This means that while students may have physical access to a campus, the community college may be too small of offer all of the courses needed for a diploma, or an articulated pathway, and that even distance education and enrollment in another community college is not an option.

There is a policy in North Carolina that states students may not graduate from community college with an associate's degree until they have first graduated high school (CC16-010, p.6). This, while small in the big scheme of things, means that students who earn an associate's degree from the community college while in high school cannot have that degree conferred until after high school graduation. In North Carolina, the school calendar is such that high school graduation is usually in June, while most community college graduations at in early May. Often students will walk in both May and June, but will not receive their community college paperwork until after high school graduation, at which point they have to present their high school diploma to the community college registrar for verification of graduation.

All of the barriers to the early college access policies listed above have a solution, if the mission of the state education leaders is, in fact, to enable early college access for all students. Those solutions will be proposed in the next section.

Implications for Practice

In chapter one, there was a definition and description of the North Carolina Education Cabinet, established by legislation in 1992. This body of leaders, in addition to the state legislature, has the potential to make some radical changes in the way in which high school students are able to access college courses, and to enable those students to transfer the courses to four year institutions.

First, having parallel access for high school students to college classes means greater choice for students. Enabling students to choose a pathway through CCP, or choose an early college high school, means that access to post-secondary education is available to more students. But cost is a barrier. Students who are enrolled in an early

college high school on the campus of a four-year institution have their tuition paid, whereas CCP does not cover tuition for four year schools. Similarly, books and most fees are paid for by the school for an early college student, but many of these are the student's responsibility through CCP. This disparity in funding means there are still students who cannot financially access college. The Education Cabinet could agree to a funding structure for tuition and fees that would be provided for students enrolled in all articulated courses, regardless of how the students access them, and irrespective of location or origin.

Next, staffing and teaching considerations should be made such that qualified staff, adjunct or full time, can teach a course from any location and the course counts towards the institution's average daily membership. In this way, high school teachers would be able to teach college courses on the high school campus so that students could access a face to face class, and the community college would get membership credit for it. This would alleviate some of the need for distance education, as well as enable students in remote areas to access college courses that have not yet been made available through distance education. In addition, in rural places where faculty is scare in particular subjects, it would allow the high school teacher to serve as that faculty member for an entire catchment area, not just the high school population.

Consideration should also be given to the who: which students are accessing college classes? Many early college high schools, the one in this case study included as described in chapter four, do not consider previous academic achievement when students apply, that is, the early college is not just for students who are academically accelerated or gifted. CCP has an age restriction, which has been modified each year by the General

Assembly, as well as a minimum grade point average bar that has to be met. This means that students who struggle academically, but who would be enriched by, and do well in, the college environment are denied access. It also means middle school students are not allowed to participate. There are some high school models now that are 6-12 and 6-13. Students in these schools would be separated by age, regardless of interest, passion, or purpose.

Finally, each of the members of the cabinet are the head of an education system, and each system has several member institutions. For example, there are seventeen institutions in the state four-year university system, and 58 in the state community college system. Each of these member institutions follows system policies, but largely is controlled locally, which means that at any given time there is the potential for 58 separate policies about the same issue. For students, it means that if they attend a community college in one catchment area, the rules may be different for them than their peer, who lives in the neighboring catchment area. While local control is important when considering community context, consistency of policy implementation across the system provides equity for all students.

It is not just incumbent upon the Education Cabinet to advocate for these changes. Educators, regardless of location or school model, have a moral imperative to advocate for their students. Having legislatively appropriated funding or access can only be useful if the people who implement these policies do so in the best interests of students. Collaboration among adults for the sake of each student is vital.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

In the final year of my study, I attended a lecture by Jack Jennings, founder of the Center on Education Policy. In his book, *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools. The Politics of Education Reform* he wrote: "the major objective is to have people think differently, to get out of the box of tinkering with the current set of federal laws and programs" (p.221). Expanding this notion, we need to get people out of tinkering with local and state programs too; we need to think differently about what constitutes school and college, and begin to think about how to serve students better.

As an educator who supports the teaching and learning, and school leadership, in a national network of schools it is also incumbent upon me to ensure that I am an advocate for all students, too. During the course of this study, I have to come to believe that early college, in whatever iteration it is found, is not place. Rather, it is a state of mind. Schools of all configurations and models should be able to find ways to ensure all students have access to college – by walking across campus or by signing onto the computer. It is my responsibility to advocate for different teaching and learning, and a different kind of leadership, for all students at all levels, such that each student's needs are met.

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Appendix A

Observation Protocol

Date:	Time:	Location:
People present:		
Activity:		Personal Reaction:

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

For the interview with the original principal.

Introduction

- How did you come to be a principal? Of an early college?
- You have been the original principal here since the school's inception. Please share some history about how the virtual early college high school came to be?
    - *Whose idea was it to start the early college?*
    - *What factors motivated the decision to pursue the possibility of an early college? Local community, district, and stakeholders.*
    - *There were several early college high schools already open in the state, all of which were on a campus of an institution of higher education, and your school is more than an hour's drive to the closest campus of higher education – what made you think that an early college was possible? Probable? Needed? Wanted?*

Descriptive

- Describe the evolution of the virtual early college high school.
- What was (and is now) the vision for a virtual early college high school?
- Tell me about changes to the design of the school over time – and why these changes were made.

Interpretive

- What can you tell me about any differences between the students who are in college courses and those who are not?
- How do you sustain the idea of college for students given that some may never set foot on campus? How do you maintain interest in college for your high school students?

Evaluative

- What do you see as the advantages for the students? Disadvantages? Have you noticed an impact on the community?
- Tell me about the choices your students have made upon graduation from the virtual early college high school.

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

For the focus group with the students – each section has one overarching question. The sub questions will be used as probes and follow up questions.

Introduction – please introduce yourself and how you came to be at the virtual early college high school.

- Tell me a little about yourself. How long have you lived here? What do you like to do outside school?
- How did you first hear about the virtual early college high school?
- What about the new school did you find appealing? Why?
- What parts did you have worries regarding? How did you address those?
- What drew you to this high school?

Descriptive – how do you describe your school to people who do not know about it?

- What is it like to go to school here?
- Tell me about your experiences with college classes.
- Tell me what you have learned about "college" since you been at this school? Is that different from when you first arrived? How so?

Interpretive – share your thoughts about college – your classes here and what you are thinking about college after high school.

- Experiential angle: When you are leaving a class to go to one of your college classes, what are you feeling/thinking as you: probe: walk to the class, enter, get prepared, work through the modules, and then leave.
- How do you talk with other students about taking a college course?
- You have taken one or two college courses. What do you think about college now? How has your thinking changed or stayed the same? Your confidence about going to college?
- How has attending college in high school changed how you think about yourself? Your future?
- What do you want to do after high school? Probe: with your college experience? Has that changed since taking college classes?

Evaluative – how would you sum up your experience at the virtual early college high school?

- Given what you know now about the virtual early college high school, would you make the same decision again?
- How are you doing in your college courses? Why do you think so?
- Do you have a goal for your college classes (degree? credential?)?
- What advice would you offer a student thinking about applying to the virtual early college high school?

Appendix D

Focus Group Protocol

For the focus group with the parents – each section has one overarching question. The sub questions will be used as probes and follow up questions.

Introduction – please introduce yourself, and how your family came to be at the virtual early college high school.

- Tell me a little about yourself – how long have you lived in the community? What previous experiences have you had with the high school?
- Why did you choose to send your child to the virtual early college high school?

Descriptive - how do you describe your student's school to people who do not know about it?

- How did you first hear about the virtual early college high school?
- What about the new school did you find appealing? Why?
- What parts did you have worries in regards to about this situation? How did you address those?
- What drew you to this high school?

Interpretive - share your thoughts about college – your student's experience with college classes here and what you and your student are thinking about for college after high school.

- What has been your experience with the virtual early college high school?
- How has this affected your family?
- Describe your experience as the parent of a high school student, and, as the parent of a college student.

Evaluative - how would you sum up your experience at the virtual early college high school?

- Given what you know now about the virtual early college high school, would you make the same decision for your child again?
- What is the best thing about the virtual early college high school?
- Something you would change?

Appendix E

Focus Group Protocol

For the focus group with the teachers – each section has one overarching question. The sub questions will be used as probes and follow up questions.

Introduction - please introduce yourself and how you came to be at the virtual early college high school.

- Tell me a little about yourself.
- Why did you choose to teach at the virtual early college high school?

Descriptive - how do you describe your school to people who do not know about it?

- What has been your experience with the students of the virtual early college?
- How do you understand the school's purpose? How do you fit into that purpose?
- How has your teaching practice been influenced by the students' college experience? probe for 2-3 examples
- How do you interact with college faculty? With the college courses? What is your impression of the difference in high school and college courses?

Interpretive - share your thoughts about college – your students here, the classes you teach.

- How do you share thoughts about college with students?
- How do you sustain the idea of college for your students? What challenges do you feel for those who are marginal, and so may never step foot on a college campus?
- How do you maintain the allure of college for your high school students?
- How do you explain the differences (if there are any) between the students who are in college classes and those who are not?
- How novel or important is the college (virtual) experience for rural communities?

Evaluative - how would you sum up your experience at the virtual early college high school?

- Given what you know now about the virtual early college high school, would you make the same decision (to teach here) again?
- How do you describe the impact of access to college on high school students?
- What is important for teacher to know about working in a virtual early college high school?

Appendix F

Document Summary Form

Name of document: *name I assign the document, or given title of documents*	Number assigned: *there will be several documents, numbering them will help with data retrieval later*
Type (circle): *written, typed, memo, photo, website, minutes, agenda, newspaper, letter…*	Date received/retrieved:
Physical description: *to help with locating document at a later date (is it on red paper, in a CD case, size, shape, color of text)*	
Brief summary of contents:	
Source: *primary (witness), secondary (reported), other (specify initial purpose of document)*	
Resource: *name of person who provided the document, or electronic (or otherwise) source*	

Appendix G

Structural codes to inform initial analysis

Question	Structural Code
Tell me a little about yourself.	Student identity (SI)
Why did you choose to attend the virtual early college?	Why VECHS (WHY)
Tell me about how you experience your college classes.	College classes (CC)
Describe the difference between the three methods of accessing college.	Access to college (AC)
How has attending college in high school influenced your thinking about yourself? Your future?	Sense of self (SS)
What will you do after high school?	Future plans (FP)
How are you doing in your college courses?	College success (CS)
Do you have a goal for your college classes (degree? credential?)?	Degree or credential (DC)
Given what you know now about early college high school, would you make the same decision again?	High school decision (HSD)

Appendix H

Crosswalk to ensure all questions and data collections methods match a structural code

Structural Code	Potential Data Collection Method and Location					
	Principal Interview	Student Focus Group	Teacher Focus Group	Parent Focus Group	Documentation	Observations
Student identity (SI)	E1, 2	In 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 I 4	In 1, 2	In 2	X	X
Why VECHS (WHY)	In 2 D 1, 2, 3 E 1, 2	In 3, 5 D 3	D 2 E 2	In 1, 2 D 1, 2, 3, 4	X	
College classes (CC)	In 2	In 4 D 2 I 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	D 3, 4 I 1, 2	I 1, 3 E 1, 2	X	X
Access to college (AC)	D 3	D 3 I 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	D 3, 4 I 4 E 1	I 1, 3 E 1, 2	X	X
Sense of self (SS)	I 1	In 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 D 2 I 3, 4, 5 E 1, 2, 3	I 1, 2, 3 E 1	I 2		X
Future plans (FP)	I 2	D 3 I 4, 5 E 3	D 1, 3 I 1, 2	I 2, 3	X	
College success (CS)	D 2, 3 I 1, 2	D 2 E 1	I 4	D 2 I 1, 2	X	X
Degree or credential (DC)	E 1, 2	I 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 E 2	I 4	D 2 I 1, 2	X	
High school decision (HSD)	D 3	In 5 D 1 E 3	D 1, 2 I 1, 2, 4 E 1	In 2 D 4 I 1, 2, 3 E 1, 2	X	

Appendix I

List of Participants, using data gathered from the recordings

Participant Type	Number assigned	Description
Student	One	Junior
Student	Two	Junior
Student	Three	Junior
Student	Four	Senior
Student	Five	Junior
Student	Six	Junior
Administrator	One	Original principal
Administrator	Two	Interim principal – also served as a teacher before the school converted to an early college high school model
Teacher	One	longer than three years
Teacher	Two	longer than three years
Teacher	Three	longer than nine years
Teacher	Four	less than three years
Teacher	Five	less than three years
Teacher	Six	less than three years
Teacher	Seven	less than three years
Teacher	Eight	assigned to support VECHS students
Parent	One	one son graduated, one currently enrolled
Parent	Two	one daughter graduated
Parent	Three	one daughter graduated comprehensive high school, one daughter currently enrolled in VECHS

Appendix J

Table of documents

Document Type	Explanation	Date Created (if available)	Number assigned (corresponds to referenced documents in case study report)
Video	Principal explaining hiring process, including application review, screening process, interview format, and panel interview process.		V1
Video	Series of students being interviewed. Asked questions about why they joined the virtual early college high school, what impact it has had on them, and what their intentions are upon graduation.		V2(a) student one V2(b) student two V2(c) student three V2(d) student four V2(e) student five V2(f) student six V2(g) student seven
Video	Series of parents being asked why they chose the virtual early college high school for their student.	November 2010	V3(a) parent one V3(b) parent two V3(c) parent three V3(d) parent four V3(e) parent five
Folder	Peer School Review: collection of documents to support the Peer School Review process.	October 2012	F1(a) agenda for the day F1(b) Rounds guide for hosts F1(c) Rounds guide for visitors F1(d) Background information F1(e) lesson plan, teacher one F1(f) lesson plan, teacher two F1(g) lesson plan, teacher three

			F1(h) lesson plan, teacher four F1(i) lesson plan, teacher five F1(j) lesson plan, teacher six F1(k) evaluation form for participants
Folder	Staff surveys: collection of responses to a survey curated by SERVE, and the results of a separate survey created by the school.	April 2009	F2(a) email from SERVE center with copy of blank survey attached F2(b) completed survey one F2(c) completed survey two F2(d) blank survey for parents from Education for the Future F2(e) six completed parent surveys stapled together F2(f) blank survey for students from Education for the Future F2(g) seven completed student surveys stapled together F2(h) school survey (created 2009) asking three questions of the parents F2(i) two pages (stapled) faculty survey responses dated 2009 *(actual survey not included in the folder)* F2(j) results for the school improvement plan survey *(actual survey not included in the folder)*
Folder	Results from the Youth Truth survey	June 2011	F3(a) power point presentation – school leader convening at debrief of survey F3(b) typed notes from school leader exchange F3(c) a report prepared by Youth Truth for the school F4(d) student comments from the Youth Truth survey F5(e) hand-written notes about survey results
Folder	Legislator Contacts	April 2011	F4(a) key messages and talking points for virtual early college high schools F4(b) hand-written notes for name tags for a legislative visit F4(c) talking points, background information, and a power point deck for the legislative visit F4(d) thank you note for the visitors F4 (e) agenda for the legislative visit F4(f) letters to legislators from teachers at the school (two letters) F4(g) letter to parents about upcoming change in schedule (not related to the legislative visit (misfiled by the school))

Folder	Series of reflections by students about their school		F5(a) collection of responses (13) by students to community college campus visit (March 2012) F5(b) copy of pages from year book F5(c) collection of letters (24) to teacher about first college class F5(d) permission slip for visit to a four-year university (March 2011) F5(e) a list of belief statements (no other context given) F5(f) mission statement of school district – adopted 2004 F5(g) agenda for planning committee March, 2010 F5(h) forms from the state education department about how to complete a school data analysis F5(i) list of students expected for college open night (October, 2010) F5(j) collection of blog posts about mentoring younger students F5(k) summary of college road trip, intended for school website F5(l) graded assignments (20) that explain a life-changing experience F5(m) agenda for open house at local regional school F5(n) copies of student speeches (2) for the opening pf the regional school F5(o) notes for the legislative visit (November, 2010)
Folder	Waivers		F6(a) list of waivers approved by the state board of education for cooperative and innovative high schools between 2005 and 2007 F6(b) list of waivers applied for by the study site in their original application to become a virtual early college high school (2007)
Folder	New Schools Success Stories		F7(a) email from NC New Schools Project to the school site requesting success stories about their students, including a list of questions to be answered by the students F7(b) two student responses to the questions above F7(c) explanation of the project undertaken by second year students centered on the local community F7(d) student's written reflection on the project above
Folder	Application	2007	F8(a) original application for the school site to become a virtual early college high school
Folder	Cultural Experiences		F9(a) agenda for eighth grade parent information evening (April, 2011) F9(b) photocopy of newspaper article about parenting

			F9(cd) agenda for tenth grade students and parents evening (October, 2009) F9(d) collection of newspaper articles about the school F9(e) poster advertising student field trip to local county community college theatre F9(f) selection of playbills from student field trips to theatre, as well as permission letters for parents F9(g) flyer for another virtual early college high school F9(h) letter to staff from virtual early college teachers asking for support in referring students who need academic support
Folder	First Year Orientation		F10(a) agenda for freshman student orientation (August 2010) F10(b) the Amazing Race orientation activity handout F10(cd) bulleted list of highlights of the school and what the virtual early college high school offers F10(d) three letters, one each for the 9th, 10th and 11th grade students, about arrangements for the upcoming college classes (all dated August, 2010)
Folder	Super Seniors Night		F11(a) email from principal reminding VECHS staff to call parents about upcoming senior info night F11(b) letter from principal to parents and seniors about options for fifth year F11(c) letter of intent for students to declare their intentions for their 5th year F11(d) notice for change of location for senior meeting F11(e) series of handouts containing course listing for community colleges for 2011-12 F11(f) screenshot of NCCCS virtual learning community home page
Folder	Virtual Learning – NCNSP	June 2009	F12(a) front page of Summer Institute 2009, listing outcomes for the school teams F12(b) the early college promise (document created by NCNSP) F12(c) action planning template for schools to tell their story F12(d) NCNSP design principles F12(e) follow up materials for the design principles

			F12(f) draft of replication model for the virtual early college high school
Folder	BCCC Early College Talks MOU	2012	F13(a) copy of MOU signed and dated June 2012 F13(b) blank MOU F13(cd) MOU with hand-written notes and stickies that highlight requested changes F14(d) email from school change coach to principal with information about how other early college high schools handle the community college Accuplacer test F14(e) series of documents containing community college programs of study F14(f) document showing grading policy for community college grades
Folder(s)	NCNSP Self-Assessment (process by which NCNSP supports the development of the school improvement plan)	Various	F15(a) NCNSP Self-Assessment 2008-2009 F15(b) NCNSP Self-Assessment 2009-2010 F15(c) NCNSP Self-Assessment 2010-2011 F15(d) NCNSP Self-Assessment 2011-2012
Folder(s)	Series of folders, each containing evidences based on the NCNSP Design Principles	Various	F16(a) evidences for each of the Design Principles 2008-2009 (two sets of folders, each containing different evidences) F16(b) evidences for each of the Design Principles 2009-2010 (three sets of folders, each containing different evidences)
Document	Staff development calendar	August 2015	D1 – copy of staff development calendar for the start of the 2015-16 school year (one page)
Document	Music 110 Syllabus	August 2015	D2 – copy of the syllabus given to the students enrolled in the college music class (ten pages)
Document	Early College High School Initiative	Undated	D3 – document created by NCNSP explaining the need for early college high schools, including the Design Principles (twelve pages)
Document	College Liaison Job Description	2011-12	D4 – bulleted list of responsibilities for the college liaison
Document	Examples of rigor	2010	D5 – a comparison of the number of students enrolled in advanced and college courses before and after the inception of the early college high school

Document	Sample agendas	Various	D6 – three examples of the agendas used when the virtual early college high school staff met with the staff of the partnering community college
Document	Parent Survey	2009-2010	D7 – an example of a three question parent survey about their experience with the virtual early college high school. The survey is presented in two languages
Document	Application Packet	Various	D8(a) four-page application to the virtual early college D8 (b) letter of acceptance (03/2013) D8(c) reapplication statement D8(d) senior intent form D8(e) example of letter from student attached to the reapplication form D8(f) exit form
Document	Club meeting dates	2008-09	D9 – a schedule of club meetings for the 2008-09 school year
Document	Parent Information Night		D10 – flyer for 8th grade parent meeting about the virtual early college high school
Document	Memo for students	May 2011	D11 – letter to students reminding them to sign up for an appointment with the college liaison to set their schedule for the following year
Document	School data	Various	D12(a) enrollment and demographic data for the students in the early college high school 2008-09 D12(b) enrollment and demographic data for the students in the early college high school 2015-16 D12(c) enrollment and demographic data for the students in the early college high school 2008-09 and 2009-10 (different format than D12(a))
Document	Letter from community college	April, 2012	D13 – letter from the community college explaining what course options would be available to the VECHS students for the upcoming school year
Document	Memorandum of Understanding	March 2009	D14 – copy of the MOU signed by both the school district and the community college
Document	Curriculum Guide	Spring 2009	D15 – one-page overview of the virtual early college high school's plan for students' college classes, plus six pages of outlined courses of study
Interview	Transcript of interviews	Fall, 2015	I(a1) – principal I(a2) – interim principal
Observations	Notes taken during observations	Fall, 2015	OFN – observation field notes