A POLICY STUDY ABOUT EQUITY AND COLLEGE ACCESS:

THE MISSOURI A+ SCHOOLS PROGRAM

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By
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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation titled

A POLICY STUDY ABOUT EQUITY AND COLLEGE ACCESS:
THE MISSOURI A+ SCHOOLS PROGRAM

Presented by Caron Linelle Daugherty Mitchell

A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

Carolyn Sue Johns Daugherty

January 18, 1948-May 30, 1982

Mom's influence drapes the periphery of my life, and memories of her frame every thought, emotion, and decision. Her example and inspiration influence both my sister, Casey L. Daugherty, and me in our continual pursuit to teach others and encourage them to realize their dreams. Her enduring love still inspires dad, Lionel Daugherty.

I would be remiss if I did not thank family and friends for their support of this journey. To my husband, Kory Mitchell, I owe infinite gratitude and thanks. His unwavering, unending efforts to encourage and support me kept me focused and motivated. His patience and tolerance kept me sane. His care and concern kept me healthy.

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ABSTRACT

The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 transformed Missouri education. With the act containing several measures to improve the delivery of education in the state, a key program embedded in the text of the act is the A+ Schools Program. To many educators, this program has done more for the quality of education than any other reform effort. Seeking not only to improve the schools by enhancing curriculum and increasing technology available to students, this program also provided financial incentives and college access to many first generation college students in Missouri. As a pathways program, the A+ Schools Program allowed many students who would have never considered college the opportunity to complete high school, transition to a community or technical college, complete a program of study in a technical field, and graduate prepared to enter the workforce in a high-skill, high-wage position in business or industry.

In1997, the scenario depicted would have been the norm. However, from 1997 to 2010, several issues surrounding the A+ Schools Program shifted from the original intent. The current constituents and intent seem to have diverged from the original, and not all students in the state have access to the pathways program and the opportunities college provides. The program is transformational—for those fortunate to attend an A+ designated school. For some students in rural and inner city environments, college is not accessible, and for students not served by the program, opportunities related to college access are lost. To a degree, the program promotes status quo and social inequity.

This mixed methods case study, with an emphasis on the qualitative design, investigated the A+ Schools Program from multiple perspectives. Interviews, focus groups, and document analysis comprised the qualitative portion of the study. As a result, the researcher gained exhaustive knowledge of the program through the depth and breadth of data available. What emerged during the study were themes of leadership, program intent, finances, and overall value. These themes were analyzed in light of college access and social equity issues related to students not served by the A+ Schools Program. A quantitative analysis of state-accessible demographics provided statistical data to support district demographics regarding population, enrollment, poverty, and free/reduced lunch percentages. A critical research perspective framed the study. This approach examined how social institutions advance the opportunities for some at the expense of others. Implications include the shift in intent pervading the delivery of the program as well as the implications on non-designated districts. With the economic situation of the state in flux, future research should study the potential changes to the future of the program and its financial implications and incentives.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Missouri Political Climate—the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993

In the early 1990s in Missouri, two key events shaped the direction of secondary and higher education in the state for the next two decades. In 1991, the citizens of Missouri voted against Proposition B, a higher education funding opportunity supported by the presidents of public and independent colleges and universities throughout the state. Had the initiative passed, public funding for higher education in Missouri would have been enhanced. A second key event emerged when a Cole County Circuit Court judge ruled in favor of the Committee for Educational Equality, who challenged Missouri's levels of funding equity in the public school systems. This ruling in January 1993 supported "establishing a minimum and then seemingly discretionary level of spending" (Committee for Educational Equality v. State of Missouri, 2007, p. 6) for school districts around the state. By May 1993, the Missouri legislature passed Senate Bill 380, which included in it the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, the framework legislation for the Missouri A+ Program.

The Missouri A+ Schools Program is a college pathways program intended to provide educational access to eligible high school students throughout the state. Those students who fulfill the secondary-level obligation of the A+ contract are eligible for "a community college, post-secondary career-technical school, or high wage job with work place skill development opportunities" (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p. 5). In addition, those students are eligible "to receive reimbursement for the cost of tuition, general fees, and up to fifty percent (50%) of the book cost, subject to legislative appropriation, to attend any Missouri public community college or career-technical

school" (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p.5). In all of its successes and accomplishments in providing higher education access to those eligible students who attend an A+-designate high school, the program inherently alienates and marginalizes those Missouri students who do not have the socioeconomic fortune to attend an A+-designate high school. This study seeks to investigate the equity of this program in providing higher education access to all high school students in the state of Missouri.

Chapter One presents an introduction to the study and the conceptual underpinnings framing the study. The background of the A+ Schools Program is established, delivering both the intent and rationale for the program. In addition, the secondary school and student requirements are identified, listing the minimum eligibility requirements for both the institutions and the students. The remainder of Chapter One provides the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of the study. These include a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, definition of key terms, significance of the study, limitations associated with the study, and a summary.

Background to Missouri Senate Bill 380–the A+ Program

The proponents of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 (see Appendix A: Senate Bill 380—Outstanding Schools Act) were determined to dramatically improve public education in the state of Missouri. First, the Outstanding Schools Act would increase funding annually by more than $360 million. It established statewide performance standards, including a new curriculum framework, statewide assessment, and school accountability measures. In addition, the state sought to provide educational equity to all students, offering access to technology and school-to-work programs. The

Act legislated educational reforms, which would reduce class size in lower grades, implement community service in the schools, expand vocational training for students, and promote increased advancements in technology (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a). The A+ Schools Program, the specific school improvement plan embedded in the text of the Act, was intended to lower the high school dropout rate, increase grade point averages, and provide career path development into community and technical colleges (Jochems, Hammons, & Stegman, 2006).

1990s Climate for Educational Change

The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 emerged from a contextual environment that included: (a) state concerns for student preparedness for globalization; (b) state awareness of the mediocrity in secondary education; and (c) state value of an educated populace. At this time, educational litigation was pervasive across the nation (Crampton, 2001; Dunn & Derthick, 2007; Lindseth, 2006). Retired Missouri Senator Mr. James (Jim) Mathewson described two forces beyond legislative control to influence the creation of the program: (a) the failure in 1991 of a statewide proposition to increase taxes for higher education and (b) a 1993 judicial decision mandating secondary school district financial equity through an educational funding formula. In addition, he noted the policy actors engaged in determining the framework for the A+ Schools Program linked the community college realm as a natural steward of the tenets of the program (J. Mathewson, personal interview, July 18, 2008).

A+ Schools Program Intent and Rationale

As identified on Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE) documents, three goals for the A+ Schools Program are: (a) all students

graduate from high school; (b) all students complete a selection of high school studies that is challenging and for which there are identified learning expectations; and (c) all students proceed from high school graduation to a college**,** post-secondary career**-**technical school or high-wage job with work place skill development opportunities (MODESE, 2008, p. 1). The A+ Schools Program emerged from the Missouri political and educational environment in 1993 as an incentive program for school improvement. With this program, the state committed to efforts necessary to prepare all Missouri secondary graduates for post-secondary education or employment. Inherent to this program, then, are characteristics promoted by the state of Missouri. The state suggests it not only places value on education, but also the social impact and character development of its students. In addition, efficiency in operations and practices benefit the common good and are additional by-products of the intent and rationale of the A+ Schools Program.

Value of education. Data obtained from the Governor's Primer on the Outstanding Schools Act stated, "Education benefits everyone in the state and it is the very foundation of a successful democracy and a prosperous economy" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993, p. 19). A supervisor with the state department of education, who works with the A+ and charter schools programs, stated, "One of the things we are seeing [is] that because of the tutoring component, a lot of those kids decide that they want to teach…because they worked with these kids…I think that's good news" (Skinner, 2008, p. 5). Mr. Jim Mathewson emphasized the role of education in one's life, asserting, "A lack of education is a barrier to freedom." He continued, stating,

> Of my thirty years down there [Jefferson City], this [the A+ Program] is the gold. This did more to change people's lives than anything, maybe even a combination of everything I ever did, because we are still expanding the secondary schools that are coming into the program. It's been gold. We are literally into the thousands and thousands and thousands of young people…it's just been wonderful. (personal interview, July 18, 2008)

MODESE published the "About A+ Schools Program" document to inform the public of the program. The document identifies A+-student success stories:

> One successful young man used his A+ eligibility to attend St. Louis Community College where he enrolled in the Ford ASSET program. He graduated and is now a Ford Transmission Specialist and Diesel Certified Technician. He used A+ to obtain a degree that led him back home where he is gainfully employed at a local business. Another student used her A+ eligibility to attend Moberly Area Community College and earn an Associate's Degree in Nursing. She then went on to enroll, at her own expense, at the University of Missouri where she graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Nursing in December 2006. She is now a Registered Nurse in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit at the University Hospitals in Columbia. (MODESE, 2009b, p. 1)

Social impact and character development. Dr. Terry Barnes, a retired community college president serving as the Assistant Provost for Community College Partnerships with the University of Missouri, commented, "I think what happened [with the A+ Program] is parents and their sons and daughters became engaged in conversations at the kitchen table probably wouldn't have happened otherwise" (Baker, 2008, p. 5). Dr. Jeff

Jochems, a former A+ coordinator at the community college level serving as a community college administrator, described his desire to promote the social impact of A+. Jochems stated,

> I would have them march these students in front of the legislators and tell their stories about tutoring and having a mentoring relationship through the A+ Program, and what that relationship means to them 10 years later. They may go to college wherever, in whatever field they choose, and it has an impact on who they have become. (White, 2008, p. 12)

The policy formulation stage did not address the benefits of the social impact and character development to result from this program. These anecdotal, insider perspectives from legislators and education administrators associated with the college-level results of the program are evidence of the program's success. This emic or "insider's perspective" reflects the researcher's desire to understand the Act from the participants' perspective (Merriam, 1998).

Efficiency. In addition to the social impact and character development qualities of the A+ Schools Program, the program also supports efficiency within districts by regulating school preparedness/school improvement and accountability. The governor's primer may have stated the argument for greater efficiency in schools the best by indicating:

> the Outstanding Schools Act also encourages – and demands – greater efficiency, more innovation, and closer cooperation among classroom teachers, principals, district superintendents, school board members and state officials… everyone is held accountable for the failure, just as all would benefit from success. (Missouri

Governor's Office, 1993, p. 10)

When identifying the role of efficiency of the A+ Schools Program, most professionals working closely with the program, either with the secondary or post-secondary environment, indicated advancements in school preparedness/school improvements as a direct result of this policy. As Jocelyn Strand indicated about the focus of the A+ Schools Program, "It's really school improvement; that's what we're focused on…it's about high schools improving the content of their curriculum to better prepare students…so we really focus on the high schools and improving the high schools" (Skinner, 2008, p. 1). To do this, the A+ Program requires high school representatives make formal application to improve their curriculum. Strand, a supervisor with the School Improvement Program through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, confirms those high schools "that wish to be designated as such improve the curriculum as a whole, making it challenging, getting rid of the general ed[ucation] classes [like] basic math…which are to be eliminated from their curriculum" (Skinner, 2008, p. 2).

One participant described the efficiency of this program in providing multiple pathways to strengthen workforce development (Myers, 2008). Again, Jochems, a community college administrator suggested, "Initial discussions focused on the idea that we were moving into that age where not all jobs are going to take a college degree, that high school diplomas are necessary and that technological or vocational training was becoming a huge need" (White, 2008, p. 8).

The retired state senator validated this sentiment. During a trip to Asia in the early 1990s, he recognized the role of technology in global competition. He noted,

> We [Missouri] had good transportation systems coming through, we had great railroad transportation, we have a reasonable good highway system. But you know what kept coming back to me…education, education, education. If one of those corporations that we were trying to convince to come to Missouri to build a plant [were] going to invest a billion dollars in a plant to be the highest t technology that you can build, they're not going to build it. We were not into technology to the level other states were. (J. Mathewson, personal interview, July 18, 2008)

With this emphasis on technology and vocational training, the community and technical colleges became integral to the success of the A+ Schools Program. As Strand, the state education department A+/Charter Schools supervisor, stated,

> Community colleges and the tech[nical] schools may have seen some benefit from [the A+ Program] because that's the only place the money can be utilized. Students who may have originally only intended to go to a 4-year [institution] wound up at a 2-year [institution] … and provided benefits to those schools. (Skinner, 2008, p. 2)

Through the efficiency of the community colleges–smaller class sizes, lower tuition rates, and closer geographic accessibility–a mutually beneficial partnership evolved. While community colleges overall may not have been the original intended recipients of funding from the A+ Schools Program, they have been the beneficiaries in terms of additional students, tuition, and recognition of their available programs. These institutions have taken the opportunity to enhance their programs to meet their growing demands.

Common good. With the value of education supported by the state, the social impact and character development qualities, and efficiency of the A+ Schools Program identified, various levels of state bureaucracy reveal elements of the common good inherent to the program. These factors comprise economic and societal concerns, including the reduction of the dropout rate, in the occurrence of crime, and in the dependency on welfare services. By funneling money into the community colleges, more tax dollars stay in Missouri. Increasing employment and academic pathways for all students contributes to equitable opportunities for all. The common good theme plays a vital role of the A+ Schools Program.

Ingrid Caldwell, supervisor of the A+ and charter schools programs through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, suggested the economic common good for the state when discussing a former governor's support for the legislation. She explained, "One of the most important education imperatives facing the state of Missouri is to reach out to youngsters who are not headed to college and keep them from dropping out of high school" (Myers, 2008, p. 1). This implies when students stay in school, the state wins. In fact, the first of three goals behind the A+ Schools Program is "all students proceed from high school graduation to a college or post-secondary vocational or technical school or high-wage job with workplace skill development opportunities" (MODESE, 2009b, p. 1). Strand echoed this sentiment, which validated the intent of the A+ Schools Program. Strand said, "The real intent was to give students an incentive, to improve high schools first, but to give students who might not otherwise have gone on for any post secondary education an incentive to go on" (Skinner, 2008, p. 2).

As a utilitarian philosophy, values-laden policies advance the interests of a group (Fowler, 2008). To educate the public on the benefits of the A+ Schools Program to the state, the governor's office distributed its "Primer to the Outstanding Schools Act." The document promotes the value of an educated working class leading to stronger economic opportunities across the state, thereby contributing to the global economy. The document states, "This legislation will provide hundreds of thousands of young [people] with the education and training to achieve their ambitions. It will give employers a vital, homegrown infusion of sophisticated skills, knowledge, and expertise" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a, p. 4).

To highlight the theme of common good valued by the state, Dr. Terry Barnes, a former community college president, iterated the purpose for the A+ Schools Program: to develop a stronger workforce and provide training for the good of the people. He stated, "What we've come to realize is that in order to become competitive globally and nationally, we have to have a more highly trained workforce" (Baker, 2008, p. 5). As explained by retired Senator Mathewson, the 1990s excursion by the Missouri legislative team supports this common good purpose. Their goal was to increase Missouri's opportunity for global economic ventures, resulting in increased job opportunities and stronger technological innovations for a stronger workforce.

Another common good value promoted by the A+ Schools Program includes the access to higher education provided to qualifying students through the program. Retired Senator Jim Mathewson was responsible for writing the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, and his public service region included a community college district. He noted the 14 community colleges in the state have experienced continual increases in enrollment,

which could be directly attributed to the A+ Schools Program (personal interview, July 18, 2008). To support the senator's position, Caldwell, who assists with the coordination of the A+ Schools Program at the state level, believes the community colleges have had good financial gain because of this program (Myers, 2008). Other key leaders in Missouri education echoed this sentiment about the increase of enrollment at the A+ post-secondary institutions (Baker, 2008; Skinner, 2008; White, 2008).

Secondary Institution Requirements

Representatives from districts seeking designation are required to identify how their district will meet the three goals inherent to the A+ Schools Program. These three goals are: (a) all students graduate from high school; (b) all students complete a selection of high school studies that is challenging and for which there are identified learning expectations; and (c) all students proceed from high school graduation to a college**,** post secondary career**-**technical school or high-wage job with work place skill development opportunities (MODESE, 2008, p. 1). The key language within the goals statements is the word *all*. These goals statements published by the state of Missouri identify *all* students have access to these benefits.

In order to be designated an A+ school, representatives and leaders within a district are required to complete a 10-page document that validates and verifies 11 requirements essential to a district receiving A+ designation (MODESE, 2008). The criteria as noted on the "A+ Schools Designation Checklist" available through MODESE require districts to provide evidence in these 11 areas to be eligible for A+ designation:

1. Measurable district-wide performance standards for the three (3) goals of the program;

2. Measurable learner objectives (competencies) that students must demonstrate in order to successfully complete any individual course offered by the school, and any course of study which qualifies a student for graduation from the school;
3. A career prep system;
4. Rigorous coursework with standards of competency in all academic subjects for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment;
5. A partnership plan developed in cooperation with and with the advice from local business persons, labor leaders, parents, and representatives of college and post-secondary vocational and technical school representatives;
6. Student eligibility system;
7. Historical data for four years prior to application for A+ designation and the years during MODESE review to be identified as an A+-designated school (usually seven years);
8. Local on-going evaluation of the A+ Schools Program;
9. Sustainability of the A+ Schools;
10. Performance standards under the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP);
11. Spin-off activities resulting from the implementation of the A+ Schools Program. (MODESE, 2008, pp. 1-10)

In addition, a district is required to employ at least half time a designated A+ Schools Program coordinator without additional district responsibilities. The coordinator administers the program objectives, and as required by Missouri state regulations, “The designated individual must possess a valid Missouri certificate of license to teach in the secondary grade levels, an administrator certificate of license to teach or a counselor

certificate of license to teach" (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p. 5). As a program supported through state funding, one values and appreciates the intricacy of the process. As is evident, the stringent requirements for a school to receive the A+ Schools Program designation are not easily attained, and those districts to achieve A+ designation status have sincerely earned the certification.

Student Requirements

According to MODESE rules and regulations policy guiding the A+ Schools Program, students in A+-designated schools are eligible for the financial incentives "for a period of four (4) years after high school graduation" (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p. 6). According to Title V of the Missouri Code of State Regulations, those eligible students:

1. Enter into a written agreement with the school prior to high school graduation;
2. Have attended a designated A+ School for three (3) consecutive years prior to high school graduation;
3. Graduate from high school with an overall grade point average of two and five-tenths (2.5) points or higher on a four (4)-point scale, or graduated from a high school with documented mastery of institutionally identified skills that would equate to a two and five-tenths (2.5) grade point average or higher;
4. Have at least a ninety-five percent (95%) attendance record overall for grades nine through twelve (9–12);
5. Perform fifty (50) hours of unpaid tutoring or mentoring; and
6. Maintain a record of good citizenship and avoidance of the unlawful use of drugs and/or alcohol. (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p. 5)

Those students who have the fortune to attend an A+-designated school and who successfully complete these six criteria are given the keys to open the doors of opportunity. Those doors open to a world of educational access, with access to myriad possibilities. Students who are eligible for the A+ Schools Program receive a tangible benefit if they fulfill requirements of the program: the cost of tuition and general fees to a community college or career technical school. According to an A+ Schools Program coordinator at the community college level, A+ Program students are eligible to utilize funding within 48 months after high school graduation, six academic semesters of usage, or until completion of an associate's degree (whichever comes first) (L. Johns, personal correspondence, Nov. 16, 2009). Dr. Terry Barnes, a former community college president, commented, "Sometimes A+ is perceived to be a free ride to community colleges" (Baker, 2008, p. 1) although the criteria requirements are monitored. Dr. Jeff Jochems, a current community college administrator, countered "a part of A+ is attendance, and so you have to be in school to get the funding but also you have to be in school in order to learn and to get the information and to graduate…what a package deal" (White, 2008, p. 3).

Conceptual Underpinnings of the Study

Results from the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, which frames the Missouri A+ Schools Program, suggest the program works–and works well–for those districts that have implemented the criteria to be identified as an A+-designated district. The key indicator, however, is 274 of 514 eligible districts have received A+ designation as of November 2009. The other high schools in the state of Missouri are not designated as A+ Schools, and this could be for a multitude of reasons. Some districts may be in the

designation phase, having committed to the program and in the process of securing designation. Some districts may not have the available funds to allocate at the required minimum a half-time coordinator. This action could force a district with fewer resources to transfer a teacher or administrator from the classroom or administrative duties, requiring the district to identify additional resources to replace the loss. This study intends to identify the reasons non-designated A+ districts in Missouri do not share in the opportunities afforded the districts designated A+ and who benefit from its associated benefits and values.

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical foundations of the study depend on several arenas for the framework of the argument. These include critical reflection and knowledge interest. The epistemology is the general knowledge related to the study. In defining the epistemology, it is key to acknowledge what variables influence the epistemology. Related to a critical reflection of the A+ Schools Program, these variables include general social and democratic values, the demographics of adequacy, and the political culture supporting pathway programs.

Herr and Anderson (2005) identified "knowledge interest," whereas an emancipatory knowledge interest uses a critical reflective approach (p. 28). Inherent to this knowledge interest is critical reflection, where the research aim recognizes how understandings and knowledge "are constrained or distorted by power relations" (p. 28). Coghlan and Brannick (2006) categorized one research approach as critical realism, an approach to follow "a subjectivist epistemology similar to the hermeneutic tradition but an objectivist ontology like the positivists" (p. 6). They continued:

> This approach concentrates on epistemic reflexivity, which looks at exposing interests and enabling emancipation through self-reflexivity. … It concerns a vision of what ought to be, what is right and what is wrong, and arises through the process of conscientiousness-raising and conscientization. (p. 7)

Epistemology

Epistemology studies the way knowledge is learned. This analysis of knowledge considers the means by which a culture understands truth and reality through theoretical, cultural, and political contexts. The researcher acquires knowledge of the subject, analyzing it through various lenses for justification and validity. Coghlan and Brannick (2006) explained researchers' epistemological perspectives "legitimate their own distinctive way of doing research and determine what they consider as a valid, legitimate contribution to knowledge" (p. 5).

The critical researcher reflects on the common good and social justice variables within the study. Sleeter (2001) suggested since "emancipatory research serves as a tool of social liberation, it must assist in clearly identifying what needs to be changed and what processes help or hinder that change" (p. 235). In exploring the value of emancipatory research, Sleeter noted this form of research "offers a way of connecting research with transformation, and it keeps the focus of both research and transformative work on the needs and perspectives of historically marginalized communities" (p. 237). This lens encourages change within a social program.

Brown (2004) noted, "Critical theory is grounded in the day-to-day lives of people, structures, and cultures. It pays attention to the educational ideas, policies, and practices that serve the interests of the dominant class while simultaneously silencing and

dehumanizing `others'" (p. 78). She challenged educational leaders to recognize their "obligations to committed action, [when] the evidence is clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis" (p. 79). She asserted, "When compared to their White middle-class counterparts, students of color and low socioeconomic status (SES) consistently experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources" (p. 79). In this case study, the researcher intends to identify connections between the marginalized community (districts not buying into the A+ Schools Program), the respective community's socioeconomic status, and the community demographics of those students in A+-designated districts.

In addition to the critical underpinnings, the researcher seeks to understand the role of the A+ Schools Program in providing educational access to high school students who achieve the stated A+ requirements to advance to post-secondary education. In part, the aim of this study is to provide greater understanding of the A+ Schools Program in terms of identifying those positive influences as well as negative, supportive as well as prohibitive. With one of the goals to understand this dichotomy inherent to the program, that of serving some students while not offering access and equity to other students, the researcher also uses a constructivist paradigm with a valued aim toward understanding. Herr and Anderson (2006) categorized this as a "practical/communicative" knowledge interest, with the valued end to understand.

Interrogating assumptions, in this case by critically probing the tenets of the A+ Schools Program and its benefits, challenges what knowledge interests we bring to the generation of knowledge and is integral to the practice of critical reflexivity. Critical

reflexivity encourages the researcher to examine assumptions and knowledge interests. This examination helps the researcher to seek what is just. That being said, a critical research lens shapes the conceptual underpinnings of the research, whereby the researcher questioned the goals of the A+ Schools Program in providing equity and access to higher education for all students in the state of Missouri. In questioning these goals, the researcher intended to seek greater knowledge to learn and understand the reasons why 100% of the secondary districts in the state have not successfully attained or are seeking A+ designation status by the program's sixteenth year of legislation and thirteenth year of implementation.

General social and democratic values. Within this critical research lens, the researcher pursued the policy environment of values as defined by Fowler (2008), where "equality – sometimes called equity or social justice – has several meanings" (p. 111). Fowler (2008) identified the need for order and the value of individualism in the public education environment as general social values, and she grouped liberty, equality, and fraternity as democratic values. She analyzed a variety of applications of equality through democratic values, asserting, "Equal opportunity exists when everyone has a similar chance to get a good education" (p. 111). In the public arena of American education policy, equal opportunity is highly valued. American children have equal access to elementary, secondary, and even through PK-20 pathway programs, post-secondary education. These opportunities are not limited to the affluent or legacy holders to education; these opportunities extend to all children through the value the culture places on public education.

Fowler (2008) suggested questions to ask when evaluating equity issues raised by

a policy. Notable ones relevant to this case study included (a) how will this policy affect families with low incomes?; (b) does the rhetoric surrounding the policy include words such as fair, just, justice, equal, equality, or level playing field?; and (c) will this policy advance economic equality by preparing a broader range of young people to participate effectively in the workplace? By investigating these questions and identifying their results, a researcher evaluates the equity of the policy and the policy's influence on its intended recipients.

Demographics of adequacy. A third issue underpinning this case study is the demographic issue of funding equity and adequacy through the state. Fowler (2008) contended, "Those who wish to understand education policy must pay as much attention to demographics as they pay to the economy" (p. 63). She suggested a long-term demographic trend to watch is the "suburbanization" (p. 65) phenomenon, where both the rural and urban populations are dwindling. Not unique in this area, Missouri experiences these trends and demographic shifts, as rings of suburbs surround its major cities.

The Missouri A+ Schools Program, well established and productive, does not alleviate the issues surrounding equity and adequacy, as litigation filters through the Missouri court systems. Five schools in the Kansas City Schools system made headlines when they were identified by Missouri education officials "as the first in the state to be labeled `academically deficient' because of poor student achievement on state tests" (Sack & Reid, 2001, p. 20). In the case of *Missouri v. Jenkins 2003*, a district judge ruled state expenditures be provided to improve the Kansas City School system and "offer a better education to the majority black population … A central focus of the remedial plan was the implementation of an `effective schools' program" (Dunn & Derthick, 2006, p.

335). Although the A+ Schools Program began its first year of operation in 1997, four years after its implementation, these examples from 2001 and 2003 from the Kansas City Schools district provides evidence the program is not accessible to all students. As an educational policy, the A+ Schools Program marginalizes some districts and its students.

Hull (2004) explored the role of a grassroots movement "that was forming to at least examine, if not challenge, Missouri's current method for distributing public school funding, which was established by the Missouri Legislature in 1993 after a court ruling found the previous system inequitable and inadequate" (p. 2). In 2003, "the Committee for Educational Equality (CEE) filed a lawsuit regarding equity and adequacy" (p. 2). Hull noted about 250 of Missouri's then-524 districts participated, with many representing rural districts.

On Sept. 1, 2009, the National Access Network, a project based out of Columbia University's Teachers' College, posted the Missouri Supreme Court ruling regarding the CEE adequacy lawsuit on its web site. A message on the site states, "The Missouri Supreme Court denied the plaintiffs' claim that the state's school funding formula is unconstitutionally disparate and inadequate. The plaintiffs in *Committee for Educational Equality v. State of Missouri* included more than half of the school districts in the state" (National Access Network, 2009, "Legislation" section, para. 1). As published on its "About Us" page,

> The mission of the National Access Network is to promote meaningful educational opportunities for all children, especially those low-income and minority children currently being denied this opportunity. Access seeks to bring about this change by forming a national network of education litigators, policy-

> makers, and advocates, in order to strengthen the links between school finance litigation, public engagement, and education policy. (National Access Network, 2009, “About Us” section, para. 1)

The National Access Network site identifies a monumental link between the Missouri A+ Schools Program and the CEE extending to 1993. Under its “State by State” section for Missouri, one section includes history and litigation issues for states. In the Network’s notes under “Litigation,” the Circuit Court of Cole County in January 1993 ruled in favor of the *Committee for Educational Equality v. State of Missouri*, and

> declared the funding system unconstitutional and held the state must provide the same educational opportunity to children living in rich and poor districts. In response to the circuit court decision, the General Assembly passed and the Governor signed the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, which increased school funding by raising taxes, improved funding equity, and instituted education reforms such as standards and assessments. (National Access Network, 2009, “State by State” section, para. 2)

In 1993, the Circuit Court of Cole County ruled, "The existing school finance system does not provide an 'equal ... opportunity' for all school age children as is required by ... the Missouri Constitution" (qtd. in Ko, 2006, p. 559). As described in the decision, "various statistical measures confirm the degree and extent of these wide inequalities" (p. 559) and "all relevant standard measures of equity ... clearly and consistently indicate that Missouri funding for its public schools is highly disequalized and is getting worse" (p. 559).

This litigation lawsuit was in and out of the Missouri court system on appeal through 2009. Missouri Senate notes from May 2009 and the Missouri Supreme Court database identify additional appeals regarding the equity of Missouri's education financing. As with previous litigation, many of the districts included in these appeals represent hundreds of Missouri districts, many of them rural districts. The common complaint within the litigation is Missouri fails to provide enough money to schools and distributes the money unfairly.

The implementation of the Missouri A+ Schools Program was in response to a court-mandated equity and adequacy lawsuit that reflected demographic economic prejudices. The funding formula in place prior to 1993 allowed some districts access to more funding opportunities for its students. As evidenced with the continued litigation, implementation of the program has accomplished little in squelching school adequacy litigation from the rural and impoverished districts around the state (Kirk, 1996; Ko, 2006).

Additional demographic consequences reflect the economics of educational choice. In personal correspondence with an English teacher in a public secondary school, she articulated her frustration with the choices some high achieving students make in relation to their academic careers. Students have access to the A+ funding, encouraging them to remain in their community college districts. The teacher, whose students are primarily seniors, shared a situation of a student choosing to remain local and attend her community college rather than accept a full scholarship to a private research institution in a major urban area in the Midwest. The teacher affirmed the value of the A+ Schools Program for some students, yet she noted, "The program encourages some high-

achieving students, who will attend college, to accept the status quo rather than venture into more challenging academic environments" (C. Stephens, personal correspondence, July 17, 2009). As Fowler (2008) asserted, "most economic decisions have political implications, which is why economics cannot be ignored in the study of any area of public policy, including education policy" (p. 58).

Political culture of pathway programs. Studying national PK12-college pathway programs is a final variable of consideration underpinning this case study. Pathway programs provide for secondary students seamless transitions to a post-secondary environment. Networking and coalition-building lend to the creation of these pathways. This includes building relationships with the representatives from secondary, community college, and baccalaureate institutions to provide win-win situations for all involved. Fowler (2008) stated, "Education leaders must deliberately develop ways to establish and maintain relationships with other professionals in their field" (p. 91). Creating these academic pathways is one example of the networking and coalition-building bridging secondary and higher education.

In the general sense of the term, the A+ Schools Program is a pathway program to provide students a seamless path to the post-secondary environment. Those students who attend an A+ designate school and who have successfully completed the state mandates associated with the A+ Schools Program at the secondary level are eligible to receive financial assistance at an approved community college or post-secondary technical school. The political networking is evident. One community college A+ coordinator hosts a luncheon at her institution for the secondary A+ coordinators in her region (L. Johns, personal communication, Nov. 16, 2009).

Many pathway programs, however, align along career initiatives and are collaborative agreements with city and county institutions. Bragg (2007) researched pathway programs available through the Maricopa Community College district in Arizona, the Anne Arundel Community College district in Maryland, and the Lorain County Community College district in Ohio. In these community college districts, the participating students chose program pathways based on career interests, and in these case studies, the interest was teacher education. The community college served as the pathway between the secondary and baccalaureate institutions for those specific fields of interest. In addition, Bragg noted students who successfully participated in the pathways programs qualified for reduced tuition rates at community colleges.

Waters (2008) identified an information technology pathway from a high school through a baccalaureate institution in the San Francisco Bay region of California, with the community college serving as the conduit. He described the program as an "innovative IT skills program … between high school, higher education, and ultimately, the job market" (p. 32). The public school, community college, and baccalaureate systems worked in collective efforts to provide seamless transition opportunities for the students.

Missouri leads the way in having implemented a unique pathways program. It provides all eligible students who attend an A+-designated high school with tuition assistance to post-secondary education–regardless of career intent. Inherent to A+ designation is evidence a district has collaborated with business, labor, industry, and other community leaders in improving the educational experience for the students (MODESE, 2008). This notion validates Fowler's (2008) premise that "education leaders communicate with people from other public agencies" (p. 92). These efforts lead to

eventual coalitions and networking valuable to the public school district. These networks and coalitions, however, are not available in providing academic pathways of success for those students who are not attending an A+ designated school in Missouri. Not all Missouri high school students have access to this pathway of access and opportunity for higher education and all it carries with it.

Summary

The Missouri A+ Schools Program, implicit to the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, is a program intended to counter the high school dropout rate while preparing eligible students for a challenging academic environment and post-secondary academic experience. The program, while beneficial to many students in the state, inherently alienates and marginalizes as many if not more than it serves. The focus of this study is to investigate this flaw inherent to the policy. Students in rural and urban educational environments, affected by low socioeconomic status, may be denied access and the opportunity for equitable education as compared to their counterparts of higher socioeconomic status. Does this program tend to support those students who are college-bound and marginalize those students who are not?

Statement of the Problem

The A+ Schools Program serves the state in myriad ways, from having a social impact and influencing character development, to providing efficiency in the accountability of the school districts, to promoting a common good to the state. Previous research regarding issues related to the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 (Crampton, 2001; Jochems et al., 2006; Ko, 2006; Lee, 2003; Martin & Neal, 1999; Ogle, 2007; Pace, 2002; Stradler & Johnson, 1999) focus on a common financial equity theme. Additional

research references judicial influence to educational funding policies (Dunn & Derthick, 2007; Fowler, 2008; Lindseth, 2006; Ogle, 2007). The intent of this policy study, however, is to reflect on the role of access and equity in education to those students who do and do not attend an A+ designated school in the state of Missouri. MODESE records indicate 556 school districts in the state of Missouri as of July 1, 2008. Of that number, fall enrollment in the secondary schools (grades 9-12) numbered 282,660 students (MODESE, 2009e). The "About A+ Schools Program" document available through the MODESE web site states,

> The A+ Schools Program was created in 1993 by state law as an incentive for improving Missouri's high schools. *The primary goal of the A+ Schools Program is to ensure that all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and/or employment* [italics mine]. The A+ Schools Program is designed to accomplish the imperative. It mobilizes an intensive partnership among high schools, community colleges, students, teachers, parents, labor, businesses, and communities to give these students the motivation, skills, and knowledge to graduate from high school. It will create an innovative and well-designed path from high school to high skill, high wage jobs. (MODESE, 2009b, para. 2-3)

The document, however, then identifies what has come to be the crux of this study: "274 designated A+ schools across the state have graduated over 106,500 A+ eligible students since the program began in 1997. At least one semester of the A+ Schools Program financial incentive has been utilized by over 44,100 eligible students" (MODESE, 2009b, para. 3). As Ogle (2007) stated, "America is historically considered

the ‘land of opportunity,’ with public education a key factor for providing that opportunity” (p. 3).

The Missouri A+ Program recognizes a social impact inherent to the program, provides opportunities for character development, encourages efficiency in the delivery of education, and supports the common good for the betterment of the state. Willis (2003) noted, “The A+ Schools Program was implemented in Missouri in response to the need to improve public schools for all students. The design and implementation of the A+ Schools Program occurred with all students in mind” (p. 114). One thing this program fails to recognize, however, is it does not provide access and equity of opportunity to all students in the state of Missouri. It inherently marginalizes students in the state of Missouri by not providing all students who graduate from Missouri high schools the opportunity to gain access to competitive skills to pursue advanced education and employment.

The original A+ Schools Program legislation highlighted the social value of equity/equality by promoting the attainment of post-secondary training. One of the commitments as identified in the state statute claims, “All students proceed from high school graduation to a college or post-secondary vocational or technical school or high-wage job with workplace skill development opportunities” (Missouri S. 380, 1993, Section 160.545.1(3)). Ingrid Caldwell, supervisor of the A+ Schools Program at the state level, stated, “I think the very fact the drop-out rate was rising, they [legislators] wanted to do something to put a halt to that or at least slow it down and to give the kids at least an opportunity to have a future” (Myers, 2008, p. 1).

In addition, the governor’s primer document states, “The act [A+] increases

equity in our educational system" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a, p. 3). Fowler (2008) asserted, "Equality of educational opportunity has appeared as a normative goal of education policy in the United States since the beginning of the republic" (p. 112). A publication of the state education department bears this heading: "Everyone benefits." The language on the document promotes the goal of the program: "The primary goal of the A+ Schools Program is to ensure all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment" (MODESE, 2009c, p. 1). As evidenced, this theme of equity was integral to the policy formation stage. During policy implementation, however, divergence emerged.

The fact that half of the state's high schools participate in the program reveals divergence of the democratic value of equity/equality. In addition, those students who utilize the A+ Schools Program 15 years after its adoption may or may not represent the intended recipient of this policy. Several equity issues emerge when one considers students who are marginalized because they are privately-schooled, home-schooled, or in districts that do not fulfill A+ eligibility requirements.

When discussing the equity in statewide funding for A+ school designation, Terry Barnes, a former community college president, asserted, "What we have today with the A+ Program is really extreme social injustice. The state of Missouri failed in not making this a level playing field, or not funding it to the extent, or truly making it a true public school improvement plan" (Baker, 2008, p. 4). Barnes explained,

> We've discriminated those school districts that can't afford to or do not [have] leadership available to pursue it. There was a window of opportunity when you could get in as a high school. If you didn't get in, basically, you were out. (p. 1)

As stated in the statute, “no school … shall receive a grant … unless the district designates a salaried employee to serve as the coordinator, with the district assuming a minimum of one-half the cost of the salary and other benefits provided to the coordinator” (Missouri S. 380, 1993, Section 160.545(4)). Not all districts have the budget resources to support this mandate. Consequently, low-income districts are marginalized. In 2009, Missouri high school students attend 214 of the districts not serviced by the A+ Schools Program. The benefits of the program for A+ districts are well documented and publicized. What of the students who do not have access and equity, who do not receive the benefits of the primary goal of the A+ Schools Program as articulated by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education—all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and/or employment?

Purpose of the Study

This policy case study intends to identify the original legislative intent of the Outstanding Schools Act, with focus on the A+ Schools Program, and evaluate the program’s success in providing educational equity and access to all students as published by program materials and determined by program planners. To better understand the parameters of the study, a background of the state’s political and educational barometers establish a backdrop for the A+ Schools Program. The purpose of this study, then, is to clarify the demographics of those students and communities served by A+ and its opportunities in contrast with the demographics of those students and communities not served by A+ and its opportunities–including access and equity in education.

Research Questions

The context of this policy case study presents and responds to these research questions:

1. What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
2. How does the A+ Schools Program as delivered in 2009-2010 align with its original intent in 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
3. According to the most recent and updated data, what constituents does the A+ Schools Program serve? What are the demographics of schools served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:
    a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,
    b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and
    c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.
4. According to the most recent and updated data, what Missouri students are not being served by the A+ Schools Program as it has grown and developed since 1993? What are the demographics of schools not served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:
    a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,

b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and

c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

Definition of Key Terms

To better understand the language of the study with respect to the A+ Schools Program and the research, the following definitions were established.

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE). MODESE is the state education agency to govern and provide policy and procedure oversight to the state's PK-12 public education system. MODESE governs the A+ Schools Program.

Senate Bill 380 (SB380). SB380 is the legislative bill passed in 1993 to establish the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993.

Outstanding Schools Acts of 1993 (OSA). The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 is the Act to establish new programs, school improvement plans, and curriculum initiatives to improve Missouri's PK-12 public education. This Act houses the A+ Schools Program.

A+ Schools Program. The A+ Schools Program is a grant program supported by MODESE to provide the public high schools an opportunity to strengthen curriculum. As stated by the Code of State Regulations, the intent of the A+ Schools Program is to ensure all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment. The three primary goals are to ensure all students:

> (a) graduate from high school; (b) complete a selection of high school studies that is challenging and has identified learning expectations; and (c) proceed from high school graduation to a community college, post-secondary career-technical

school, or high wage job with work place skill development opportunities. (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p. 4)

In addition, participating high schools are required to: (a) reduce the dropout rate; (b) raise academic expectations by eliminating general-track courses; (c) provide career pathways for all students; and (d) work closely with business and higher-education leaders to better prepare students for their lives after graduation (MODESE, 2008).

A+-designated (or "designated"). A+-designated is the term used to refer to schools who have completed the commitment phase of the application process and are recognized by MODESE as a district offering its students the A+ Schools Program.

Access. Access refers to the availability of opportunities for any Missouri secondary student to attain post-secondary education.

Equity. Equity pertains to the equal opportunity for Missouri public secondary student to have access to state-supported post-secondary education.

Pathways programs. Pathways programs are education and community collaborative initiatives designed to ease the transition from high school and provide students skills and support in leaving a secondary environment to entering a post-secondary or workforce environment. They may or may not include financial assistance.

Post-secondary (or "higher education"). Post-secondary or higher education refers to accredited public and private community or technical colleges and universities, and to accredited area vocational-technical schools offering certification programs.

Policy actors (and "primary stakeholders"). The policy actors and primary stakeholders are those participants on the legislative or state department levels who played major roles in the formulation and implementation of the A+ Schools Program.

Significance of the Study

The Missouri A+ Schools Program is a pathways program to provide financial assistance and encourage eligible secondary students to advance to a post-secondary institution after high school. As Gale and Densmore (2003) explained, "Education leaders face conflicting pressures, at one level, to privilege some groups over others and, on another, to ensure that disadvantaged groups have a voice in educational decision-making" (p. 120). With that consideration, the significance of this study is the A+ Schools Program, albeit a progressive and successful program, inherently marginalizes those students who do not attend an A+-designated high school.

Whereas education seeks to open equitable opportunities for students, Missouri provides this access to some students, not all. Elder (2007) suggested, "when students … have some form of constitutional right to education and the formula for educating all students is known, the achievement gap can only be attributed to a failure of will among those who control the resources" (p. 787). The A+ Schools Program, financed and supported by MODESE, marginalizes students by limiting opportunities for families not living in A+-designated districts. The A+ Schools Program potentially alienates first generation, socioeconomic disadvantaged students limited in opportunities because of a lack of access to higher education. However, as they should, students who might normally attend college from affluent, educated family backgrounds utilize A+ Schools Program benefits. The program's mere implementation indicates the state values college access, but the availability of the program suggests equity is not valued as highly as college access. Gale and Densmore (2006) researched educational policy and the influence of the policy makers on the outcomes of the policy. As they acknowledged,

"The challenge is to create conditions and processes within schools, and among all those interested in education, that promote the ability to regard the interests of others as, in some very important ways, our own" (p. 121).

Limitations and Assumptions

Limitations to the study include the death of a key policy actor, the governor of the state of Missouri, which prohibited the full contextual understanding of the policy formulation. The governor's positions and views on the A+ legislation were identified through published documents and interviews. These resources, however, limited the researcher's knowledge on the history of the program from the key policy actor's perspective.

Since the A+ Schools Program supports public high schools, this study investigated only Missouri public high schools, eliminating from the MODESE data collection elementary, middle school, and K-8 districts. Charter schools have also been eliminated from inclusion of the data. When considering the implications of the A+ Schools Program, the researcher's focus narrows to those public high schools not designated A+, establishing an additional limitation to the study. Students who are home-schooled or enrolled in private secondary institutions, such as parochial schools, are not considered within the framework and context of this study.

An additional limitation is much of the data for this study has been retrieved from MODESE from data submitted by individual school districts. The accuracy of the data has not been confirmed by an outside auditing agency. The use of administrative data provided by the Missouri state government assures greater reliability of the measures of program participation and the lack thereof. The MODESE administrative data made

public and retrieved through the portals of their website, such as performance data, census, demographics, and budgets, are assumed to be accurate and current. This is an assumption the researcher made while conducting the study.

Chapter Summary

This study of the Missouri A+ Schools Program begins by presenting a climate that establishes a political framework for the history of the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993. This knowledge transitions the reader to understanding the environment out of which Missouri Senate Bill 380—the A+ Schools Program—emerged. The intent and rationale of the program is established, as the state supports and values education. In addition, the mentoring requirement of the program provides a social impact and develops character for those students invested in its benefits. The benefits for the state and public districts continue with the efficiency of the program in enhancing and improving a district's curriculum and student outcomes. Finally, the goal of the A+ Schools Program provides a common good to the state in offering access to post-secondary education and qualities associated with post-secondary and higher education opportunities: a stronger work force, an educated public, and economic stability. This study also provides the basic student and secondary requirements of the A+ Schools Program.

The conceptual underpinnings of the study include philosophical foundations that review the epistemology of the research. Included in this knowledge are the notions of the values associated with public policies, such as social and democratic values. In addition, the influence of the demographics of adequacy reflect another element of policy

assessment, and finally, the philosophical foundations section closes with providing an understanding of political cultures surrounding pathway programs.

The chapter states the problems associated with the A+ Schools Program and identifying the purpose of the study, which is to review the access and equity of the program to those districts not designated as A+. The research questions reflect this, emphasizing the value of acquiring the demographic data of the districts in addition to the data and rationale from representative of non-designated districts. Chapter One closes by defining key terms, by identifying the significance of the study, and by noting the limitations and implications of this study.

Chapter Two reviews the literature relevant to this study, identifying current research on the Missouri A+ Schools Program. This section also reviews literature of social justice and equity in education, adequacy in education, and literature of other programs of a similar nature, especially those connected to the secondary/post-secondary pathways. As this study is a policy study of a program within a state education department, the literature review includes sections dedicated to policy analysis, program evaluation, and organizational leadership.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and provides rationale for the methodology, which includes a qualitative design to review documents, available resources, interview opportunities, and a survey of practitioners. Chapter Four reports the findings of the study and presents the data. Chapter Five closes the study by providing a summary for the overall study. It suggests ideas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Missouri's A+ Schools Program is an educational access program supported by the state education department and made available to eligible students who attend an A+-designated high school. These students have access to two years of post-secondary education at state-supported community or technical colleges. As long as they maintain minimum college GPA (2.5) and credit-hour requirements (12) per semester, the students continue to receive tuition payments through the completion of their particular technical, allied health, or transfer degree program at a Missouri community or technical college. This opportunity is available to eligible high school graduates for four years after high school, and upon starting the program, available for three years.

To understand the implications of the A+ Schools Program and its benefits and challenges, a review of the literature is essential. This investigation of the literature identifies several components related to the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993. Current Research of Missouri's A+ Schools Program includes examples of those articles or other research documents, such as published or unpublished dissertations or conference papers, which directly address the A+ Schools Program.

The second section, Issues Related to the A+ Schools Program, identifies those articles related to the program on a tangential basis. This review of the literature includes court-motivated and legislated fiscal equity as well as community response to Missouri Senate Bill 380 (SB380), which houses the A+ Schools Program. In addition, the researcher reviews the issues relevant to this study and related in some way to the Outstanding Schools Act, such as those issues of social justice, those involving the

demographics of adequacy, issues related to the politics of pathway programs, those issues related to policy implementation and program evaluation, and, finally, issues related to organizational leadership. These areas comprise a holistic and comprehensive approach to richer a fuller understanding of this program. Contextually, one also realizes the emerging influence of power and politics in the shaping of the A+ Schools Program.

Current Research of Missouri's A+ Schools Program

Implemented in 1993 through Missouri Senate Bill 380, the Outstanding Schools Act is unique to the state of Missouri. While it is common for secondary districts to provide financial assistance to students attending their respective regional or district-affiliated community colleges, uncommon is a state legislating it will provide post-secondary financial assistance to its eligible secondary students. Although this form of access to higher education is a unique opportunity to eligible Missouri students, much of the research responds to the economic or fiscal impact of the program as opposed to the issues related to the social equity of this program, providing some Missouri students with access to post-secondary education.

Financial Support for Eligible Students

As a MODESE-supported program offering financial assistance to eligible students, much of the research highlighting the Missouri A+ Schools Program reflects this financial variable. Ko (2006) suggested the rationale of the A+ Schools Program was "to ensure greater finance equity in the allocation of basic state aid to school districts" (p. 560). Ko contended, however, "A+ grant … monies may be distributed without the intention of equalization" (p. 566). As suggested, the funding for A+ derives from budget allocations separate from the basic state aid to school districts. This allows for funding to

be granted only to A+-designated districts, which translates to those districts having the resources to comply with the program's requirements.

In addition, Lee (2003) researched the financial implications of the legislated A+ Schools Program. Her analysis "examines the extent to which the financial incentives of Missouri's A+ Program affect the demand for Missouri's higher education in general" (p. 3). Ogle (2007) confirmed the rationale for her study of the Outstanding Schools Act, which was "to assess the impact of the 1993 Missouri Outstanding Schools Act (OSA) Foundation Funding Formula and subsequent revisions on the equity of statewide educational funding" (p. 53). Strader and Johnson (1999) as well supported the existence of the A+ Schools Program resulting from legislated funding equity. Kirk (1996) researched the Outstanding Schools Act as it related to fiscal equity and adequacy, with goals to evaluate the new funding formula inherent to the Act.

Performance Issues

Other researchers evaluated and assessed the impact of the A+ Schools Program on the participating high schools and community or technical colleges. Lawler (2005) examined and compared the performance levels of A+ students to non-A+ students at Ozarks Technical Community College. Her findings concluded there were no significant differences between degree completion rates for A+ and non-A+ students. She also concluded A+ students did not receive higher employment wage earnings than non-A+ students. Jochems et al. (2006) compared the academic performance of A+ students with two similar groups of students at a community college in southwest Missouri. Their findings suggested significant differences were found between the three groups regarding cumulative GPA and number of developmental courses taken.

Barbis (2003) supported this line of research, researching the success of A+-designated schools compared to non-A+ schools. Overall, his findings concluded the presence of the A+ Schools Program did not significantly change graduation rates for secondary institutions. Although his research supported the premise graduates from A+-designated schools were better prepared for post-secondary education, it also concluded, "A+ status does not impact graduation or post-secondary enrollment rates" (p. 67) when compared to non-A+-designated schools.

In her introduction, Galbreath (2007) explained the rationale for her study. She explained its intent was to track "statewide public post-secondary enrollment patterns of the 2002 Missouri A+ Schools Program cohort graduates for three years beyond their high school graduation in order to understand the longitudinal effects of the A+ Schools Program on post-secondary enrollment patterns" (p. 1). Her findings also suggested "statewide merit aid programs act largely as a tuition subsidy for students who would have attended college anyway rather than as incentives to encourage students to attend college" (p. 242). As such, the award does not appear to be enhancing the college going-rate of Missouri high school students but rather shifting enrollment patterns at both two-year and four-year institutions.

Approaching the A+ Schools Program from a different perspective, Willis (2003) engaged a panel of professionals affiliated with the A+ Schools Program. The internal constituents represented MODESE administrators while the external constituency was comprised of A+ coordinators at the secondary and collegiate levels. Based on the participant feedback in response to prompts and surveys, three key areas were identified as "high consensus" (p. 123) from both constituent groups. These three areas related to

continued funding for the program, increased communication lines for all involved with the program, and continued desirable direction of the program.

Worts (1999) identified the primary purpose of her study as a focus on student perceptions. She sought to learn if students perceived the educational programs at their school changed as a result of the school being designated an A+ school. Her study concluded students, in fact, did perceive the educational programs were strengthened as a result of being an A+-designated school.

Barger (1999) analyzed the affect of the A+ Schools Program on teacher learning and training. He concluded:

> the staff development component could be an invaluable addition to the criteria a school must meet in order to be designated an A+ School. In addition, schools rethink the allocation of time and money in the current system and develop ways to redirect those resources to better support teacher learning and training. (p. 112)

Political Policy Perspectives

With the A+ Schools Program legislated in 1993, formally implemented in districts in 1997, and graduating successful A+ students bound for college into 2010, those in positions of power with the ability to change the delivery of the program may be in office. The state elected a new governor in November 2008, whose education platform included expanding the A+ Schools Program to public baccalaureate institutions. Eligible secondary students were to complete their requirements at the community or technical college. Upon completion of those requirements, they would have been eligible to continue A+ funding at a public baccalaureate institution.

This proposal, titled the *Missouri Promise*, identified the scope of the plan:

"making college education a reality for middle-class Missouri families" (Jay Nixon for Missouri, 2008, para. 1). Statements in campaign literature claimed the Missouri Promise "provides middle-class Missourians struggling to afford a college education with a pathway to earn a four-year degree from a state college or university–tuition free" (Jay Nixon for Missouri, 2008, para. 3).

Unfortunately, the intent of the proposed changes would support what the current program accomplishes: the marginalization of those students in socioeconomic classes whose chances of attending post-secondary education are lower than their peers. This validates research supporting A+ benefits were primarily extended to those who were not low-income or minority, but also not particularly academically high-achieving (Galbreath, 2007; Lee, 2003). Galbreath (2007) concluded, "Missouri's A+ Schools Program's post-secondary incentive has the unintended effect of primarily subsidizing the post-secondary education of students who may already have had the financial means to enroll and persist in college" (p. 239). With this having been noted, Missouri, through the context of the A+ Schools Program, appears to financially support and academically encourage those who *have* and culturally alienate and educationally marginalize those who *have not*.

As the Missouri governor elected in 2008, Mr. Nixon filed Executive Order 10-16 in January 2010, a Reorganization Plan for the A+ Schools Program. Executive Order 10-16 transfers the scholarship portion of the A+ Schools Program from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and assigns it, and all of its responsibilities and functions, to the Department of Higher Education (Missouri Secretary of State, 2010). In 2010, the A+ Schools Program remains an agenda item for the Missouri governor.

Issues of social justice and equity frame a memo written from an enrollment management professional at a Missouri baccalaureate institution. In the memo, written to the assistant commissioner of education in Missouri from Matt Melvin, the Assistant Provost for Enrollment Management with the University of Central Missouri, Melvin responded to public policy issues on state financial aid programs, one of which is the A+ Schools Program. Melvin reminded the assistant commissioner

> the development of a financial profile of students and families benefitting from state aid programs is warranted to determine if state aid dollars are being distributed to those with the highest level of need or if they are being distributed to students and families with medium to low level of need that are fortunate to live in areas where they can benefit from attendance at an A+ designated high school or have family, social, education and economic support systems. (Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2009, p. 1)

This suggests the A+ Schools Program is not providing access to students who would not attend college without the award; rather, the program tends to support those who are electing to enter higher education via the community college sector for financial reasons.

A substantial library of research supported the financial and academic variables associated with the A+ Schools Program. Nonetheless, within the research conducted to date, the innate challenge is to identify research outside of an academic, economic, or fiscal perspective to explore an essential phrase inherent to the program and its mission: *educational equity for all students who graduate from Missouri high schools*. The literature to investigate and challenge this phrasing of the program's mission is unavailable.

Issues Related to the A+ Schools Program

By reviewing the components feeding into the A+ Schools Program, the goal is to explicate the program in a way to allow for clarity of and increased knowledge for the program. The literature reviewed for this section of the policy study encompassed court-mandated and legislated equity as well as social justice issues in secondary education. In addition, a review of issues related to demographics and adequacy in education are provided. A small section analyzes the literature of pathway programs to provide depth of knowledge about this issue, as several pathway programs exist around the nation. The A+ Schools Program is a classic example of this type of bridging program to connect K-12 with a seamless transition to higher education.

With this research analyzing the tenets of a state education policy, this review highlights literature of policy implementation and its relevance to the A+ Schools Program within the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993. The researcher intends to establish knowledge and working awareness of the literature surrounding the equity and access issues for this policy affecting both secondary and post-secondary education. Finally, literature of organizational leadership identifies the value of leadership choice and its political implications for education and local communities. Those leaders at the planning table in positions of power have the capability to shape the policy and provide true educational equity and access for all Missouri secondary students. At that point, the economic dividend returned to the state will be invaluable.

Court-mandated and Legislated Equity

Public school equity and funding issues pervade the court systems (Beasley, 1993; Elder, 2007; Kirk, 1996; Ko, 2006; Lee, 2003; Podgursky, 2008; Podgursky, Smith, &

Springer, 2008). Dunn and Derthick (2007) reviewed the role of litigation in forcing educational equity. The authors contended the courts are legislating adequate education for students to be able to function in a global economy, not legislating equitable education.

For the state of Missouri, the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 is a direct result of a Circuit Court of Cole County decision by Judge Byron Kinder recommending the state should respond to inequitable funding processes or face legal mandates. Lindseth (2006) identified the role of federal and state courts in establishing educational policy through judicial means rather than legislative ones. In addition, Crampton (2001) explored the issue of economics and educational finance, noting 563 acts of legislation in all 50 states mandate funding policy for secondary education. Podgursky (2008) confirmed "125 school cases challenging the constitutionality of state school finance systems, and 23 states have had their state funding systems ruled unconstitutional on adequacy grounds" (p. 171).

Beasley (1993) researched funding formulas in Missouri up to the 1992 legislative session. His study provided an overview of the economic state of the state prior to the implementation of the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993. According to Beasley's research, Missouri's funding formula had not changed since 1977, and the primary issue of concern was its inherent financial inequities. Beasley noted, "To ensure equal education opportunity for all children, the concepts of adequacy, efficiency, and equity are frequently addressed as standards against which an educational finance plan ought to be measured" (p. 3). He confirmed the purpose of his 1993 study: "This study uses

horizontal equity and equal opportunity as the criteria to measure the equality of educational funding across Missouri school districts" (p. 4).

Podgursky et al. (2008) reviewed the most recent litigation in Missouri educational finance equity, which in early 2010 hovers in and out of the court system. The authors noted, "The plaintiffs in the Missouri case are three groups of school districts, 264 in all, representing roughly 60% of Missouri public school enrollments. … the real defendant was the state legislature, which crafted the school finance law" (p. 175). Given all its grandeur and success, Senate Bill 380, which houses the Outstanding Schools Act and the framework for the A+ Schools Program, spawned years of litigation.

Community Response to SB380

Hurst (1995), a Missouri public school board president, expressed dissatisfaction with Senate Bill 380. He asserted,

> Missouri Senate Bill 380, the educational reform act, raised taxes, increased funding to some schools (not Westboro), and instituted various reforms to "improve" education. The reforms all measure inputs to education; none attempts to measure results. Meanwhile, schools will be evaluated on teaching certificates and multicultural programs and handicapped accessibility, but not on what the students are learning. (p. 75)

Hurst provided anecdotal evidence of the implications of SB380 and its detrimental effect on his district, which lost accreditation. In order to regain accreditation, he admitted their district representatives "adopted policies and procedures and curricula. … Each new policy we establish[ed] [had] to be approved by the state. In order to assure approval, we cop[ied] our policies from a school district that ha[d] been through the

approval process and simply substitute[d] "Westboro" for the name of that school district" (p. 75).

The *Missouri Report: Achieving the National Education Goals* document, published by the Missouri Governor's Office, summarized the Outstanding Schools Act within Senate Bill 380. It concluded this Act was preparing children for success, providing accountability and opportunity, and increasing resources and equity for Missouri public schools (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993b). Within two years of the passing of SB380, Hurst (1995) concluded, "One major thing stands between us and a better education for our students, and that is the State of Missouri and its program of educational reform" (p. 75).

Many districts benefit from the A+ Schools Program. As Hurst (1995) identified, those districts unable to respond to the educational reform requirements face other challenges. Elder (2007) contended, "A quality education is critical for all children, yet not all children have the opportunity to receive that education" (p. 757). Rather than supporting all students, on an implicit level the A+ Schools Program marginalizes the very students it intended to serve.

Literature of Social Justice and Equity in Education

Brown (2004) encouraged educational administration programs to produce leaders who will function as change agents within the educational realm, the effects of which will then permeate into the greater culture. These leaders ought to be committed to "diminishing the inequities of American life" (p. 81) by weaving theoretical foundations through pedagogical assumptions. This, in turn, produces leaders who will garner the courage to take action to eliminate inequities within educational arenas. Brown stated,

"Segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis" (p. 79). She suggested ways to improve the learning environment for all students, starting with proactive leaders seeking social justice.

For students in Missouri school districts not served by the A+ Schools Program, these students have limited opportunities to improved technologies, enhanced curricula, and financial support to acceptable post-secondary institutions. Inherently, the program may be delivering not only progressive technological services and mentoring or leadership opportunities to its service district constituents but also social injustice and educational inequity to the remaining school districts not supported by the Outstanding Schools Act and its star child, the A+ Schools Program.

Retired Missouri Senator Jim Mathewson, recognized as the engineer of Senate Bill 380 and the successful negotiation of the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, confirmed, "We [Missouri] were not into technology to the level that so many of the other states were. When we started out on this mission, there was nothing that was more important to me, or the future of this state" (personal interview, July 18, 2008). From its earliest blueprint, the Outstanding Schools Act sought to improve technologies, enhance curricula, and offer financial support to students in the state of Missouri.

Shields (2004) and Troyna (1994) also explored the role of social justice in secondary education. Shields examined ways in which the status quo marginalizes large numbers of students and their families, preventing them from being heard or even acknowledged. Her research encouraged transformative educational leaders to promote the academic success of all children "through engaging in moral dialogue that facilitates the development of strong relationships, supplants pathologizing silences, challenges

existing beliefs and practices, and grounds educational leadership in some criteria for social justice" (p. 109). The families and their students in the state of Missouri not served by the A+ Schools Program could consider Shields' research as their call to action. In addition, research provided by Troyna (1994) established a framework for applying critical social theory to the educational realm.

Additional educational research supports the value of equal opportunity. Fowler (2008) analyzed terms of "equality of opportunity and equality of results" (p. 111). She noted, "Equal opportunity exists when everyone has a similar chance to get a good education to find a decent job, regardless of race, sex, sexual orientation, handicapping condition, age, or national origin" (pp. 111-112). Fowler continued, noting, "equal opportunity has always been a major value in U.S. education policy" (p. 112).

Larson and Ovando (2001) evaluated the role of ethics in education, exploring the deep-seeded truths regarding equity through the perceptions of educators. They asserted, "Many educators … want to ensure that all children receive equal treatment and equal access to all entitlements" (p. 66). When one considers the language of the state of Missouri in promoting the benefits and values of the A+ Schools Program to students throughout the state, ensuring equal educational access to all children seems plausible. However, as these social researchers indicate, often the policy intent and the policy application diverge.

Social justice and equity issues infiltrate the classroom and educational environment from varied avenues. Frattura and Topinka (2006) suggested without intent, educational leaders "teach all children that typically White students and those of middle class belong to the normed group and every once in a great while someone of poverty and

non-White status has the opportunity to become part of the norm" (p. 329). Frattura and Topinka consider social justice and equity on behalf of special education students, yet the tenets between these marginalized groups and others within the educational culture are common. The researchers clarified their intent, noting, "If we want to marginalize groups of people, we will continue to slot and block those who do not meet the dominant criteria to perpetuate the status quo of the dominant group" (p. 334). Education is intended to dissolve barriers, not reinforce and encourage the status quo.

Often, the notion of status quo is advanced by socioeconomic influences. Checchi (2003) researched the relationship between inequality in income distribution and access to education. He charged financial constraints seem relevant in limiting the access to secondary education. His conclusions found only weak evidence of public resources spent on education increase enrollment. These findings align with the variables influencing and hampering marginalized and alienated students from having access to higher education.

Although Bucks (2004) researched racial disparities in education and employment, his concepts related to fundamental principles: policies supporting historically disadvantaged groups remain controversial because of the persistence of economic inequality they were intended to eliminate. The A+ Schools Program was not designed to eliminate socioeconomic or impoverishment inequities within the secondary education system, yet by not confronting them in the policy arena, it does nothing to counter them.

The introduction to the collection Dickert-Conlin and Rubinstein (2007) edited about inequity in higher education began with this statement: "Students from less

economically privileged families face considerable barriers to entering and completing college. … post-secondary education is one of the most … critical avenues for reducing persistent societal income inequalities" (p. 1). They argued the social benefits of higher education as well as increased productivity and civic engagement and decreased criminal involvement from those who have access to higher education. The premise of the overall collection of essays documented "the extent if inequality in access, persistence, and success in higher education" (p. 1). As the authors asserted, the benefits – individually, socially, and economically – of higher education justify strong policy interventions to encourage "students from low-income families to enroll and succeed in higher education" (p. 7). The collection directly responds to the access to education issues related to the *haves* and *have nots*.

The research of social justice and the equitable delivery of education to all children suggests all students have access to equal opportunities and entitlements. The research surrounding this issue would substantiate and validate the mission of the A+ Schools Program: educational access for all public high school students who graduate from Missouri schools.

Demographics of the Disconnected in Education

In this context, the demographics of the disconnected suggest one's geographic location and socioeconomic status shape one's access and opportunity for quality education. Disconnected also symbolized the marginalized, the disadvantaged, the alienated, and the at-risk. A state education department, in all likelihood, promotes the equitable and available access to education for all its state's students. Missouri is no different. Rural and urban, suburban and inner city–the state of Missouri ensures students

at all age levels have access to education in their communities. This is evident with the K-8 districts in the state feeding into secondary districts. With only two major metropolitan centers–Kansas City and St. Louis–throughout the state, Missouri fields a large percentage of rural environments. The districts of the urban areas also face the challenges resulting from inner-city poverty and lack of education. Disadvantaged by geographic location and lower socioeconomic status, students in Missouri's rural and inner urban districts face monumental struggles in overcoming variables over which they have no control. Education *is* their key. Education is their *only* key.

Students who reside in rural school districts of the state may have a tendency to be slighted by state education funding. This is supported in Podgursky et al. (2008), who noted the demographic makeup of the Committee for Educational Equality. This committee formed to challenge the constitutionality of the funding formula in SB380. The authors asserted, "On the plaintiff side was a core group of 236 heavily rural or small-town districts (Committee for Educational Equality). These districts typically, although not consistently, had below-average spending per student" (p. 180).

Researchers with Child Trends, who provide research, data, and analysis to education and social professionals working with children, track children's issues related to education, welfare, poverty, school readiness, well-being, and health. Hair, Moore, Ling, McPhee-Baker, and Brown (2009) found in their research,

> Most notably, participation in a job search, job training or school-to-work program is related to a lower risk of becoming disconnected. Our work reinforces the idea that involvement in programs and support from caring adults can lower the risk of disconnection among disadvantaged young people, a finding that

> should inform the work of policy makers and program providers to address the needs of this vulnerable population. (p. 1)

Eligible students of the A+ Schools Program have access and opportunity as explored in Hair et al.'s (2009) research findings. The benefits of the program itself excel in providing these opportunities to students – if, and only if, one is fortunate enough to be a student in an A+ designated district. Additional research by Hair et al. (2009) identified:

> more than 5 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 (15% of the total youth population) were not in school or in the workforce in 2001. Disconnected youth are more likely to be poor, to have academic difficulties, to suffer from mental health problems and/or substance abuse, to be involved in violence, and to be teen parents. Moreover, youth who are disconnected for three or more years suffer long-term consequences such as lower incomes, lack of health insurance, and difficulty getting and keeping a job. … Young women who are disconnected for three or more years are more likely to receive welfare payments and food stamps than are their counterparts who have never been disconnected. (p. 1).

Not only do resources in education disadvantage the students, especially the young women, in these demographics, but they also face other burdens affecting their ability to escape the issues of their communities that lead to a sense of disconnection. A Saint Louis University School of Nursing research project studied access to social services for pregnant adolescents in Missouri (Anderson, Smiley, Flick, & Lewis, 2000). Their findings concluded the rural white birth rate was higher than the urban white birth rate. Higher numbers of white girls and young women from ages 10-19 were pregnant and having babies compared to their urban counterparts. In addition, poor birth outcomes

and pregnancy risk factors were more prevalent in rural rather than urban areas for all adolescent mothers. Those numbers reversed for nonwhite adolescents in urban environments (Anderson et al., 2000).

Students and educators in rural schools face challenges. The students face obstacles as they matriculate from high school to post-secondary or work-force environments; the educators face challenges with meeting the educational needs of their students. Horst and Martin (2007) confirmed the challenges facing educators in rural locations. Focused on smaller Missouri rural districts, their research identified those challenges as "the increasing number of children from homes of poverty, who have unique educational needs. In addition, rural schools are confronted with barriers such as funding, isolation and community support" (p. 33).

Economic and demographic status is a factor in student achievement. Crosnoe (2009) researched the impact on the education of low-income students attending both higher socioeconomic status (SES) and lower SES schools. He explained school advocates often promote socioeconomic desegregation as a means to reduce the socioeconomic stratification of education. The premise, then, is to provide

> underprivileged children access to better organized classrooms with low turnover and more higher-order instruction. Furthermore, such schools often have more involved, informed parents who form networks of social capital, raise non-state financial support, and produce higher standards of performance and accountability. (p. 710)

Crosnoe concluded his research by noting the role of demographic status in achievement.

He explained,

> Findings from this approach suggested students, parents, and school personnel use SES as a marker of academic ability (and social worth) when evaluating students. As a result, lower SES students are at greater competitive disadvantage in the curricular regimes and social markets of higher SES schools because their SES can label them as academically or socially inferior to their peers. (p. 725)

Fowler (2008) addressed "unusual disempowerment" (p. 38), where "people … have been unusually disempowered through the shaping of consciousness. They have grown up surrounded by messages that communicate their low status …" (p. 38). Educating students who have been surrounded by these messages is possible. This does, however, require a commitment to "more time, more effort, and more resources than the status quo allows" (Elder, 2007, p. 787). Through its legislation and power, the state can provide assistance to all students.

Regardless if the variable identified is rural or urban, male or female, students representing disadvantaged demographics need the opportunities post-secondary education can provide them. For those students attending approximately half of Missouri's A+-designated schools and fulfilling the obligation of the program, they have access to opportunities education provides.

Post-secondary Pathway Programs

Post-secondary pathway programs provide students with guidance, direction, and purpose. They serve anyone, from those students with multiple generations of college education in their heritage to the first-generation college students. These pathway programs transition the student from secondary education to higher education, with the

ultimate goal being a career.

The A+ Schools Program is a pathways program. It provides eligible students access to tuition-free community or technical college education, aligning them on a path linking their secondary experience with their marketability, whether that is to transfer to a baccalaureate institution or enter the workforce. Kirst (2007) outlined the challenges facing leaders at the K-12 and post-secondary levels, identifying the signals indicating pathways programs: alignment of policies and curriculum, shared finances, accessible data, and accountability between the secondary and post-secondary institutions. For all intents and purposes, the Missouri A+ Schools Program accomplishes these objectives.

Pathways programs are visible in several states and support various academic and workforce incentives. Waters (2008) explored an information technology (IT) pathway program in California supported by Cisco, where the students gain IT skills, academic coursework, and business training. Bragg (2007) highlighted a pathway program focused on teaching opportunities for its students.

Focusing on a separate teaching certification transitions program in the state of Illinois, Walker, Downey and Kuehl (2008) explored the success of a PK-12, community college, university transitions program intended to recruit and prepare future educators. The community, the college, and the university developed “a conduit system of PK–12 educators for recruiting diverse and underrepresented groups into the teaching profession to serve local needs” (p. 963). The constituents identified the need to develop an efficient and quality teacher recruitment model. Introduction to the program and its benefits begins for students in the surrounding region’s schools as early as the fourth and fifth grade (Walker et al., 2008).

As indicated with the research, some pathways programs identify a specific content field or degree program the students are required to pursue in order to gain job benefits or financial incentives. Similar in nature to the statewide Missouri A+ Schools Program is a community program in Arkansas City, Kansas, titled School Counts. Rourke and Hartzman (2009) clarified the tenets of School Counts, a tuition scholarship program to Cowley County Community College for all students in the Arkansas City high school system who complete specific criteria. Similar in nature to the A+ Schools Program, the Arkansas City students are required to attend their classes, earn a 2.5 or better GPA, attend monthly skills workshops, create a portfolio, and participate in community service (Rourke & Hartzman, 2009). The program encourages students to see the value of soft skills–dependability, reliability, and time management–while attaining technical, communication, and problem-solving skills (Rourke & Hartzman, 2009).

Research findings from programs in the state of Florida identified the value of educational pathways to high-paying careers to improve social mobility. The study followed students from their first year of high school, through to college, and into the workforce. The study confirmed "development of career-oriented skills often opens the best pathway to enhanced earnings for low-performing high school students" (Jacobson & Mokher, 2009, p. 1). Jacobson and Mokher (2009) underscored the value of post-secondary education by highlighting the results of the study, which indicated an increase in the attainment of four-year degrees by low-income students as well as an increase in the attainment of certificates from two-year colleges by low-income students.

Kempner and Warford (2009) reported on the College and Career Transitions Initiative, a program which "demonstrated considerable promise of the role pathways can

play in helping students find their way through education to work and on to their careers" (p. 40). The initial outcomes of the Initiative were to decrease remediation rates and increase entrance rates and persistence. Students who were part of this initiative did demonstrate lower remediation rates and higher entrance and persistence rates than the national average (Kempner & Warford, 2009). The participating community college sites instituted several recruitment and persistence strategies to assist students with their transitions through the educational pipeline. This proved to be invaluable, as "providing high school students with additional counseling, early remediation testing, and simply bringing them to the community college campus all proved to be effective strategies to recruit and retain students in the career pathways" (p. 42).

Having the resources to provide individual attention and interpersonal communication strategies prove invaluable. On a similar note, this is what the A+ Schools Program provides its students – individual attention and interpersonal communication as students navigate their way from their secondary environment to post-secondary education. One simple, key strategy Kempner and Warford (2009) noted to provide the most significant outcomes was "introducing students to the community college campus helped demystify the college experience, especially for first generation college attendees" (p. 42).

The community college houses the environment to encourage students of all educational backgrounds and provide for them a path to achievement and success. The October 2008 publication of *The Regional Economist,* a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank, dedicated its focus to the role of the community college in the community and to the economy. It included an article not only about the Missouri A+ Schools

Program but also regional pathway programs. Kolesnikova and Shimek (2008) explained, "Missouri isn't the only state in the [Federal Reserve Bank] Eighth District that has a program to encourage students to attend community college. For example, Mississippi has the Tech Prep program and Arkansas has Nex+ Step" (p. 9). Kolesnikova's economic research focuses on the value of the community college as a viable step on the path to upward mobility.

Economic value is placed on community colleges, and the community colleges invest in pathways programs. These educational venues support pathways programs with more efficiency and adaptability than their baccalaureate counterparts do. In addition, the common taglines affiliated with community colleges–smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, increased tutoring assistance, and lower tuition costs–attract many students. Goldhaber and Peri (2007) explained community colleges "appear to be particularly important for lower-income and minority students" (p. 102). The community college has become renowned for its "ability to focus on programs aimed at increasing opportunities for low-income students" (Goldhaber & Peri, 2007, p. 117). In addition, Goldhaber and Peri emphasized the role of the community colleges and their "experimentation with actual partnerships" (p. 119) in education. They noted the "increasingly prominent role that community colleges play as an initial access point to higher education for minorities and students from disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 121).

The Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges collated examples of community collaborations originating with the community college. This collection highlighted collaborative efforts with community agencies, K-12 schools, baccalaureate and research institutions, business and industry, and national service

programs from around the nation. This resource emphasized the inherent value of the community college in managing assets, enhancing student learning, and meeting community needs. Pickeral (1996) provided the rationale for campus-community collaborations. He explained, "(1) They add value to each partner and the collaboration, and (2) they are needed to solve our complex social problems" (p. 2).

Public Education Policy Issues

Dickert-Conlin and Rubenstein (2007) underscored the power of the policy makers. They asserted, "Policy makers at the state and federal levels must commit to ensuring public comprehensive and broad-access institutions have the operating and capital resources needed to provide high quality education and services for students from low-income families" (p. 11). The state legislation for the A+ Schools Program passed in 1993, establishing a state education policy for participating districts to implement a school improvement and curriculum alignment plan. These were the initial bricks to lay the path to access and opportunity for all Missouri public secondary students. The policy was adopted in May 1993 (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993), schools applied and were accepted, and the state began distributing A+ Schools Programs funds to eligible high schools with the 1997 academic year. This section reviews the A+ policy benefits as they have shifted since program implementation. In addition, the section investigates the literature associated with policy adoption, implementation, review, and evaluation. Within this context, the role of politics emerges.

A+ Benefits Shift

The state has revised on a minor level the details of the post-secondary scholarship provided to students. The Education Finance Statistics Center of the National

Center for Education Statistics identified public school finance programs during 1998-1999. Gerri Ogle, Director of School Administrative Services with MODESE, submitted the statistical overview for Missouri, including in her report, “Students graduating from a school with an A+ Schools Program qualify for state-paid assistance (full tuition and books) to attend any public community college or technical school in the state” (Ogle, n.d., p. 12).

Joplin High School, one of the earliest high schools to receive A+-designation in 1998, printed in its A+ Manual updated policies “beginning in June 2003” (Joplin High School, 2005, p. 4). These indicated the A+ benefits to eligible students included “tuition, general fees, up to 50% of their required books paid, pending funding from the state of Missouri, to any community college or public vocational/technical school in the state of Missouri, paid through the A+ reimbursement program (beginning in June 2003)” (p. 4).

A pioneer of the A+ Schools Program since 1997, Logan Rogersville High School publishes its A+ Schools Program handbook on its website. For the 2009-2010 academic year, their handbook states, “When students satisfy all A+ Program requirements, the State of Missouri agrees to reimburse the cost of tuition for up to two years (as funds are available), accept enrollment in any public community college or career/technical school in Missouri, and guarantee the incentives for a period of four years after the student graduates from high school” (Logan Rogersville High School, 2010, p. 3).

Over the years, it is evident the state has modified the benefits provided to students. In general, A+ funding for books has been deleted over the years, as the grant program reimburses tuition and fees to eligible participants. Symbolizing the strength of the initial policy adoption in 1993, the A+ Schools Program in 2010 remains true to its

initial tenets – to provide Missouri students a pathway to post-secondary education and career-enhancing opportunities (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a).

Policy Adoption, Implementation, Review, and Evaluation

Whereas the A+ Schools Program has remained consistent in its intent and purpose, some researchers have suggested the state review the policy and consider changing the A+ Schools Program. Some studies indicate the policies of the A+ Schools Program should be reviewed. As policies undergo the process of adoption, implementation, review, and evaluation, continued cycles indicate strengths and challenges. Some researchers suggest the review in order for the A+ Schools Program to better respond to a current education environment as opposed to the political and economic environment of the early 1990s out of which the policy emerged.

Barger (2000) recommended MODESE "should review the A+ designation standards. Furthermore, the state department should consider adding a criterion that addresses the importance of quality staff development" (p. 110). Barger asserted districts implemented changes to staff development to secure A+ designation, yet once the designation was granted, a return to a traditional model of staff development emerged (Barger, 2000). The viability and sustainability of the A+ Schools Program was in question.

Dropout rates are a primary variable in identifying the success of the A+ Schools Program. Lee (2003) raised a similar question about the retention of A+ designation. Her conclusions suggested "the improvement in dropout rates of A+ schools does not seem to persist in the years following the A+ designation in comparison to the prior years" (p. 162). She concluded the schools may "drift" and minimize the work to prevent dropouts

once the school acquires A+ status (Lee, 2003).

The 95th General Assembly of the Missouri Senate proposed in 2009 the establishment of the Missouri Promise program, legislation to serve as a successor to the A+ Schools Program. This legislative review of the A+ Schools Program proposed to enhance the program by expanding the benefits of the program policies to baccalaureate institutions (Missouri S. 558, 2009). Originally presented to the public in early 2008 as part of then-Attorney General Jay Nixon's campaign platform for governor, the Missouri Promise program intended to reshape the benefits of the A+ Schools Program policies.

Key policy and education actors at the state level influence education policies (Elder, 2007). Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1986) identified the key stakeholders involved with the shaping of state educational policies. They generated a list of policy actors most likely to be responsible for educational policy-making, creating a Venn diagram of their interconnected relationships. These policy actors, with the state legislature as the center of the diagram, included the governor, the state attorney general, state education agencies, the courts, state universities and higher education, and other state agencies (Marshall et al., 1986).

Fowler (2008) identified these agency policy actors and added to the list the power and influence of individuals within the specific agencies. She identified "individual legislators" (Fowler, 2008, p. 141) as first in the rank of influence, above the legislature as a whole. In the context of the formulation and adoption of the Outstanding Schools Act, retired Missouri Senator Jim Mathewson is recognized as the primary policy actor to influence the success of the Act. As another variable to validate the formulation and success of the original A+ Schools Program policies, he and the agency policy actors

shaped the program's adoption, implementation, and review.

As key players at the state level, individuals and respective agencies represent dimensions of power to shape social consciousness through the implementation of education policy that affects the social welfare of the state. Fowler (2008) listed questions to consider when evaluating equality issues raised by an education policy. These include:

1. Does the rhetoric surrounding the policy or policy proposal include words such as fair, just, justice, equal, equality, or level playing field?
2. Is equality understood as equality of opportunity of as equality of outcome?
3. Will this policy advance political equality by facilitating participation in the school or in the broader society?
4. Will this policy advance economic equality by preparing a broader range of young people to participate effectively in the workplace?
5. How will this policy affect members of racial minorities?
6. How will this policy affect families with low incomes?

(Fowler, 2008, p. 113)

These questions identified the social implications a policy and its implementation can have on its constituents. As practitioners, researchers, and politicians have indicated in this review, policies shift after years of being implemented and reviewed. In addition, as policies are framed and adopted, those policy actors identified as most feasible to accomplish change in a program are legislators, who have the power to shape policy. This is evident with the formulation, adoption, implementation, and review of the A+ Schools Program and its benefits to its constituents.

Politics of Evaluation

The evaluation of any program is to be expected after years of implementation. Cervero and Wilson (2006) explored the application of democratic negotiation in the planning process for program evaluation. Because the A+ Schools Program affects so many constituents on so many levels in the state of Missouri, informal evaluation of the program is ongoing.

Formal evaluation, however, more effectively judges the worth of a program. This includes the educational, management, and political objectives associated with the program being evaluated (Cervero & Wilson, 2006). Since the program's implementation, researchers have conducted evaluations on various outcomes of the A+ Schools Program (Barbis, 2003; Galbreath, 2007; Jochems et al., 2006; Lawler, 2005; Lee, 2003; Mueser, Lee, & Podgursky, 2004).

In addition, the public information available via the state department website suggested further evaluation of the program outcomes, as data from the 2005-2009 School Accountability Report Card suggested Missouri graduates entering two-year colleges and technical institutions dropped, from 30.8% in 2005 to 28.7% in 2009 (MODESE, 2009f). Mueser et al. (2004) suggested high schools that initially have greater enrollments in 2-year colleges are more likely to participate in the program. This supports the notion of students who would enroll in college tend to be the students who take advantage of the program's financial rewards.

Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004) warned of the disappointments associated with program evaluations, especially those programs intended to improve the human social condition. They reminded potential evaluators that "evaluators … have been disappointed

by finding out that many programs do not produce marked improvements" (p. 371). In addition, the authors validated the political value of evaluation, noting "at every stage, evaluation in only one ingredient in an inherently political process," emphasizing "decisions with important social consequences should be determined in a democratic society by political processes" (p. 381). In their review of the role of evaluations, Bolman and Deal (2003) suggested, "evaluation produces magic numbers to help us believe that things are working" (p. 281).

Whereas one finds challenge in identifying substantial or significant negatives of the A+ Schools Program overall, a variety of evaluation studies indicated there is evidence to suggest the program does limit opportunities to Missouri students. The A+ Schools Program does this by not providing equitable access opportunities to post-secondary education to all students, as indicated by the program's mission. As a result, many Missouri students lack the access to an equitable education afforded to many of their Missouri peers.

Transformational Leadership

Dainton and Zelley (2005) asserted organizations have shifted from "accommodating the industrial revolution to sustaining the information age" (p. 136). Human beings have entered into an era of a global rather than local economy. The policy actors shaping the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 recognized the value of technology on a global scale, seeking to improve and increase Missouri's role in an international, technical economy. Their vision and leadership established the framework to the A+ Schools Program and its insistence on improving technology in the public schools. Transformational leadership appeals to those qualities, fostering personal and

organizational growth (Brown, 2004; Dainton & Zelley, 2005; Yukl, 2006).

Educational leaders in a world of changing contexts value the support of the community. Conducting research framed by transformative leadership, Goldring and Sullivan (1996) emphasized the role of the community as an empowering agent. In establishing the framework for the A+ Schools Program, its leaders emphasized the power of the school collaborating with community leaders in providing opportunities for students. As such, collaboration between community leaders and schools "implies closer linkages in such areas as communication, shared mission, and actual service delivery" (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996, p. 205). This value is evidenced in the role community engagement plays in the criteria of the A+ Schools Program. The A+ Designation Checklist requires applying schools to provide evidence showing parental and community leader support (MODESE, 2008).

Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2000) clarified the value of power relations in transformational leadership. This form of leadership considers the motives, resources, leaders, and followers. Leaders embracing transformational leadership also address and respond to issues surrounding resource allocation as well as political influence in shaping change in organizations and their policies (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2000; Yukl, 2006). Transformational leadership entails not only change, but also the ability of the leader to engage followers because of the moral or common good of the change. The change is *for the better*. When designing the A+ Schools Program, the leadership at the state and local levels believed in those values. In education, transformational leaders inspire a district, a community , and a state to implement change and rise above the trenches of the status quo.

Chapter Summary

The literature surrounding the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 and its inherent A+ Schools Program revolves around economic, fiscal, and funding equity. Little published research is available in the format of a policy study of this program and its development, where the issues of social justice and equity in education are evaluated and reviewed. As such, this state-supported program has little quantitative research to support the injustices or inequities delivered to students whose schools choose to not undertake the mandated requirements of implementation, whether for cost, available resources, or other reasons.

The research supporting issues indirectly related to the A+ Schools Program are many. Research related to the A+ Schools Program includes court-mandated and legislated adequacy and equity studies. Other studies research the role of social policies and educational programs in leveraging social justice and social equity to particular student demographics, specifically the disconnected or marginalized demographics. This would include students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. Other related issues include the myriad pathways programs available to high school students around the nation. These programs offer assistance and provide transitioning links, bridging the student from the secondary realm to either post-secondary education or workforce training. Another area of research related to the issues of the A+ Schools Program are those involving public education policy making, where key political and educational players have the power and capability to embrace transformational leadership and influence policy for the common good.

As of November 2009, the A+ Schools Program operates in 274 of the eligible

514 high schools in Missouri. For a program so highly touted by the state and lauded by government agencies, statewide implementation to 514 high schools, regardless of budget, resources, and family socioeconomic status, should have been achieved after 13 years of policy and procedure refinement. Unfortunately, the A+ Schools Program is not providing educational access and equity for all students who graduate from Missouri high schools.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In 1993, the State of Missouri legislated access to higher education for its high school graduates through Senate Bill 380, the Outstanding Schools Act. This legislative action granted to qualified Missouri high school graduating seniors six semesters of tuition to eligible post-secondary institutions. Eligible post-secondary institutions include one private technical school, 39 public career technical schools, and 14 public community colleges. These eligible seniors, however, graduated from any one of 274A+-designated high schools (MODESE, 2009d)–not from any of the other 240 public school districts recognized by the state department of education.

In contrast, however, to the 274 school districts designated as A+ Schools in early 2009, the supporters of the Outstanding Schools Act in 1993 sought to provide educational equity to all students, offering access to technology and school-to-work programs. The Act legislated educational reforms, which would reduce class size in lower grades, implement community service in the schools, expand vocational training for students, and promote increased advancements in technology (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a).

Purpose and Overview of the Study

The A+ Schools Program, a specific school improvement plan embedded in the text of the Outstanding Schools Act, was intended to lower the high school dropout rate, increase grade point averages, and provide career path development into community and technical colleges (Jochems et al., 2006). As published in the September 2008 A+ Fact

Sheet distributed by MODESE, “the primary goal of the A+ Schools Program is to ensure *all students who graduate from Missouri high schools* [emphasis mine] are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment” (MODESE, Facts, 2008, p. 1).

This policy study intends to identify the demographics of those students and schools served and not served by the A+ Schools Program within the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993. These demographics are available through MODESE and U.S. Census data. In addition, a survey and interviews lend credibility to the study from those practitioners who work with the A+ Schools Program. Through these methods, a goal of this study is to evaluate the program’s equity in providing educational access to all students, as published by program materials and determined by program planners.

Research Questions

The context of this case study presents and responds to the following research questions:

1. What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
2. How does the A+ Schools Program as delivered in 2009-2010 align with its original intent in 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
3. According to the most recent and updated data, what constituents does the A+ Schools Program serve? What are the demographics of schools served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE.
b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE.
c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

4. According to the most recent and updated data, what Missouri students are not being served by the A+ Schools Program as it has grown and developed since 1993? What are the demographics of schools not served by the A+ Schools Program? These include:
   a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE.
   b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE.
   c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

Design of the Study

The purpose of research is not to change the world but to clarify flawed understanding (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003). In addition, Merriam (1998) noted, "Getting started on a research project begins with examining your own orientation to basic tenets about the nature of reality, the purpose of doing research, and the type of knowledge to be produced" (p. 5). Sumser (2001) suggested research is evaluated "by the extent to which it serves a useful purpose" (p. 11).

The framework, process, design, collection, and analysis of the research combine to respond in a meaningful way to the root of any worthy research endeavor: *who cares*?

The researcher intends to submit conclusions derived from not only a qualitative case study but also an analysis of the available statistical administrative data. Regardless of the design or framework of the study, the researcher maintains awareness of the uncertainty of the conclusions inherent to any study (Booth et al., 2003; Creswell, 2003; Herr & Anderson, 2005; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Sumser, 2001).

Qualitative Case Study

To acquire its results, this case study will include as part of its research design information acquired through the interview process. For much of the information, the researcher intends to use the human instrument in the research and to build on data as it emerges. Merriam (1998) identified five variables inherent to qualitative research: (a) understanding the phenomenon through the participants' perspective; (b) using the human instrument for research; (c) conducting fieldwork; (d) building on emergent data; and (e) using rich description.

King et al. (1996) offered an in-depth analysis of the qualitative method. This They identified this research design, which:

> covers a wide range of approaches, but none of these approaches relies on numerical measurements. Such work has tended to focus on one or a small number of cases, to use intensive interviews or depth analysis of historical materials, to be discursive in method, and to be concerned with a rounded or comprehensive account of some event or unit. Even though they have a small number of cases, qualitative researchers generally unearth enormous amounts of information from their studies. Sometimes this kind of work in the social sciences

> is linked with area or case studies where the focus is on a particular event, decision, institution, location, issue, or piece of legislation. (p. 4)

This description relates to the A+ Schools Program study, as one policy is the focus of the research.

The qualitative design allows for meaningful formulation of the gathered information beyond the statistical analysis. This design encourages the researcher to seek the rich and descriptive element of the unique human experience in context of the subject of the study. The case study, then, "is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). The case study provides "intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system" (p. 19).

Quantitative Demographic Data

Whereas a qualitative approach strengthens the meaning of the experience and reveals thematic associations, the application of quantitative data supports the research with statistical framework. Statistical administrative data through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provides information to support the longevity and growth of the A+ Schools Program. In addition, this statistical data, available to the public through MODESE's web site, provides much of the demographic data to respond to the research questions. In addition to statistical administrative data through MODESE, additional demographic data is available through U.S. Census information.

Rationale and Defense for the Research Design

Combining a qualitative case study design with the quantitative administrative data increases the validity, reliability, and truthfulness of the study. Creswell, Clark,

Gutmann, and Hanson (2003) suggested mixing methods can strengthen a study. They indicated research conducted in the social sciences represents both the contextual complexities and statistical analysis of a subject, which opens the field for mixed designs. These mixed designs, then, offer better understanding and clarity of complex issues. Creswell (2003) validated "mixed methods research involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of a study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research" (p. 4).

Critical Research Lens

The researcher approaches a study and analyzes it from his or her knowledge and understanding of how the world works. When conducting the study, the researcher acknowledges how this knowledge and understanding influence the study through an epistemological theoretical perspective. Epistemology is understood as the way humans acquire knowledge. For this study, the epistemological view is through critical research, one of three main research paradigms (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Merriam, 1998). In the context of the A+ Schools Program, the paradigm of critical research "is guided by principles of democratic engagement" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006, p. 7). In addition, critical theory perspectives as forms of inquiry help "unshackle people from the constraints of irrational and unjust structures that limit self-development and self-determination" (Creswell, 2003, p. 11).

Critical research shapes the conceptual underpinnings of the research within a values and ideology framework. Through the critical perspective, the goal is to determine how certain people win the political game more than they would if things were perfectly fair (Troyna, 1994). In this qualitative case study approach, a critical research perspective

frames the research. Merriam (1998) explained, “Knowledge generated through this mode of research is an ideological critique of power, privilege, and oppression in areas of educational practice” (p. 4). In addition, she noted, “From a critical research perspective, [researchers] would be interested in how the social institution of school is structured such that the interests of some members and classes of society are preserved and perpetuated at the expense of others” (p. 5). In many ways, Merriam’s commentary reflected the incongruent goals of the A+ Schools Program. Coghlan and Brannick (2006) suggested:

> Researchers’ epistemological and ontological perspectives legitimate their own distinctive way of doing research and determine what they consider as a valid, legitimate contribution to knowledge or theory irrespective of whether we called it development, confirmation, validation, creation, building or generation. (p. 5)

In the qualitative design identified as critical realism (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006), an objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology support the design. This position concentrates on “exposing interests and enabling emancipation” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006, p. 7). Knowledge gained from this process “has to do with normative states in social, economic and political realms. It concerns a vision of what ought to be, what is right, and what is wrong, and arises through a process of consciousness-raising and conscientization” (p. 7).

Thus, the researcher believes the implementation and accessibility of the Missouri A+ Schools Program limits equity and access to higher education within the structure of a statewide policy to endorse equity and access to all students. With this state education policy, some high school students have access to the benefits and values of the program while others are marginalized and alienated from its opportunities. The state inherently

limits educational equity and access to higher education for those students who are ineligible for the opportunity because the leadership governing the high school they attend chooses not to apply and identify as an A+-affiliated school by MODESE. The researcher of this qualitative case study seeks to understand the rationale of MODESE's decision to inherently limit post-secondary educational equity and access to Missouri secondary students. By using a critical realism lens, the researcher hopes to learn as the data emerge what is right and what ought to be.

Qualitative Case Study

The purpose of this case study is to understand the policy formulation and adoption (Fowler, 2008) of the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, specifically the A+ Schools Program and its delivery to the secondary institutions in the state of Missouri. The research plan is to use a qualitative research design utilizing case study methods to understand the rationale for a state legislating limited access to higher education for Missouri secondary students when the rationale is to provide access to all students. Qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding, with the product being rich with description (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Creswell, 2003; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 1998).

The key concern when using qualitative methods is "understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). As Creswell (2003) explained, "a qualitative approach … uses strategies of inquiry such as narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies, grounded theory studies, or case studies. The researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from that data" (p. 18). The researcher in the

qualitative design seeks to learn the essence of the research, as the data emerges and evolves as the research continues (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) added, “This type of research builds on abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than tests existing theory” (p. 7) and “findings are in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypothesis, even theory, which have been inductively derived from the data” (p. 7). In addition, the researcher using the qualitative design “must physically go to the people” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7), where data emerge in the “form of participants’ own words” (p. 8).

For these reasons, the researcher for this study believes the qualitative design offers an advantage in providing “rich, thick descriptions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211) within the context of the A+ Schools Program. For this study, an experiment is not being conducted to test the impact on an outcome (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative researcher prefers for the hypotheses to emerge as the investigation develops, applying definitions through narrative descriptions as the study progresses. In contrast, the quantitative researcher prefers a precise hypothesis stated at the outset of the investigation, at which point precise definitions are clarified. The quantitative researcher also seeks specific design control to yield a statistical summary of results. The researcher for this study identifies with the strengths of the qualitative methods and the demands for flexibility on the part of the researcher to analyze the emergent data.

Merriam (1998) defended the application of the case study in educational research. She explained,

> A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than

> outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

This form of qualitative research leads to an analysis of socioeconomic, political, or cultural causes behind educational research, leading to collective action to address the emergent data.

To enhance the qualitative experience and glean a richer understanding of the contextual environment of a subject for study, the researcher may conduct interviews or arrange focus groups for depth of meaning. These methods allow the researcher to identify and code categories, patterns, and themes to emerge from the information (Creswell, 2003; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Researchers include these forms of information gathering as a part of the qualitative research design (Creswell, 2003; Creswell et al., 2003; Merriam, 1998).

Participants

In a qualitative study, participants inform the study through their rich experiences and varied perspectives. Merriam (1998) explained types of purposeful sampling for participants. She listed "convenience, snowball, and network sampling" (p. 62) as a few examples of methods used to seek participants. For this study, convenience, snowball, and network sampling are applied.

Interview participants. Merriam (1998) recommended "nonprobability sampling" (p. 61) as the structure for conducting interviews within qualitative research. With nonprobability sampling, or purposeful sampling, the researcher identifies the subjects for interview, utilizing snowballing or other methods to add key actors to the interview or

focus group pools (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). For this study, key policy actors and practitioners were interviewed to provide a purposeful sample (Merriam, 1998). These interviews were scheduled with leaders of both A+-designated and non-A+-designated high schools, representing a cross-section of Missouri districts.

For the interview process, participants were purposefully selected based on their experiences and perspectives with the history, implementation, and supervision of the A+ Schools Program. Their titles and level of experience vary, from state-level politicians and MODESE staff to retired principals and superintendents who worked in 1994 to establish the A+ Schools Program in their districts. Initial contacts were established through network sampling, and as discussions with potential interview participants increased, names snowballed. One former principal from a rural public school recommended 10 names of key players, whose experiences spanned from the state department to local board members.

Focus group participants. This selected group includes governmental officials, administrators, A+ coordinators, guidance counselors, students, and faculty of districts representing both A+ and non-A+ designation status. The intent is to include in the interview process representatives of urban and rural secondary schools, whose family and community socioeconomic status indicators reflect diverse backgrounds. The researcher intends to gain better understanding of the A+ Schools Program by interviewing representatives of both A+ and non-A+ districts. The intent is these representatives will represent districts of diverse socioeconomic regions throughout the state.

Focus groups participants were purposefully selected based on their experience with the program in 2010. The participants were selected based on initial face-to-face,

email, and phone requests soliciting their participation. These groups included current college students who graduated from A+-designated high schools and those who did not. Additional focus groups were comprised of A+ coordinators and guidance counselors and administrators of schools not designated as an A+ Schools Program.

To protect the participants, approval was sought from institutional review boards (IRB) from two institutions of higher education. Ozarks Technical Community College and the University of Missouri-Columbia extended IRB permission for the research study. Permission was also sought to secure the use of premises of two off-site locations: a high school and a community college. Seeking permission validates the procedure and the research design to the participants. This process also validates the ethical support for the study. Institutional review boards ensure that the study and processes framing the study protect the rights and welfare of the human subjects. Herr and Anderson (2005) articulated the importance of internal review boards not only to protect the rights and welfare of the participants but also to ensure an ethical research process. Creswell (2003) supported the role of IRBs in respecting both the participants and the sites for research.

Quantitative Demographic Data

Statistical data are available through both the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education web site and the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, U.S. Census Bureau statistics are available to the researcher. The use of administrative data provided by MODESE assures greater reliability of the program outcomes and participation. These statistical data identify the A+-designated public school districts, allowing a distinction between A+- and non-A+ schools. In addition, the statistics offer socioeconomic demographics for both A+ and non-A+ schools. The U.S.

Census data allow the researcher to reflect on the household incomes for both the A+-designated schools and those not designated as A+. This data provide participation numbers and demographic insight to the study. This numerical segment of the research supports the equity and access issues surrounding the A+ Schools Program and its goal to provide opportunities for higher education to all students in the state of Missouri. Identifying both quantitative data and qualitative feedback about the program allows for a more thorough understanding of the A+ Schools Program and the demographic, statistical, and human context in which it operates.

Data Collection

In the data collection phase of a study, a researcher identifies the methods used to gather and analyze the data (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 1998). The methods identified for this study include a mixed method framework, with qualitative and quantitative methods utilized. As noted by Lincoln & Guba (1985), findings increase in credibility if a researcher can "triangulate, using different sources, different methods, and sometimes multiple investigators, the data that are collected" (p. 307). Creswell (2003) clarified triangulation as a strategy associated with mixed method approaches. He explained triangulation emerged from the observation that "biases inherent in any single method could neutralize or cancel the biases of other methods" (p. 15).

A mixed method design will be used for data collection. Within the quantitative realm of the research, methods for collecting data include gathering administrative demographic data from state sites and archives, such as MODESE, and national data collection web sites, such as the Census Bureau or the National Center for Education

Statistics. Within the qualitative case study of the Missouri A+ Schools Program, the additional methods for inquiry include focus groups and interviews. To support the qualitative phase of the research, the researcher intends to identify and analyze relevant Missouri government, state education department, and secondary school documents for a thorough analysis of the materials available to investigate the A+ Schools Program.

Researcher Positionality and Bias

Merriam (1998) noted a tolerance for ambiguity as essential for the qualitative researcher. With this method, a direction is not always clear and a protocol is not always defined. The researcher who prefers clearly structured and organized results may experience frustration with the qualitative design. This researcher responds to the context, variables, physical environment, people, overt and covert agendas, nonverbal behaviors, political, social, and socioeconomic variables emerge within a qualitative design (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Creswell, 2003; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 1998).

Creswell (2003) noted, “Inquirers explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interests about their research topic and process” (p. 184). The researcher “brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people’s constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied” (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). Within the context of this inquiry, the researcher is an outsider who studies insiders (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 41). Because the data are “mediated through the human instrument, the researcher, rather than through some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or computer,” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7), the researcher uses human subjects for collecting data. This type of data collection requires permission from Internal Review Boards to

protect the rights of human participants (Creswell, 2003; Pritchard, 2002). For this study, the researcher is an outsider studying insiders.

Researcher bias and ethical considerations weigh heavily in the realm of qualitative research. Manipulations of data and findings can occur with both qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry. A researcher can manipulate quantitative data to reflect preferred outcomes. As well, the investigator can code and categorize themes to reflect an emerging result. Regardless, the researcher strives to establish trustworthiness and credibility through disclosure and openness.

Creswell (2003) explained the role of the researcher in identifying bias in the qualitative study. With the researcher involved on a professional level with human instruments, ethical and personal issues factor into data analysis. He clarified, “inquirers explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interests about their research topic and interest” (p. 184). Merriam (1998) articulated concerns about case study research because the researcher “is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 42). Krueger and Casey (2000) warn the researcher to “beware of personal bias or preexisting opinions about the topic” (p. 140).

With this case study, the researcher is aware of biases and influences. As an employee of a Missouri community college, she recognizes the role of the community college in providing pathways to students. In addition, the community college at which she is employed enrolls numerous A+ students. An additional bias is the researcher’s own shift in understanding of the A+ Schools Program. While the program merits praise and provides opportunity to many students, the researcher acknowledges inherent bias emerged when she first learned the percentage of high schools participating in the

scholarship/school improvement program. With a sibling in secondary public education in Missouri, the investigator admits additional biases based on anecdotal discussions surrounding the means by which the program inadvertently promotes status quo. It is with these biases and understandings the researcher seeks to acknowledge their existence ensure integrity, credibility, and validity frame the trustworthiness of the study.

Qualitative Research Process

Modes of inquiry for qualitative research include the use of observations, interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and video/audio analysis if those forms of media are available as artifacts (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) explained two levels of samples guiding the data collection process in qualitative research: purposeful sampling and a case to investigate. She clarified, noting, "a sample within the case needs to be selected … with purposeful sampling used to select the sample … using a second set of criteria … to purposefully select whom to interview, what to observe, and which documents to analyze" (pp. 65-66). She defined the case as "the bounded system, the unit of analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 65). For the researcher to collect data to produce a document rich in description, the researcher identifies and learns his or her own positionality on the topic. In addition, he or she determines an event to observe, the interview process or the focus group plan.

Interview process. Merriam (1998) articulated five issues to be addressed with the interview subject prior to conducting the interview. These include (a) the investigator explaining his or her motives and intentions for the inquiry and the inquiry's purpose; (b) the investigator assuring the respondent he or she is protected through pseudonyms; (c) the researcher determining who has final say over the study's content; (d) the researcher

being explicit regarding payment or nonpayment; and (e) the investigator identifying the logistics of the interview (time, location, number of interviews scheduled, videotaping and/or audiotaping, etc.).

Creswell (2003) recommended identifying the format for the interview as well– via face-to-face or telephone interviews or through focus groups of six to eight members. He also explained the value of an interview protocol to be used during the interview (see Appendix B: Interview Protocol). The protocol

> includes the following components: a heading, instructions to the interviewer (opening statements), the key research questions, probes to follow key questions, transition message for the interviewer, space for recording the interviewer's comments, and space in which the researcher records reflective notes. (p. 190).

When the researcher constructs the interview questions, he or she clarifies their format and intent. Creswell (2003) explained, "These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants" (p. 188). Merriam (1998) and Coghlan and Brannick (2006) support the role of open-ended and less structured questions in collecting data through the interview mode. The researcher will determine the method for note-taking, with a preferred method to audiotape or videotape the event. Other options include taking notes during the interview or writing as much as can be remembered after the interview. The final method, however, affects the validity and reliability of the data. Regardless, the inquirer maintains neutrality about the topic and drafts good questions, employing strong communication skills while conducting the interview or guiding a focus group. The questions for the interview are included with Appendix C: Interview Questions.

Focus group protocol. The focus groups will have homogenous overtones. The intent of the researcher is to organize the groups into their respective secondary cultures: ones from an A+ designated school, one from schools without A+ designation, and one representing students. The participants comprising the groups represent a diversity of experience with the A+ Schools Programs, which extends from little to no experience to the coordination and administration of the program at the local or collegiate level. The protocol and questions for the focus group are included in Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol and Questions.

Document analysis. Written, visual or physical material relevant to the study comprises the documents for investigation. These documents include public records, personal documents, physical material, researcher-generated documents, online data resources (determine authenticity first), primary or secondary sources, artifacts, reports, memos, meeting minutes, documents in archives and libraries, newspapers, official reports, personal journals, diaries, letters, and emails (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

For this study, the researcher intends to analyze administrative policies and implementation documents, which include state government documents, state education department documents, community college documents, and secondary education policy documents. Examples of these documents include:

1. The Missouri Code of Regulations published by the state.
2. A Primer to the Outstanding Schools Act published by the office of the governor.
3. The A+ Schools Designation Checklist published through MODESE.

4. Statistics of Missouri Public Schools published by MODESE.
5. The Schools Accountability Report Card published by MODESE.
6. Missouri General Assembly documents available through the Missouri General Assembly.

In addition to these documents, the researcher plans to "gain access to research or archival sites by seeking the approval of 'gatekeepers'" (Creswell, 2003, p. 184). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify archived data as a means "to test the validity of the conclusions" (p. 313). This includes documents such as the original 1993 version of the Outstanding Schools Act or other government or MODESE historical or archived documents. A primary document protocol is included (Appendix E: Document Analysis Protocol).

Quantitative Research—Administrative Demographic Data

The bulk of the administrative demographic data is available through the state department's online portal. As stewards of public institutions, secondary school administrators are required to report their district's finances, operations, practices, and policies to the state. This data, generated by both the districts and the state and compiled at the state level, are available to the public.

Accessed via "Missouri School District Profiles," key administrative data to be analyzed include information gathered from the following data sets:

1. Demographics
    a. 2000 Census demographics;
    b. County profiles;
    c. Attendance and dropout rates; and

    d. Student demographics;

2. Educational resources
    a. School finance data;
    b. Missouri school directory; and
    c. School district report cards.
3. A+ Schools Program (school improvement and accountability)
    a. A+ data collection information;
    b. A+ designated public high schools; and
    c. Public schools seeking designation.

Data collected from these resources—demographics, educational resources, and A+ Schools Program—provide statistics to support the quantitative study.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection process, the inquirer organizes and reviews the data and derives a general sense of the information and material. The gathered data and information respond to the research questions. Analyzing the data and gathered information includes transcribing audio or videotapes of the interviews or focus groups. In addition, the researcher organizes notes from document analysis. Using these multiple forms of data analysis allows for triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where the researcher overcomes biases and weaknesses by presenting multiple approaches for investigation of the research study. While organizing and reviewing these multiple inquiry strategies, the inquirer seeks to identify common categories and emerging themes from the data, using a coding process for organization. In the context of the A+ Schools

Program policy study, the meaning emerges from the analysis. In aligning with the equity and access issues related to the study, Fowler (2008) suggested some language is inherent to policy equity: equal, level playing field, low income, etc. Using triangulation, the researcher analyzes codes, categories, and themes related to the research questions and rationale for the study.

Coding, Categories, and Themes

After organizing and managing the collected data, the researcher utilizes a coding process to identify categories and themes evident across focus groups, interviews, and document analysis. Creswell (2003) defined coding as "the process of organizing material into chunks before bringing meaning to those chunks" (p. 192). He recommended identifying "data into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often based in the actual language of the participant (called an *in vivo* term)" (p. 192). The researcher codes for emergent patterns and relevant themes the documents and interview transcripts (Creswell, 2003; Grbich, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Applying this coding process–including listing categories and identifying emergent themes–to each interview transcription or other inquiry strategy allows the researcher to interpret the data as they emerge. These themes emerge as organizational headings for the major findings, and the researcher articulates complex theme connections (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). By archiving research materials for future use as more data are collected, the researcher identifies emergent patterns. Because of these methods, the researcher recognizes data collection and analysis may occur simultaneously (Merriam, 1998).

Credibility and Validity

Multiple inquiry strategies validate the accuracy and credibility of the study. In

mixed methods research, multiple data collection strategies enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Researchers identify multiple processes to support the integrity of the study, many of which will be utilized in this study.

Credibility and trustworthiness. Herr and Anderson (2005) noted trustworthiness is more appropriate for qualitative inquiry. They explained, "A study's trustworthiness involves the demonstration that the researcher's interpretations of the data are credible, or 'ring true,' to those who provided the data" (p. 50). Lincoln and Guba (1985) include "persistent observation" (p. 304), triangulation, and member checking as activities to promote reliability and dependability. Creswell (2003) listed eight strategies to check the accuracy of the research findings. The list includes, from ease to difficulty of implementation, the use of: (a) triangulation, (b) member-checking, (c) rich, thick descriptions, (d) researcher bias, (e) negative or discrepant information, (f) spending prolonged time in the field, (g) peer debriefing, and (h) an external auditor.

Validity and reliability. Merriam (1998) encouraged the use of six of these eight in her recommendations to enhance internal validity. She identified rich, thick descriptions and negative or discrepant information with reliability. In addition, she listed investigator positionality, triangulation, and an audit trail "as methods to encourage reliability" (p. 206). Internal validity supports "how research findings match reality" (Merriam, 1998, p. 201); in contrast, rich descriptions support external validity, which is the "extent to which findings of one study can be applied to other situations" (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). Herr and Anderson (2005) observed the generation of new knowledge provided dialogic validity; the education of the stakeholders provided catalytic validity;

results relevant to the local setting provided democratic validity; and sound and appropriate research methodology provided process validity.

The researcher for this qualitative case study plans to use investigator positionality, triangulation, rich descriptions, an audit trail, peer debriefing, and other methods to test for credibility and trustworthiness. While working with quantitative data, the researcher heeds internal and external validity threats (Creswell, 2003). A goal is to identify results relevant to the local setting and to implement a sound and appropriate research methodology. By applying a rigorous and valid process to arrive at the findings, a researcher strengthens the validity and reliability of the study.

Research Questions and Corresponding Analysis

1. What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?

   Analysis procedures: This information will be identified through knowledge gained through interviews and information available from the retired state senator and the participants of the focus group and practitioner interviews.

2. How does the A+ Schools Program as delivered in 2009-2010 align with its original intent in 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?

   Analysis procedures: Information for Research Question 2 will be identified through the emergent data for from the focus group and interview processes.

3. According to the most recent and updated data, what constituents does the A+ Schools Program serve? What are the demographics of schools served by the

A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as recorded by census data and MODESE.
b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE.
c. Median household incomes as indicated by census data within boundaries of designated schools.

Analysis procedures: Information for Research Question 3 will be identified from administrative and statistical data available from the MODESE databases and public information sites as well as Census Bureau statistics.

4. According to the most recent and updated data, what Missouri students are not being served by the A+ Schools Program as it has grown and developed since 1993? What are the demographics of schools not served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as recorded by census data and MODESE.
b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE.
c. Median household incomes as indicated by census data within boundaries of designated schools.

Analysis procedures: Information for Research Question 4 will be identified from administrative and statistical data available from MODESE databases and public information sites as well as the U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

Chapter Summary

Coghlan and Brannick (2006) explained, “Reflection means thinking about the

conditions for what one is doing, investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched" (p. 5). Through a qualitative approach, the researcher seeks emerging methods, asks open-ended questions of the participants, gathers interview data, document data, and audiovisual data and conducts textual analysis (Creswell, 2003).

In addition, Merriam (1998) identified qualitative research as research to focus on the nature or essence of a phenomenon, which will include fieldwork with a goal of understanding or discovering meaning. Prior to initiating the interview process during the data collection phase of the inquiry (see Appendix F: Research Recruitment Correspondence), a researcher seeks permission from the IRB with an institution (see Appendix G: Informed Consent). Upon approval from the IRB, the researcher begins formal correspondence with participants in the study. In addition, the design characteristics are emergent from a small, purposeful sample, allowing the researcher to collect data through interviews, observations and documents, where the findings are richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998). To support learning gained over the past several semesters of study, specifically of interviewing and using focus groups, the researcher designed an interview protocol for the interview or focus group situations. By loosely adapting Creswell's (2003) recommendations, the researcher creates and uses document protocols for use with Missouri government archives or MODESE library documents.

The researcher for this qualitative case study will investigate the implications of a state-supported collaboration between secondary and higher education, where approximately half the secondary population resides in the margins of the formation and implementation of this policy. As a result, these students are not afforded equitable

access to two years of higher education the students in A+ districts receive. The implications of the Outstanding Schools Act infiltrate pockets of education in the state: secondary and college students; secondary and college faculty; administrators at both levels of education; the state departments for both secondary education and higher education in the state; and the communities in which these multiple stakeholders work and live.

When determining if one should research a particular topic, Creswell (2003) encouraged a researcher to assess whether the topic would be of interest "to anyone outside the researcher's area" (p. 29). The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 affects public education in the State of Missouri. This Act has implications for public schools, community and technical colleges, and 4-year institutions. The researcher, then, seeks to explore not only oral histories through policy actors but also the socio-cultural narratives of the people involved in the formulation and implementation of the policy (Grbich, 2007). In addition, the researcher seeks information through the sector not represented through A+ affiliation. Through analyzing and coding interview transcripts, legal documents, Missouri Senate proceedings, official documents distributed through the Missouri Governor's office and other artifacts relevant to the formulation and implementation of the Act, the case study's reliability and validity stabilize (Creswell, 2003; Grbich, 2007; Merriam, 1998). This in-depth investigation achieves this reliability through key patterns and common themes emerging during this process.

Missouri Senate Bill 380 of 1993 changed education in Missouri. Upon initial investigation of the history of SB 380 and the Outstanding Schools Act, a researcher can identify provisions binding the Act to secondary schools and community and technical

colleges. The research should indicate the influence the Outstanding Schools Act has had on both the policy actors and those secondary students who pursue higher education in Missouri. Viewing the Act through its nonparticipants offers a new understanding of the strengths and limitations of the A+ Schools Program. Implications for higher education should also indicate how both the community colleges and four-year institutions have adapted to the Outstanding Schools Act. This information is best acquired through the methods inherent to a qualitative study: interviews, focus groups, document analysis, observations, narratives, and ethnographies (Creswell, 2003).

By engaging in a qualitative study of the various influences and policy actors shaping the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, a researcher seeks to identify the critical framework binding the implementation of this educational policy marginalizing more than half of the high schools in the state of Missouri. This knowledge is gained through the interview process, including the policy makers, college A+ coordinators and presidents, state education department officials, and the leaderships of non-A+ high schools. The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 benefits communities, secondary institutions and higher education around the state–but only the secondary institution if the district applies to and fulfills state-mandated requirements to affiliate with the program.

The goal of this research is to analyze the critical intent of the Outstanding Schools Act and determine if the Act fulfills its intent of offering post-secondary education to all students in the state of Missouri. The intent is to identify the rationale of not providing this access half of the high schools around the state. This case study identifies ways in which the Act has fulfilled its intent to serve students in the state of Missouri as well as the ways in which it has veered from its original intent. As a policy

whose goals indicate it is dedicated to providing all students in the state with an equitable access to higher education, the A+ Schools Program falls short of its own goals.

The final two chapters of this research study analyze the results of the research. In addition, appendices present a collection of the documents accessed, analyzed, and created to support the study. Chapter Four presents the research study and its findings, investigating state education and government data and assessing information from the interview and document analysis. Chapter Five concludes the study and recommends future research and studies.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

This study investigated the access and equity of the Missouri A+ Schools Program as a statewide policy to provide postsecondary education or training to all students in the state. In the early 1990s in Missouri, two key events shaped the direction of secondary and higher education in the state for the next two decades. In 1991, the citizens of Missouri voted against Proposition B, a higher education funding opportunity supported by the presidents of public and independent colleges and universities throughout the state. Had the initiative passed, public funding for higher education in Missouri would have been significantly enhanced. A second key event emerged when a Cole County Circuit Court judge ruled in favor of the Committee for Educational Equality, who challenged Missouri's levels of funding equity in the public school systems. This ruling in January 1993 supported "establishing a minimum and then seemingly discretionary level of spending" (Committee for Educational Equality v. State of Missouri, 2007, p. 6) for school districts around the state. By May 1993, the Missouri legislature passed Senate Bill 380, which included in it the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, the framework legislation for the Missouri A+ Schools Program.

The Missouri A+ Schools Program is a college pathways program intended to provide educational access to eligible high school students throughout the state. Those students who fulfill the secondary-level obligation of the A+ contract are eligible to attend "a community college, postsecondary career-technical school, or high wage job with work place skill development opportunities" (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p.

5). In addition, those students are eligible "to receive reimbursement for the cost of tuition, general fees, and up to fifty percent (50%) of the book cost, subject to legislative appropriation, to attend any Missouri public community college or career-technical school" (Missouri Secretary of State, 2007, p. 5). Since 1997, when A+ designated public schools produced their first graduates, the A+ Schools Program has required districts to align along five criteria:

1. Improve graduation rates.
2. Lower dropout rates.
3. Eliminate general studies curriculum.
4. Provide career pathways for all students.
5. Prepare students for life after graduation (MODESE, 2009b; MO S. 380, 1993).

These five criteria have guided the program since its inception. However, challenges existed within the application and qualification process of the program in its early years because many districts, for a multitude of reasons, were unable to apply for the opportunity. In all of its successes and accomplishments in providing higher education access to those eligible students who attend an A+-designated high school, the program inherently alienates and marginalizes those Missouri students who do not have the socioeconomic fortune to attend an A+-designated high school. This study seeks to investigate the policy shifts from 1993 to the present and the equity of this program in providing higher education access to all high school students in the state of Missouri.

This policy case study intends to identify the original legislative intent of the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, with focus on the A+ Schools Program, and evaluate the program's success in providing educational equity and access to all students in 2010

as published by program materials and determined by program planners. The purpose of this study, then, is to clarify the demographics of those students and communities served by the A+ Schools Program and its opportunities in contrast with the demographics of those students and communities not served by A+ and its opportunities–including access and equity in education.

The following research questions guided the study and influenced the data analysis process.

1. What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
2. How does the A+ Schools Program as delivered in 2009-2010 align with its original intent in 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
3. According to the most recent and updated data, what constituents does the A+ Schools Program serve? What are the demographics of schools served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:
    a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,
    b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and
    c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.
4. According to the most recent and updated data, what Missouri students are not being served by the A+ Schools Program as it has grown and developed since

1993? What are the demographics of schools not served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,
b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and
c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

To investigate these questions, the researcher designed a mixed methods case study of the Missouri A+ Schools Program. To support the qualitative portion of the study, interviews and focus groups were conducted with secondary and postsecondary stakeholders invested with the A+ Schools Program. In addition, a focus group was conducted for postsecondary student recipients of the A+ Schools Program financial benefits. To achieve data rich not only with experiential but also with textual evidence, the researcher analyzed documents relevant to the A+ Schools Program. These included Missouri Senate Bill 380 and Missouri Revised Statutes identifying the A+ Schools Program, MODESE publications, and secondary school district documents. For the quantitative data portion of the study, the researcher identified and compared demographic data relevant to the study, such as MODESE statistical and U.S. Census data demographic data. This data was compiled into a spreadsheet and analyzed for demographic trends and patterns.

Although available to all districts in the state, 13 years into the A+ Schools Program, many schools district do not participate in this program. For this case study of a legislated program available to all districts in Missouri, a critical perspective framed the

research. Merriam (1998) explained, “Knowledge generated through this mode of research is an ideological critique of power, privilege, and oppression in areas of educational practice” (p. 4). In addition, she noted, “From a critical research perspective, [researchers] would be interested in how the social institution of school is structured such that the interests of some members and classes of society are preserved and perpetuated at the expense of others” (p. 5). In many ways, Merriam’s commentary reflected the incongruent goals of the A+ Schools Program. In addition, through the qualitative design identified as critical realism (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006), an objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology support the design. This position concentrates on “exposing interests and enabling emancipation” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2006, p. 7). Knowledge gained from this process “has to do with normative states in social, economic, and political realms. It concerns a vision of what ought to be, what is right, and what is wrong, and arises through a process of consciousness-raising and conscientization” (p. 7). This study sought to identify these relationships surrounding the A+ Schools Program and its access and equity to all students as intended through the language used with the original implementation of the A+ Schools Program.

Organization of the Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to present a summary of the data collected during the mixed method process of utilizing both qualitative and quantitative means to acquire data. The quantitative data provided results in support of two of the four research questions, and the data is presented in summarized format. Whereas the mixed method design was utilized, the majority of the data analyzed emerged from the qualitative portion of the study. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggested there are “no formulae or

recipes for the 'best' way to analyze the stories we elicit and collect. Indeed, one of the strengths of thinking about data as narrative is this opens up the possibilities for a variety of analytic strategies" (p. 80). Chapter Four, then, identifies these strategies and processes of collecting and analyzing not only the stories and documents but also the statistical data related to the A+ Schools Program. Part I: Qualitative Protocol and Analysis identifies the processes used to collect and analyze the data through the qualitative methods of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. In Part II: Qualitative Findings and Emergent Themes, the researcher identifies the themes as they emerged through the shared narratives and document analysis of the study. The multiple transcriptions from the interviews and focus groups were coded initially for commonalities, at which point themes emerged from the data and notes. As data was collected and notes were analyzed, writing began. As noted by a multitude of qualitative design researchers, data collection and data analysis in qualitative studies are interrelated and occur simultaneously (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, Clark, Guttman, & Hanson, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Part III: Quantitative Findings and Analysis articulates the process implemented for the administrative data review and subsequent statistical analysis. This part includes an analysis of the quantitative data as defined and supported by the administrative data available through MODESE and U.S. Census Bureau web sites accessible by the public. With independent samples *t* tests used to compare data, this section also provides the results of the *t* tests and their levels of significance.

Part I: Qualitative Protocol and Analysis

The researcher sought to capture relevant A+ and non-A+ experiences from the practitioners and students through stories and narratives about the A+ Schools Program.

In this qualitative part of the policy case study regarding equity and college access related to the Missouri A+ Schools Program, multiple methods of data collection were implemented: interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

Prior to recruitment for and subsequent scheduling of interviews and focus groups, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured through the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU). In addition, IRB approval was granted with Ozarks Technical Community College, as focus groups and interviews were conducted on the college's Springfield campus. Because a regional high school site's facilities were used for additional interviews and focus groups, the school's superintendent wrote a letter indicating permission for the researcher to use the district's facilities. Both the OTC IRB document and the superintendent's permission letter were submitted in fulfillment of the MU IRB packet. The MU IRB also approved the protocol for the related qualitative documents related to the recruitment of participants, the interview questions, and the focus group protocol for the different samples. A common protocol was utilized for the interviews, but the focus group protocol was differentiated by group participants: (a) A+ designated, (b) non-A+ designated, and (c) community college students utilizing their A+ Schools Program benefits.

Interview Protocol

Interview participants were recruited based on their experiences with the A+ Schools Program. Twenty-four interviews were conducted with participants comprising a cross-section of the A+ spectrum: graduates of A+ designated schools, high school teachers representing both A+ and non-A+ designated districts, high school curriculum specialists, A+ coordinators, high school principals, high school superintendents, state-

level supervisors, community college financial aid representatives, community college vice-presidents, and former community college presidents.

The researcher initially utilized convenience sampling (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998) to recruit participants. As a faculty member with a community college and a member of a mailing list for regional A+ coordinators, the researcher had access to contact information of many practitioners. Students were recruited from community college classes. Other participants were recruited based on their professional positions—the state-level supervisor and director of the A+ Schools Program were recruited as well as a university administrator who was formerly a community college president. Through the interview process, snowball sampling (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Crotty, 1998) resulted in participants recommending other potential interview recruits, whose history and experience with the A+ Schools Program deemed them of value to the study.

The researcher initiated contact with interview recruits via email correspondence and phone calls (see Appendix F: Research Recruitment Correspondence). For those recruits who agreed to an interview, a time convenient to them was scheduled, and protocol and informed consent documents were emailed as attachments (see Appendix B: Interview Protocol; Appendix C: Interview Questions; and Appendix G: Informed Consent). Prior to the interview at the respective sites, all participants were provided the Informed Consent documents and interview questions, at which point they were provided time to read and sign the informed consent documents. Two copies of the informed consent signature page were distributed: the researcher collected one and the participant kept one for his or her records. At this time, the researcher secured permission for the interview to be audio taped, explaining the role of the recording to ensure accuracy of the

participant's statements.

As the interview commenced, the researcher recorded notes on the interview protocol document (see Appendix B: Interview Protocol). In addition, upon transcription of the audio recording, the transcriptions were delivered to the participants via email attachment to validate and ensure the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2003). Participants were entitled to clarify statements or review comments to ensure their statements accurately reflected their intentions.

Focus Group Protocol

With a recruitment process similar in nature to that of the interview protocol, the focus groups were scheduled. The researcher arranged and conducted three focus groups: one with A+ coordinators and high school teachers from the greater Springfield metropolitan region; one with A+ coordinators, superintendents, and teachers representing a rural community in southeast Missouri; and one with college students utilizing their A+ Schools Program benefits for their postsecondary education.

Prior to engaging in the focus group process, participants were encouraged to arrive early to take advantage of snacks and beverages provided by the researcher. This time served as an opportunity for casual discussion and introductions, which encouraged an open and conversational focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researcher shared background information about the study with the participants as a transition from the light meal to beginning the formal focus group. During this transition, informed consent documents were distributed and explained. As noted with the interview protocol, two copies of the signature page were distributed to the participants, allowing the participant a copy and the researcher a copy for files.

The researcher also noted the protocol for the focus group questioning procedure, verbalizing to participants each person would have an opportunity both to respond and to choose not to respond to any questions. One primary distinction between the interview and focus group process, however, was the use of video recording in addition to audio recording of the focus group session. The researcher explained the role of the recordings in ensuring accuracy of the academic research. Participants were directed to the section of the informed consent documents that articulated all recordings would be used exclusively for the purpose of educational research and would be destroyed after a period of three years (see Appendix G: Informed Consent). These participants also received a copy of the respective focus group transcriptions for review and accuracy. This review strategy ensured validity of the data (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Merriam, 1998).

Document Collection

Another data collection method for the quantitative design is document collection. The documents for analysis related to the A+ Schools Program may span from secondary documents such as newspaper or other media forms to primary documents, such as meeting minutes, senate bills, revised statutes, and documents created and published by MODESE or individual districts. For this study of the A+ Schools Program, the researcher analyzed several primary documents with the use of a document analysis protocol (see Appendix E: Primary Document Analysis Protocol).

Various search strategies produced a strong collection of A+ Schools Program documents for analysis. Some documents were retrieved from the historical archives for Governor Mel Carnahan at the Missouri State Library, which is operated under the

auspices of the Secretary of State. As public information materials, additional documents were available through the A+ Schools Program portal of the School Improvement area of MODESE's web site. Some participants delivered documents to the researcher during the interview process. To protect the privacy of districts sharing materials, those districts are identified as A, B, C, etc. rather than by their district affiliation.

Fifteen documents were collected and analyzed. They are categorized according to the following organizational pattern:

1. Legislative and government documents. These documents included Governor Mel Carnahan's documents, the Secretary of State's publications, and legislative documents. These were acquired at the official state library, where then-Governor Carnahan's archives are housed.
    a. The Missouri Report 1993: Achieving the National Education Goals.
    b. A Primer to the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993.
    c. Code of State Regulations—Title 5, Division 50, Chapter 350, Section 040: The A+ Schools Program.
    d. The A+ Schools Program section of Missouri Senate Bill 380 "perfected" April 21, 1993.
    e. Missouri Revised Statutes: 1994, 2002, 2008, and 2009.
2. MODESE A+ Schools Program documents. These documents were accessible to the researcher through MODESE's School Improvement web portal.
    a. Facts about Missouri's A+ Schools Program (MODESE 3300-3 Rev. 08/09).

b. Notification of Commitment for Public Schools Seeking A+ Designation (MO500-2387 07/07).

c. A+ Pre-Designation Report for Eligible Schools.

d. A+ Schools Program Designation Checklist (MO500-2301 08/08).

e. A+ Schools Self-Monitoring Checklist (MO500-2439 07/07).

3. Practitioner documents. Without solicitation by the researcher, interview and focus group participants of the study submitted these documents to the researcher for further study and analysis.

a. District A Scholarship Application (non-A+ designated district).

b. District B board reports, annual reports, A+ agreement, monthly checklist, and career planning guide.

c. MODESE graphic: A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009 (See Appendix H: A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009).

d. MODESE-generated report: A+ Schools Program.

e. MODESE-generated report: A+ Expenditures 1995-2002.

Process of Analysis

In this qualitative segment of the research study, results of the interviews, focus groups, and primary documents drive the analysis. Krueger and Casey (2000) noted, "Analysis begins by going back to the intent of the study" (p. 127). Creswell (2003) recommended the analysis stage was "an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study" (p. 190). In a separate publication, Creswell (1998) explained the data analysis process as a spiral, where "one enters with data of text or images (e.g., photographs, videotapes) and

exits with an account or narrative" (p. 150). Merriam (1998) presented a direct assessment of data analysis: "Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data" (p. 178).

From the onset, as interviews and focus groups concluded and documents emerged, data collection and analysis began. The researcher analyzed documents, interview responses, and focus group feedback during the data collection phase. In addition to accessing the notes recorded on the various protocol documents during the data collection stage, the researcher transcribed and reviewed the audio recordings. As findings emerged, the researcher focused on the purpose for the study and the research questions, using these parameters as guides for the data management. Grbich (2007) identified the value of "accumulating emerging issues into themes" (p. 30). He described an iterative approach of tracking and checking the data as it emerges, having the researcher engage with the transcribed text. He recommended this process "in order to highlight emerging issues, to allow all relevant data to be identified, and to provide direction in the seeking of further data" (p. 25). The result for the researcher is heightened awareness of patterns, themes, and meanings as they emerged from the collected data. These results related to the initial and final research questions, research questions one and four, framing the study.

In this qualitative case study design, the researcher increased the credibility of the findings by subscribing to multiple methods used to validate and support the research findings. The researcher implemented credibility strategies as itemized by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (1998). These strategies included triangulation, member-checking, and long-term observation. Toward triangulation, the researcher interviewed

and conducted focus groups with a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Participants included the following representatives:

1. College students receiving A+ Schools Program benefits.
2. Community members benefitting from the community business partnership.
3. A+-designated middle school teachers utilizing high school students as tutors.
4. A+-designated high school teachers observing student behaviors and decisions.
5. Non-A+ designated high school teachers and administrators considering A+ Schools Program designation.
6. High school current and former administrators and A+ Schools Program coordinators analyzing the A+ data for the state.
7. State-department administrators supervising the A+ Schools Program.
8. Community college financial aid administrators and A+ coordinators facilitating the A+ Program and regulating tuition reimbursement on the postsecondary side.
9. A former community college president currently serving at a four-year institution as an assistant provost.

In addition to the diverse representation for the interview process and focus groups, the researcher analyzed a multitude of A+ Schools Program-related documents.

Member-checking and long-term observation were also utilized to increase the credibility of the research study. Upon completion of transcribing the audio recordings, the researcher submitted via email attachment the transcriptions to the participants. They reviewed the document for clarity and accuracy, advocating the value of member-checking. In addition, the researcher's long-term observation of and familiarity with the A+ Schools Program aided in increasing credibility. With professional experiences at

both university and community college levels since 1993, the researcher had professional knowledge of the related discussions surrounding the A+ Schools Program and its benefits or challenges. This professional experience was also identified through Merriam (1998) as researcher's bias, another strategy used to enhance validity. In addition to the accumulated informal professional knowledge of the A+ Schools Program, the researcher began formal research on and tracking of the program in 2008.

Part II: Qualitative Findings and Emergent Themes

The researcher transcribed and coded the interview and focus group sessions, identifying multiple codes that emerged from the texts. Using overarching concepts of access and equity to frame the codes, the initial coding strategy produced 86 codes ranging from affluence issues to workforce criteria. These codes aligned along a continuum supporting the overall role of access and equity in the implementation and ongoing delivery of the A+ Schools Program. These 86 codes were then grouped into categories related to key components of the A+ Schools Program as shared by the participants through the interviews and focus groups.

In relationship to the multiple perspectives and experiences captured from the participants, the results aligned along the following themes related to access and equity of the A+ Schools Program: the leadership factor, the program intent, the fiscal variable, and the overall value of the A+ Schools Program. These themes span the changes related to the shifts in leadership, program intent, finances, and program value from 1993 through 2010. Results from both the interviews and focus groups aligned along these four themes. These themes also responded to the demographic and statistical issues of access and equity within the A+ Schools Program of the state-legislated Outstanding Schools

Act as identified through the quantitative analysis.

Through the interview process, key historical and chronological timelines were shared by participants, resulting in a shared and common experience in the early years of the A+ Schools Program. To establish a general understanding of the A+ Schools Program and its process, one should be introduced to common events essential to understanding the process prior to analyzing the themes of the research study.

A+ Schools Program Historical Timeline of Events

In 1994, a Request for Proposals (RFP) was created by MODESE and delivered to all superintendents in the state to promote and solicit district participants for the A+ Schools Program. At this time, grant funding from the state was available to districts who sought to overhaul their curriculum and establish substantial access to computers and vocational school-to-work pathways programs for their students. If a district completed these and other changes required by the A+ Schools Program initiative, they were granted A+ designation. Although 38 schools were selected as grant recipients in 1994 to begin the process to achieve A+ designation, only 36 of those schools fulfilled the obligations of the RFP. The 36 schools received designation in 1997, the first year postsecondary benefits were available to students graduating from the A+ designated high schools. In the second year of designation, 1998, 18 schools were granted designation, bringing the total around the state to 54. The grants from the state to implement the A+ Schools Program were available until 2001-2002, at which time both the numbers of schools receiving A+ designation and schools applying for designation dropped. From 2002-2003 to the present, the onus has been on the district to fund the technical and curriculum changes required to achieve A+ designation. During this time, the Missouri School

Improvement Program (MSIP) strengthened its requirements, and many non-designated schools' curricula aligned more closely with the A+ Program's curriculum recommendations.

Interviews

The interviews yielded rich information. The four themes emerged as dominant considerations within the interviews and were consistent throughout the overall interview process. Upon reviewing the transcriptions and codes, the researcher identified overwhelming numbers of statements related to these themes, which were emphasized and reiterated by the participants. These results responded to Research Questions 1 and 2, which asked participants to address the original intent and current understanding of the A+ Schools Program. In addition, the questions asked the participants to identify constituents who would benefit from the program. The following section explores the primary themes that emerged from the interview discussions.

The Leadership Factor

This theme captured for the researcher the value many of the participants placed on leadership at a multitude of levels, from the governor to the superintendents to the local school boards. The types of leadership styles described, however, were incongruent with each other. The leadership examples emerged to polar extremes—they represented either status quo decision-making or visionary and forward thinking action.

Status quo leadership. Two of the participants interviewed, both representing non-designated schools from rural southwest Missouri school districts, shared common responses to the inquiry as to why their district had not applied for designation. One school counselor said,

> I started questioning my principal [about A+], asking, "Why aren't we part of this?" That was under our former superintendent, and my principal told me he had said, "When I retire, you guys go for it, but I don't want to do it." He retired two years ago. We're in the process of making application.

The other participant explained, "They [school board members] are supportive and our superintendent is supportive, but we're so lean right now financially. We feel we need to wait for a little bit better economic times before we ask for any additional money from our people."

A former A+ coordinator related challenges with the leadership represented on a school board. She illustrated how leadership can stifle a district. She explained,

> [This district] had a school board comprised of doctors, dentists, and attorneys, and they didn't feel like A+ was something they wanted to do. I had presented on A+ and the School to Work initiatives, and they were very negative, very opposed to the concepts. After the meeting, the principal of [one of the district's high schools] said to me, "Now you see why we're not working toward an A+ grant. These people don't want their children to be plumbers, welders, and automotive technicians." Now, 15 years later, not only do they [this district] want it, they worked hard to get all [district] schools A+ designated. The last two didn't even get funding. They did it on their own.

A former superintendent explained why some superintendents chose not to apply when the program was unveiled. He stated, "Some didn't apply in the late 1990s because they weren't willing to make the changes. It was very, very time consuming, and it was tough. … It is easier to move a cemetery than to get schools to change."

Visionary leadership. A current community college administrator wrote the original grant for the A+ Schools Program at her district when she was teaching in the secondary arena. Her district was one of the original 38 to receive A+ designation. She explained the value of strong leadership at the state level:

> Mel Carnahan ran for the governor, and one of his main platforms was educational reform. His was the A+ Schools Program. When he was elected in [November] 1992, as early as that December before he was even sworn in [in January 1993], he started calling high school principals and superintendents to talk about how to roll this unique, highly unusual program out. This was a program never rolled out in the high schools.

She continued, emphasizing the role and influence a state leader can have on the direction of a state's education path. She noted,

> Carnahan stood on the state's steps on January 11, 1993. He said Missouri's future begins with our children, and unless we give them the tools and the incentives to learn, really learn, we doom our children and our workforce to mediocrity and failure. We withdraw the promise of opportunity and prosperity, and that's what [the A+ Schools Program] is all about.

A former secondary superintendent who now teaches educators at the college level emphasized, while tapping his hand on a café table, the value of visionary leaders in districts. He confirmed, "We need people with that vision, with that passion. We can't just change names of our courses. We have to change what we're doing and how we're doing it. Students need to see it, do it, know it." He concluded his comments about

leadership, suggesting the changes expected of those districts applying for A+ designation were “true cultural and systemic changes.”

A community college financial aid administrator with experience in a secondary district in the southeast region of Missouri praised the visionary leadership of a small, rural district in the lowest socioeconomic region of the state. That particular district’s superintendent applied for A+ designation in the program’s first year of availability. The community college representative explained the impact the superintendent’s decisions had on the community:

> It was amazing to see how this insurgence of A+ suddenly took school districts that couldn’t have technology because [they] didn’t have any money or resources to having the cutting edge of some of the best technology there was. Now those students were being educated and progressing forward because [the A+ Schools Program] was really something forward.

Several interview participants praised the value of change and transformational leadership at the state and local district level. A former A+ coordinator with a community college stated, “A+ is the best program the state has ever initiated because of what it does. I don't know of another state program that impacts students at that level.”

Additional interviews were conducted with administrators and teachers of schools without A+ designation. Visionary and transformational leadership, however, was not exclusive to the A+ designated schools. A superintendent of a small, rural district in a lower socioeconomic region of southeast Missouri shared his district’s experiences with the A+ application process in the late 1990s. During this era, when he was principal of the district and the A+ grant money was available, his superintendent applied for

designation twice and was denied twice. This principal then became superintendent upon the retirement of the prior leader. This story symbolizes the change and effect visionary and transformational leaders can have on non-A+ designated districts. The superintendent shared his district's story:

> When I became a superintendent in 2000, I started thinking about a way to provide our students here with the same opportunities students in A+ districts had. Every district that surrounds me was an A+ school. There was a political issue there. Although I hadn't had parents complain, I could see my students were at a disadvantage with other students as far as being able to go to college. We'd put some of the groundwork together, and I'd talked with Three Rivers Community College. We established a foundation and patterned our [scholarship] after the A+ Schools Program requirements. One difference is our program is geared specifically to [Three Rivers Community College]. … Since the program was established, we've provided over $100,000 in scholarship money. We have a balance of a little over $200,000. Our teachers have contributed approximately $25,000. We allow payroll deduction. We developed memorial envelopes like at the funeral home. We developed one of those envelopes that has the basics of the scholarship. Sometimes when someone close to the school district passes away, instead of sending flowers, many members in the district and in the community make memorial contributions to the scholarship fund.

An additional interview was conducted with the bookkeeper for this district, who shared a story of one of the district's students who took advantage of the scholarship funds. She stated,

> I'm just letting you know what the program does. [The student] had 18 college hours when he graduated high school, and he was not an overachiever at all. His 18 hours of dual credit was paid by [the scholarship], and he got his associate's [at Three Rivers], and now he's over at College of the Ozarks in his junior year. So we do our own scholarship instead of being part of the A+ Program.

As summarized by one participant when he was asked to reflect on the implementation of the program in its early years, he simply stated, "I can't help but think it's really forward-thinking, visionary superintendents" who effected change within districts. Based on the experience in a rural district in southeast Missouri whose superintendent implemented a foundation and scholarship, those forward-thinking, visionary superintendents served both A+ designated and non-A+ designated districts.

Those principals, superintendents, and A+ coordinators submitting grants and implementing the A+ changes in their districts in the mid- to late 1990s echoed common sentiments about the leadership from the state in that era. The MODESE representatives helped districts at the local level implement changes by scheduling and arranging quarterly regional meetings. As one former superintendent explained, these meetings were where several policies for the A+ Schools Program were created—by the practitioners, from the bottom up. He clarified his point:

> When we were setting this [A+ Schools Program] up, we went to Saturn in Tennessee when they were setting their place up. One thing about setting Saturn up was that every employee from top to bottom is required to do 92 hours of training per year. That was part of their system, and [that's how] we set up ours. It was important for everyone to be involved, bottom to top. If you had an A+

person doing this who is not an administrator, there was not going to be a change. A former A+ coordinator at the secondary level corroborated his statements. She explained, "Those individuals [at MODESE] pounded out policies as we would go because 38 coordinators would come to the table, and we would meet on a fairly regular basis, and we had a lot of questions."

Visionary and transformational leaders implemented educational change in a state that had not experienced educational reform. With guidance and support at the state level, the principals, superintendents, and A+ coordinators worked together to implement a progressive program to improve the lives of their students and enhance the quality of life for the state's citizens and communities. As one superintendent asserted, "We're not here to maintain status quo."

The Program Intent

Through the continued interview analysis, an additional theme emerged about the A+ Schools Program and its intent. This analysis, however, needed to be defined further, as interviews with participants resulted in two views for the intent of the program, depending on whether the interview participant had experience with or implemented the A+ Schools Program in its early years or in more recent years. The program intent identified in this section reflect the original and current intent as articulated by superintendents, principals, A+ coordinators, and others affiliated on an intimate level with the implementation and continued delivery of the program.

Original intent. When participants were asked of the original intent of the A+ Schools Program, five key responses emerged: (a) lower the dropout rate, (b) the average student, (c) increase rigor in the curriculum, (d) improve technology in the classroom,

and (e) provide Missouri with a highly skilled workforce. Those participants who had worked to implement A+ in their district in the 1990s iterated those key responses with consistency. Participants who no longer worked in secondary education yet were an integral part in implementing the program with their schools responded, almost verbatim, with those key criteria. In the late 1990s, the intent for the A+ Schools Program was communicated by the state with efficiency and precision. This program provided average students with vocational pathways to high-wage, high-skill, technical careers.

An interview with a high school biology teacher at a south-central Missouri district, which had been designated A+ since 1998, yielded this response without hesitation: “to help prepare some of the kids for the vocational and technical type occupations.” Another participant explained the original intent this way:

> So we can get these individuals trained and in these areas that are skill-based, then business and industry can say okay, Missouri is building a trained workforce for us to move in and hire without us having to worry about getting them educated. They’re going to be educated and are going to be available as a workforce to fill those jobs for us.

An assistant superintendent who implemented the A+ Schools Program in her district in the late 1990s articulated the original intent of the A+ program as “an opportunity for the middle-of-the-road student to go on in a two-year career pathway.” She emphasized the original dependence on the “vocational schools,” those schools where students would matriculate upon graduation, intended to “help kids realize their potential with career pathways.” She closed the response by confirming the intent for A+: “It was targeted for those vocational students who were not four-year college bound.”

Two respondents shared what they deemed as the "true intent" of the program with examples of students who had succeeded as a direct result of the A+ Schools Program and its intent. A community college administrator who implemented the program in her district in the late 1990s defined the intent of the program with the example of one of her students who was strongly recruited by Trane, a nationally-known heating and air conditioning company. She explained,

> That young man came from a family that struggled, and he got through high school. He got to the community college. He's highly skilled, in a high-wage job in the heating, refrigeration, and air conditioning industry. That was the intent.

Another interview participant, a former superintendent at a school designated in south-central Missouri in the late 1990s, provided another example of the "true intent" of the A+ Schools Program. He explained,

> This is why we came up with the pathways. … I had a kid who fought having to take math. The kid's dad worked for Coke, and he's wanting to make a glass pyramid, design this thing, to have one of those little Coke bottles inside of it. He's got all these angles and everything. He's setting up a CNC machine to do this. He said, "I want you to come down [to Linn Technical College] and see the program with me, okay?" When I walk in, he and his instructor are at the little grease board working on stuff. They're doing trigonometry because that's what it takes to decide how to cut these angles that perfectly fit on top of that Coke bottle and sit on that base. That's what we hope to accomplish. You're talking about relevance and meaning. Suddenly, he's seeing why Algebra 1 was not enough.

A former higher education state-department administrator for community colleges in technical education explained the original intent of the program from the post-secondary side. He confirmed,

> The original intent of the A+ Schools Program … was to increase the rate of students going to college. Two, [it] was to help them become more academically-prepared to go to college. Three, it was designed to help students or encourage students to go into high skill, high-wage technical programs. It never, ever was designed for an Associate of Arts degree for university transfer.

These interview respondents were very detailed and clear as to the original intent of the A+ Schools Program. Interview results from other respondents whose current job descriptions were to implement or coordinate the program delivered different responses. Their current implementation experiences with the program suggested a shift in the program's intent from 1997 to the present.

Current intent. As the A+ Schools Program has grown and increased its presence and visibility in schools and communities around the state, having it undergo a shift in policy is not unexpected. What is unexpected, however, is the degree to which the program has deviated from its original intent. As one participant shared, with a dejected tone to his voice, "We've lost the whole vision of what A+ was going to bring about."

During an interview with an A+ coordinator at a school receiving designation in 2010, the coordinator shared his enthusiasm for their district's first A+ graduates. He explained,

> We have three seniors [who] have completed all the requirements, including tutoring. There are three more seniors [who] are completing their tutoring and,

> hopefully, will be eligible for the financial incentive. This is the first group of A+ students to graduate from [our district], and two are planning to go to [the local community college].

A representative from a district initiating the A+ designation application in 2010 delivered this response to the question about the current intent of the program: “To my knowledge, it's two years of paid education at a technical college. It's going to really be beneficial at our school because we have a lot make that choice.” These statements crystallized what has come to be the current rationale for a district to be designated as an A+ school.

Other interview participants validated this current perspective of the program’s intent. One teacher commented, “It’s changed a lot. We don’t have ABC [Applied Biology and Chemistry] classes, and we don’t have Principles of Technology. Those classes that were instituted when we first got the A+ School’s Program don’t exist anymore in our curriculum.” A secondary administrator echoed disappointment with the program shift in his response to the current intent of the program. He explained,

> Technical language, technical writing, relevant set of skills. I haven’t heard any talk about that. We’re so focused on end-of-course exams and MAP scores. We really lost sight of this right here [He points to a diagram with the words “see it, do it, know it” connected by relational arrows that he constructed during the interview.]. [This is] why we entered into that.

The administrators of the A+ Schools Program at the state level articulated the reason for the shift. The director noted, “There was, at that time, applied course work being offered. It wasn’t a requirement of the program, but was strongly encouraged, so

there were a lot of technological, hands-on activities being implemented. That has changed." The supervisor added, "A lot of those applied pieces are gone. We no longer require it because training is no longer available for teachers."

Evidence of departure from the original program intent resounded in interview after interview. One community college coordinator stated, "The focus is on the financial incentive for college." Two community college administrators, one with extensive experience in the K-12 environment, supported the current paradigm that many people see the primary intent of the A+ Schools Program as a financial incentive for college. One administrator stated, "Now, everybody just focuses at the incentive at the end and loses sight of all the school improvement pieces to the program. Money is the bottom line."

One participant provided some insight to the shift in intent. He shared the following story involving the intent of the program. He explained,

> I was the state director of higher ed. vocational education. … [There was an] assistant state director of vocational education. But [the state director of vocational education] and I were the original administrators who implemented the A+ program. He did the high school piece and I did the community college piece. We might have been at the state conference. It was occasionally called the Career and Technical Conference. … Someone asks [the assistant state director], "I keep getting these questions from parents of these kids, what about these kids that come out of these A+ eligible schools and want to transfer to the university, are they eligible?" He said, yes. Everyone gasped. He just created a policy. It was one of those, can you believe he just did it?, moments. They said, [X], are you

> sure about this? He said, “Yes, oh, yes. We're going to reimburse for anybody who wants just an A.A. degree or university transfer.” [X], I don't think that's in the administrative rules. I don't think that was in [SB] 380. It's not what we had in SB101 on the higher ed side. [On the higher education side], we're building this infrastructure to accept these A+ eligible kids and create a market for the adults. This bureaucrat by one utterance changed the policy.

Another administrator validated this policy shift in intent during her interview. She provided this anecdote, which summarized the philosophy of the current perspectives of the intent for the A+ Schools Program:

> We veered from Mel Carnahan's original intent in that you got Sally Jones at Republic High School, and Sally has a 3.5 or 4.0, and she scored 30 on the ACT. She probably got a scholarship somewhere. Those individuals whose parents might have the funds, they might have gone on to a Drury or MSU. But they’re coming [to the community college] for the first two years. She’s getting an A.A. and then she’s going on to get a bachelor’s in sociology and a master’s in guidance and counseling. Is there anything wrong with that? That’s a philosophical debate.

One participant closed her response to the current intent question with this observation: “The only thing I really see out of the A+ Program that we still have is the tutoring.” Although a valuable element of the A+ Schools Program, the tutoring component was not identified as a key variable of the program’s original intent. Interview participants in their responses to the original intent question rarely mentioned the tutoring

component of the program. The tutoring aspect of the program emerged through the line of questioning which focused on the current intent.

The practitioners and academic professionals affiliated with the A+ Schools Program as it was implemented in 1994 have witnessed the program's true intent as well as its departures as delivered in 2010. The program continues to grow, however, and in interviews with both the director and supervisor of the A+ Schools Program at MODESE, the director explained 40 schools will receive A+ designation by May 2010, with another 42 set to receive designation in 2011. Perhaps one college educator summarized this shift in intent best:

> As time goes by, we have people coming into the system, and we have people leave. People coming in don't have that vision, don't have that passion, and we're going to revert to our past. Senator Matthewson [who is credited for drafting the Outstanding Schools Act] has been gone a long time. We have new commissioners. As all those faces and names change, you lose the original intent.

The Fiscal Variable

As indicated with the prior section analyzing the shifting intent of the A+ Schools Program, a major theme associated with the program centers around the fiscal aspects, which vary from program implementation costs to scholarships to the financial burden on the state to financial incentives for students attending A+ designated schools. As suggested, several categories emerged within the overarching theme of finances, and the two dominant ones are those involving implementation costs and financial incentives for students.

Implementation costs. Several interview participants described the fiscal cost of

implementing the requirements of the program, which included (a) upgraded technologies and the infrastructure to support those technologies; (b) an overhaul to the curriculum by eliminating general track courses and integrating technical courses; and (c) employing a dedicated A+ coordinator at least half-time. For any district, the required changes created budgetary strains. The state, however, provided grants to offset the strategic costs for schools seeking A+ designation. These grants were available from 1994-1995, the first year of application, to fiscal year 2001-2002. Several of the participants articulated the uses for the grant funds. In many situations, unintended challenges emerged upon implementation of the technology and revised curriculum.

The former state higher education department administrator explained the fiscal investment and perceived need for curriculum overhaul. He noted,

> Missouri had not done a very good job in investing in technical equipment, and our area career schools and our community colleges truly had what I would call second-rate training equipment. Things were out-of-date, worn-out, and obsolete. We didn't even have computer labs. We were literally, and I traveled the state back then, we were using World War II surplus stuff. We wanted to increase the accessibility of post-secondary career and technical programs.

One of the original authors for an A+ Schools Program grant detailed the process as she recalled it. As she disclosed, she also served as a member of an A+ grant selection committee in subsequent years upon her district's designation. She explained the process of selection first:

> I started reading A+ grants once we were an A+ school. I started reading the grants in quadrants, so that we evenly distributed them. The southwest didn't get

> all. We were going to grant 30 awards in a year. Fifteen of them didn't go to southwest. But they were pretty well split up.

She then explained her district's process of application:

> An RFP went out to all high schools to write. The grants were read at MODESE, and there was a pot of money. It was done so much like it is today. If there's a pot of money with $6 million and we have a 125 grants, we can only fund this many. They ranked them, they rated them, [and] they divided the state into quadrants. We were contacted in the summer that the district had been awarded a grant for A+ designation. The guidelines were you have three years. At the end of three years, we went through a huge review, much like MSIP.

A principal who was an A+ coordinator for her district in the late 1990s described the grant process in her interview. She explained, "It was competitive. It was a hefty grant application process. You had to speak to the goals of A+ [reduce the dropout rate, eliminate general track courses, and provide career pathways for all students]." A current superintendent reiterated the original grant funding available from the state in the early years of the program. He clarified, "Back in the 1990s, when the A+ grants came out from the state, money was available for schools to put in the course work and the equipment."

Another participant articulated the challenges with the changing educational environment. She explained, "We used some A+ funds to pay stipends to teachers to rewrite their curriculum. Many teachers had no curriculum guides, and didn't even know what one would look like." Another former A+ coordinator at the secondary level explained,

> We were totally funded. We got $150,000 a year for three years. Many of the schools didn't have the level of technology they needed. The grants paid for professional development and allowed instructors to go to National Science conferences. We had state of the art technical physics labs, physics labs in which the curriculum was applied and contextual. It really overhauled the curriculum.

A current assistant superintendent itemized the purchases for her district because of the A+ grant funding. She explained,

> We had reading literacy, and we started that program because our kids could learn tutoring along with that. That lifted our reading levels two grade levels for those kids who were having difficulties. That was funded to our school through A+. We built it in as a link to dropout rate. We also bought an attendance program, where we could track kids' attendance and call their home and try to work on that 95% [four-year attendance rate required by the program]. Without that funding, we could not have done that.

A current curriculum coordinator with a rural district served as the A+ coordinator with a southwest Missouri district in the late 1990s. She explained,

> At that time, they [MODESE] were providing money, and we had things we had to do with that money. A big part was to buy technology to incorporate into curriculum. We improved the curriculum to include technical courses, which were wonderful at the time, but when that teacher retired, finding a new teacher for those supply tech classes was a challenge. Schools have done away with those courses because of that situation. In addition, schools were unable to maintain the equipment they bought with A+ because the equipment was expensive to maintain

and replace. You're expected to sustain, replace, repair. Grant funds run out.

To exemplify how quickly the technology infiltrated the A+ designated schools, one participant, who serves as a member of a community A+ advisory committee, described the experiences of one teacher moving from an A+ designated school to a non-A+ district in the late-1990s. One of the most distressing transitions she experienced centered on the insufficient technology as compared to her prior district. He explained, "The computer in her classroom was a computer that was granted to [the district] by an outside entity that we worked with to get a computer in her classroom."

A counselor from a non-A+ designated district explained the toll on resources within her rural, small district. Her professional experiences spanned two rural districts in southwest Missouri. She explained,

> At [my first district], I was the social studies department. I was the lone ranger. Now, I am the 7th through 12th counselor. There are no extras. We're spending every dime we have to meet MODESE requirements. In the last two years, we've gotten a secretary. She is shared with me, the athletic director, and the special ed[ucation] director. She's one of two secretaries in our 7th through 12th building. We felt so blessed to be able to hire a second secretary. At [my first district], we had one K-12 counselor. One. Yes.

She later explained her district dropped programs in order to fulfill other MODESE mandates, so applying for the A+ Schools Program was not a priority when programs were already being eliminated from their district's curriculum.

Grant funds did run out during the 2001-2002 fiscal year. One participant explained the grants provided by the state had ended, noting, "If a school wants in the A+

Program, that school has to commit to do it." A former A+ college coordinator who also serves on an A+ community advisory committee confirmed, "There's no incentive from the state. If a school wants to become an A+ school, they march through those original steps that were there from the beginning. The sheer numbers have overwhelmed the entire program."

Financial incentives. As noted by one of the participants, numbers have overwhelmed the program. With 274 schools designated A+ and 80 or more schools selected to receive A+ designation by 2011, resources are not infinite for the program as it is delivered in 2010. In economic times such as what the state is experiencing, record numbers of students pursue the requirements for and seek to use their A+ financial incentive for use at a state-supported two-year institution.

Whereas the state uses the term "financial incentive" in its A+ Schools Program documentation, recipients of the A+ benefits, those students and their families, use the term scholarship. One teacher explained the perceptions of students in her district, noting, "A+ is pretty much a scholarship program. That's pretty much it. That's all it is." Another participant explained, "I would hope that Governor Carnahan wouldn't be too disappointed in us that we veered off that path a little bit, but there was nothing in the law that would disallow someone from coming in and enrolling in the associate of arts degree and using the money for a scholarship."

Unfortunately, financial aid administrators at the college level have data to support alarming attrition rates for A+ students using their financial incentives or scholarships in their first semester of college. One financial aid administrator at the community college level stated,

> If legislators were to look at the money being spent on this incentive and wanted us to validate the money being spent in the program, they would simply want to ask for how many students we have in our program. We plan on at the end of each fall semester losing in the ballpark of 40% to 43% of our A+ students.

He further explained this phenomenon is not exclusive to a recession economy, as his office has years of data to support the statistic. In addition, this phenomenon is not unique to one community college. His discussions with members of other community college financial aid offices address similar results around the state.

The state has modified the financial incentives from the program's inception, currently reimbursing tuition and common fees, which are fees all students at a college pay. Originally, costs for required books were reimbursed. That part of the policy was reviewed after a few years, as students would receive reimbursement and then sell the books for cash at the end of the semester. The community college financial aid administrator, however, shared the context of some of the state-level discussions surrounding the affordability of the program and its financial incentives. He explained,

> For getting more schools in, it's going to cost more money. There could be restrictions. Instead of paying for a student's full tuition, [the state] is going to cut a student at 15 [hours]. Or a student only needs 12, and we're not paying any more than that.

As increasing numbers of non-A+ designated schools apply and become accepted as A+ designated schools, the financial incentives will be affected. How the state responds will be the charge of the visionaries and transformational leaders in the

legislature, whose own children have perhaps participated in and benefitted from the A+ Schools Program, gaining an appreciation for the overall value of the program itself.

The Overall Value

As other themes emerged from the interview data in bold form, so the overall value of the A+ Schools Program emerged. The value of this program is seen by a multitude of constituents, which include students, families, communities, business partners, schools, colleges, the state, and the state's workforce. The interview participants shared stories and narratives to spotlight the program's inherent value. The primary categories identified and analyzed in this section include college access and the A+ initiative, which comprised the four requirements related to tutoring, attendance, citizenship, and grades.

College access. Providing college access to eligible graduates of A+ Schools Programs may be the variable of highest value on an A+ values continuum. Other issues on that continuum include the benefits of the program, which include contributing to the common good, building an educated workforce, and valuing family and community support. For a state to value its citizenry to that degree is noble. Providing a student basic access to the opportunity for a college education influences every other part on the continuum—the common good, an educated workforce, and family and community support.

Several of the participants noted the value college access had to students and their families. One participant explained, "This program really focused on those average kids from families that never went to college." Another participant responded, "[A+] is for those people who are sustaining. They're surviving, they're not out asking for handouts,

[and] they're not buying McMansions. Those are the backbone of our workforce. Those are the ones who benefit from this program." Another participant commented on the value of access to college. He shared, "I commonly have people say A+ is the deciding factor for their son or daughter to go to college. Had it not been for the A+ program, they would have never considered even going to college." A former community college A+ coordinator reflected on Governor Carnahan's views. He stated,

> His [Carnahan's] focus was for second-tier students who were good, solid students, but maybe they were not considering college as an option for whatever reason … because their parents hadn't gone, they weren't sure if they wanted to, because school was a chore to attend and get it done. They were somewhat marginal as a student. A+ was to try to tackle that, to take that group that may not be considering college and give them incentive.

Throughout the interview process, a common interview response reiterated the value of a student being able to consider college. An A+ coordinator at a community college explained, "The concept of going to college has gone from non-existent to maybe this can happen." The financial aid administrator reflected to the attrition rates of A+ students. He queried, "We talked about the numbers earlier where there's the failing out of that first semester. How many of those students are first generation students? They're just not prepared for college." In a separate interview, a principal's comments echoed the recognition of the first generation student. She noted, "I think we felt those students didn't financially have the means for [college]. The A+ program was set up to speak to that group of students, first generation students."

The former superintendent suggested community and family culture, primarily for the first generation status student, directly influenced expectations. For this population, he supported the "stay at home and go to college" perspective. He explained,

> I agree totally with that because the proximity eases that transition. I can think of a handful of kids right at the top of my head who have gone to college [at home] and have all the potential in the world, but they're not comfortable leaving their security to go away to MU or to St. Louis. But they've been extremely successful at [this campus].

The A+ initiatives. As the interview participants discussed the value of the A+ Schools Program and its benefits, their responses often bridged the related A+ requirements into a single, linked initiative. The students were required (a) to complete 50 hours of tutoring; (b) to achieve a minimum 95% attendance rate over the four years of high school; (c) to attain a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA; and (d) to be a good citizen, when translated meant avoid drugs and alcohol or any variety of vernacular phrases used by the interview participants to describe the students: stay clean, keep their nose clean, stay out of trouble, etc. Through the interview discussions, these requirements merged into a single A+ initiative, as the interview participants spoke of all the requirements as a single entity. For example, citizenship was not discussed exclusive of GPA. They were discussed as an initiative. A former secondary A+ coordinator praised the value of the A+ initiative: "It's rewarding those kids for being there every day even though they're not valedictorian and salutatorian. They're there, and they provide community service with tutoring. They're good citizens."

An example separate from the A+ designated schools emerged from the rural southeast Missouri non-A+ district whose superintendent formed a foundation and developed a scholarship program for the district's students. The program was patterned after the A+ Schools Program, and as he explained the requirements, he described them as a single initiative: "The motivation factor for the students is to stay out of trouble and have good attendance and average GPA. The mentoring program… that's been a real plus. We have high school students mentor some of our elementary students and provide tutoring." Another participant described the initiative as a checklist: "Do well. Good GPA. Citizenship. Tutoring. Keeping your nose clean. Just being the best you can be getting out of high school." A community college participant itemized the initiative as well: "The tutoring aspects, the requirements of the GPA, the attendance requirements, the citizenship. A+ drills these in their head."

This concept of repetition and reiteration was evident during an interview with a counselor from a non-A+ designated school. With her professional experiences from non-A+ designated districts, she rolled off the A+ requirements with little difficulty. She clarified, "Their [district students] tutoring and all that won't start for another couple of years. Their attendance and their grades, the citizenship aspect of it all, though, will be in effect. We had decided there are so many advantages offering that." She indicated her district anticipates A+ designation in three to four years.

The initiatives, then, affect choices. These choices influence decision-making, and these filter to develop responsible and mature citizens. These initiatives influence the common good. One participant suggested, "Let's tie those factors to self-esteem issues for that student who grows up connected in high school." A school counselor in a rural,

south-central Missouri district suggested this A+ initiative "has helped raise the standards of those students. They now expect this of themselves. They raised their own standards."

Focus Groups

Supplementing the interview process with focus group discussions contextualized the A+ experience beyond a single administrator or practitioner. Rather than engaging in a one-on-one discussion, the participants of the focus groups shared best practices, challenges, and anecdotal stories related to their particular programs. The range of experiences also enhanced the focus group discussions, as one participant would clarify or explain questions raised by others. Conducting the focus groups provided a successful experience and allowed the researcher to acquire greater levels of understanding of the A+ Schools Program in action.

The four themes—leadership, intent, finances, and value—emerged through the focus groups, but to a weighted degree. Whereas the interviews equitably yielded themes in bold form, the focus groups resulted in a stronger dominant theme with the other themes evident to a lesser degree. For an example, the overall value of the A+ program prevailed as a discussion issue with the student focus group. The questions themselves contributed to this shift, but another variable to consider was the numbers of interviews compared to the numbers of focus groups conducted. This section, then, continues the analysis of the qualitative data by reviewing the findings of the focus groups, which respond to research questions one and four of the research study.

Student Focus Group

While five students were scheduled to participate in the student focus group, three followed through with the process. The students were enrolled at the local community

college, which is where the focus group was scheduled. The students graduated from A+ designated schools within a 90-minute drive to the campus. Although the three were eligible for the financial incentive, two used their A+ funds for their college tuition and common fees. One student graduated in 2008 from a school designated A+ in 1997, one graduated in 2009 from a school designated A+ in 1998, and the third student graduated in 2009 from a high school designated A+ in 2009. His class was the first from that high school eligible for the A+ financial incentives. To note, none of the three students identified vocational training, technical curriculum, or school-to-work programs in their discussion of the A+ Schools Program.

This section analyzed the findings and identified the themes to emerge from the student focus group. Of the four themes to emerge through the interview process, two emerged with the student focus group: the fiscal variable and the overall value. This discussion did not produce any commentary regarding administrative leadership styles or original or current A+ program intent. For clarity, the students will be identified as SH, LR, and WS.

The fiscal variable. The students explained their process of learning about the A+ Schools Program for their district and how it was presented to them. The two students from the established A+ districts stated the A+ process and paperwork started in the 8th grade, when everyone was required to sign the paperwork and parents were given information about the program. LR said, “They [A+ coordinator and counselor] pretty much promote it in our school as if even if you think you’re not using this, let this be your plan B, because it’s too good of a financial deal not to take it.” SH said, “They [A+ coordinator and counselor] promoted it [A+] to us as if you don’t have money to go

somewhere else [for college] or want to go for free for a couple of years and get your basics out of the way, this is a good deal." WS's experience with her district mirrored those of her peers.

The tenets of the A+ Schools Program require students to submit their Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) documents and pursue federal financial aid before being eligible for the A+ incentive. SH, who does not use his A+ incentive money, explained, "I could potentially use that A+ money to get my classes paid for. My Pell Grant actually covers all of my classes, so I don't use my A+ money at all but I am qualified for it. If for some reason I didn't get the Pell Grant, I would have access to those funds or I would have access if I transferred somewhere else and they had A+ scholarships available."

WS, a 4.0 Bright Flight recipient who has financially profited by attending college, said the community college was always Plan A for her. For her, the challenge was determining which community college to attend—the one at home or the one 90 miles away. She asserted, however, she "had every intention of using that A+ money." LR followed up on WS's comment and explained the A+ funding had always been her Plan B for college, even as recently as the beginning of her senior year of high school. As can happen without warning or planning, life dealt her family a change of events. She explained,

> I entered my senior year with A+ as Plan B. With family situations changing and things happening, A+ turned into what was going to happen and there was not another option. When my dad got sick, it cut our family income in half. My family income didn't qualify me for the grants but I couldn't afford to go to

> a four-year because of dad's cancer. The A+ program was really the only way to go, at least for the first couple of years, until I can get things situated with my dad. We would have had to reevaluate everything if A+ was not an option.

Later in the discussion, LR observed if A+ had not been an option, she would have attended a regional four-year college renowned for its work ethic.

All three students confirmed they were headed to college regardless of the A+ incentives. SH added he would have entered the U.S. Air Force and had college paid through the military, but not attending college was not an option for any of the students.

The overall value. The interview participants emphasized the importance of the citizenship requirements and tutoring experiences for the students. Parents, district teachers, and administrators witnessed transformations in many students because of the tutoring experiences, and these have come to be highly valued by the A+ constituents. The students in the focus group dedicated a majority of the time to the overall value of the program to them post-high school. They included their tutoring experiences and the other A+ initiatives as what they valued most from their tenure with the secondary side of their A+ experience.

WS observed, "I had to do tutoring [for A+] and that really directed me into liking to work directly with people and help them. I really enjoyed that experience." SH, nodding in agreement, said,

> I had worked with this 3rd grade kid throughout the year. He was a troubled student academically and behavior-wise. Not a lot of people wanted to work with him. He told that teacher, I still see her, the only teacher he's ever really understood was me. I was the only person that ever helped him learn. In hearing

> that … I wouldn't have expected to have anything sentimental out of it. But in hearing I actually helped someone, it did give me a sense of pride. For our sophomore seminar, we have service learning. I thought about going back and helping him because he'll be in fifth grade. Obviously, it's a big enough impact that I would go back to help him again.

LR validated the shared value of the tutoring experience. She noted, "I would probably say the experience with tutoring through the A+ program did lead to me applying for the job at the writing center where I help with people's academic writings."

The overall value of the program also includes its focus on grades, attendance, and citizenship. WS confessed,

> As a college student, I will say that A+ puts a little added pressure on what I do. That's what I'm thinking whenever I make decisions about what I'm doing outside of school because I can't lose that scholarship. You are required to stay in the good with the law and you have to have a certain grade point average, which hasn't been a problem. It has made me more aware of my behavior and what I'm doing in my life. It gives you a certain degree of accountability as a person.

Both LR and SH responded to the confession. SH explained, "It gave me a sense of maturity because [I'm] on the other side. It's no longer, I'm in school and I go learn from the teachers. You're helping someone else. It gives you a sense of empowerment." LR agreed:

> Along with the ideas of maturity, you are building your future. Whenever you talk about A+ stuff and whenever you're responsible for your attendance and your grades, this is going to affect you in the future. It gives you that sense of maturity

of starting the growing up process.

The students taking part in the focus group were high-achieving, driven, dedicated to college, and committed to other responsibilities. As an interesting observation noted by the researcher, the two students who had agreed to participate in the focus group but did not attend were graduates of non-A+ designated schools.

A+ Focus Group—Springfield and Southwest Region

Four high school teachers and A+ coordinators participated in the first focus group, which was conducted in a classroom at a community college. With the exception of one school to have received A+ designation in 2009, the other schools represented were designated A+ within the first three years of its availability. The cross-section of experience and perception proved invaluable as the researcher observed varying levels of A+ understanding, intent, and purpose from the participants. Although the four themes related to leadership, finances, goals, and value emerged, the themes related to program intent and overall value dominated the discussion.

The program intent. As was evident with the interviews, divergence has infiltrated the A+ Schools Program from 1993 to 2010, and the goals for its implementation and maintenance have shifted. While the two teachers who participated in the focus group had common classroom experiences, the two A+ coordinators symbolized the departures from the original intent the program had taken over the 13 years of existence. One coordinator, in only her second year with her respective school, was hired as coordinator the year prior to the school receiving designation in 2009. The other coordinator's professional experiences extended to when she was Tech Prep coordinator in the mid-1990s, at which time she responded to the RFP and was awarded the grant to develop the A+ program in

her district.

The veteran A+ coordinator explained the grant process and the original intent for the A+ Schools Program as she knew it. Her language iterated the vocational importance of the program in its early years. She recalled,

> We started A+ and a school-to-work grant at the same time. I wrote those grants side by side and facilitated as the coordinator of the school-to-work as it went through designations. They were so closely related, you couldn't tell which was A+ and which was school-to-work. I took over the A+, and I'm also the tech prep coordinator, which a lot of times A+ coordinators are.

Although the veteran coordinator could have monopolized the discussion about the original intent, the others contributed their awareness of the program's original goals. One classroom teacher commented, "I was never really clear of the intent of the A+ Program. In my mind, I felt it was for those B and C students, to get them to come to school and to get them to college." The A+ coordinator from the recently A+ designated school added, "On the student side, I think the original intent seems like it was more for the students, in that we needed more kids to go into the technical field. We needed more kids to get that two-year education." She added,

> At the early start of A+, there was more of a technology component. I think that was really important, and I think that was part of the reason the state selected schools to be A+. Part of that was the intent to see what dynamic change would happen if they got to push technology in with other school improvements.

Representing the spectrum of experience with the A+ Schools Program, these respondents on average were aware of the emphasis on the technical portions of the

program. The veteran A+ coordinator summarized the shift in intent best: “Over the years, it was a gradual shift. I think the students did it themselves. It didn't take long to figure out.” One of the teachers added, “We in the very beginning were told not to push that [four-year transfer degree option].”

The veteran coordinator conceded the program had shifted from its original intent to its current intent. Her perspective, however, was “it just naturally evolved into what more and more students see as a way of getting two years of a four year degree.” The newer coordinator added, “Now, everybody markets it that way. You can have this technical degree, or you can have this associate’s transfer degree. Either way, you're better off.”

The overall value. During the value portion of the focus group discussion, while each participant offered experiences related to tutoring and other benefits to the program, the classroom teachers’ observations described students who had articulated life-changing and career-aligning decisions they had made because of the A+ Program’s impact in their life.

The students in the districts represented by the participants of this focus group live within 30-40 miles of private and state-supported four-year universities. In many ways, their access to higher education is not limited by availability. One of the participants explained, “If our students don't want to leave home but want to do the four year, they can live at home and go to [the state university] or [the private university]. It's not different. But they may not be able to afford that opportunity.” Another participant agreed, adding, “A+ gives them that opportunity.”

One of the teachers at a metropolitan area school noted, “I think that it [A+] ups significantly the number of kids going on past high school because it makes it [college] so much more affordable.” The teacher from a rural district added,

> A+ was the big deal. At a smaller school, everybody does A+. [Our school] is 20 miles from [a community college campus]. It would be interesting to look at how many [students] we sent to [that campus] in the last 10 years because of A+. Because the college was so close, I know we have A+ students who go who could not or would not have gone [to college] in the first place.

One of the coordinators explained the value of students having the option for college. She offered an example:

> In planning, what we talk to the student about is A+ is an opportunity for access. It may not be the best situation for you when you’re going to make a decision about where you want to go to school or what the next step is, but don't end up not having that opportunity because you didn't follow these guidelines. We have a lot of students that have A+ but when they look at four years there versus what they can have with two years paid, they see they might be better off with A+.

The newer coordinator explained her professional history and the different districts where she had taught. She explained,

> I worked in the St. Louis schools with the Hazelwood district, and I taught in the Kirkwood district, and when I came to Springfield, I taught at Glendale High School first and now, I'm at [another school]. I've been at very different schools, but as an educator, A+ is the best thing I've done. To me, it's the most authentic

thing and it's made me a better educator because the guidelines are there. Students know, I have to do this, and I have to do this.

The veteran coordinator explained the overall perception of the value of the program not only by the students but also by community members. She emphasized,

> Businesses that hire high school students, when they see A+ on there, they already know certain things are true about that kid. They know they're at school 95% of the time, they know they're making good grades, they're making good decisions, and they're willing to volunteer to help their community. That alone is something that's become more apparent to our community members.

A+ Focus Group—Southeast Missouri

Whereas the first practitioner focus group represented A+ coordinators and teachers from a metropolitan region in southwest Missouri, the second focus group was staged in a rural region of southeast Missouri. The students in the southwest metropolitan districts had geographic access as well as A+ financial incentives for access to local colleges and universities. The students of the practitioners and community members participating in the second focus group, however, had geographic access to one community college in the greater southeast region. Universities were either out-of-state or a two- to three-hour drive in-state.

Five professionals and community members comprised the focus group in southeast Missouri, which was conducted in the boardroom of the district’s school board office. The focus group participants represented community members, middle school and high school teachers, and administrators.

The researcher noted a primary distinction between this focus group and the initial

one. Whereas the students of the participants in the first focus group were destined for college on some level, the commentary and discussion emerging from the southeast Missouri focus group lacked that level of assurance for matriculation of their students. Another distinction noted by the researcher was the composition of this focus group. All members represented the district, which was designated an A+ school in 1998, the second year of A+ grant funding availability. Of the themes of leadership, intent, finances, and value, the dominant themes to emerge from this focus group, which were similar to the non-student focus group, were those involving program intent and overall value.

Program intent. Because this focus group was comprised of community leaders and educators of a rural southeast community, each participant had professional and social relationships. They had lived and worked in this community since the district was designated A+, and when they discussed intent, it was evident the district had succeeded in conveying the original intent of the A+ program. As well, it was obvious they attempted to adhere to the original spirit of the program as they delivered the program in 2010.

The participants offered in-depth and specific examples to the question concerning the original intent of the program. When asked if A+ was vocational in nature, one of the community members, who was an administrator when the district was designated A+ in 1998, explained, “That’s what I thought. In my opinion, that’s what the original intent was.” A current administrator added, “That's the biggest difference. To just reiterate, it started out as a vocational track, for more technical training for the state.” To iterate the level of knowledge about the program and its value to the school, a middle school teacher posed her response to the question. Her math students have benefitted

from the use of tutors since the program was implemented at the district. She explained,

> The original intent was for kids to get a career and into community college to help them do vocational-type training rather just preparing for two years. That's what I thought the benefit was. It was one of the programs that was cutting edge. You're supposed to be the best schools in the state. Because of that, people looked up to you and you were supposed to set the standards for everybody else.

This district excelled in developing, communicating, and integrating the A+ Schools Program into its culture. Very few practitioners in positions extraneous to the A+ coordinator knew the policies of the A+ Schools Program as well as the representatives and community members of this district.

When asked about the shift in intent and the current alignment of the A+ Schools Program, the administrator confirmed, with a tone of dejection in his voice, "We really don't send a lot of kids for career training." He articulated the gravity of the shift in the intent, and his comments confirmed an earlier A+ coordinator's statement about student choices influencing the shift. He offered this example:

> As the ag[riculture] teacher, I promoted Linn Tech a lot because these students can get a $60,000 job with Caterpillar and work for Caterpillar out of West Plains. I never had a student choose that. For all those years, I'd have Caterpillar come in. I'd take students to Caterpillar. I'd even had Linn Tech bring down backhoes and track loaders, and I took students out on the school farm and let them work the equipment. I told them, hey, you can be working with Caterpillar, finish college, and have a $60,000 job. They just didn't choose to pursue that.

The teacher expressed no qualms with the shift in intent. Her philosophy was students

were getting an education, and regardless of intent, they should not be limited because they chose to use the financial incentive for a transfer degree and subsequent pathway to a four-year institution. She also offered an example of students using their funds during the summer. She explained,

> One of our students went to Truman [State University]. She came home for the summers and took summer classes at the community college. So she was not going for a vocation or a career, but she used her A+ money for summer classes. Rather than drain her bank account, she advanced her college. A lot of kids have gone on and gotten more education who wouldn't have. That limits no one.

The overall value. The stories shared by the participants indicated the passion and investment the district devoted to this program. In addition, the participants praised the program's value to their students and their community. The community business owner shared his thoughts: "The program is ingrained because it's been at [this district] for so many years now. It's part of the culture."

In addition to the tutoring, the participants shared the value that access to college has to students in this rural region of southeast Missouri. The middle school teacher disclosed the way she promoted the program to her middle school students when she would introduce her A+ tutors. She said, "When my A+ person shows up in the beginning, I make a big deal about this person getting thousands of dollars for college just by helping them. … It's a good motivator for them [the students] because it's hard to get college scholarships." A former administrator suggested, "I think it's socioeconomic, too. They [MODESE] started out trying to help students who didn't have the grades to go to college but weren't choosing to go to junior college. [Those students] now have the

opportunity for junior college." The current administrator agreed. He added, "It pushed some of those students who may not have gone on to have the opportunity, to give them a chance to open another door."

The teacher quickly responded not only to the value of college access but also to the value of the A+ initiatives: the attendance, GPA, citizenship, and tutoring requirements. In middle school, she ensures she reviews what is required for them to get those thousands of dollars for access to college. She explained the speech she delivers to her 8th grade students in the presence of the A+ tutor:

> You have to come to school for good attendance. They always say [to the tutor], "Is that hard for you to do?" And then, we explain you have to get passing grades, and they'll ask, "You don't have to get As and Bs to get this money?" No, you have to get passing grades like Cs. And I say, "You have to stay away from drugs and alcohol, and you have to help kids. Then I ask them, "Is that something that you could do?" My kids are always like, wow! I can do that!

The administrator emphasized the role the initiatives play in encouraging students to make responsible choices. He added,

> They [initiatives] give the administrators another tool to use with students. If you're not going to show up in school, you're going to lose your A+. If you're not behaving, you're going to lose your A+. If you get caught drinking or doing drugs, you're going to lose your A+. We educate the parents as well, starting with the 8th grade registration.

The participants from this rural community confirmed the role of A+ for their school and their community. The program is ingrained in the culture, and the A+

coordinator and counselor begin preparing students for the program by the 8th grade. The administrator praised their efforts, and with pride in his voice, he affirmed, "We do a good job of reminding our parents from the time the kids are in 8th grade on. We remind and remind them. And the coordinator and counselor get 100% participation."

Document Analysis

As indicated prior, the researcher grouped and analyzed 15 documents according to their agency, publication, or distribution. The documents were analyzed according to the following organizational patterns: (a) legislative and government documents; (b) MODESE A+ Schools Program documents; and (c) practitioner documents.

Legislative and Government Documents

This section focuses on those documents published and distributed through the Missouri Governor's office and other state agencies. *The Missouri Report 1993: Achieving the National Education Goals* is a publication dated September 28, 1993, written by then-Governor Mel Carnahan. Governor Carnahan included a cover letter to the report, in which he emphasized his administration's priority for education. Contained within this report is a summary of the Outstanding Schools Act, in which the governor identifies key strategies for improving education in Missouri. One of these key strategies is the A+ Schools Program. In this context, the governor defined the intent for the program, which was to "establish a 'career-track' for non-college bound students" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993b, p. 16). In addition, the program provides "non-college bound students access to apprenticeships, training, internships, counseling, and other career-enhancing opportunities" (p. 16).

An additional publication written by Governor Carnahan was *A Primer to the*

Outstanding Schools Act of 1993. The publication details on the document indicate a publication year of 1993 through the Missouri Governor's Office. This document provides a history of the state of education in Missouri up to Governor Carnahan's election, emphasizing the role his administration had in overhauling the quality of education for the state. In describing the A+ Schools Program as a key reform, the document premieres the program as "a career curriculum for non-college bound students" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a, p. 10).

The Office of the Missouri Secretary of State publishes the *Code of State Regulations* (CSR). Dated May 31, 2007, this publication defines the minimum requirements for the administration of the A+ Schools Program, which are found in Title 5, Division 50, Chapter 350, Section 040: The A+ Schools Program. This document identifies the rules and regulations currently governing the A+ Schools Program, including the requirements expected from both the A+ designated district and the student.

Declared perfected and ordered printed April 21, 1993, *Senate Bill No. 380* provides the protocol for the A+ Schools Program and establishes grant awards to be made to public secondary schools. Among other requirements, these schools are committed to "insure all students proceed from high school graduation to a college or post-secondary or vocational or technical school or high wage job with work place skill development opportunities" (Missouri S. 380, 1993, p. 81).

Missouri Revised Statutes from 1994, 2002, 2008, and 2009 were analyzed to assess the legislative shifts evident in the implementation of the A+ Schools Program. The primary changes involved the grant funding of the program, which was available through the end of the 2001-2002 academic year. One key statement in the 2009

Cumulative Supplement to the Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri 2000 indicates an "A school district may participate in the program irrespective of its accreditation classification by the state board of education, provided it meets all other requirements" (A+ Schools Program, 2009, p. 34). This revision opens access and opportunity of the A+ Schools Program and all its benefits to students in the St. Louis city public schools district, which is not accredited by the state.

MODESE A+ Schools Program Documents

The *Facts about Missouri's A+ Schools Program* publication is a two-page document updated annually and made available to the public at the department's web site. It states the primary goal of the program, which is "to ensure that all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment" (MODESE, 2009c, p. 1). The August 2009 fact sheet lists the eligibility criteria participating schools are "encouraged" to meet, such as dropout rates, rigorous curriculum, career pathways, and business partnerships. This document also details the ongoing eligibility requirements, the value of the A+ Schools designation, and the benefits of the program to the state.

Dated July 2007, the *Notification of Commitment for Public Schools Seeking A+ Designation (MO500-2387 07/07)* document is a one-page document that indicates a district's commitment to seek A+ designation. In so doing, the district identifies its planning timeline and methods for seeking technical assistance to implement the program in their district. Half of the sheet is dedicated to signatures in support of the commitment. The *A+ Pre-Designation Report for Eligible Schools* is another one-page document due March 31 prior to the district's Designation Review. This document itemizes a checklist

of requirements to be included in the designation process report. This report is guided by the *A+ Schools Program Designation Checklist (MO500-2301 08/08),* which itself is a 10-page document. The itemized sections offer structure for the subsequent report to emerge from this evaluation and assessment of the school's plan to meet A+ designation expectations. The resulting document provides evidence of ways in which the district will demonstrate its commitment to the A+ Schools Program. This report includes documentation supporting curriculum revisions and objectives, career preparation, partnership plans with the community, student eligibility tracking, district historical data, and A+ Program evaluation and sustainability.

Referenced in the interviews and focus groups, the *A+ Schools Self-Monitoring Checklist (MO500-2439 07/07)* is a document that reflects a change in the monitoring and evaluation of the A+ Schools Program. Initially, schools underwent external reviews; currently, schools self-monitor their progress in order to continue their designation as an A+ school. This four-page document distinguishes 11 requirements, and each section for a requirement has a column where the A+ coordinator may check either "yes" or "no" to indicate whether or not a requirement is in place. If a requirement is not met, a plan and time frame for resolution is to be included. One of the focus group A+ coordinators indicated she was not in compliance on some requirements in 2009. Upon submitting a plan for resolution to MODESE, her program was not penalized as long as she communicated the status of the situation to the state.

Practitioner Documents

These documents were provided to the researcher by A+ coordinators, superintendents, and supervisors of the A+ Schools Program at MODESE. The district

documents (*District A: non-A+ designated district scholarship application and District B: A+ designated district board reports, annual reports, A+ agreement, monthly checklist, and career planning guide)* provided a contextual application of the inner workings of the districts and aided the researcher in understanding the value of the A+ Schools Program or the non-designated district's scholarship plan. The educators strive to provide the best education to their students with their available resources. The researcher noted an interesting observation while analyzing the data from the documents of District B. According to their annual reports and data, neither their dropout rates nor their college matriculation rates had significantly changed since the implementation of the A+ Schools Program.

The final documents analyzed, which were acquired while on a visit to MODESE and delivered while conducting interviews with both the supervisor and director of the A+ Schools Program, were in many ways the most valuable in capturing a composite inventory of the A+ Schools Program and its access and equity as distributed throughout the state. The graphic, *A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009* (see Appendix H: A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009), is a graphic of the state of Missouri, which includes county boundaries. In addition, however, this graphic employs a scatter plot technique to indicate four key populations: (a) locations of public community colleges, (b) A+ designated high schools through 2009 (*n*=274), (c) high schools recommended for 2009-2010, and (d) counties with no A+ representation. As the scatter plot indicates, the highest concentration of A+ designated schools are in close proximity to community colleges. Fourteen counties have no districts designated A+. Those counties without A+ representation exist in the extreme boundaries of the state: the far west (south of Kansas

City and north of Joplin), the northwest corner, the northeast corner, and the Bootheel region of the state.

An additional document produced by the MODESE representatives was an expenditures report, *A+ Expenditures 1995-2003*. This document captured fiscal data and grant cycles of all A+ designated schools and their designation year. Through this tracking report, FY95 (fiscal year 1995) lists the initial 38 schools receiving grants for the program. During FY95, grants ranged from $35,910 to New Franklin R-I to the cap amount of $150,000, distributed to six districts. This data cycles through each fiscal year and identifies the newly designated high school and its grant amount per year over the three-year cycle. When analyzed closely and used in tandem with the *A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009* graphic, the researcher noted the geographic locations of the A+ designated schools and the program's annual progression, which advanced equitably among rural and metropolitan public districts.

A document printed off and delivered by the assistant provost of a Missouri university was another MODESE-generated report: *A+ Schools Program*. This document categorized the quantitative data of the A+ Schools Program, noting the fiscal year appropriations from 1995-2010, numbers of A+ students reimbursed by semesters from FY98-FY09, utilization of A+ financial incentives 1997-2008, and positive impact of the A+ Schools Program (lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates). Compared to the state average, A+ schools did have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates.

The document analysis yielded information that both validated and supported aspects of the researcher's study. As explained prior, the researcher categorized and analyzed 15 documents according to their agency, publication, or distribution. These 15

documents were analyzed according to the following categories: (a) legislative and government documents; (b) MODESE A+ Schools Program documents; and (c) practitioner documents. As well, the document analysis produced data that supported the themes that emerged during the interviews and focus groups. These themes included leadership, which the governor's documents supported; program intent, which the governor's, secretary of state's, and MODESE documents supported; the fiscal variables, which the MODESE-and practitioner-generated documents supported; and finally, the overall value of the A+ Schools Program, which was supported with documents representing the three categories used to achieve a thorough and effective analysis of the documents used to support and quantify the A+ Schools Program.

Part III: Quantitative Findings and Analysis

In addition to the use of the qualitative data to frame and establish the study, the researcher used quantitative data to strengthen the study. Using a mixed method design, the researcher incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods to arrive at the findings. This section, Part III: Quantitative Findings and Analysis, describes the strategies used to compile and summarize administrative and demographic data relevant to the study. Once the data was compiled and analyzed, the researcher used the findings as a means to complement the qualitative data.

Demographic and Administrative Data

To complete the quantitative analysis of the research study, the researcher compiled administrative data available through MODESE's web site and demographic statistical data available through the U.S. Census web site. To arrive at statistical support for the data, independent samples *t* tests were conducted. In addition, the MODESE

Socio-Economic Indicator Resource (SEIR) site provided district-specific data. The process began by downloading a MODESE-created Excel spreadsheet retrieved from School Finance Data under the Educational Resources portal of the School Data and Statistics area on MODESE's web site. Using this data as the basis for the statistical analysis, the researcher created a master spreadsheet.

The master spreadsheet included a number of fields for data. These fields included administrative and demographic fields with the following designations:

1. A+ Year. Exclusive to the A+ designated districts, this field identified in what year the specific school was designated as A+ through MODESE. This is essential data, as not all schools in a specified district were recognized as A+, or schools in a district were recognized as A+ in different years, depending on when that particular school sought designation. For instance, one district has five high schools. The first school from that district was designated in 1997, the initial year for graduates to receive fiscal benefits. Two other schools from that district were designated in 2000. The final two schools received designation in 2009.
2. District Name. This field included MODESE-identified districts. For districts with multiple schools, each school was identified within that district.
3. Percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL)—2009. This field identified for each public high school the percentage of students enrolled in the state's free or reduced lunch program during 2009.
4. Per Pupil Expenditures—2006. Accessible through MODESE, the per pupil expenditures PDF file, published in 2007, provided the most updated data

available for this information. This data provide expenditures for each student in the respective districts.

5. School Population—2005-2009. Although the data were available for this five-year span, the researcher focused on 2009 school population numbers. This number represents the students enrolled in the high school for 2009.
6. District Population—2000. Retrieved through the SEIR site, this resource provided population, poverty, income, educational attainment, and household data for all districts in Missouri. This is community population of the district.
7. County. This field represented the county in which the school district resided.
8. County Population—2008. Identified through U.S. Census data, this field listed the county's population for 2008 as projected and recorded by U.S. Census data. The population for individual cities within each county were not available unless a city's population exceeded 25,000. Sub-fields were included for those cities identified within the respective counties, and the population is indicated for the particular city or cities within the county.
9. Percentage of County Population below Poverty Level—2008. This field lists the percentage of the respective county's population who is identified through U.S. Census data records and projections as living below the poverty level as of 2008.
10. District Median Household—2000. As detailed in the SEIR data records, this field identifies the median household income for the respective district for 2000.

Two additional spreadsheets emerged from this master: (a) A+ designated schools and (b) non-A+ designated schools. With all data saved on the master spreadsheet, the other spreadsheets supported data exclusive to their designation. One supported data

exclusive to the A+ designated schools and districts and the other supported data exclusive to the non-A+ designated schools and districts. Data included with the A+ designated schools spreadsheet included those schools and districts having had received their A+ schools designation as of the beginning of the 2009 academic year. According to MODESE's A+ Schools portal and the statistical data available through MODESE's School Improvement web site, the number of A+ designated schools identified for inclusion in this study was 274. This number was accurate based on information available from the state department as of November 2009.

To strengthen the interpretation of the demographic and administrative data, independent samples *t* tests were calculated. These *t* tests used designation as A+ or non-A+ independent variables and seven demographic characteristics as the dependent variables. These *t* tests were run on numbers related to per pupil expenditures, free and reduced lunch, high school enrollment, median household income, percentage of the district below the poverty level, and district populations. The tests were conducted with a 95% confidence interval.

Independent Samples t Test Findings

Free/reduced lunch t test. This independent samples *t* test analysis compared the mean score of the percentages of students on the free and reduced lunch program in A+ and non-A+ designated districts. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(512) = -4.708$, $p < .001$). The mean percentage of A+ students (M=39.55, SD=16.173) was significantly lower than the mean of non-A+ students (M=46.53, SD =17.428) enrolled in the FRL program. The mean percentage difference between A+ and non-A+ students enrolled in the FRL program was 6.98%. Table 1:

Results of Independent Samples *t* Tests—A+ and non-A+ gathers and presents the results from seven independent samples *t* tests.

Table 1

Results of Independent Samples t Tests—A+ and non-A+

A+/Non-A+ Comparison	Equal Var. Assumed	*n*	*t*	*df*	*Sig.*
FRL	Yes	274	-4.71	512.00	<.001
HS Enrollment	No	274	4.21	445.67	<.001
District Pop.	No	246	4.26	433.86	<.001
Poverty	Yes	274	-3.77	512.00	<.001
Household Income - *mdn*	No	274	2.87	505.59	.004
Per Pupil Expenditures	Yes	241	-4.43	446.00	<.001
100% Rep.	Yes	241	-2.08	00.131	.040

High school enrollment t test. This independent samples *t* test analysis compared the mean score of the high school enrollments at A+ and non-A+ designated districts. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(445.669) = 4.206$, $p < .001$). The mean high school enrollment at A+ schools (M=2,540.54, SD=3,569.360) was significantly higher than the mean high school enrollment at non-A+ school districts (M =1,185.79, SD =3,252.50). The mean high school enrollment difference between A+ and non-A+ high school enrollments was 1,354.75 students.

District population (community). This independent samples *t* test analysis compared the community populations of A+ and non-A+ designated districts. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(433.864) = 4.261$, $p<.001$). The mean population of communities with A+ schools (M=14,163.44, SD=21,896.027) was significantly higher than the mean population of communities whose high schools were not designated as an A+ school district (M =4,994.30, SD =23,896.591). The mean community population difference between A+ and non-A+ high district community population was 9,169.14 students. The independent group number (n=246) calculated for this analysis does not indicate 274 schools because some district communities have multiple high schools.

District percentages living below poverty level. This independent samples *t* test analysis compared the district percentages of subjects living below the poverty level in A+ and non-A+ designated districts. A significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(512) = -3.772$, $p <.001$) existed. The mean percentage of subjects living below the poverty level in communities with A+ schools (M=13.99, SD=5.922) was significantly lower than the mean percentage of the same subjects in communities without A+ schools designation (M =15.96, SD =5.903). The mean percentage difference of subjects living below the poverty level between A+ and non-A+ districts was 1.97%.

District median household income. This independent samples *t* test analysis compared the district median household income in A+ and non-A+ designated districts. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(505.588) = 2.876$, $p < .05$). The mean household income in districts with A+ schools (M=$42,510.91,

SD=$10,826.02) was significantly higher than the mean household income in districts without A+ schools designation (*M* =$40,060.41, *SD* =$8,457.01). The mean difference between A+ and non-A+ district median household income was $2,450.50.

Per pupil expenditures. This independent samples *t* test analysis compared the district per pupil expenditures in A+ and non-A+ designated schools. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(446) = -4.432$, $p<.001$). The mean expenditures per pupil in districts designated as A+ schools (*M*=$6,994.04, *SD*=$1,109.64) were significantly lower per pupil than expenditures per pupil in districts without A+ schools designation (*M* =$7,594.11, *SD* =$1,727.61). The mean difference between per pupil expenditures of A+ and non-A+ districts was $600.07. The independent group number (*n*=241) for this comparison differs from the assigned value of 274 because per pupil expenditures were provided for districts rather than independent schools. Some districts have multiple high schools, which changes the number.

Per pupil expenditures in select county populations. This independent samples *t* test analysis compared two distinct samples of county populations. Thirteen counties have no A+ representation in their 34 school districts; 24 counties have 100% A+ designation within their 57 districts. This *t* test analysis compared the per pupil expenditures within the districts of the respective counties. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(89) = -2.087$, $p < .05$). The mean expenditures per pupil in counties with 100% of the districts designated as A+ (*M*=$6,844.37, *SD*=$1,082.87) were significantly lower than expenditures per pupil in counties with no district participating in the A+ program (*M* =$7,366.12, *SD* =$1,265.14). The mean difference between the expenditures per pupil from counties with 100% of the

districts designated as A+ and counties with no district participating in the A+ program was $521.75. Whereas MODESE included the public schools in St. Louis City for their calculations with the counties not represented with A+, those 18 schools were not included in this analysis.

Summary of independent samples t tests. The *t* test results provided significant data in support of the A+ Schools Program and the related demographics. The A+ schools reflect significant differences to the non-A+ schools with lower FRL rates, higher enrollments, larger overall district populations, lower poverty rates, and higher median household incomes. The differences in per pupil expenditures for A+ and non-A+ is significant. With this data, the students in non-A+ districts receive higher funds per pupil expenditure than students in A+ districts. In addition, counties with no A+ representation have higher spending per pupil than the counties with 100% district participation.

Demographic and Administrative Analysis

The results from the quantitative data supported represent the financial status and community populations of A+-designated and non-A+ designated schools. These findings are translated to additional tables. These tables identify the district population numbers as of 2000 per U.S. Census data, the percentage of the population living below poverty level in 2000 per U.S. Census data, and median household incomes for the district in 2000 per SEIR data. Additional tables include data from MODESE, which includes the percentage of students on free and reduced lunches (FRL) and high school enrollment numbers, both as of the 2009-2010 academic year. In addition to averages, the maximum, minimum, median, and standard deviation are provided.

Table 2. Administrative and Demographic Data: A+ vs. non-A+ Districts presents

with visual clarity the potential inherent inequities in the delivery of the A+ Schools Program by the state of Missouri. The A+ designated districts are larger in both district and secondary population than their non-designated counterparts. To clarify, however, the most updated Census Bureau and SEIR data are from 2000, whereas MODESE data sets represented data from the 2009-2010 academic year.

This table also includes the minimum, maximum, mean, median, and standard deviation of the respective data variables. This table presents the A+ schools data with the non-A+ schools data listed in the lower portion of the table.

Table 2

Administrative and Demographic Data: A+ vs. non-A+ Districts

Demographic data	Min.	Max.	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*
		A+ Schools (*n*=274)			
Dist. Pop. 2000*	845	186,542	12,024	7053.5	18,046.53
District % Below Poverty Level 2000	1.6%	20.7%	7.3%	6.7%	3.54%
District Household Median Income—2000*	$23,336	$72,428	$42,087	$38,543	9,134.53
FRL—2009	3.95%	80.92%	39.5%	39.11%	16.17%
HS Population—2009*	127	23,595	2,550	1321	3,569.36
		Non-A+ Schools (*n*=240)			
Dist. Pop. 2000	531	31,367	3,389	2,418	3,758.29
District % Below Poverty Level 2000*	1%	25.1%	7.9%	7.4%	3.66%

District Household Median Income—2000	$22,234	$67,401	$37,533	$36,134	$6,659.88
FRL—2009*	7.04%	94.4%	46.6%	47.04%	17.43%
HS Population—2009	74	26,108	1,266	403	3,244.67

Note. * represents the demographics in each group that are significantly higher (alpha=.05).

A composite summary of school data related to non-A+ designated districts resulted in distinctions in all fields when they were compared to A+ designated school districts. The average district population numbered 3,389, while the average median household income for that district in 2000 was $37,533. The average secondary school population for this snapshot was 1,266 students, with 46.6% of those districts' populations on FRL program. The average percentage of the district population living below the poverty level in 2000 numbered 7.9%.

Overall, the districts to support the A+ designated school improvement plan had higher district community populations, higher district household median incomes, and higher secondary populations than their non-A+ designated counterparts. In addition, the numbers of people in the district living below poverty level were lower and the numbers of students on free/reduced lunch were lower than non-A+ designated peers. These demographic numbers were validated by the independent samples *t* tests results. The numbers were averaged to create a composite high school representation of the fields used to calculate the averages.

Table 3. For the table titled Composite of 38 Schools: Missouri A+ District Representation in 1997, the researcher analyzed data from 38 districts implementing the A+ Schools Program in 1997, the first year post-secondary financial incentives were available to A+ graduates. These districts implemented the program with the 1994-1995

academic year, establishing their required curriculum and community partnerships during the three-year window. This statistical analysis provides a snapshot of the composite school pursuing A+ designation in the program's first years. This table also includes the minimum, maximum, mean, median, and standard deviation of the data variables.

Table 3

Composite of 38 Schools: 1997 A+ District Representation

	Min.	Max.	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*
Dist. Pop. 2000	1,767	186,592	27,768	14,221	35,437
District % Below Poverty Level 2000	1.5%	14.4%	5.98%	5.6%	2.52%
Dist. household median income—2000	$30,212	$66,296	$43,045	$40,512	$9,381
FRL—2009	11.93%	71.58%	36.75%	35.33%	13.10%
HS enrollment—2009	324	23,959	3,772	2,168	4,893

Note. 1997 A+ districts included districts from Kansas City.

Table 4. The Cross-section Sampling of Nine A+ Districts: 1997 is a table to reflect an analysis of the data of a selected sampling of A+ school districts selected to implement the A+ Schools Program in 1997. Nine districts were included in the sample, with the northeast, north central, northwest, central, southeast, south central, and southwest regions of the state represented. The additional two districts represent selected urban districts from the St. Louis and Kansas City regions.

The data represented on Table 4: Cross-section Sampling of Nine A+ Districts: 1997 was important to the study because the sampling, representing approximately 25%

of the 1997 designates, suggested the state attempted to select a cross-representation of districts, from urban to rural, from affluent to socio-economically disadvantaged.

Table 4

Cross-section Sampling of Nine A+ Districts: 1997

District (*n*=9) (County)	District Population 2000	Secondary Population 2009	District % < Poverty 2000	District % FRL 2009
Northeast: Kirksville R-III (Adair)	21,543	2,451	6.5%	32.3%
North central: Brookfield R-III (Linn)	6,804	1,047	8.7%	31.23%
Northwest: Richmond R-XVI (Ray)	10,180	1,623	4.7%	31.29%
Central: Eldon R-I (Miller)	12,001	1,852	7.9%	46.06%
Southeast: Gideon (New Madrid)	1,767	345	14.4%	60.4%
South central: West Plains (Howell)	12,651	2,519	10.1%	39.9%
Southwest: Aurora (Lawrence)	10,407	2,045	8.8%	36.48%
Kansas City: Center 58 (Jackson)	26,775	3,864	4.1%	52.12%
St. Louis: Lindberg R-VIII (St. Louis)	45,843	5,643	1.5%	13.05%

Table 5. District Financials: 2009 presents a table to compare the average of the per pupil expenditures, total expenditures, the assessed values, and the local, state, and

federal funding dollars dedicated to the A+ versus non-A+ designated school districts. MODESE (1997) articulates in its budgeting documents specific variables included in the design of the budget, which include expenditures and the anticipated revenues. In addition, budget summaries include assessed values and funding resources available at the local, state, and federal levels. Table 5 summarizes some of the items included in budget design as recommended by MODESE (1997), with the Local, State, and Federal rows indicating the percentage of assistance from those resources.

Table 5

District Financials: 2009

District Financial Budget Items	A+ schools (*n*=274)*	Non-A+ schools (*n*=240)**	State Mean (*N*=514)
Per pupil expenditures 2006	$6994.04	$7594.11	$7,294.08
Total expenditures 2009	$29,647,319	$15,978,714	$23,315,315
Assessed values 2009	$243,484,165	$154,952,993	$202,471,952
Local funding %	48.90%	45.59%	47.4%
State funding %	41.29%	44.62%	42.8%
Federal funding %	9.81%	9.79%	9.8%

Note. *Urban districts included. **No urban districts included.

Table 6. Counties without A+ Designation: 2009 presents data for 12 counties and St. Louis city, whose districts represent students who are not served by the A+ Schools Program. This information is calculated based on a graphic map provided to the researcher by the administrators of the A+ Schools Program with MODESE (see Appendix H: A+ Schools Program in Missouri, AY 2008-2009).

Table 6

Counties without A+ Designation: 2009

County (*n*=12) [Districts *n*=34]	Median Household Income 2000	Combined District Population 2000	Combined Secondary Population 2009	Average District % < Poverty 2000	Average District % FRL 2009
Atchison (3 districts)	$31,128	6,430	897	5.7%	41.74%
Bates (6 districts)	$36,302	15,747	2,658	7.5%	40.47%
Cedar (2 districts)	$32,505	14,803	2,263	7.8%	42.93%
Dade (4 districts)	$34,003	7,756	1,154	6.7%	49.52%
DeKalb (4 districts)	$40,418	7,171	1,145	4.2%	37.22%
Holt (3 districts)	$36,170	2,934	652	6.6%	37.83%
Lewis (3 districts)	$36,187	10,814	1,549	7.4%	33.91%
Moniteau (2 districts)	$43,479	6,890	2,159	4.8%	33.60%
Monroe (3 districts)	$38,596	10,089	1,414	5.5%	38.79%
Ralls (1 district)	$37,657	5,275	759	6.0%	26.92%
Ripley (2 districts)	$27,720	11,724	3,491	12.2%	59.08%
Worth (1 district)	$33,995	2,418	370	7.4%	41.76%
St. Louis City[a] (18 districts)	$33,993	348,189	26,108	23.5%	73.31%
Missouri	$39,771	7,294.08	1,859	15.61%	41.95%

[a]MODESE's graphic includes schools within the St. Louis City school district in its identification of counties without A+ designation. Because of its unaccredited status, St. Louis City has been ineligible to seek A+ designation.

This table identifies demographic and financial data per counties not served by the A+ Schools Program. With the exception of Moniteau county, which borders Cole and Boone counties (Jefferson City and Columbia), these counties (and St. Louis city) are located along the state's western, northwestern, northeastern, eastern, and southeastern borders. In contrast to this table, included in the appendix is a listing of counties with 100% A+ designated districts (see Appendix I: Counties with 100% A+ Designation). This appendix is included to complement Table 6.

Summary. The results of the statistical and demographic analysis comparing the data relevant to the A+ and non-A+ designated schools supported two of the four research questions dedicated to identifying the demographics of A+ Schools. This data suggests schools in stronger financial regions and with access to community resources and funding outlets ensure their students have an opportunity to benefit from the opportunities the A+ Schools Program delivers in 2010. Those schools with A+ designation have higher median incomes in their districts, and they are more populated. In addition, their poverty and free/reduced lunch rates are lower. On average A+ designated districts have higher assessed values and almost double the expenditures of non-A+ designated schools. With higher local and lower state resources for funding than the non-designated counterparts, A+ schools and their communities reflect a stronger commitment to local resources and value the schools in a different way than non-A+ district patrons.

A challenge to the researcher, however, was the inclusion of urban and rural schools in the statistical analysis. St. Louis City districts were not eligible to apply to the program. Some Kansas City districts, however, have been included in A+ statistical data

since 1997, the program's first year of implementation. This distinction is important to note, as statistical data in some areas is skewed. For instance, in Table 2, large outliers exist, yet these larger, urban districts were designated A+ and are included in the data.

The quantitative statistical and demographic data provided the researcher with a critical understanding of the demographics of the program. The qualitative findings, however, added layers to the study as the researcher analyzed the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Because of the opportunity to enrich and clarify the quantitative data through the qualitative process, a heightened perspective and understanding of the access to postsecondary education and equity related to the A+ Schools Program emerged.

Data Collection Summary—A+ Schools Program

Chapter Four presented an analysis of the data collected during the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection for this research study. To gain depth and breadth of knowledge for Research Questions 1 and 2, the researcher interviewed 24 participants, conducted three focus groups, and performed analysis on 15 documents related to the A+ Schools Program. The researcher conducted independent samples *t* tests as well as compiled and analyzed statistical and demographic data available through MODESE and the U.S. Census Bureau to achieve a base of knowledge for Research Questions 3 and 4. This triangulation of information and data from both the qualitative and quantitative fields of research and data collection strengthened the study.

Part I: Qualitative Protocol and Analysis included an analysis of the process used to collect data through the qualitative methods of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. In Part II: Qualitative Findings and Emergent Themes, the researcher identified

the themes as they emerged through the shared narratives and document analysis of the study. Part III: Quantitative Findings and Analysis explained the process implemented for the administrative data review and subsequent statistical analysis, which included the use of independent samples *t* tests. This part included an analysis of the quantitative data as defined and supported by the administrative data available through MODESE and U.S. Census Bureau web sites. The chapter as a whole presented an analysis of the emergent themes evident from the transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups and the quantitative data as supported by the statistical and demographic dat. Four themes emerged, which related to leadership, finances, program intent, and the overall value of the program. To arrive at these themes, the researcher coded, categorized, and analyzed the qualitative data for commonalities.

Chapter Five presents a summary of the findings alongside the research questions to frame the research study. A discussion of the relationship of the research findings to the review of the literature from Chapter Two advances the chapter. In addition, implications for practice as related to the findings will be discussed. To close Chapter Five and the research study, the researcher will identify the limitations of the study and offer recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Chapter Five delivers the findings and conclusions of the research study. It is outlined along the following organizational plan. The Summary of the Findings includes two parts: Qualitative Response to Research Questions 1 and 2 and Quantitative Response to Research Questions 3 and 4. The Discussion of the Research Study follows the summary, and the Implications for Practice are identified and discussed. The chapter closes with the Limitations of the Study and the Recommendations for Future Research.

Operating under the legislative umbrella of Senate Bill 380, the A+ Schools Program of the Outstanding Schools Act of1993 set to transform education in Missouri. By legislating reform, the state sought to decrease the secondary dropout rate while increasing vocational and career opportunities for graduates (Barbis, 2003; Barger, 1999; Lawler, 2005; Worts, 1999). As articulated on state-supported and district-supported materials, the A+ Schools Program serves to improve the schools. The program's primary goals are to ensure all students graduate from Missouri high schools and are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment. In addition, the A+ designated high schools strive to accomplish four charges: (a) reduce the dropout rate, (b) raise academic expectations by eliminating general-track courses, (c) provide career pathways for all students, and (d) work closely with business and higher-education leaders to better prepare students for their lives after graduation (MODESE, 2008; MODESE, 2009c; Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a; Missouri Governor's Office, 1993b; Missouri Secretary of State, 2007). While implemented in the secondary schools, this pathways

program provides its graduates access to postsecondary education in the community and technical college environment. In turn, the state argues a better-educated workforce attracts national and global business and industry, thus improving the state's economy and the quality of life for all its citizens (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a).

By legislating and providing resources for this school improvement and pathways program, the state indicates it values for its citizens educational access, character development, efficiency of operations, and the common good. The current literature on the A+ Schools Program supports many of the themes to emerge from this research study. Other research studies respond to the economic and fiscal impact of the program as opposed to the issues related to social equity or access. The financial implications and related equity issues analyze how the program's resources are utilized (Kirk, 1996; Ko, 2006; Lee, 2003; Strader & Johnson, 1999). As a state-supported school improvement plan that offered three-year grants as financial incentives to encourage participation, the program has not been without controversy.

The review of the literature surrounding the issues related to the A+ Schools Program includes court-motivated and legislated fiscal equity (Beasley, 1993; Dunn & Derthick, 2007; Galbreath, 2007; Ogle, 2007), as well as community response to Missouri Senate Bill 380 (SB380) (Hurst, 1995), which houses the A+ Schools Program. In addition, the implementation of this program hinges on issues of social justice (Brown, 2004; Elder, 2007; Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2009; Shields, 2004; Troyna, 1994). Leveraging social justice and social equity, students not served represent the disconnected or marginalized demographics, such as those students in extreme rural or inner city demographics

(Crosnoe, 2009; Hair et al., 2009; Horst & Martin, 2007; Podgursky et al., 2008). Because this program is available to students in schools which are designated as A+ and not to students in non-A+ designated districts, one can conclude students in non-A+ designated districts are disadvantaged in their access to postsecondary education.

As a program to affect both the secondary and post-secondary education realms, the A+ Schools Program relates to the myriad pathways programs available to high school students around the nation. These programs offer assistance and provide transitioning links, bridging the student from the secondary realm to either post-secondary education or workforce training (Jacobson & Mokher, 2009; Kirst, 2007; Rourke & Hartzman, 2009; Walker et al., 2008; Waters, 2008).

Public education policy-making is an arena for key political and educational players who have the power and capability to embrace transformational leadership and influence policy for the common good (Barger, 1999; Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Fowler, 2008; Lee, 2003; Rossi et al., 2004). Finally, this school improvement program exists because of the influence of those transformational and effective leaders (Dainton & Zelley, 2005; Goldring & Sullivan, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2000; Yukl, 2006) who resist the ease and comfort of status quo. These public, social, political, and organizational webs of the A+ Schools Program comprise a holistic and comprehensive approach, allowing the researcher to acquire an understanding of the depth and breadth of this program. Contextually, one also realizes the influence of power and politics in shaping the A+ Schools Program.

To arrive at the findings, the researcher utilized a mixed method research study to analyze the A+ Schools Program from multiple perspectives. Interviews, focus groups,

and document analysis were performed to gather rich narratives of the program. Twenty-four interviews and three focus groups were conducted, and the researcher analyzed 15 documents related to the A+ Schools Program. These qualitative methods added personal narratives and practitioner experiences to the study, allowing the researcher a richer awareness and enhanced knowledge about the program and its value to its constituents. The researcher analyzed statistical and administrative demographic data to support the quantitative side of the study, which responded to the demographics of the students served and not served by the program. This information included publicly available MODESE and U.S. Census Bureau data. Variables such as school population, free and reduced lunch percentages, and median incomes for Missouri counties were analyzed to arrive at conclusions. In addition, these mixed methods allowed the researcher to identify shifts in the program's intent over its 13 years of existence.

Summary of the Findings

The research study yielded data in two distinctive arenas, and those two arenas responded to different sets of research questions. The qualitative portion of the study sought to address Research Questions 1 and 2, whereas the quantitative data was aligned with Research Questions 3 and 4. This section of the chapter is arranged to allow the respective research design to respond to its intended question. The Summary of the Findings follows this organizational plan: Qualitative Response to Research Questions 1 and 2 and Quantitative Response to Research Questions 3 and 4.

Through the qualitative analysis, four dominant themes emerged from the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. These themes related to the leadership, program intent, finances, and overall value of the A+ Schools Program. The quantitative

analysis aligned with the demographic and statistical data regarding the school and county populations, the district financing, and median household incomes. The demographic data and qualitative themes will be discussed as they relate to the four research questions:

1. What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
2. How does the A+ Schools Program as delivered in 2009-2010 align with its original intent in 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?
3. According to the most recent and updated data, what constituents does the A+ Schools Program serve? What are the demographics of schools served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:
    a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,
    b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and
    c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.
4. According to the most recent and updated data, what Missouri students are not being served by the A+ Schools Program as it has grown and developed since 1993? What are the demographics of schools not served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,
b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and
c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

The discussion of the four research questions applies the respective quantitative or qualitative findings from Chapter Four.

Qualitative Response to Research Questions 1 and 2

The dominant themes to emerge from the qualitative data were those related to leadership, program intent, finances, and overall value. These themes are discussed as they relate to Research Questions 1 and 2.

1. What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents to be served and the outcomes achieved?

The results of the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were invaluable sources in providing support to Research Question 1.

Leadership. Visionary leaders and progressive districts willing to invest time and energy to the challenges demanded for successful implementation of this school improvement plan validated the A+ Schools Program. One of the interview participants explained, “I can’t help but think forward-thinking, visionary superintendents led this.” As one focus group member noted, “It was cutting edge. You’re supposed to be the best schools in the state. Because of that, people were supposed to look up to you and you were supposed to set the standards for everybody else.” Another former superintendent explained why other districts did not participate in the early years of the program: “They

weren't willing to make the changes. That's not easy. It's very, very time consuming, and it's tough." An administrator at the university level explained it thus:

> I don't think any of the superintendents and school boards that were less aggressive realized the unintended consequences. By not jumping in and playing, they would be really hurting the destiny for the higher education opportunity for their kids.

Visionary and transformational leadership was evident not only by the governor's actions and commitment to resources to implement the program but also by the coordinators at the district level who led the charge to overhaul their curricula. These efforts led to a clear understanding of the constituents to be served and the outcomes to be achieved through this educational policy.

Program intent. The original intent of the A+ Schools Program was "to establish a career curriculum for non-college bound students" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993a, p. 11). With consistency, interview responses from coordinators to teachers to superintendents to state-level administrators iterated a common constituent to be served by the A+ Schools Program: that average, middle-of-the-road career or technical-minded student who may or may not attend post-secondary education. This program was to encourage at-risk students to pursue job training or placement in community colleges, vocational, or technical schools. Many of the documents from the early 1990s in support of the program emphasize the role of the program in "providing non-college bound students access to apprenticeships, training, internships, counseling, and other career enhancing opportunities" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993b, p. 15).

Those practitioners involved with the grant writing and subsequent curriculum

overhaul and improvements in technology with the program articulate common aspects of the original intent of the program. As a former A+ coordinator whose district received A+ designation in 1997 validated,

> Mel Carnahan's major objective was to bring a highly skilled workforce to the state of Missouri. Number one, I would say it was to reduce the dropout rate. But in reducing the dropout rate, we were not only keeping those students in school but also turning out a highly skilled workforce. When Missouri would go to the table to try to attract business and industry to the state, they needed to show that they were turning out a skilled workforce. As we saw it, our objective was to reduce the dropout rate and create a highly skilled workforce.

The former administrator of technical education with the higher education department pinpointed the constituents to be served and the outcomes to be achieved: "Students who would not have gone to college otherwise. It was originally designed to create more college goers in high skill, high wage technician jobs." A veteran A+ coordinator, in her position since 1995, clarified: "It was to take those solid, middle-of-the-road students, give them technical skills, and put them out in a high-wage job."

Finances. The original intent of the financial part of the program was to assist two populations of constituents by providing grants to districts and financial incentives to students. Participants identified the financial incentives to students. One assistant superintendent explained, "It was targeted for those vocational students who were not four-year college bound but needed an incentive to get the [post-secondary] two-year program." Another teacher noted, "A+ gave first generation students financial access to college."

From fiscal year 1994-1995 to 2001-2002, MODESE made available to districts willing to implement the A+ Schools Program grants for three years, up to $150,000 per year. The criteria required to implement the program included increasing rigor in the curriculum by adding technical-based courses and eliminating general track courses. In addition, districts were required to increase technology access to better prepare students for outcomes leading to high-wage, high-skill careers after graduation. The grants were used to improve technology and to provide computer labs for the students.

By implementing the A+ Schools Program, a district would provide these outcomes: improve the rigor in its courses, improve the technology available to students, and dedicate a coordinator to the successful implementation and maintenance of the A+ Schools Program. The implementation and planning checklist for the A+ Schools Program through MODESE states a district "plans a budget of $80,000 per year for three years." The start-up costs for the program strained district budgets, which made the grant process valuable as the program was implemented.

Overall value. The A+ Schools Program provided post-secondary access to students who may have never chosen to attend college. As one participant noted, "We wanted to provide pathways so we could increase our accessibility and certainly affordability because it [postsecondary education] was going to be free for students, at least through the associate degree."

An early proponent of the program explained the value of collaborations and partnerships with businesses and the community. He noted the following outcomes,

> The community colleges would say, 'In exchange for us using your night welding lab, we will use some of our resources to buy you new welding machines for free

> if you would moonlight for us and teach at night.' We went from 12 community college districts to 58 outreach centers to deliver post-secondary technical ed[ucation] to these A+ schools students. We developed the infrastructure to increase the accessibility of post-secondary career and technical programs.

A former A+ coordinator affirmed the overall value of the A+ Schools Program. She identified these constituents who were served by the program:

> A+ is credited with sending more kids to post-secondary school than any other program we've ever had, and especially kids from families who'd never had people go to college in their family. I don't know how many kids I've had say, 'I'm the first one in my family to ever to go college.' It was only because of A+ that they could say that.

Research Question 1 targeted the original intent for the A+ Schools Program as communicated to public schools districts in 1993. Research Question 2, then, sought to identify the shift in intent the program had undertaken since the distribution of those first RFPs in 1994.

2. How does the A+ Schools Program as delivered in 2009-2010 align with its original intent in 1993 in terms of the constituents served and the outcomes achieved?

The responses focused to this question show the shift in the program over the 13 years it has been in existence. As with Research Question 1, the themes to emerge during the data analysis of the findings in Chapter Four include those of leadership, program intent, finances, and overall value.

Leadership. Changes in leadership result in shifts in policy. As those in power

take on new challenges or seek different paths, programs change. A key example in this case study is the death of the primary policy actor and education reformer, Governor Mel Carnahan. Those participants who had listened to him speak of and promote the A+ Schools Program and its vocational emphasis were apprised of his commitment to educational reform workforce training in Missouri in the 1990s. The original grant writers and A+ coordinators have retired, transferred, or pursued other interests and are rarely employed at their original A+ district.

A former superintendent emphasized, “[The senator] is retired. If people coming in don’t have that vision, we’re going to revert back to what we had done. They’re not going to operate with the new sets of skills and a vision.” This factor influences the shifts in the A+ Schools Program from its implementation to its current delivery.

Since the program’s inception, leadership has changed at both the government and state department levels. For example, one of the administrators of the A+ Schools Program at the state level confessed, “I have no idea what criteria they used [in 1994 to select A+ schools]. A team of readers came in and looked at the applications. That we know, but the criteria itself, I couldn't tell you.” When the researcher shared the process as explained through other interviews, where readers divided the state into quadrants and equitably distributed grants to both rural and urban districts, the current administrators chuckled. One replied, “That's great,” and the other expressed, “That's good to know because that's something we wouldn't have known.” The director then explained, “In those early years, not everything was written on paper. That's why we have so little to go by. It's just that there isn't much. There’s not a paper trail. We didn’t depend on

computers like we do now." This verbal exchange exemplifies the challenges facing programs as leadership changes.

Program intent. As delivered in 2010, the A+ Schools Program has shifted from the original intent of providing at-risk students the tools and skills necessary to compete for high wage, technical careers. Although reducing the dropout rate persists as a primary outcome of the program, the primary constituent to whom the program was directed has veered. Currently, the literature about the A+ Schools Program articulates it as a means by which "students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment" (MODESE, 2009c, p. 1). A counselor with a non-designated rural school in southwest Missouri shared her views on the outcomes of the program. She articulated her understanding of the primary constituents. She explained,

> To my knowledge, it's students from 9th through 12th grade. Even though they're not picking up any dollars yet for their future education, they're benefitting because of the required attendance rate, their required GPA, and the tutoring. Their community service is good for them. The citizenship gives them one more reason to be good and make good choices. To me, they start benefitting immediately because of all those reasons.

She then explained what she perceived the intended outcome to be: "To my knowledge, it's two years of paid education at a community technical college. … It's going to be beneficial at our school because we have a lot make that choice." Her respective district plans to submit an application and to become designated as an A+ school. To date, the financial cost and leadership have prevented them from pursuing designation. The

superintendent has retired, and the district intends to put a tax levy measure on the ballot to offset costs.

Concerning outcomes, the A+ Schools Program was intended as a pathways program for technical or vocational training, resulting in a highly skilled workforce for high-wage, technical careers. An A+ coordinator noted, “More and more students see [A+] as a way of getting two years of a four-year degree. In the beginning, we were told not to push that. That's not really the intent, but now everybody markets it that way.”

A former community college president who is also a former administrator affiliated with the program through the former Coordinating Board of Higher Education explained, “It never, ever was designed for an associate arts degree for university transfer.” As he indicated, one utterance by a bureaucrat changed the intent of the program, which resulted in the original intent being lost and the vocational emphasis being minimized.

Finances. Financial issues surround the A+ Schools Program as it directly serves its two constituents: schools and students. Whereas MODESE offered grants of up to $150,000 to districts to defray implementation costs through 2002, the state does not provide grants to districts seeking A+ designation. One participant from the south central region of the state observed why some districts have not filed application for A+ designation. She continued, “[New districts] won’t buy into it. They have to pay if they want to be a part of it.”

A participant from a rural, non-designated high school clarified the A+ status of her district. She explained, “What I know about our district in particular is that we have one of the lowest tax bases in the state. [The community] doesn’t want to raise taxes.

We're about two years down the road from asking for a proxy roll back, which would give us more funds. Then, maybe we could get tax revenue raised so we could do this [A+ Schools Program]." To support the financial implications felt by rural districts, one interview participant explained, "You had some of your rural school districts in Missouri disenfranchised because of a lack of entrepreneurialism. It wasn't because there wasn't enough money." The A+ Schools Program Designation Checklist suggests that a "district plans a budget of $80,000 per year for three years" (MODESE, 2008, p. 1). In contrast, the original grants provided a constituent district up to $150,000 per year for three years.

A final issue surrounding the financial incentive of the program involves the emphasis on the result, which is the financial incentive for the student constituency. Those students who complete the program are eligible to have tuition and common fees reimbursed, and at one time the reimbursement included book costs as well. A state-level administrator for the program explained, "In FY04, the appropriation was reduced by $5.9 million—the textbook reimbursement was eliminated."

Several interview and focus group participants noted the A+ Schools Program is now identified as a scholarship program rather than a pathways program for vocational training. One A+ coordinator explained, "It's just about the money that the kids get at the end." A teacher noted, "That's pretty much it. That's all it is [at our district] right now." A community college administrator added, "When [most people] talk about A+, all they focus on is the money or the incentive at the end." An assistant superintendent explained, "Now, all the kids want to get [A+] on their transcript and get the tuition."

Overall value. Whereas vocational and technical training leading to a high-skill, high-wage career represented the original value of the program to the state, the college

access and A+ initiatives are of value to the interview and focus group participants. Rather than serving those middle-of-the-road, at-risk constituents by providing them accessible vocational and technical postsecondary training otherwise unavailable to them, the program serves students highly motivated with every intention of attending post-secondary education. One teacher explained the shift in college access at her A+ designated high school. Over the years, she observed, “Top 10 kids lowered expectations for themselves when some could’ve broadened their horizons. A+ was supposed to be serving vo-tech kids and help them get higher rather than taking the top kids and keeping them down a little bit.” Each of the students in the focus group confirmed the intent to attend college, one saying, “I knew since 3rd grade I was going to college.” In addition, each student has attained a minimum 3.5 GPA in college. One of the students, an A+ recipient, disclosed she was a 4.0 GPA Bright Flight recipient applying for more scholarships and financial incentives for her matriculation to the university. She finished 3rd in her high school class.

The tutoring requirement signifies an additional shift in the program’s alignment and purpose. The technical lexicon surrounding the A+ discussion is gone. Current outcomes spotlight the value and benefit of tutoring and teaching. Perhaps an unexpected outcome by those who shaped the A+ Schools Program, the tutoring component is transformational. A 2008 graduate explained how the tutoring experience directly influenced her choice to help others. She stated, “[Tutoring] gave me a new patience and appreciation for education because some kids got it and some kids couldn't. That really made me see how some people struggle, and it made me want to help them.”

Qualitative summary. The process of conducting interviews, scheduling and hosting focus groups, and analyzing relevant documents provided depth and breadth of knowledge about the original and current intent of the A+ Schools Program. In addition, narratives and stories about the intended constituents and the current constituents further informed the degree to which the policy has shifted. The quantitative data enabled the researcher to see a composite picture of the students, districts, and communities served or not served by the A+ Schools Program.

Quantitative Response to Research Questions 3 and 4

One master excel spreadsheet was used to collect the demographic and administrative data, which was available through public access web portals for MODESE, the U.S. Census Bureau, and SEIR. The variables compiled and analyzed included the (a) county, district, and school names; (b) the district population in 2000; (c) the percentage of the district living below the poverty rate in 2000; (d) median household income for the district in 2000; (e) the percentage of the district on free/reduced lunch as of 2009; (f) expenditures; (g) percentages of local, state, and federal resources; and (h) assessed value. The data from this analysis responds to research questions two and three.

3. According to the most recent and updated data, what constituents does the A+ Schools Program serve? What are the demographics of schools served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,

b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and

c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

Because of the comparative nature of the data, the researcher concludes the results of the data resulting from the analysis of Research Questions 3 and 4 through a common response. This parallel approach aligns the A+ designated schools with their non-A+ counterparts, enabling the summary to achieve clarity as the results are reviewed.

4. According to the most recent and updated data, what Missouri students are not being served by the A+ Schools Program as it has grown and developed since 1993? What are the demographics of schools not served by the A+ Schools Program? These demographics include:

a. Community and school populations as indicated by U.S. Census data and MODESE,

b. School budgets as indicated by MODESE, and

c. Median household incomes as indicated by U.S. Census data within boundaries of designated schools.

The administrative and demographic data of schools served and not served by the A+ Schools Program corresponds directly to Research Questions 3 and 4 in regard to the demographics and accessibility of the A+ Schools Program. Overall, the schools served by the A+ Schools Program have higher populations, at 11,981, compared to schools not served by the program, at 3,389. The average enrollment for schools served by the program is 2,550 students, whereas half that number attends a school not served by the program, at 1,266. Those schools served by the A+ Schools Program are more affluent than schools not served, as the median income for households in A+ districts is $42,087.91 compared to a median household income of $37,533.28 in the non-designated district. On a comparable note, the average number of residents living below the poverty level in a school served by A+ is 7.3%, while those living below the poverty level in a

district not served by the A+ program is 7.9%. However, numbers for free and reduced lunch percentages differ: 39.54% of the students in schools served by the A+ program are eligible compared to 46.40% of the students attending the average school not being served by the benefits of the program. The results of the independent samples *t* tests validate these comparisons and suggest significant differences between the demographic framework of the districts and communities.

The state provides guidelines for budget design, whereas assessed values, total expenditures, and percentage of local, state, and federal resources are included in budget summaries. In analyzing the fiscal equity and opportunity to operate a program such as the A+ Schools Program, these variables were analyzed. As indicated in the demographic data, the financial data suggests schools served by the A+ program have access to more resources. However, this cycle may be in correlation to the increased attendance numbers at A+ schools. The independent samples *t* tests, however, negated this assumption. The per pupil expenditures in A+ districts are lower than the per pupil expenditures in non-designated districts. This distinction should also reflect the Kansas City and St. Louis urban districts were not included in the per pupil expenditures. This study also compared the assessed valuation of A+ schools to non-designated schools, where market values of schools served by the A+ program are higher than the assessed values of schools not served. The *t* test reflecting average household incomes supported this information.

Schools served by the A+ program have an assessed valuation of $243,484,165 compared to a sharply decreased assessed valuation of $154,952,993 within school districts not served by A+. As indicated prior, some urban Kansas City districts are included while St. Louis districts are omitted, resulting in sharp contrasts. Comparatively,

a school served by A+ receives slightly higher fiscal resources on the local level than a district not served by the program, at 48.90% compared to 45.59%. The district not served by the program on average receives higher state-level funds, at 44.62% compared to 41.29% for districts served by A+. Both populations receive comparable assistance at the federal level, with A+ designated schools slightly edging non-designated schools in assistance percentages at 9.81% compared to 9.79%. Budgetary variables indicate assessed values and total expenditures of the average schools served by A+ district not served by the program. At the local and federal funding levels, data suggests A+ schools receive a higher percentage of funding than non-designated schools, whereas non-designated schools receive a higher percentage of support from the state. The independent samples *t* tests validated the suggestion that non-designated districts receive higher per pupil expenditures than A+ districts.

Discussion

To investigate the depth and breadth of the A+ Schools Program, this mixed methods case study analyzed demographic data, administrative data, and financial data. In addition, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis provided triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Creswell et al., 2003; Grbich, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Through the research study, key themes emerged relevant to the A+ Schools Program, which included themes related to leadership, program intent, finances, and overall value.

This case study of the A+ Schools Program, however, approached the program from multiple perspectives to arrive at a thorough analysis of the issues of college access and social equity in relationship to this pathways program. Its success or failure,

alignment or divergence, resulted from efforts at the local level led by progressive and transformational leadership, including school boards, superintendents, and A+ coordinators, who saw the value of educational access and social equity in students' lives.

The philosophical foundations of the research study support the epistemology of critical theory. As a research study investigating the social justice and equity of a public education policy, this investigation integrates the values of educational access and social justice into the practice of research. Frattura and Topinka (2006) explained,

> Critical theory explores how injustice and subjugation shape people's experience and understanding of the world. A critical theory perspective is concerned in particular with the issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions interact to construct a social system. Inquiry that is critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustices of society. (p. 336)

The research of Dickert-Conlin and Rubenstein (2007) highlighted the role of the policy maker in providing education access to students. Fowler (2008) presented questions to ask when evaluating equity issues raised by a public policy. Questions to ask include this small sampling:

1. How will this policy affect members of racial minorities?
2. How will this policy affect families with low incomes? (p. 113)

This discussion of the A+ Schools Program in Missouri analyzes the potential of this public policy to alienate or marginalize some students by not enabling all public secondary students access to college and the potential for economic, social mobility, and personal development opportunities affiliated with that access.

College Access and Pathways Programs

Educational pathways programs tend to align low-income secondary students with a post-secondary career or technical path. Attaining a post-secondary credential has become increasingly important for securing opportunities to get high-wage jobs in the United States. Jacobson and Mokher (2009) emphasized the value of such programs in their study. They stated,

> This study seeks to identify educational pathways to high-paying careers that may improve social mobility. Students from low-income families are underrepresented at every milestone in the educational pipeline. That limits their ability to attain post-secondary credentials and break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. (p. i)

The A+ Schools Program as developed in 1993 and implemented in 1994 aligned along this philosophy, intending to serve at-risk students who had few opportunities for post-secondary attainment. As a conduit from the secondary realm to the community and technical colleges, the A+ Program was designed to provide at-risk students with skills and technology to succeed in technical careers or post-secondary education leading to those careers. The governor emphasized the program as a means "to improve career education" (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993b, p. 45). In order to prepare students for advanced education for technical careers, the state sought to improve career education by enhancing technology in the schools and realigning the curriculum along a technical and college track, eliminating the general studies track.

Jacobson and Mokher (2009) suggested ways to strengthen pathways access and opportunity are to increase "the quality and quantity of career-oriented programs. At the

same time, differences in degree attainment between low-income and other students with comparable high school preparation suggest more might be done to make college affordable" (p. 2). Kirst (2007) provided signals to indicate a pathways program, which included shared finances, accessible data, and accountability between the secondary and post-secondary institution. The A+ Schools Program is such a program. Goldring and Sullivan (1996) noted the value of educational leaders garnering community support in a world of changing contexts and environments. Through the implementation of the A+ Schools Program, Missouri accomplished several charges. First, it strengthened the curriculum and improved technology, and second, it delivered a financial incentive to those students participating in the program through their high school. In addition, it built on the support of the community to stabilize the pathways program.

The primary incentive included reimbursement for tuition and common fees at any community, technical, or vocational college throughout the state. This access was communicated clearly, as the overwhelming response by interview participants echoed this sentiment by one A+ coordinator: "The original intent was for kids to get a career and into community college to help them do vocational-type training." The communication strategies worked, and through the evolution of this college access program, these pathways "that are too often overlooked" (Jacobson & Mokher, 2009, p. 2) attracted and supported students outside of the original constituency. However, as a result of the program experiencing a policy shift and serving students not representing the original constituency and not attaining the intended outcomes, the state may have inadvertently resumed what it had intended to resolve: too few students entering the high-skill, high-wage careers to attract innovative business and industry to the state.

The A+ Schools Program is a post-secondary pathways program that has undergone a shift in its intent, identified constituents, and outcomes. Martin and Neal (1999) suggested the educational system has had high expectations for college-bound students, and "with the implementation of career pathways, schools can better prepare to meet the needs of the non-college bound (school-to-work) student" (p. 7). In 2010, however, the A+ designated districts are serving those needs of the college-bound students, those who have access to college and opportunity. As a result, issues of equity pertaining to the disconnected persist. In some ways, this policy shift has resulted in educational injustices, especially for students in socioeconomic disadvantaged rural and inner city districts without equal access to post-secondary opportunities. As referenced in Chapter 4, Table 6: Counties without A+ Designation: 2009 (see Appendix H: A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009) details the demographic and financial data of the 12 rural districts and the St. Louis City district who do not have access to this pathway to college access.

Equity, the Disconnected, and Social Justice in Education

Larson and Ovando (2001) suggested society in general adheres to "the belief we have achieved a fair and equitable society, and that, today, all people have equal rights and opportunities … The belief in equity runs deep in this nation" (p. 66). They continue, noting "[educators] want to ensure that all children receive equal treatment and access to all entitlements" (p. 66). This philosophy frames the perceptions held by many participants in the research study. The dominant response to questions pertaining to the possibility the A+ Schools Program marginalizes or alienates students were met with apprehension, and then "No." One participant asked, "Alienate or marginalize students?

Can you explain how someone would make that argument?" Another respondent observed, "No, I don't think the state has marginalized any students. There are locations where districts have made decisions that may have jeopardized their student's ability to participate in the program or they have elected not to participate in the program because their kids don't do career ed[ucation] or community colleges, but no." However, one participant conceded,

> The most obvious one from a policy standpoint is that the state of Missouri, on a wholesale basis, has been discriminatory with regard to the numbers of A+ Schools that they've made eligible. … You had some of your rural school districts in Missouri that were disenfranchised because of a lack of entrepreneurialism. … And of course, the next major discriminatory point was the fact that the wealthier school districts were able to become A+ eligible. That left some of the poorest rural and inner cities' school districts out. The inner cities, they're still out. It's a meritocracy as opposed to an equalization or a parity. In other words, I can't say the people who needed it the worst got exempt or got left out, but yes, they did.

Leadership qualities and strategic change affect issue interpretation (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Frattura and Topinka (2006) iterated the philosophies espoused by Larson and Ovando (2001). They explained, "We as educators consistently facilitate societal oppression through educational practices in support of separateness and then mystify it in nondiscrimination acts that often discriminate through the very application of their regulations" (Frattura & Topinka, 2006, p. 327). The very nature of the A+ Schools Program very well may alienate and marginalize those students in extreme rural and inner city districts. One of the interview participants taught students who were not

served by A+, which was in a county not served by the pathway program. She explained,

> It's resources. [It's] a little tiny school out there. They pay one of the highest tax bases of any place in Missouri, but who's going to record all that attendance? That's going to be our secretary. When some grade has been turned in wrong, [who] does those grade verification sheets from the teachers? [The district] has one secretary. She would be a big part of it. Whereas, I know bigger schools can afford to have an A+ coordinator. The A+ coordinator has a secretary all by themselves. It's more of a joint effort. … But this is our ninth year in a row for performance in distinction. I feel like our kids are getting a very good education and they deserve to have a break.

Economic and geographic factors influence the implementation of the A+ Schools Program. Dainton and Zelley (2005) explored the value of global accessibility in the information age. Simple, fundamental access provided pathways to students and paved the way for opportunity not only locally but also globally. A strengthened, educated, high-skills workforce could attract business ventures. To implement A+, a district chooses to fund the curriculum overhaul and technological improvements. In one district, three of its five high schools applied and were funded early in the process. The final two high schools received designation in 2009, and one familiar with the application process explained, "They didn't get funded. They just did it on their own." Not all districts have the economic feasibility to implement the program based on their resources. Larson and Ovando (2001) warned,

> If we deny that difference matters in our society, we may logically conclude that universal policies lead to neutral, nondiscriminatory, and objective practices in

> schools. However, when we examine how universalism plays out in decision making in multiracial and multicultural [researcher's note: and rural] school communities, we see serious obstacles to attaining equity. (p. 69)

The program without intention may institute obstacles to attaining equity. One participant explained,

> [The program] is headed in this direction and we're creating some unintended consequences. We're making ourselves vulnerable to a discriminatory lawsuit. One related to inner city issues. Two, we're being discriminatory because some schools are paying and some are not. We're having sort of a redistribution of college going based upon the initiative of the school board or superintendent.

Another interview participant noted, "[A+ Schools selection] was done on a grant basis as opposed to some kind of equity basis." In and of itself, it was his belief the program inherently discriminated students in rural districts through its very application. Another participant, however, believed the rural districts absorbed too many resources. In the response, the participant explained,

> You have the haves and the have-nots. Those small schools shouldn't be in existence. [The A+ Schools Program] is going to be dummied down like a lot of our other programs It's not giving those kids who do benefit what other kids are given, so why do we give it to them? It's not the standard. [The district] is not going to be able to support it and do it.

The A+ Schools Program serves and benefits many students. Many students, though, do not have access to the program's benefits, which is why one has to ask, as one of the participants suggested, if the program is meritocratic or fair and equitable in its

distribution of services to students and districts. To note, out of 114 counties, 13 of the most rural and geographically distanced counties in the state have no representation by a school district as an A+ designated school. St. Louis City public schools have not been eligible to apply for A+ designation, as they are not accredited through MODESE. Forty-five districts with a student population of 450,240 function in counties, if not entire regions, not served by the A+ Schools Program.

Other non-designated districts in extreme rural areas, through their own scholarship opportunities and transformational leaders, serve their students' post-secondary educational needs by negotiating their own pathways opportunities. One district, after having applied and been denied A+ designation and access to the grant opportunity twice by MODESE, sought additional methods by which to provide pathways opportunities to their its students. Gale and Densmore (2003) indicate

> democratic leaders are seen as those that enable the formation of social, learning and culturally responsive public educational institutions, in part by enabling contextually specific struggles to determine what is needed, and by developing a politically informed commitment to justice for all. (p. 119)

After his district had been denied by MODESE twice, a superintendent created a 501(c)3 tax exempt foundation through which to create a district scholarship. With the support of parents and the community (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996), he developed a pathway program with the region's community college, approximately 40 miles to the east. Although these students are not served by MODESE's A+ Schools Program, they have access to the opportunities higher education provides. The superintendent explained the scholarship was implemented "in 2004, and has provided over $100,000 in

scholarship money. We currently have a balance of a little over $200,000. Our teachers have contributed approximately $25,000." Within the challenges facing his district as a rural district, he has provided for the students not served by A+ access to post-secondary education. His leadership—without the encouragement of state mandates or inducements—is classic transformational (Brown, 2004; Gale & Densmore, 2003; Shields, 2004; Yukl, 2006).

The research study sought to identify and bring to the surface possible inequities of the A+ Schools Program. This program and its leadership, financial incentives, intent, and overall value are evident among its varied constituents: the state, districts, students, communities, and community and technical colleges. Inherent to this value, however, is the issue that only select students have access and the related opportunities affiliated with the program. These benefits of the program are not accessible for all students in the state. By that admission, the program marginalizes many students in the state. If the original constituency represented the at-risk student, those very students in the extreme rural and inner city environments are not served by, nor do they have access to, this public policy. Social inequities are evident.

Implications for Practice

Undoubtedly, the A+ Schools Program provides postsecondary access to students. In addition, the financial incentive is equitable, and all students who choose to participate in the program have equitable access to its financial incentives and overall value. In addition to the implications related to financial incentives and overall value, implications exist with the leadership and program intent. With an original intent of providing at-risk students a pathway to community college, vocational, and technical training, the policy

agents sought to strengthen the workforce with educated, highly-skilled employees. These employees would attract business and industry, making available to the state's citizens high-wage jobs.

One implication to this public education program embedded within the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 is its limited access. Students in the inner city and rural districts not served by the program are alienated and marginalized from access to college and an opportunity for an equitable and socially mobile life. In some ways, the program promotes the status quo—those at the fringes are disenfranchised. This is for a multitude of reasons, with a few possible examples being leadership, resources, community, or public policy.

Some school boards and superintendents have impeded districts from participating with and gaining from the program. The implication for this is far-reaching, yet as one participant explained, giving the rationale from his perspective:

> Less aggressive leaders did not realize they would be really hurting the destiny for the higher education opportunity for their kids. It's unprecedented. … Some superintendents and school boards may have said, I don't want to play any of those MODESE rules because I know it's going to lead to more bureaucracy, more rules, and it's going to be a hassle. They didn't realize they were cutting off this wonderful higher ed[ucation] opportunity from the parents and kiddos coming in an unprecedented way.

Another implication relates to program intent and the resulting access and equity issues emerging. As has been investigated through this case study, the potential for policy shift is high. In 1997, the A+ coordinators who led the program in their districts were also

the School-to-Work Program coordinators. In this study, each participant (a) who was interviewed or served on a focus group and (b) who served as the A+ coordinator for the district anytime from 1997-2000 (c) served as the technical education coordinator and the School-to-Work person for the district. They shared a common culture. Morgan (2006) highlighted the value of the cultural context within an organization. He explained,

> The organization [A+ Schools Program] is viewed as a collectivity to which employees [A+ coordinators] belong rather than just a workplace [school district] comprising separate individuals. The collaborative spirit of a village or commune often pervades work experience, and there is considerable emphasis on interdependence, shared concerns, and mutual help. (p. 118)

One interview participant explained,

> The 38 coordinators would come to the table, and we would meet at Lake of the Ozarks and Jeff[erson] City on a regular basis. We had a lot of questions. For instance, there'll be competencies written for every single course in high school. Do you mean every single course in high school? Yes. The first three years, our plates were full.

In contrast, the majority of A+ coordinators leading the district programs currently are administrators, from assistant principals and principals to assistant superintendents. Fewer coordinators have the technical and vocational experiences, and the implications are the technical and vocational intent of the program is lost. The impetus to encourage those technical or vocational track students to participate in the program and pursue a technical career may not be as prominent as it was in 1997. One coordinator articulated, "I am the cross-country coach. That I do for me." Although the

coordinators still meet for regional meetings, the agenda for the meetings is less intensive in curriculum formation and policy implementation. The level of "interdependence, shared concern, and mutual help" (Morgan, 2006, p. 118) has been minimized as the program functions in 2010.

Another implication for practice involves the emergence or unintended expectation of the tutoring component. One of the requirements of A+ is community service, and the majority of students tutor elementary or middle school students in their district. One of the interview participants explained,

> I don't know if it was certainly an intent of the program, but one of the absolute benefits of the program stems from the tutoring and the many aspects of tutoring. Once students gets exposed to tutoring and they find out that they enjoy that, this leads them to career opportunities they may not have otherwise considered.

The result is the Top 10 graduate has replaced the at-risk, possible dropout student as a primary constituent, and rather than seeking vocational training, the constituent completes her associate of arts in teaching and transfers to the university to complete her degree in elementary education, returning to her home community to teach. The implications affect a possible teacher surplus in the state, with potentially negative economic implications for those in the field.

The financial incentive of the program in an era of budget cuts and program elimination is an additional implication. The financial incentives related to the A+ Schools Program are entrenched in the secondary culture. One interview participant needed an early interview time because that evening, she was registering 8th graders and introducing their parents to the A+ contract. The students in the focus group indicated

school guidance counselors and A+ coordinators started talking to them about A+ as early as 8th grade. The program has developed distinctive values and expectations (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Morgan, 2006). One participant indicated the financial incentive may be amended. As more districts pursue the A+ Schools Program as a scholarship for their students, the financial incentives awarded by the state of full tuition reimbursement and common fees may be revisited for amendment.

In early 2010, legislative discussions focus on implementing the A+ Schools Program in all Missouri public secondary schools. The natural implications involve financing the program and maintaining its rigor. In addition, this level of implementation raises questions related to curriculum and technology. Would curriculum be overhauled if it did not align with A+ requirements? Would a district be required to improve computer labs and access to technology?

Most implications relate to students who are served by the A+ Schools Program. How will students be affected if their tuition reimbursement decreases from full reimbursement for tuition and common fees to reimbursement of tuition, with students paying for common fees? How will the education field absorb an influx of educators? How will a district's leadership adapt to shifts in program intent? The most essential question, however, relates to those students who do not have access to and are not served by the A+ Schools Program. Students in A+ designated districts have the opportunity for college access and social mobility and equity. The greater social implications exist with the population not granted access to or served by the A+ Schools Program.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher identifies several limitations to the study, which influenced both

the qualitative and quantitative sides of the study. The Missouri A+ Schools Program is a state-wide program. With the exception of the interviews with the administrators at the state department and the former community college president, participants for the focus groups and interviews were limited to the southwest, south central, and southeast regions. Interviews or focus groups were not conducted with education professionals in the inner cities or with practitioners in the urban districts surrounding Kansas City and St. Louis.

In addition to the regional focus for the study, the administrative data through MODESE is the most updated available as of the 2009-2010 academic year, but the SEIR and U.S. Census Bureau financial and demographic data extend to 2000. The span may have skewed the appearance and understanding of some of the data.

Limitations to the study include the death of a key policy actor, the governor of the state of Missouri, which prohibited the full contextual understanding of the policy formulation. The governor's positions and views on the A+ legislation were identified through published documents and interviews. These resources, however, limited the researcher's knowledge on the history of the program from the key policy actor's perspective.

Since the A+ Schools Program supports public high schools, this study investigated only Missouri public high schools, and eliminated from the MODESE data collection were the elementary, middle school, and K-8 districts. Charter schools have also been eliminated from inclusion of the data. When considering the implications of the A+ Schools Program, the researcher's focus narrows to those public high schools not designated A+, establishing an additional limitation to the study. Students who are home-schooled or enrolled in private secondary institutions, such as parochial schools, are not

considered within the framework and context of this study.

An additional limitation is much of the data for this study has been retrieved from MODESE and SEIR from data submitted by individual school districts. The accuracy of the data has not been confirmed by an outside auditing agency. The use of administrative data provided by the Missouri state government assures greater reliability of the measures of program participation and the lack thereof. The MODESE administrative data made public and retrieved through the portals of their website, such as performance data, census, demographics, and budgets, are assumed to be accurate and current. This is an assumption the researcher made while conducting the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

As a public policy that has shifted in intent and exists in an era of economic downturns and recession, several studies emerged as future research studies. One is to analyze the effect of the economy on decisions students make to utilize their financial incentives. Numbers at the community college levels have increased over the past two to three years, yet attrition numbers have remained constant.

Additional ideas for future research include the economic impact on higher education institutions due to the restrictive nature of the policy. The Program supports only community or technical college—two-year—educational access. Studying the economic impact on the higher education institutions in the state would be substantive. An additional study would be to track students from the community college to the university and observe their challenges, successes, and graduation rate.

As noted in the introduction of this study, two years prior to the enactment of the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993, Proposition B on the Missouri ballot failed. Had it

passed, according to the retired state senator, the baccalaureate institutions “had a much higher percentage [of funding] going to [them] than the elementary and secondary levels.” What impact did this failed public vote have on the future of education in the state?

Based on feedback from the interview and focus group participants, additional research studies include performance standards at the community college level of A+ students compared to students who attended non-A+ designated high schools. Anecdotal experiences of college professionals suggested students who attended A+ designated high schools had higher levels of motivation and initiative in the classroom. These students had a willingness to take higher-level courses at the community college, such as Biology I and Chemistry I, over the introductory courses. In addition, these students had an inclination to participate with campus organizations or volunteer with student groups.

Three of the higher education professionals interviewed posed concerns with the economic impact of the A+ grant. One suggested that because of the weakened economy, more students were applying to take advantage of the financial benefits of the A+ Schools Program. His concern was for decreased funding overall for the program because of the strain on the state, yet the financial implications were echoed during a separate interview with a financial aid professional. Reflecting on the economic downturn, his concern was for the approximately 40-45% of A+ students who lost their A+ funding after their first semester with the community college. He was uncertain if the reason was grade-related or simple attrition. In response to this situation, a recommendation for another study would be to track the numbers of A+ graduates who capitalize on the A+ grant during their full tenure with the community college. Related to this, an additional study in this sector

encourages a researcher to identify if students who have lost their A+ funding after one semester return after a semester break, continue in the classroom but not on A+ funding (the grant is reinstated if students stabilize their GPA to the minimum 2.5), or leave higher education. An associate vice-president at the community college level validated this sentiment, stating the community college sector performed poorly at retaining these students.

Additional recommendations for studies are to identify and review those districts who are not designated as A+, yet they have established district-specific scholarships and pathways agreements with a community college in their region. During interviews with the administrators of the program at the state level, they shared several districts began that process if they were denied designation as an A+ school. The examples they shared were districts located in the extremely low socio-economic region in the southeast quadrant of the state.

One district, which is not part of the A+ Schools Program, offers to its graduates who fulfill a designated set of criteria two years of education at Three Rivers Community College in Poplar Bluff, MO. Its scholarship, an endowed scholarship program through the district's foundation, is financially supported by both community members and employees of the school district. The employees may elect to enroll in a payroll deduction plan, which deposits funds to the 501(c)3 foundation. If the leadership of the state of Missouri were to ever cut A+ benefits, the students with this particular district have access to foundation funding supported by the community and employee investment. This collaborative effort presents all the variables required by the state for a district to be eligible for A+, but it is fully supported at the community level.

A few of the interview and focus group participants shared stories of the A+ Schools Program success stories related to the program's original intent. A meaningful study would be to identify and capture a record of those who followed through with the original intent of the program. These students had no intention of attending college, yet they completed their two-year program with the community college in a technical field and are now employed in high-skill, high-wage positions. Through the interviews and focus groups conducted for this study, three students were identified as achieving the original outcome of the program.

While researching and investigating the A+ Schools Program, a researcher would be remiss not to mention students at private schools and students being home-schooled around the state. Some private administrators consider their students as disadvantaged, as some of their students consider the community colleges and technical programs available in those areas. The home-schooled population is also ineligible for access to the A+ Schools Program financial incentives. Both factions of parents pay taxes and support the education funding sources in many ways, yet their students are not eligible for A+ Schools benefits. Both populations of students may have students who want to pursue vocational or technical training, and home-schooled students may be within that constituency for whom the program was promoted.

As of March 2010, an additional 137 Missouri public schools were seeking A+ designation. With natural implications associated with this jump in the number of programs in the state, this increase opens opportunities for further research as well. The research includes an analysis of the integrity of the program as more schools are designated A+. As additional districts recognize the value of the A+ Schools Program,

not only to their students but also to the state in a more marketable and better educated workforce, one has to identify at what point the legislature will amend the financial grant to community colleges and financial incentives to students. Many of those interviewed articulated an awareness of discussions at the state level to minimize or amend the A+ funding. Whereas students currently have access to tuition and common fees, discussions at the state level have centered on capping eligible semester credit hours, eliminating common fees, or adjusting the grant in other ways.

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Appendix A

Senate Bill 380–Outstanding Schools Act

A+ Schools: Section 160.545

Senate Bill 380 – Outstanding Schools Act
A+ Schools: Section 160.545

(Linked to Missouri General Assembly Website)

Section 88.790	Assessment of public property--street repairs (cities, under 30,000).
Section 108.180	Bond issue--funds kept separate.
Section 143.071	Corporations.
Section 143.105	Corporations.
Section 143.106	Federal income tax deductions.
Section 143.107	Effective date of sections 143.105 and 143.106--contingency--expiration of other sections.
Section 143.171	Federal income tax deduction, amount, corporation and individual taxpayers.
Section 144.700	Revenue placed in general revenue, exception placement in school district trust fund--payment under protest, procedure, appeal, refund.
Section 144.701	One cent sales and use tax designated local tax--collection fee allowed state--school district trust fund created, investment.
Section 149.015	Rate of tax--how stamped--samples, how taxed--tax impact to be on consumer--fair share school fund, distribution.
Section 151.150	Apportionment by county commission of schools by railroads.
Section 160.041	Minimum school day, school month, school year, defined--reduction of required number of hours and days, when.

Section 160.268	Excellence in education revolving fund established--purposes--funding, administration of fund--exempt from transfer to general revenue.
Section 160.500	Citation of law--outstanding schools trust fund--commissioner of administration, estimates--state treasurer, duties, transfer of funds.
Section 160.510	Commission on performance established, members, terms--duties, remuneration--expired January 1, 2000.
Section 160.514	Academic performance standards, adoption by state board, standards--procedure for adoption--development of written curriculum frameworks--adoption of written curriculum by boards of education.
Section 160.518	Statewide assessment system, standards, restriction--exemplary levels, outstanding school waivers-summary waiver of pupil testing requirements--waiver void, when.
Section 160.522	Annual public reporting of information by school districts, distribution--multiple reporting models, contents--summary of accreditation, contents.
Section 160.526	Development of academic standards and assessment system, criteria--assistance of experts--notification of implementation of system, legislative veto--professional advice and counsel.
Section 160.530	Eligibility for state aid, allocation of funds to professional development committee--statewide areas of critical need, funds--success leads to success grant program created, purpose.
Section 160.534	Excursion gambling boat proceeds, transfer to gaming proceeds for education fund and state school moneys fund.
Section 160.545	A+ School Program established--purpose--rules--variable fund match requirement--waiver of rules and regulations, requirement--

	reimbursement for higher education costs for students--evaluation.
Section 160.550	Repealed.
Section 161.099	Department to ensure that curriculum promotes preparation of teachers.
Section 161.520	Districts in financial stress, factors determining--notification to district school board, contents--board to prepare budget and education plan, contents.
Section 161.610	Procedure for reporting performance of high school graduates completing vocational education programs--procedure--data included--public reports.
Section 162.081	lapse of district corporate organization, grounds, effect--hearing prior to determination of attachment of territory of lapsed district--special administrative board--employment interviews for teacher of lapsed district, when--division of district, vote, when.
Section 162.203	Orientation and training requirements for board members initially elected or appointed.
Section 162.975	Repealed.
Section 162.1010	New schools pilot project established--management of schools, bids--eligible schools--exemptions--evaluation.
Section 163.011	Definitions--method of calculating state aid.
Section 163.011	Definitions--method of calculating state aid--contingent effective date.
Section 163.013	Schools offering both kindergarten and transportation, state aid, how

	computed.
Section 163.021	Eligibility for state aid, requirements--evaluation of correlation of rates and assessed valuation, report, calculation--further requirements--exception.
Section 163.023	School district with operating levy below minimum value classified unaccredited, when--procedure for classification.
Section 163.031	State aid--amount, how determined--deductions--categorical add-on revenue, determination of amount--district apportionment, determination of--adjustment of operating levy--minimum revenue--waiver of rules--deposits to outstanding schools trust fund, when--placement of funds received--penalty.
Section 163.031	State aid--amount, how determined--deductions--categorical add-on revenue, determination of amount--district apportionment, determination of--adjustment of operating levy--minimum revenue--waiver of rules--deposits to outstanding schools trust fund, when--placement of funds received--penalty--contingent effective date.
Section 163.036	Estimates of daily average attendance, authorized, how computed--error in computation between actual and estimated attendance, how corrected--use of assessed valuation for state aid.
Section 163.071	State aid for pupils residing on federal lands.
Section 163.087	School district trust fund distribution, certain school districts--eligible pupils defined--districts foregoing reduction in total operating levy, calculation of entitlement.
Section 163.161	State aid for transportation of pupils--powers of state board to approve routes, or portions of routes--effect--limitations on use of funds.

Section 163.172	Minimum teacher's salary--information to be provided to general assembly--salary defined--general assembly to appropriate funds--district qualifications, limitations.
Section 164.013	Schools, certain districts, operating levy adjustment required when, effect--not to affect senior citizens tax relief benefit.
Section 165.011	Tuition--accounting of school moneys, funds--uses--transfers to and from incidental fund, when.
Section 165.051	Investment of surplus funds.
Section 166.260	Repealed.
Section 166.275	Appropriations to satisfy certain judgments transferred to school moneys fund--amount, distribution.
Section 166.300	Definitions--School building Revolving Fund created--lease purchases for projects, plan--eligibility for a lease purchase--ranking of projects--plan waived, when--repayment, interest--failure to make annual payments, state to take possession of buildings, procedures.
Section 167.031	School attendance compulsory, who may be excused--nonattendance, penalty--home school, definition, requirements--school year defined--daily log, defense to prosecution.
Section 167.131	District not accredited shall pay tuition and transportation, when--amount charged.
Section 167.241	Transportation of pupils to another district.
Section 167.332	Department to evaluate and assess needs--detailed instruction plan to be submitted--receipt of state aid--transfer of funds--year-end student reports--new centers funded on priority basis.

Section 168.505	Teacher receiving career pay not to affect district base pay.
Section 168.515	Salary supplement for participants in career plan--method of distribution--amounts--matching funds, formula, contributions--bonus contribution, when--review of career pay--tax levy authorized, when--use of funds--exception to contribution.
Section 170.254	Grants for acquisition of computer and telecommunications technology equipment--limitation.
Section 173.750	Annual reporting of performance of graduates, furnishing of report--procedure--data included.
Section 177.051	Conveyance of property to public institution of higher education.
Section 177.061	Conveyance of sixteenth-section lands.
Section 177.073	Procurement of sites--sale or lease of property, procedure--deposit of proceeds.
Section 177.091	Elementary and high schools, establishment--acquisition of additional grounds--sale of property, distribution of proceeds.
Section 178.585	Upgrade of vocational and technical education--advisory committees--listing of demand occupations--use of funds.
Section 178.693	Educational and screening programs--reimbursement by state.
Section 178.697	Costs not to exceed appropriations.
Section 178.698	Plan to distribute funds to allow voluntary participation.

Missouri Revised Statutes

Chapter 160
Schools--General Provisions
Section *160.545*

August 28, 2009

A+ school program established--purpose--rules--variable fund match requirement--waiver of rules and regulations, requirement--reimbursement for higher education costs for students--evaluation--reimbursement for two-year schools.

160.545. 1. There is hereby established within the department of elementary and secondary education the "A+ Schools Program" to be administered by the commissioner of education. The program shall consist of grant awards made to public secondary schools that demonstrate a commitment to ensure that:

(1) All students be graduated from school;

(2) All students complete a selection of high school studies that is challenging and for which there are identified learning expectations; and

(3) All students proceed from high school graduation to a college or post-secondary vocational or technical school or high-wage job with work place skill development opportunities.

2. The state board of education shall promulgate rules and regulations for the approval of grants made under the program to schools that:

(1) Establish measurable district-wide performance standards for the goals of the program outlined in subsection 1 of this section; and

(2) Specify the knowledge, skills and competencies, in measurable terms, that students must demonstrate to successfully complete any individual course offered by the school, and any course of studies which will qualify a student for graduation from the school; and

(3) Do not offer a general track of courses that, upon completion, can lead to a high school diploma; and

(4) Require rigorous coursework with standards of competency in basic academic subjects for students pursuing vocational and technical education as prescribed by rule and regulation of the state board of education; and

(5) Have a partnership plan developed in cooperation and with the advice of local business persons, labor leaders, parents, and representatives of college and post-secondary vocational and technical school representatives, with the plan then approved by the local board of education. The plan shall specify a mechanism to receive information on an annual basis from those who developed the plan in addition to senior citizens, community leaders, and teachers to update the plan in order to best meet the goals of the program as provided in subsection 1 of this section. Further, the plan shall detail the procedures used in the school to identify students that may drop out of school and the intervention services to be used to meet the needs of such students. The plan shall outline counseling and mentoring services provided to students who will enter the work force upon graduation from high school, address apprenticeship and intern programs, and shall contain procedures for the recruitment of volunteers from the community of the school to serve in schools receiving program grants.

[Important shift in the policy] 3. A school district may participate in the program irrespective of its accreditation classification by the state board of education, provided it meets all other requirements.

4. By rule and regulation, the state board of education may determine a local school district variable fund match requirement in order for a school or schools in the district to receive a grant under the program. However, no school in any district shall receive a grant under the program unless the district designates a salaried employee to serve as the program coordinator, with the district assuming a minimum of one-half the cost of the salary and other benefits provided to the coordinator. Further, no school in any district shall receive a grant under the program unless the district makes available facilities and services for adult literacy training as specified by rule of the state board of education.

5. For any school that meets the requirements for the approval of the grants authorized by this section and specified in subsection 2 of this section for three successive school years, by August first following the third such school year, the commissioner of education shall present a plan to the superintendent of the school district in which such school is located for the waiver of rules and regulations to promote flexibility in the operations of the school and to enhance and encourage efficiency in the delivery of instructional services in the school. The provisions of other law to the contrary notwithstanding, the plan presented to the superintendent shall provide a summary waiver, with no conditions, for the pupil testing requirements pursuant to section 160.257 in the school. Further, the provisions of other law to the contrary notwithstanding, the plan shall detail a means for the waiver of requirements otherwise imposed on the school related to the authority of the state board of education to classify school districts pursuant to subdivision (9) of section 161.092, RSMo, and such other rules and regulations as determined by the commissioner of education, except such waivers shall be confined to the school and not other schools in the school district unless such other schools meet the requirements of this subsection.

However, any waiver provided to any school as outlined in this subsection shall be void on June thirtieth of any school year in which the school fails to meet the requirements for the approval of the grants authorized by this section as specified in subsection 2 of this section.

6. For any school year, grants authorized by subsections 1 to 3 of this section shall be funded with the amount appropriated for this program, less those funds necessary to reimburse eligible students pursuant to subsection 7 of this section.

7. The commissioner of education shall, by rule and regulation of the state board of education and with the advice of the coordinating board for higher education, establish a procedure for the reimbursement of the cost of tuition, books and fees to any public community college or vocational or technical school or within the limits established in subsection 9 of this section for any two-year private vocational or technical school for any student:

(1) Who has attended a public high school in the state for at least three years immediately prior to graduation that meets the requirements of subsection 2 of this section, except that students who are active duty military dependents who, in the school year immediately preceding graduation, meet all other requirements of this subsection and are attending a school that meets the requirements of subsection 2 of this section shall be exempt from the three-year attendance requirement of this subdivision; and

(2) Who has made a good faith effort to first secure all available federal sources of funding that could be applied to the reimbursement described in this subsection; and

(3) Who has earned a minimal grade average while in high school as determined by rule of the state board of education, and other requirements for the reimbursement authorized by this subsection as determined by rule and regulation of said board.

8. The commissioner of education shall develop a procedure for evaluating the effectiveness of the program described in this section. Such evaluation shall be conducted annually with the results of the evaluation provided to the governor, speaker of the house, and president pro tempore of the senate.

9. For a two-year private vocational or technical school to obtain reimbursements under subsection 7 of this section, the following requirements shall be satisfied:

(1) Such two-year private vocational or technical school shall be a member of the North Central Association and be accredited by the Higher Learning Commission as of July 1, 2008, and maintain such accreditation;

(2) Such two-year private vocational or technical school shall be designated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended;

(3) No two-year private vocational or technical school shall receive tuition reimbursements in excess of the tuition rate charged by a public community college for course work offered by the private vocational or technical school within the service area of such college; and

(4) The reimbursements provided to any two-year private vocational or technical school shall not violate the provisions of article IX, section 8, or article I, section 7, of the Missouri Constitution or the first amendment of the United States Constitution.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Access and Equity of the Missouri A+ Schools Program

Date:

Location:

Participant:

Video/audio recorded?

Notes:

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Key case study research question:

RQ1: What was the original intent for the A+ section of the Missouri Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 in terms of the constituents to be served and the outcomes achieved?

1. What was the original intent for the A+ Schools Program?
2. Who were targeted as the original constituents?
3. What were the intended outcomes or benefits for the A+ Schools Program?
4. Who was to benefit from the A+ Schools Program?
5. In what ways does the A+ Schools Program in 2010 align with its original intent from 1993?
6. In what ways does the A+ Schools Program in 2010 deviate from its original intent from 1993?
7. Does the A+ Schools Program alienate or marginalize students in the state of Missouri in 2010?
8. How were schools originally identified for participation in the A+ Schools Program? Were particular schools initially targeted?
9. How did MODESE market the A+ Schools Program? How were schools notified of this opportunity?
10. Did MODESE anticipate waves or phases of implementation?

Appendix D

Focus Group Protocol and Questions

1. Focus Group 1 Protocol—A+ Designated Schools
2. Focus Group 2 Protocol—non-A+ Designated Schools
3. Focus Group 3 Protocol—College Students

Focus Group 1 Protocol—A+ Designated Schools

Introductions and protocol – 10 minutes

Participants will be welcomed into a feasible board room or classroom at Ozarks Technical Community College. A video recorder will be visible in a corner. An audio recorder will be visible on a table. The researcher will identify the recording devices. Participants will be free to withdraw from participation at any time. The researcher will remind participants of IRB contact information and protections. **The informed consent forms for signatures will be distributed and collected at this time. Participants will keep a copy for their records.**

Participants will be asked to respond to each question, allowing all members to speak and share their responses and experiences. Anyone may choose not to respond without penalty or consequence.

Research intent: The participants will be informed that the conclusions emerging with this research project will be included in a doctoral dissertation and possibly for journal publication. Their identity will be protected and disclosed in non-identifiable and generic terms (a guidance counselor with a non-A+ designated school, for example), and their participation with the focus group will not be disclosed. Confidentiality will be maintained.

Participant Background – 20 minutes

1. What is your role with the A+ Schools Program?
2. Do you fulfill other contractual duties for your district?

A+ Schools Program Intent and Benefits – 30 minutes

1. What is your understanding of the original intent for the A+ Schools Program as it was enacted in 1993?
2. Who would you identify as the original constituents to benefit from this Program?
3. What are the intended outcomes or benefits for the A+ Schools Program in 2010?
4. In what ways does the A+ Schools Program in 2010 align with the Program's intent?

5. In what ways does the A+ Schools Program in 2010 deviate from the Program's intent?

A+ Schools Program Constituents – 20 minutes

1. What students are alienated or marginalized by the A+ Schools Program in the state of Missouri in 2010?
2. In what ways do you see the A+ Schools Program benefit students?
3. In what ways do you see the A+ Schools Program limit students?

Concluding Remarks and Comments – 10 minutes

1. Does anyone have any comments or observations you would like to share that you did not have the opportunity to share?
2. Extend thanks… remind how the research will be used as explained at beginning.

Focus Group 2 Protocol—non-A+ Designated Schools

Introductions and protocol – 10 minutes

Participants will be welcomed into a feasible board room or classroom at Ozarks Technical Community College. A video recorder will be visible in a corner. An audio recorder will be visible on a table. The researcher will identify the recording devices. Participants will be free to withdraw from participation at any time. The researcher will remind participants of IRB contact information and protections. **The informed consent forms for signatures will be distributed and collected at this time. Participants will keep a copy for their records.**

Participants will be asked to respond to each question, allowing all members to speak and share their responses and experiences. Anyone may choose not to respond without penalty or consequence.

Research intent: The participants will be informed that the conclusions emerging with this research project will be included in a doctoral dissertation and possibly for journal publication. Their identity will be protected and disclosed in non-identifiable and generic terms (a guidance counselor with a non-A+ designated school, for example), and their participation with the focus group will not be disclosed. Confidentiality will be maintained.

Participant Background/Basic A+ Knowledge – 20 minutes

1. What is your awareness of the A+ Schools Program?
2. What are your contractual duties for your district?
3. Who would you identify as the original constituents to benefit from this Program?
4. What are the intended outcomes or benefits for the A+ Schools Program in 2010?

Equity and College Access – A+ Intent and Purpose – 40 minutes

1. In terms of your awareness of the A+ Schools Program, in what ways are your students alienated or marginalized from its benefits?
2. What is your understanding of the original intent for the A+ Schools Program as it was enacted in 1993?

3. What students are alienated or marginalized by the A+ Schools Program in the state of Missouri in 2010?
4. In what ways does the A+ Schools Program in 2010 align with the Program's intent?
5. In what ways does the A+ Schools Program in 2010 deviate from the Program's intent?

Concluding Remarks and Comments – 20 minutes

1. Does anyone have any comments or observations you would like to share that you did not have the opportunity to share?
2. Extend thanks… remind how the research will be used as explained at beginning.

Focus Group 3 Protocol—College Students

Introductions and protocol – 10 minutes

Participants will be welcomed into a feasible board room or classroom at Ozarks Technical Community College. A video recorder will be visible in a corner. An audio recorder will be visible on a table. The researcher will identify the recording devices. Participants will be free to withdraw from participation at any time. The researcher will remind participants of IRB contact information and protections. **The informed consent forms for signatures will be distributed and collected at this time. Participants will keep a copy for their records.**

Participants will be asked to respond to each question, allowing all members to speak and share their responses and experiences. Anyone may choose not to respond without penalty or consequence.

Research intent: The participants will be informed that the conclusions emerging with this research project will be included in a doctoral dissertation and possibly for journal publication. Their identity will be protected and disclosed in non-identifiable and generic terms (a guidance counselor with a non-A+ designated school, for example), and their participation with the focus group will not be disclosed. Confidentiality will be maintained.

Introductions, demographics, and A+ background knowledge – 20 minutes

1. Where do you attend college?
2. Where did you attend high school?
3. What is your knowledge of the A+ Schools Program?

Access and lack of access to A+ benefits – 30 minutes

1. What A+ Schools Program benefits do you receive?
2. Was your high school an A+ Schools Program designated school?
3. Did anyone eligible for the benefits not take advantage of them?
4. Was your choice to attend college based on your A+ Schools Program benefits?

5. Would you have attended college had A+ Schools Program benefits not been in place?
6. If yes, would you have attended a different institution? Where?
7. If no, are you attending college solely because of the A+ Schools Program benefits?

A+ specific benefits and experiences – 15 minutes

1. What benefits did you gain from participating in the A+ Schools Program?
2. What A+ Schools Program requirements remain with you as a college student?
3. Did you experience unintended consequences or benefits you did not expect to gain?

Concluding Remarks and Comments – 5 minutes

1. Does anyone have any comments or observations you would like to share that you did not have the opportunity to share?
2. Extend thanks… remind how the research will be used as explained at beginning.

Appendix E

Primary Document Analysis Protocol

Primary Document Analysis Protocol

Document Title:

Retrieval location:

Source of Document:

Dates published/available to users:

Responds to Research Questions:

Notes:

Appendix F

Research Recruitment Correspondence

1. Interview Recruitment
2. Focus Group Recruitment

Research Recruitment Correspondence—Interview

Doctoral Research: I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with the University of Missouri. I am completing the requirements for the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree and am conducting a research study to determine the equity and accessibility of the A+ Schools Program to all public high school students in the state of Missouri. I am conducting both interviews and focus groups to collect and gather data for this research study.

Interview: I am recruiting individuals to participate in a minimum of five interviews. Participants include state department facilitators of the Program, college A+ coordinators, key political agents, and other key policy actors who have a role in the policies and procedures associated with the A+ Schools Act as implemented within the environment of the public secondary schools.

The interviews will be staged in a setting comfortable to you, the participant. This might be your office or another neutral location.

The interview will not take longer than an hour of the participant's time.

Is it possible for us to schedule a time convenient to your schedule?

Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at 417-447-8229, 417-860-0392, or email daugherc@otc.edu.

Research Recruitment Correspondence—Focus Groups

Doctoral Research: I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with the University of Missouri. I am completing the requirements for the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree and am conducting a research study to determine the equity and accessibility of the A+ Schools Program to all public high school students in the state of Missouri. I am conducting both interviews and focus groups to collect and gather data for this research study.

Focus Groups: I am recruiting individuals to participate in three focus groups: A+ coordinators, non-A+ designated schools reps, and adult college students.

- ❑ The A+ focus group comprises A+ coordinators from the southwest Missouri region to discuss issues related to equity and access as provided by the A+ Schools Program.
- ❑ A second focus group comprises non-A+ schools representatives (guidance counselors, principals, superintendents, for example) to discuss issues related to the effect the lack of A+ benefits and opportunities has on their students.
- ❑ The final focus group is comprised of adult college students who have A+ Schools Program benefits and students who graduated from non-A+ designated high schools.
- ❑ Each focus group will take maximum 2 hours (the goal is 1.5 hours).

Please check your population:

- ❑ A+ designated representative
- ❑ Non-A+ designated school
- ❑ Adult College Student with _____ or without _____ A+ Program benefits.

Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at 417-447-8229, 417-860-0392, or email daugherc@otc.edu.

Appendix G

Informed Consent

1. Informed Consent Signature Letter—Interview
2. Informed Consent Signature Letter—Focus Groups
3. Informed Consent Signature Form

Informed Consent Signature–Interview

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for considering participation in this research study, *A Policy Study about Equity and College Access: The Missouri A+ Schools Program*. It is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Informed Consent: The University of Missouri subscribes to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services protocol and policies regarding protection of human subjects. These policies state no researcher may involve a human being as a subject in research unless the researcher has obtained legally effective informed consent of the subject or the subject's legal representative.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify if the Missouri A+ Schools Program from 1993 fulfills its goal to offer post-secondary education to all students in the state of Missouri in 2010. As stated on the A+ Facts Sheet distributed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE), "The primary goal of the A+ Schools Program is to ensure that all students that graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment." Based on documentation through MODESE, as of November 2009, 49% of the public high schools in the state were designated A+ with the A+ Schools Program.

Goal: The goal of this research is to critically analyze the mission and intent of the A+ Schools Program and determine if the program fulfills its original intent as articulated. In addition, this study seeks to investigate the equity of this program in providing higher education access to all high school students in the state of Missouri.

Researcher: Caron Daugherty, University of Missouri doctoral candidate. 417-860-0392. daugherc@otc.edu.

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr. Robert (Bob) Watson, Missouri State University. 417-836-5177. RobertWatson@missouristate.edu.

Interview Procedure: You will be asked 8-10 questions focusing on the intent, mission, accessibility, and equity of the A+ Schools Program and the state's goal that all students benefit from the program's value. The interview will be audiotaped and/or videotaped.

Integrity, Confidentiality, Risks, and Personal Rights: This study has been reviewed and approved by a Dissertation Committee. These professors believe that the research procedures adequately safeguard participants' privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights.

Interview materials will be kept for three years in a secure, locked file accessible only by the researcher, after which the interview materials will be destroyed. There are no reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subject through participation in this study. Other than contributing to meaningful educational research, no benefits can be expected from the research. Any questions or concerns may be directed to Dr. Watson, dissertation supervisor, at his contact information.

Before making a final decision about participation, please read the following about the use of your feedback and protecting your rights as a participant:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not respond to all of the questions.
- Your feedback will be kept confidential. Results will be submitted as findings for the dissertation, without names or other identifying information. For example, participants will be identified as "an A+ Coordinator" or "a guidance counselor at a public school without A+ designation."
- Your participation will take approximately 1 hour. During this time your responses will be recorded, either with video or audio, if not both.

Institutional Research Board: The University of Missouri Campus Institutional Research Board (CIRB) approved this study. You may contact the CIRB if you have questions about your rights, concerns, complaints, or comments as a research participant.

Campus Institutional Research Board
483 McReynolds Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-9585
umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu
www.research.missouri.edu/cirb/index.htm

If at this point you are still interested in participating and assisting with this important educational research project, please complete the Informed Consent Signature Form. You may email your agreement to daugherc@otc.edu.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Caron Daugherty, Doctoral candidate
University of Missouri-Columbia

Informed Consent Signature–Focus Group

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for considering participation in this research study, *A Policy Study about Equity and College Access: The Missouri A+ Schools Program*. It is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Informed Consent: The University of Missouri subscribes to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services protocol and policies regarding protection of human subjects. These policies state no researcher may involve a human being as a subject in research unless the researcher has obtained legally effective informed consent of the subject or the subject's legal representative.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify if the Missouri A+ Schools Program from 1993 fulfills its goal to offer post-secondary education to all students in the state of Missouri in 2010. As stated on the A+ Facts Sheet distributed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE), "The primary goal of the A+ Schools Program is to ensure that all students that graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment." Based on documentation through MODESE, as of November 2009, 49% of the public high schools in the state were designated A+ with the A+ Schools Program.

Goal: The goal of this research is to critically analyze the mission and intent of the A+ Schools Program and determine if the program fulfills its original intent as articulated. In addition, this study seeks to investigate the equity of this program in providing higher education access to all high school students in the state of Missouri.

Researcher: Caron Daugherty, University of Missouri doctoral candidate. 417-860-0392. daugherc@otc.edu.

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr. Robert (Bob) Watson, Missouri State University. 417-836-5177. RobertWatson@missouristate.edu.

Focus Group Procedures: You will be with a group of 5-6 other people. The duration of the focus group will be limited to less than one hour. Questions you will be asked focus on the intent, mission, accessibility, and equity of the A+ Schools Program and the state's goal that all students benefit from the program's value. The focus group will be audiotaped and/or videotaped.

Integrity, Confidentiality, Risks, and Personal Rights: This study has been reviewed and approved by a Dissertation Committee. These professors believe that the research procedures adequately safeguard participants' privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. Focus group materials will be kept for three years in a secure, locked file accessible only by the researcher, after which the focus group materials will be destroyed. There are no reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subject through participation in this study. Other than contributing to meaningful educational research, no benefits can be expected from the research. Any questions or concerns may be directed to Dr. Watson, dissertation supervisor, at his contact information.

Before making a final decision about participation, please read the following about the use of your feedback and protecting your rights as a participant:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not respond to all of the questions.
- Your feedback will be kept confidential. Results will be submitted as findings for the dissertation, without names or other identifying information. For example, participants will be identified as "an A+ Coordinator" or "a guidance counselor at a public school without A+ designation."
- Your participation will take approximately 1 hour. During this time your responses will be recorded, either with video or audio, if not both.

Institutional Research Board: The University of Missouri Campus Institutional Research Board (CIRB) approved this study. You may contact the CIRB if you have questions about your rights, concerns, complaints, or comments as a research participant.

Campus Institutional Research Board
483 McReynolds Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-9585
umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu
www.research.missouri.edu/cirb/index.htm

If at this point you are still interested in participating and assisting with this important educational research project, please complete the Informed Consent Signature Form. You may email your agreement to daugherc@otc.edu.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Caron Daugherty, Doctoral candidate
University of Missouri-Columbia

Informed Consent Signature Form

Date:

I, _____, agree to participate in this study conducted by Caron Daugherty.

I understand that:

- My answers will be used for educational research.
- My participation is voluntary.
- I may stop participation at any time without penalty.
- I need not answer all of the questions.
- My answers and identity will be kept confidential.
- My participation is being audiotaped and/or videotaped.

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realizing that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time.

Signature:_____

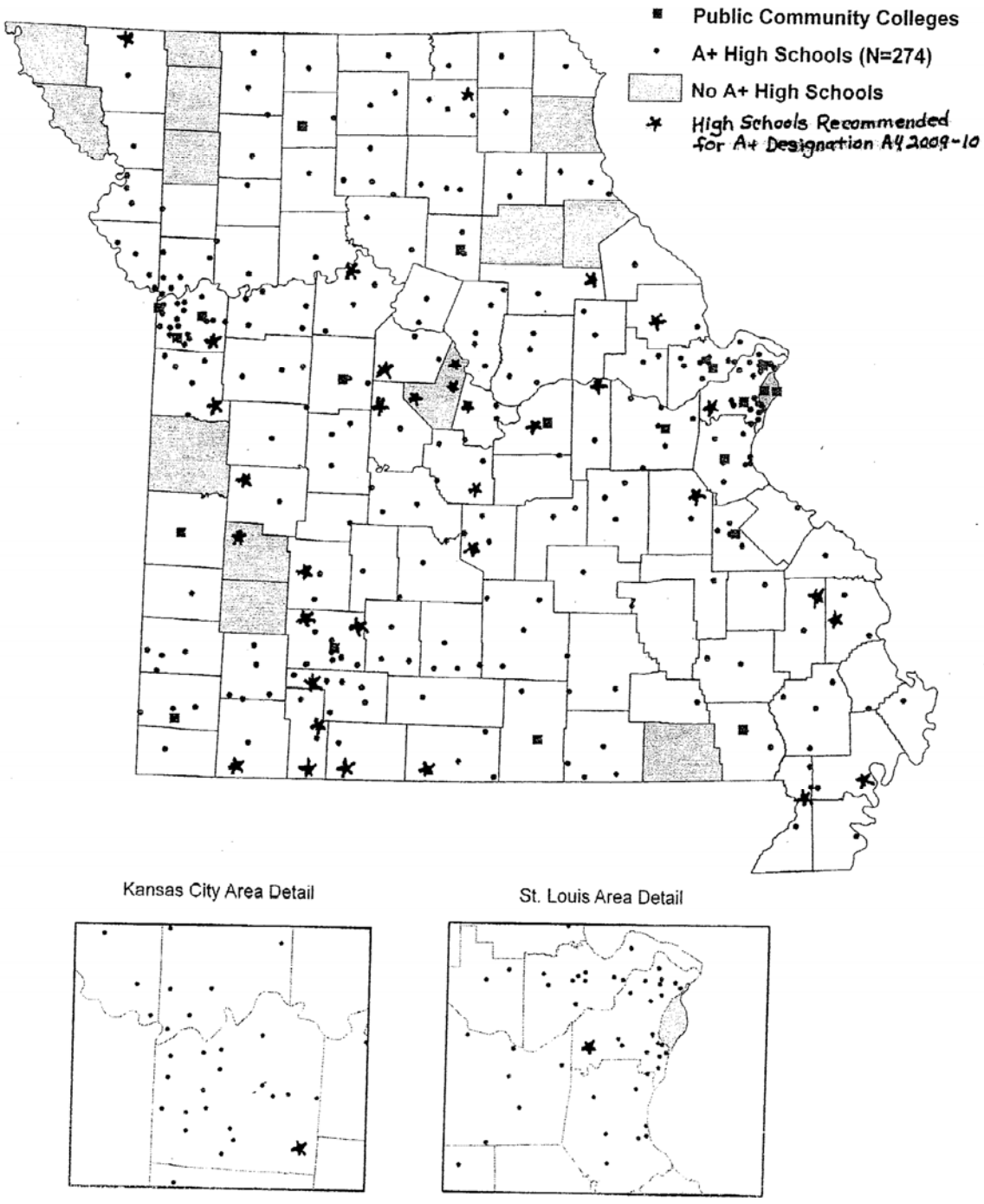
Date:_____

Appendix H

A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY 2008-2009

Note: The researcher was granted permission in April 2010 to insert the graphic, a public document, by the Supervisor of the A+/Charter Schools Programs at MODESE.

A+ High Schools in Missouri, AY2008-09



APPENDIX I

Counties with 100% A+ designation: 2009

Appendix I

Counties with 100% A+ designation: 2009

County (*n*=24) [Districts *n*=58]	Median Household Income 2000	Combined District Population 2000	Combined Secondary Population 2009	Average District % < Poverty 2000	Average District % FRL 2009
Benton (3 districts)	$33,542	17,827	2,532	6.53%	51.33%
Callaway (4 districts)	$43,466	28,352	5,047	3.97%	33.51%
Camden (4 districts)	$38,732	34,141	5,205	7.98%	56.51%
Crawford (3 districts)	$36,936	19,617	3,300	9.33%	45.89%
Dent (1 districts)	$32,948	6,810	1,534	7.50%	42.50%
Douglas (1 districts)	$30,987	8,737	1,393	8.80%	61.22%
Franklin (6 districts)	$42,208	92,697	15,594	3.40%	31.24%
Grundy (2 districts)	$34,195	1,221	1,328	7.90%	50.19%
Howell (3 districts)	$27,755	27,625	5,085	12.03%	48.25%
Knox (1 district)	$32,023	4,329	530	8.80%	58.84%
MacDonald (1 districts)	$32,411	17,753	3,621	11.00%	50.57%
Marion (3 districts)	$41,585	30,157	4,886	5.60%	30.84%

Montgomery (2 districts)	$37,793	11,123	1,754	7.00%	43.29%
Oregon (4 districts)	$27,276	10,955	1,927	12.48%	57.12%
Perry (1 district)	$42,915	16,956	2,301	3.80%	35.40%
Putnam (1 district)	$32,715	5,085	773	8.50%	34.38%
Ste. Genevieve (1 district)	$46,312	15,057	1,986	3.90%	31.02%
Schuyler (1 district)	$34,121	4,309	678	9.70%	49.11%
Scotland (1 district)	$34,776	4,522	592	8.80%	45.69%
Shelby (2 districts)	$35,939	4,727	1,097	11.95%	36.07%
Texas (5 districts)	$29,759	21,579	3,631	10.96%	50.71%
Warren (2 districts)	$48,176	21,560	4,482	4.95%	34.09%
Wayne (2 districts)	$28,057	12,156	1,768	12.55%	66.46%
Wright (4 districts)	$30,025	19,435	3,357	11.98%	57.18%
Missouri	$39,771	7,294.08	1,859	15.61%	41.95%

VITA

Caron Linelle Daugherty Mitchell was born January 29, 1966, in Springfield, MO. Growing up in Sparta, Thayer, and Gainesville, MO, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Writing from Missouri State University in 1989 and a Master of Arts in English in 1991. In 1993, she became an academic advisor with Missouri State, eventually working with transfer students as the university's transfer advisor.

In 2002, Daugherty Mitchell accepted a position with Ozarks Technical Community College, where she is a member of the English faculty, teaching composition, poetry, and literature. In December 2007, she was promoted to Director of Grants with the college. After a short tenure with grants, she accepted the position with the college as the Director of the Honors Program in September 2008. This program, formally implemented in July 2009, piloted its first courses to students during the spring semester of 2009. The first students graduate from the program in May 2010.