

Running head: OPTIMIZE POST-SECONDARY SUCCESS

**EFFECTIVE PREPAREDNESS FOR THE WEST MIFFLIN AREA LIFE SKILLS
PROGRAM TO OPTIMIZE POST-SECONDARY SUCCESS**

A Doctoral Capstone Project

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

Department of Secondary Education and Administrative Leadership

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Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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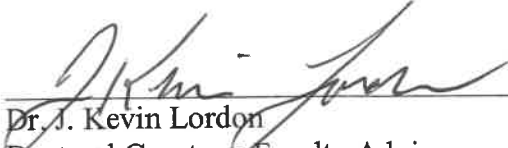
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Abstract

As our society moves toward enriching every individual, educators need to drive each student to excel in the college/career ready world. Schools are forced to mimic today's business model that strives to be the most efficient and effective as possible, while staying budget friendly. Schools have to comply with this model as prices are soaring for responsibilities such as, facilities, healthcare and salaries.

The purpose of this capstone is to determine whether the traditional (academic) curriculum or transitional (functional) curriculum is the best educational direction for the life skills student and program. Considering special education costs are on the rise, districts must make quality educational data driven decisions. To ensure this, the study researched what items are key components to a transitional life skills school to work program. Most importantly, to find out if there are improved employment outcomes due to effective transition programming. Also, what data can teachers and staff provide that can improve the life skills curriculum.

Forty-one administrators and high school staff participated in the questionnaire aimed at what direction the curriculum should move toward and focus on in the next few years. The data collection reveals that the participants' strongly believed that a transitional curriculum is more effective for high school life skills students in gaining skill sets than an academic curriculum. Additionally, the study indicated that an academic curriculum is important for the foundation of necessities of an education, however, a functional curriculum aids in future employability.

CHAPTER I

Background

This research paper delves into the two distinct methods of learning for a life skills classroom. For centuries the question has loomed as to what learning method most benefits a life skills student. My task is to evaluate the spectrum between the two learning techniques. Functional or transitional learning believes that adding actual life skills, beyond the books, propels the student to becoming a more marketable candidate for employment. Skills would include hands-on teaching like washing and folding clothes, completing a transaction or serving a cup of coffee. The idea is that familiarizing students with everyday life skills may boost confidence and allow these students to be trained to be more employable. Traditional or academic learning is categorized as modifying course studies in reading and math in order to advance the life skills student. The student will remain in a classroom while using specially designed instruction.

The West Mifflin Area High School has been implementing many crucial changes to the traditional life skills School to Work program. The administration, staff and myself have been researching and familiarizing ourselves with a transitional versus traditional curriculum. We have studied the trend for a functional curriculum which provides the student a competitive chance at post-secondary jobs or schooling. This is accomplished by practicing, preparing and ultimately gaining employment at a local business. The life skills School to Work functional curriculum's goal is to work closely with qualifying businesses. This allows for them to provide lists of skills to master in order to gain employment at their local company.

Over the last few years, as I am continuing to acquaint myself with the West Mifflin Area High School's Life Skills School to Work program, I am enthusiastic as to how far it has developed. I noticed an opportunity to broaden the curriculum by introducing real world experiences and tasks. These examples are running the school store operated by the life skills students; making coffee, cleaning, learning the cash register to selling t-shirts. The administration, teachers and school board members have been supportive and encouraging with these changes. We are currently offering opportunities to master real life skills to secure employability. Prior to implementing this new method, the rate of post-secondary work was low.

At the conclusion of the 2018-2019 school year, a significant number of students did not have any concrete post-secondary plans. The research collected came from the math and English Language Arts classes that were being taught in a traditional manner, with modifications and accommodations on a student's educational level. Witnessing the traditional life skills curriculum taught throughout this last year, I noted a lack of student ability to attain gainful employment. After coming across a new transitional program of a life skills curriculum that propelled students to excel in a high school setting, I recognized a need for further research. This program introduces additional skills allowing the students to become more marketable in the workforce.

My research is to find the effectiveness of introducing students to skills for employment vs skills that focus on the traditional learning style of the classroom setting. In order to fully grasp the extent of both curriculum styles and their benefits vs disadvantages, I am administering questionnaires, surveys and interviews to several entities within the school. I have collected data from special education teachers, staff and

administrators. Also, from life skills para-professionals, potential employers and parents, among others. Ultimately, these answers will differentiate which program maximizes the students chance in becoming essential members of society. I find that as this research unfolds the fluidity of this program is essential. We are beginning to see how effectively adding everyday tasks, with mastery and confidence, contributes to these students' achievements after graduation.

As assistant superintendent, I aspire for all of our students to graduate with confidence, ability and skill sets to become successful contributing adults post-secondary. The increase in numbers of our life skills students meeting that goal and achieving job security is critical. As this new method unfolds, I am pleased to be able to implement greater opportunities to include within this educational technique. We eagerly expand our resources and tasks as I collect data from several sources. The teachers and administrators continue to learn more about the expectations from our local businesses. The program has gotten off to a slow start with the pandemic, however, grows with momentum as we begin to return to school. The creation of the school store has cost the district minimal budgetary expenses, thus far. Expenses are projected to include supplies and equipment. At the height of this program succeeding, it is projected to be able to sustain itself with the revenue from sales, such as our very own West Mifflin merchandise. Balancing education while remaining fiscally responsible is also a large part of my role as assistant superintendent. The school setting now promotes vocational school as an opportunity to teach the life skills student a trade. Sending a student off campus to educate them in a trade or skill costs the district. Increasing in-house opportunities for these students will

ultimately save money for the school district and allow us to have more time with them to maximize their needs and education.

Identify Capstone Focus

My focus for this project is to evaluate the traditional versus transitional life skills curriculum. Delving into the functional program which begins to include certain everyday skills as part of a daily lesson. These life skills can vary but could include the completion of an order in its entirety. For example, taking the order, serving a cup of coffee, operating a cash register or washing, drying and folding towels. The question is does having a skill set advance the opportunities for employment.

Reflection

My reflection on this Capstone project would be described as wanting every student to have an education in its entirety. Every student deserves to leave the school setting having the skills and confidence to move on to the next level. If we as educators have succeeded then the students move on to the outside world with mastery and capability of holding down a job, learning a new trade or continuing their education. Key components to developing a truly functioning transitional program will come from the extensive research I complete. The documented answers and opinions from educational entities and local cooperating businesses will be the future of the program.

Research Questions

Identifying whether the functional or traditional method improves the quality of life after graduation is my biggest deliberation.

- *What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?*

Focus on this particular question will be developed by a brief interview process. This process will be longer than a questionnaire because the base questions can allow for expansion in their answers. In order to collect data, this particular group will be close knit to the program and the students. For example, I will seek out the answers from; the Director of Special Education, Director of Special Education Administrative Assistant, both learning support teachers, three learning support paraprofessionals, and also the three high school administrators. Additionally, interviewing potential employers will be critical to determine further needs of the program in order to cultivate successful school to work employees.

- *Does effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes?*

To collect data and formulate a true spectrum of the traditional vs transitional programming, I will reach out to a larger group. The survey will consist of both open-ended and Likert scale questions. I will continue to utilize the original five groups, as well as including all high school special education teachers, all paraprofessionals, three guidance counselors, the department heads, and any potential employers for the program.

- *What data can the teachers and staff provide to highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program?*

In order to get a broader viewpoint, a questionnaire will be circulated to culminate my resources. They will include; all high school staff and administrators, all paraprofessionals, and also the life skills program parents.

Expected Outcomes

Looking at the data collected from previous school years throughout the current year will be an effective way of measuring whether the change from traditional vs transitional programming will be the future of the life skills program. For example, purposeful sampling will be used because it involves the intentional selection of a specific group of individuals in a selected curriculum. Within the purposeful sampling there are subcategories to utilize such as, homogeneous. Homogeneous is available because it includes all life skills students participating and all of these students will be introduced to this new curriculum. Through observation as a participant I will be able to analyze the data based on casual interactions and non-verbal communication that occurs during my visits. Through an interview guide I can analyze the direct answers and those of the follow up questions. Previous data collected from the number of students staying at West Mifflin Area vs continuing to go to a vo-tech school and statistics of the number of students able to gain employment will be studied. Also, the aforementioned semi structured interviews, surveys and questionnaires will provide important data for my research. Rendering a decision, at the end of the year, will depend on the statistics showing the students learning and grasping new concepts. West Mifflin Area School District will compute data and results to apprise parents and students of the best route for them to take. If the modernized curriculum has allowed students to accumulate the same or more knowledge of traditional standards, the program will continue forward.

Fiscal Implications

When discussing fiscal decisions about the project, the immediate focus was on the amount of money being spent on materials, supplies and resources. These costs in the

grand scheme were minimal to the district. Purchases of paint, decorations, coffee supplies, ink and shirts easily fit into the annual instructional budget. The true implication is the ability to offer our students the educational process of assimilating to the post-graduate world, particularly through a quality work experience. This directly competes with charter/cyber schools, special education placements and local vo-tech schools and the large costs associated with them. The district's program will be marketed to these students, keeping funds in our budget, while giving a quality alternative.

Summary

To corroborate that a more efficient career readiness life skills program, in both curriculum and hands-on teaching, will better prepare these students for post-secondary success. This can be accomplished by cultivating a school to work environment and culminating a database of businesses willing to train and hire our students. Current life skills program curriculum does not emphasize true life skills. These everyday tasks, whether for home life or work life, can allow our students the opportunity to learn at the home district vs leaving for a traditional vo-tech education. Examining whether a non-traditional curriculum will foster higher attendance, participation and involvement within the home district is a top priority.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career readiness has become a significant priority with today's life skills students, making it a necessity to explore a modern form of teaching in these classrooms.

Previously, life skills students have learned using the traditional method, receiving the same education as their peers but with modifications and accommodations. Although educators thought modifying a traditional curriculum was the best way of educating these students, many have questioned its efficacy.

There are characteristics of traditional learning that trace back from the 18th century in Europe that were brought to the United States via Massachusetts by Horace Mann in the 19th century (Watters, 2015). The Factory Model was named after schools constructed to mold the student into an optimal adult factory worker to perform duties in the town's factory. This culminated in mass education that resembled factory work as students sat in "cemetery" style rows. The bell schedule was first introduced and students were taught from an authoritarian teacher. Then traditional style of learning lasted for decades but started phasing out more over the last 20 years.

In 1936, the United States Office of Education had a conference in Washington, D.C. At the conference, some of the most well-known educational experts of the time met to discuss and create *A Guide to Curriculum Adjustment for Mentally Retarded Children*. This group felt that the educational integration of these students in school was important to their success. The students were to be exposed to life experiences that dealt with employment, along with being taught objectives through repeated instruction (Beaman et al., 1936). Grades were not as important as social maturity because of the belief that the

students could learn to work well with concrete materials (Beaman et al., 1936). Students that could not learn from the repetition of a lesson would end up displaying attendance or behavior issues. Those 1936 beliefs resemble an Intellectually Disabled student learning from both functional instruction through Community Based Instruction and academic instruction through Direct Instruction. These applications were discussed as far back as 85 years ago, and are still relevant amongst educators debating between functional versus academic curriculum.

West Mifflin Area High School History

The history of the West Mifflin Area School District life skills student program has greatly changed over the last few years. Previous to the 2017-2018 school year the life skills program was based on a conservative academic curriculum taught in a traditional manner in self-contained classrooms, at the high school level. The lower grades did not have any significant life skills curriculum program. During the 2017-2018 year the students were slowly introduced to the idea of being out of their classroom. They were taken on a few Community Based Instruction trips to expose the students to experiences outside the four walls of the building. Upon being hired during the 2018-2019 school year as the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, I observed that the instruction mainly remained traditional and there was a lack of opportunities for the functional curriculum to be utilized.

The West Mifflin Area School District has initiated a new transitional program for high school life skills students. This new program will be assessed by its effectiveness in optimizing post-secondary success. Educators have sought a modern hands-on method that incorporates actual life skills, ranging from painting a wall or completing a transaction, among others (Burton, 2010). Staff are hopeful that by including these skills

and tasks, the student will be able to compete, as an optimal candidate, for a job post-secondary.

At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, I wanted to optimize the opportunities for the life skills program to enhance and begin to apply this new method. The teachers believe that a mixture of both methods is imperative but were willing to explore the transition from traditional to functional. Additionally, the district leaders, education committee and teachers met to create a new functional curriculum plan at the high school level. The most significant and exciting part was the idea to create a school store completely managed by the life skills students in the program. The creation of the school store gave an opportunity to practice real life skills, taught in the classroom prior to working in the store, and in a monitored safe environment, that can lead to employment opportunities outside of the school. Some of these skills include running a cash register, making and serving coffee, cleaning the store, among many others. The entire program focuses on the notion that these students will need to have real life skills and experiences to be competitive with employers for post-secondary success.

Traditional or Academic Instruction

The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 (IDEA) required that all students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) have a statement of transitional services (Patton et al., 1997). Since No Child Left Behind was introduced, there has been a constant focus on student academic achievement due to the federal minimum mandates. The ever growing list of requirements left little time to enhance the transitional aspect of the curriculum into the students' day. The article added that many students have not been properly prepared for life after graduation. The hypothesis is that many institutions, like

West Mifflin Area School District, continued the focus on grade level and state standards achievement. Transitional services were present, but the focus was more on what was transpiring in the classroom. Any type of hands-on instruction was to take place at an out-of-district location, for additional costs. The traditional planning process ended with teaching of knowledge in a classroom or linkage to outside supports and services (Patton et al., 1997). The curriculum that was designated focused on mastery of general academic content. Although it was mentioned that there are points that need to be addressed, the education must be relevant to the individual student. A student may learn skills that could be helpful in their future, the goal must be to read, write, and acquire study skills before exiting high school (Patton et al., 1997).

Direct Instruction

Articles about Direct Instruction (DI) have existed for many years boasting about successful results regarding student achievement. The greatest strength of DI is that it allows student engagement to be maximized with efficiency and effectiveness while still being compatible with special education practices (Goodman, 1990). Special education teachers use DI for a multitude of reasons, most specifically, to supervise the students. Supervision can be categorized by monitoring a larger number of students, controlling the behavior and keeping on task with schedules (Goodman, 1990). It focuses on stations to minimize group size, allowing for the students to receive the information directly in a smaller setting. It focuses on direct eye contact due to the formation of the desks and sets the stage for students to know their learning goal. DI permits the teacher to feel confident about their classroom control and knowledgeable about the actions that transpire in the classroom. By directing the lesson, the teacher will know which students need

remediation after learning/repetitive lessons or it presents those that could benefit with enrichment. Direct Instruction makes it easier to target activities to the explicit skill set and perform a top-down instruction delivery to accomplish all the objectives needed to complete the class. Other types of instructional delivery may not allow the teacher to focus on the instructional areas needed for a special needs student to succeed (Goodman, 1990).

Rohrer and Samson (2014) wrote to use Direct Instruction the correct way, students should be frequently assessed for learning comprehension. Through demonstration and independent practice, a student with disabilities will learn the desired objective. Teachers that exhibit the modeling technique with explicit directions during DI will learn better than other teaching strategies (Rohrer & Samson, 2014).

Standard Classroom Configurations

The seating arrangement in a classroom can set the tone for the whole environment impacting social engagement, focus and instructional communication. Each individual classroom is organized by the personal choice of the teacher. There are three traditional seating models that occur in a classroom; Station-Oriented, Student-Oriented and Teacher-Oriented (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). The Station-Oriented model renders a variety of station areas focusing on specific needs of the students. Students move from station to station, with each one concentrating on a particular weakness identified by the teacher or providing an expansion to a lesson working on cross-curricular material (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). Another seating arrangement is Student-Oriented. This model looks like a traditional classroom where the students are separated from each other into rows. This is thought to maximize the students' ability to concentrate on the direct

instruction of a lesson and limit the number of distractions by accentuating the focus to the front of the classroom (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). The Teacher-Oriented model utilizes the teacher at a large table in the middle of the room with the students sitting around during the lesson. This table could also be used for tutoring, small group instruction, or intensified instruction. A teacher could add or subtract students to the table depending on the actions and activities of the teacher.

Traditional or Academic Curriculum

A common traditional teaching strategy for special education students is to deliver intensive instruction in functional academic areas through direct instruction (Karvonen et al., 2011). Advances have been observed early in scholastic careers, but as students reach high school, education becomes more challenging (Karvonen et al., 2011). Teachers are expected to balance academics with transitional goals and other services while still attempting to have students prepared for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and the Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA). Trying to maintain quality education for the students' grade level and academic level becomes overwhelming when trying to achieve proficiency on either test. Even when a student performs proficient on the PASA, the school and district's School Performance Profile (SPP) score does not fairly indicate the true success of the student, teacher and school. Reviewing studies of the topics most covered in the core subjects are; reading focusing on questioning and listening skills, math focusing on number sense comprehension, and science focusing on functions of the Earth (Karvonen et al., 2011).

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) does allow for students to perform educationally in a regular education classroom. This does provide a student with

disabilities the opportunity to be exposed to appropriate grade level material in hopes of increasing their achievement. Inclusion has shown some positive results for all types of students. Different reports have displayed various levels of progress in math and reading for high and low incidence students. To make this strategy work at its best, the teachers must be educated and trained with quality professional development (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016). However, the functional curriculum is not standardized, therefore, making it difficult to find professional development that adheres to this topic.

Over the last decade, the educational focus has been on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in improving achievement for all students, not just students in regular education. During grade level instruction, the teacher should accomplish goals for students using the CCSS method for acquiring skills in both English Language Arts and mathematics. Using materials and manipulatives in ELA instruction accompanied by a comprehensive understanding of grade level expectations will be beneficial in providing an academic curriculum for the learning disabled student (Van Boxtel, 2017). For mathematics, the teacher needs to become particularly familiar with the CCSS to fully understand the foundational skills that each student needs to possess (Van Boxtel, 2017). However, this is highly dependent, and in direct correlation with, how school leaders institute appropriate professional development time and collaboration time between the teachers (Van Boxtel, 2017).

Van Boxtel (2017), states that IEP writing, broken down into six steps, is imperative in the academic success of students. Considering grade level content with CCSS and collecting data to determine level of functioning are two factors. Identifying present academic levels, developing measurable goals, progress reporting and identifying

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) are the actions necessary for meaningful IEP writing (Van Boxtel, 2017).

Challenges presented in the academic or traditional focus on incorporating functional, transitional and therapeutic goals within the classroom for each teacher since an abundance of time is consumed with lower levels (Karvonen et al., 2011). Difficulties arise for special education teachers when having to find the appropriate level of academic content to deliver to students. This is the most apparent when there has been a lack of evidence based strategies presented to the instructors (Karvonen et al., 2011).

Common Accommodations

Accommodations in special needs student learning is a core part of today's educational system. They are an essential necessity of any Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This became a federal law when the IDEA Act of 2004 was placed into schools across the country. The IDEA made the mandate that if a disability is determined by an IEP team, accommodations must take place (Newman & Madaus, 2015). Common strategies are with presentation, response, timing, setting, etc. Examples are allowing verbal answers, preferential seating or reading the test to the student, among others. Accommodations take commonplace in today's high schools, the question is how these mitigations are improving these students' success in their post-secondary life. Intellectually Disabled (ID) students make up over 9% of the total population of post-secondary schools (Newman & Madaus, 2015). These may include Vocational Educational schooling, adult education and continuing education programs or two and four year colleges or universities. ID students are characterized by below average intelligence who can learn new things, but attain this knowledge more slowly. These

students need other mitigations as well, including asking short questions, speaking clearly, cooperative learning techniques, visual learning, etc. Newman & Madaus (2015) defined accommodation as this:

An accommodation can be a device, practice, intervention, or procedure provided to a student with a disability that affords equal access to instruction or assessment. Its purpose is to reduce or eliminate the impact of the student's disability so that he or she can achieve a standard. A key point is that an accommodation does not change the content being taught, nor does it reduce learning or achievement expectations. (p. 174)

A battle can arise out of an IEP meeting in deciding what is reasonable or not for an accommodation. It is agreed upon regularly that the most common accommodation is extra time to work on or complete an assignment. Approximately 44% of accommodations in 2012 were for extra time, followed by extended test taking time. (Newman & Madaus, 2015). Other well-known accommodations are alternative assessments or tests and small group instruction. The idea behind these certain popular accommodations is that learning mastery can be achieved.

Test Taking Strategies

With such an emphasis on high stakes testing over the past twenty years, schools adhered to focusing on raising test scores versus trying to acquire mastery of a topic. When discussing high stakes testing, it comes with another familiar term, high expectations. Since 2001, student assessment scores, school performance profile, etc. have dominated the conversation when speaking of student achievement. Unfortunately, even though most life skills students take the Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA) the scores reflect low performance. With poor performance, the scores damage their confidence and the students can begin to have lower expectations for themselves, or the student may start to consider dropping out of school. (Carter et al., 2005).

Offering diverse test taking strategies have proven to only slightly improve the achievement of special needs students. A teacher taking advantage of these techniques during a test can guide a student to use deductive reasoning or the use of context clues (Carter et al., 2005). The most common strategies are estimation (particularly in math) and eliminating answer choices. These strategies will provide assistance in improving a specific assessment score, but any exclusive reliance on this approach does not produce high student success. Additionally, encountering a student with test anxiety may prove to be a non-motivating factor in trying to improve standardized test scores. Test anxiety occurs when a student's level of anxiety rises when there is pressure to do well in a particular situation, either from fear of failure or uncertainty of the future.

Small Group Instruction

Small group instruction is a widely known accommodation for all students yet seldom utilized with special needs students. Typically, small group instruction contains 2 to 10 students (Ledford et al., 2012). The most desired method when educating special needs students is 1:1, but knowing the impracticality of this occurring at a public high school due to the high cost, makes it infeasible. Some advantages of small group instruction over 1:1 is the opportunity for efficient instructional time and monitoring students more closely. Most importantly, students interact and engage with peers, which benefits the child as a whole. This accommodation remains less restrictive and allows for opportunities to engage with a number of perspectives to improve generalization techniques. Expert data shows that there are more benefits with this strategy than using the Center Time practice (Ledford et al., 2012). Center Time is where students move from one activity center to another and tables vary from themed to each table being a learned skill.

English Language Arts (ELA), with the direct focus on reading and vocabulary is the most common eligible content used in this method (Ledford et al., 2012). Although other standards are taught using this, the instruction of the teacher is key to the success. This method permits the teacher to quickly assess students by allowing the teacher to prompt students to their level of content mastery. Keeping a steady flow of progression during instruction and being on task significantly more than other methods, makes this accommodation a successful one. It also enables the teacher to minimize behaviors, particularly with the students that are learning and emotionally disabled. Educationally, it

has been determined that small group instruction has improved education effectiveness (Ledford et al., 2012).

Extra Time for Assessments

The most common accommodation is an instructor allowing extra time for an assessment. This accommodation is found in a multitude of IEP's throughout the United States. The idea behind giving additional time to a student is to attempt to temporarily counteract the disability and acquire a true assessment score to compare to a student without a learning disability. Each child receives a varied amount of time given depending upon what best suits their needs. Experts commonly predict that students with disabilities will benefit and be placed on a level playing field with students without any disabilities (Elliott & Marquart, 2004).

Removing barriers for Learning Disabled (LD) and Intellectually Disabled (ID) students have had mixed results depending on the content being tested. Studies have shown that students with disabilities have had previous success with reading assessments and even some on the SAT's (Elliott & Marquart, 2004). However, when assessing these same students with math or the ACT's, there has not been any type of data that proves the extra time accommodation is beneficial. Even when given extra time at the college level, students with disabilities have not shown any notable achievements with the scores on their assessment.

The standard length of time to take an assessment in school is approximately 20 minutes, for extended time the length is 40 minutes (Elliott & Marquart, 2004). What was discovered is that accommodation generally helps the academic skills a student possesses regardless of the actual disability. Even though this accommodation has not obtained

solid evidence through different ages, subjects and grade levels, it will continue to be a part of the current IEP landscape because of parent perception. As long as parents request it, it does not require additional costs and cannot hurt the student in any form, it will continue to be accepted.

Transitional or Functional Curriculum

Functional curriculum is another term for life skills curriculum with the goal in mind to make a student successful for life after high school (Wehman, 2006). This curriculum can encompass different standards such as daily living, transportation, job employment, social skills and self-confidence (Wehman, 2006). Different versions of a functional curriculum are available to be purchased, but many school districts create their own based on the resources that are available to the district and the demographics of the community. The most successful types of curriculum are the ones that focus on real world relevance and community interaction. The object is to make a productive citizen out of the student, one that is able to participate in the workforce and be a positive member of society. The functional curriculum is not only beneficial to students with disabilities, but to students without, such as writing checks or changing a tire (Wehman, 2006). Additionally, varying degrees of disabilities can also benefit from this curriculum and it is not necessary to be mandated daily.

A teacher's lesson in functional curriculum can last anywhere from one class to on occasion many weeks determined by the benefits of the students living or working independently (Wehman, 2006). This type of curriculum as of 2013, did not have any significant findings of being any more positive outcomes than the academic based curriculum that included modifications and accommodations. Research collected points

toward more positive outcomes being found with students with disabilities that had strong post-secondary goals, and more importantly, strong family support and cooperation with strong post-secondary goals (Wehman, 2006). It appears that the students that gained the most from the functional curriculum were the ones that needed to learn skills to succeed and function in the workplace post-secondary, nonetheless, the students that needed the academic based curriculum did better at that.

Cronin and Patton (1993) indicated that students with higher levels of incidence could benefit from a functional curriculum along with the lower levels. The focus of a functional curriculum includes community involvement, daily functioning, independent living skills, self-determination, grocery skills, employment and social skills (Bouck & Satsangi, 2014). Historically, a decline of using the functional curriculum was noted in the late 1990's and early 2000's, but does not include any data that would support the curriculum doing worse for post-secondary outcomes (Bouck & Satsangi, 2014). It mostly coincides with NCLB and the US Department of Education with their well-known support of an academic based curriculum. Since then, Bouck and Joshi (2012) researched the relationship of Academic versus functional curriculum for life skills students without any evidence that either one improves post-secondary outcomes.

Key Components

Occurring routinely over the years is the debate whether it is more important to have an academic and standards based curriculum taught versus the functional curriculum. These have been the only two options for students with disabilities that have traditionally been offered. Research has shown that the functional curriculum specifically prepares students for everyday life after school (Bouck & Satsangi, 2014).

The functional curriculum encompasses different components that all address post-secondary life. The curriculum enables the students to be able to experience independence, fit into their community and have the ability to make everyday life decisions (Ain, 2018). An academic curriculum has its strengths with general education, keying on grade level skills, which most experts agree on for younger elementary students. The functional curriculum becomes more evident as the students get older and need a smooth transition to addressing personal requirements and student preferences. Ain (2018) wrote that ensuring goals are achieved leads to a better quality of life as the student gets older. The importance of this mind frame is the inclusion of the functionality of success post-graduation.

When transitional goals are created for an IEP, research has indicated that family support greatly improves the opportunity of success. However, experience shows that parents can become defensive or argumentative when dealing with subject matter that they don't have a strong grasp of or comprehension. Another factor, due to disabilities being strongly linked to genes and heredity, parents may be wrestling their own learning curve. This is why the academic curriculum is not as favored as the functional curriculum when working as a team. Parents may perceive the academic curriculum as unfavorable because they might not see how these components can benefit their child later in life. What they can see is how a functional curriculum helps today and in the future. The parents can also offer assistance by helping at home or viewing the student practicing the learned skills in the house (Ain, 2018).

Unfortunately, at times, educators tend to forget that many parents are not proficient in the educational vocabulary which makes parents feel left out or inadequate

(Bakken & Obiakor, 2008). A realistic problem is that this type of IEP meeting is taking place over many years and the only thing that parents end up hearing are discussions about their child's weaknesses. To counteract, the school employees need to develop a relationship with the family to fully comprehend the values. Each family varies greatly in their own home culture and no two are identical. Over time, positive relationships can be formed with mutual respect and the family and school personnel can work uniformly. Noting never to try to start a relationship at a high-stress meeting (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008).

Community Based Instruction (CBI) plays a key component and is most attractive when math, ELA, and science is still the base of the teaching. CBI facilitates opportunities in the classroom to practice independent living skills. Pro-academic supporters would argue that students performing in CBI lessons are taking away from their academics. Ain (2018) suggests that most students with disabilities will have to work to make a living, urging that the CBI is absolutely obligatory. The consumer skills acquired in CBI will allow these students to do tasks such as, having a debit or credit card to purchase items on Amazon, pay utility bills or other forms of banking online and expand independence through self-determination. These lessons provide the foundation for these students to become successful members of their communities.

Collaboration & Goal Setting

Goal setting is the major educational component in a successful transitional curriculum. A student should possess goals that are attainable and realistic, yet challenging (Wehman, 2013). Teachers and parents actively participating in assisting a student creating goals permits the process to reach the highest potential. Unfortunately,

there are some parents who struggle to support and give guidance to the collaboration process (Burke et al., 2019). Reasons for the apprehensiveness can come from feeling inadequate with their own knowledge and confidence level, which easily leads to a stressful situation (Burke et al., 2019). The overall purpose of a true collaborative effort is for a student to create goals and utilize these same goals to impact their educational career (Sambolt & Balestreri, 2013).

The first step in collaboration starts with setting a goal. An example goal might be to gain employment at the local hotel in the housekeeping department. Once the student goal is established, then the process advances to the next step of taking action (Sambolt & Balestreri, 2013). A teacher led team then develops an action plan. For instance, collecting the clothes in the lost and found to be washed, hung on a hanger and organized in an area of the school. This team created a simulation and demonstrated the skills tested in housekeeping at a hotel. The student should be able to self-monitor the progress while using the skills. If the student is not satisfied in working with soap and water, the next step is to adjust the plan. The teacher can then remove the barrier and readjust by possibly making the student collect the clothes, and fold and organize them after the washing task is completed (Sambolt & Balestreri, 2013). Once the student completes a certain amount of time performing the task, the teacher uses progress monitoring to come together with the family to collaborate. At this time, the goal can be revisited to adjust or decide that the goal has been completed. This can be as simple as answering the question, “Did I learn what I wanted?” (Sambolt & Balestreri, 2013).

Self-Determination

Successful disabled students show improved confidence through self-determination. This skill can be acquired in a transitional curriculum and has converged into an option to include in a student's IEP. With today's regulations, a disabled student has more rights than ever before. The goal of the curriculum should be to empower the students with high expectations, include challenge and not just maintain the status quo. Empowering exhibits the ability to improve one's quality of life (Wehman, 2013). The educator's task is to develop a productive citizen that can participate in the workforce and can live independently. A multitude of skills can be taught to enhance the quality of these students' lives, bring out the best in the student and have them acquire these skills for a successful fulfilled adult life. Choice making, decision making and problem solving are three behaviors that gives a student an opportunity to improve their confidence with self-determination and even carry over to the academic curriculum. (Wehman, 2013).

Promoting choice making opportunities in a transitional curriculum can greatly increase engagement in an activity (Wehman, 2013). Like any student, giving choices can increase comfortability, which often leads to confidence. Refining this behavior makes a choice sincere and will lead to a greater effort in completing a task. Significant improvement in this behavior can appear when using Community Based Instruction (CBI) (Cooper & Browder, 1998). An example can be allowing a student to choose what type of soda to buy, on the local shopping field trip, to sell at the school store. By making a choice, the student is empowered, therefore, experiences confidence.

Decision making skills continue to create an empowered student by enabling the ability to participate in decisions regarding the future (Wehman, 2013). Lessons in a

transitional curriculum center on real world relevance. These real world situations will prepare students by enhancing their choice making skills and preparing them for comprehending the consequences of their decisions (Wehman, 2013). A student that possesses this acquired skill then has the opportunity to excel in a workplace or independent living situation. Wehman (2013) also pointed out that decision making skills can prove valuable in avoiding abusive relationships, especially amongst the female students with disabilities.

Students can create more effective solutions when trained with proper problem solving skills. This factors when communication or social skills becomes the basis of learning productive problem solving techniques. The student is instructed to initiate a conversation to begin to solve a problem. Through communication, the student can continually improve and resolve conflict or settle issues that arise, particularly in a work environment (Wehman, 2013). When these three behaviors are combined together in a transitional curriculum, the student with disabilities increases success in obtaining the skills for self-determination and confidence.

Soft Skills

Today, soft skills or sometimes called people skills, are more important than ever. In an economy that is changing from production-based to service driven, it is key for an employee to possess an employable amount of adequate soft skills. Employers see the most common soft skills as having a positive attitude, good oral communication, self-determination and problem solving (Majid et al., 2019). On the other hand, employers see positive attitudes, teamwork, good ethics and problem solving as key soft skills (Majid et al., 2019). This eventually starts to create a gap between the two groups. For many years,

employers were attracted to employees who possessed hard skills or skills that could be acquired through traditional learning. These hard skills can be measured, identified and tested (Majid et al., 2019).

Employers feel that one of the soft skills commonly lacking in new employees is good oral communication skills. Wats and Wats (2009) claim that 85% of an employee's success comes from soft skills. If an employee is good at oral communication skills, it greatly lowers the percentage of having a work conflict and significantly rises the percentage of success. Good oral communication skills can also assist an employee with or without disabilities in gaining specific help for a task instead of becoming frustrated. Employers greatly value the benefits of quality soft skills as the employees are seen as the greatest asset to the workplace (Majid et al., 2019).

Community Based Instruction

Community Based Instruction (CBI) is a meaningful and purposeful teaching strategy that takes place in a natural environment (Rohrer & Samson, 2014). Before a productive CBI can occur, the lesson must be practiced in the classroom to gain a basic understanding.

For example, in preparation for a CBI field trip to a hotel, the teacher may spend time reviewing and practicing patron etiquette. This may include greetings, not only a formal front desk arrival greeting, but include such small nuances as welcoming expressions. Rehearsing a smile, friendly banter and courtesy can go a long way in these students transitioning into the workforce easily. Mastery is not necessary before heading out into the community, as recitation and reinforcement can continue there. Rohrer and Samson (2014) advises that before partaking in community involvement, it is beneficial

for the students to rehearse in the school community. This gives the flexibility to the teacher to reinforce the material taught along with transitioning the students with any behavioral or self-determining issues. While recitation and reinforcement at the school level are significant and important, some schools offer such real life experiences as running school stores. While taking the responsibilities of a multitude of team and individual jobs, such as dishes, cash register, cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, etc., this truly allows for the life skills student to immerse themselves in a variety of career positions without leaving school property.

Community Based Instruction is an important piece of transition planning and an excellent opportunity to practice daily independent skills on people in the community (Dubberly, 2012). The Phoenix Day School for the Deaf (n.d.) identified the top four CBI areas: domestic, vocational, community and recreation. Domestic focuses on cooking and cleaning, vocational on career readiness, community on transportation and recreation on social events. The CBI allows the students to explore different areas to get ideas of future employment and gain a reality of what these jobs fully entail (Dubberly, 2012).

Schools Together with Athletes Reaching Success (STARS)

Schools Together with Athletes Reaching Success (STARS) is a group with over 20 high schools in southwestern Pennsylvania (Hacke, 2019). To be an active member school, each school takes a turn hosting a STARS event. Different events take place in each district. Participating high schools in the STARS network conclude each year with a pinnacle baseball tournament at Baldwin-Whitehall that is attended by Pittsburgh Pirates players (Mackall, 2015). The purpose of this consortium is to expose ID students and

students with incidences to various learning experiences. The goal is for them to develop teamwork and mentorship (Hacke, 2019).

One of the original members of STARS is Elizabeth Forward High School. Partners P.E. is a co-operative physical education class with regular and ID students that currently exists at Elizabeth Forward High School. During their late summer football event, Camp of Champions, there are a total of 30 Partners (general education students) coaching and mentoring close to 170 disabled athletes at the event (Mackall, 2015). The camp was created for students with disabilities to educate them on athletic awareness and focusing on a healthy lifestyle, and has become an annual event (Mackall, 2015).

At Carlynton High School in Carnegie, PA, their functional curriculum focuses on science, art, life management and physical education. On March 15, 2019, Carlynton held a St. Patrick's Day celebration that included dancing, bocce games and other activities. The Carlynton principal spoke about the STARS events, being proactive in the community and educating students with celebration (Hacke, 2019). The Baldwin-Whitehall special education teacher attending the event shared that the students learned some true components of life through all the socializing activities (Hacke, 2019).

The Upper St. Clair's Partners in PE class is a physical education class receiving their own PE credits while supporting students with special needs. The life skill students participate in social activities throughout the whole school year. One event occurred on April 4, 2017, with the Put Your Best Foot Forward Day that included soccer and Mat-Ball (Upper St. Clair, 2017). Throughout the event, an USC life skills support teacher felt that her students were engaged with activities and social skills throughout the whole day. Students demonstrated accomplishments and success at different levels, while continuing

to encourage and build self-determination. All these features were evident through the display of teamwork and the opportunity to interact with others on a social level (Upper St. Clair, 2017).

Washington (PA) High School also contributes regularly to the STARS consortium. Washington High School has an annual Minute to Win It Challenge that reinforces physical skills through holiday themed games. This occasion also exposed the students to interact socially, make choices and build relationships (Washington School District, 2019).

School to Work Connection

Intellectually Disabled (ID) students seek employment and independent living as the most important factors in securing a substantial post-secondary life (Ryan et al., 2019). This is supported by the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (2000). The DD Act was created for ID students to promote independence and receive support services to become an active participant in the community. With transitional planning to occur within the IEP, this helps in creating the goals by the student and the IEP team.

Ryan et al. (2019) completed a journal article that contained data that only a few individuals with ID end up being full-time employees or receive competitive wages and benefits. The average salary for adults with ID was \$7.63 per hour (Bradley, 2015). The 2009–2010 National Core Indicator Survey reported approximately 16% of adults with ID live “on their own” which includes independent home/apartments, or apartment programs (Ryan et al., 2019). This does not mean that these same students cannot gain

reputable work as a productive member of the community, it is just indicative of the low numbers.

Ryan et al. (2019) separates academics in a functional curriculum by breaking it into four separate categories. These include math, literacy, life skills, and employment. Math would focus on budgeting, banking, bills, etc. Literacy would practice reading bus schedules and cooking directions, among others. Life skills would teach cleaning, including dusting, vacuuming, and cleaning dishes and help develop relationship building. Lastly, employment would address appropriate apparel for a job, whether it is a fresh uniform or proper attire from their closet, and also stress the importance of time management. Although other categories could be added, these four are the ones deemed most appropriate and beneficial. Ryan et al. (2019) continued breaking down employment, specifying retail, food service, distribution and hospitality are the areas that most ID students tend to gravitate toward.

As groups and schools continue to put more effort into the success of ID and other incidence students, the transitional curriculum must expand even further to include a “Best Buddies” environment.

Best Buddies International (2014) claims they are “the world’s largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical and economic isolation of the 200 million people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).” Groups like Best Buddies are growing in schools and becoming a major part of transitional services. Another crucial aspect is the job coach, who assists student employees in improving their work and social skills both inside and outside of the workplace (Center for Autism Research, 2016). Ryan et al. (2019) concludes that self-determination, social life, and

mental and physical student wellness are components of a positive school to work transition for success.

Employment Programs

There are various employment programs and services available today for all types of students with disabilities. One major program is the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), that provides students with physical, mental or emotional impairments or disabilities in preparing, obtaining or maintaining employment (Department of Labor & Industry, 2020). According to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry, OVR services meet face to face with individuals to go over shared lists of approved vendors and have the capacity to create an Individualized Plan for Employment to organize the objectives and responsibilities for the worker. The OVR counselor continues by extending the types of practice with job applications, interviews, employment trends and job accommodations. Job accommodations can include On-the-Job-Training (OTJT) which allows employers to train the worker while the learner gets paid. The employer does have the option of receiving partial funding from OVR to help with the salary of the employee, and possibly add a job coach for more intense training (Department of Labor & Industry, 2020).

The Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) is a part of the PA Department of Human Services created to assist individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ID). The website for the ODP contains the home and community informational system that is broken down into categories of county, providers, services and contacts along with the *Mental Health and Mental Retardation Act of 1966*.

The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services has a section called the Office of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services that focuses on individuals who battle mental illness with opportunities to improve themselves in the community (Department of Human Services, 2020). Its primary goal is to reduce costs to society resulting from mental illness and supports preventive measures and treatment to have individuals enter or stay in the workforce.

Pennsylvania CareerLink operates under the PA Department of Labor and Industry and has a relationship with OVR (PA CareerLink, 2020). CareerLink has a website resource that is a one stop shop for all items a person would need to participate in the work field to allow individuals to improve themselves as employers, employees, or future employees (PA CareerLink, 2020). The staff of CareerLink includes various specialists and instructors that can help with apprenticeships, training and the unemployment process.

Transition Planning

The cornerstone of transitional planning begins with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) which directly links to future plans and a Result Oriented Process. (Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities, 2015). The IEP team collaboratively works on the transition plan section of an IEP by focusing on the academic and functional achievement through the individual needs, strengths, interests and preferences of the student. During the school year the interests are developed through skills, and self-determination is reinforced to continue heading toward the final goal of finding employment. Goals are met when students are supported and integrated into their

positions in the company, with independent living and community involvement as a bonus.

In Pennsylvania, Indicator 13 has measures for the IEP goals and services annually for a student to meet post-secondary goals (Pennsylvania Secondary Transition Guide, n.d.). Indicator 13 has various checkpoints such as having evidence of an IEP invite for the student continuing with additional transitional services to assist the student. It is imperative for the success of the IEP and transition planning to have the students in agreement, or the process is sure to fail. Proper evaluation of the transitional planning is essential. This can be accomplished by performing age-appropriate assessments on measurable goals in training education, employment and independent living skills at least once a year (Pennsylvania Secondary Transition Guide, n.d.). These assessments can range from the higher range of job shadowing or internships to the lower range of websites like Career Cruising and Bridges Interest Inventory.

Another opportunity for the student with disabilities is participating in a work-study program. Most high schools today with the college and career readiness programs allow students to participate in a part-time job in a work-study program. The majority of students with disabilities that participate in a work-study will find employment in the food service industry (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008). There are different variations of work-study programs, some schools offer elective credit, while some allow students to get paid for their service. The best model for students with disabilities is to be able to get credit, collect a salary, be evaluated by the employer and return evaluation to the teacher to continue improving the student's skills (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008).

Transition Services

Transition services are agreed upon by the parents and school district as an integral part of the IEP. Typical examples can include items such as transportation options, community links and relationships with outside resources, while continuing towards the goals of reaching a predetermined set of skills and abilities (Pennsylvania Secondary Transition Guide, n.d.).

Bakken & Obiakor (2008) wrote:

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA2004), transition services are defined as “a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that (a) is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (b) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (p. 5)

A crucial part of the transition services is the team collaboration with the student, parents, district and outside resources. With parent permission and approval, a district can

be responsible for a student until the age of 21, making it critical to gain post-secondary employment. Examples of the agencies are the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Office of Developmental Programs, Office of Mental Health and the Career Links Office (Pennsylvania Secondary Transition Guide, n.d.). Additional transition services can be used to acquire drivers' license, state issued identification, and convenient ways to find transportation and shop for essentials.

A beneficial component of the transition services is the Functional Vocational Assessment and Evaluation decided by the IEP team and distributed by the district (William & Mary School of Education, 2020). The assessment data collected through formal or informal measures can determine the skills acquired, or the skills still needed, to obtain secure employment after graduation (Pennsylvania Secondary Transition Guide, n.d.).

Conclusion

Answering the questions of the efficacy of how a modern curriculum can affect the life skill students beyond the classroom is not a new concept but one educators have pondered for decades. Upon assessing the literature review, there are several outstanding factors that show that the trend to move toward a more functional life skills curriculum in the West Mifflin Area High School seems inevitable. Acknowledging that the students working in a traditional setting can indeed absorb and master a certain level of the material is understood. However, the evidence is lacking that they will leave high school for a successful post-secondary career. When students leave the high school environment without proper preparation and guidance, then their education has done them a disservice. Their education has been a success when students graduate having or finding a career

makes them functioning and thriving members of society. If a student is excited about life post-graduation and they exude confidence in their chosen career field, then the world seems easier to navigate.

While transitioning toward the new method, these students become exposed to a multitude of outside learning tools. They will exit high school with an indispensable level of skill sets that make them valuable to employers. It is crucial to work with employers to assess the types of skills sets to focus on in the classroom or school setting. The functional life skills program encourages Community Based Instruction, which provides exposure to a variety of employment opportunities post-secondary. These students would not have the chance to explore these avenues while following the traditional life skills program. Lining up jobs and training for these students to transition smoothly into their positions after leaving school is fundamental. Also, within these parameters students acquire independent living skills.

The West Mifflin Area School District, administration, teachers, education committee and school board members have supported the creation of the school store. The team was excited at the possibility to expose the life skills students to their own student run multi-functioning school store. This would allow a plethora of opportunities and skill sets to be taught, recited and utilized within the comfort of the high school walls. Utilizing the space in the high school to allow the students to perform these duties and practicing the life skills acquired through this program is beneficial. The store encompasses three hours throughout the regular school day. Students are expected to perform a multitude of tasks and jobs to run this business.

The factors beyond the classroom that affect the life skills students are numerous, including such programs as STARS. Several entities have noticed that additional time socializing is imperative to these students maintaining social etiquette, team building and increasing self-confidence. Therefore, many districts now offer and encourage participation into a variety of outdoor team building activities.

This collective data acknowledges the notion that transitional skills and programs increase the chance of these students being functional members of society after leaving high school. Summarizing the differences between traditional academic based curriculum and functional instruction concludes that education has changed over the years. In conclusion, it is necessary that the life skills students need both the academics of schooling and hands-on training to become contributing adults.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

After completing a thorough literature review on the effective preparedness for a life skills program to optimize post-secondary success, the researcher has consumed a vast amount of information to be used in determining the success of a program. Over fifty articles were read, reviewed and examined to compile an extensive variety of viewpoints, backgrounds and past evidence. This chapter will identify the purpose, research plan, data collection and validity of the capstone project. Each section will focus on the life skills program at the West Mifflin Area High School and the correlation with the three research questions. Delving into a more thorough look as to how to maximize the student's education and enhance this life skills program. Although the revamped program is new to the school, the data collection will provide the necessary information moving forward for the students to become successful after high school.

The researcher is closely monitoring the analysis from the study between functional vs traditional curriculum used in the life skills classroom. The methodology of the project will use the knowledge gathered through the literature review and will include the data collected through the interviews, survey and questionnaire. This will determine the best type of instruction for the life skills students to become successful in the workforce and community. The researcher will examine the benefits and traits of both the academic curriculum and functional curriculum. The fact that both of these curricula have been in existence for decades shows their validity. Throughout much of the extensive data, each had many positive reviews, with minimal negativity, making this a straightforward task. Traditional gets accolades by continuing to teach the basic math and

English skills students need to function beyond high school. It modifies the classroom skills to the level of the individual students' abilities. For example, it allows one student to take a test with less questions while another may have the test read to them. This method adapts the traditional skills to fit the student while keeping them in tune with the classroom curriculum. Functional, on the other hand, allows the students a broader experience. The life skills classroom is designed to provide new skills, such as laundry or serving coffee. Students utilizing this method will be able to take CBI (Community Based Instruction) educational trips to potential employers. This method's ideology exposes these students to a variety of job related skills sets in order to build knowledge and self-confidence when applying and securing employment. In order to analyze these curricula fully, an action plan was devised. Focusing on the individuals that could give the most effective feedback motivated the action research. West Mifflin Area High School has a large student and staff population which, at times, makes it difficult to have a deep comprehension of everyday happenings of all the various subgroups. Choosing a qualitative based research plan allowed the researcher to discover the essential information to complete a quality capstone project. Deciphering the collected data and showing the various components of these curricula will give the school leaders the information to move forward in the most efficient and effective way for the students. Within the capstone project data, the best options will be laid out for all of the entities involved in the decision process to examine. The overall goal is to eliminate any current opinions, regardless of position, and start to make data driven decisions for the students.

The recent educational trend is aiming to increase the career readiness of students and tie those skills into graduation requirements. It becomes increasingly necessary to

reinforce these skills for the students. The readiness will be determined through the ability to pass multiple evaluations throughout this program. These evaluations may include state assessments, acceptance of an accredited four-year institution or attainment of an industry-recognized credential. Also, a letter guaranteeing full time employment, a certification of successful completion of an internship or by meeting the goals of their IEP. This chapter will clarify the evidence to continue making data driven decisions to the program as it moves forward into next school year. The West Mifflin Area High School prioritizes both college and career readiness for all the students and carries out the mission to have students prepared for life after high school.

Career readiness in the life skills program is the focus of the capstone project. It is crucial to determine what knowledge and skills will catapult a student into a successful member of society. The purpose of the capstone project focuses on the separate curricula and pivotal decision to choose one vs the other. The origination of the research questions is based upon information studied comparing and contrasting the two methods. Each research question will be articulated, examined and supported with educated components taken from the literature review. Peer opinions, and how that opinion was shaped, will be collected by the researcher to be assessed. Throughout history educators believed modification was the best option. Allowing the student to remain in the classroom, using the same schooling, with accommodations. The future of the life skills students' education is heading toward more precise skill sets to accompany the student post-graduation. Examining key components, in conjunction with the data provided, the project will thoroughly analyze which program fully advances the students.

The research plan will dissect the data collection step-by-step through the entirety of the process. The plan took place over three months and included three data collection procedures. Each procedure provides questions that correlate with the three capstone project research questions approved by the Institutional Review Board of California University of Pennsylvania. All three questions consistently examine how the current curriculum is affecting the educational outcome of the life skills students. Over 70 items were collected during the research plan starting in November 2020 and concluding in January 2021. Using this information, allows the researcher to clarify the comparisons with the academic versus functional curricula. Finding the optimal education is the ultimate goal. Additionally, the researcher has to relate decisions in accordance with any fiscal implications.

The data collection section describes the precise research design and the approach taken with the participants. Participants were given either a survey, questionnaire or individual interview. Each of these methods contained several relevant questions pertaining to the advantages or disadvantages of each respective program. The specificity of how the information is collected and recorded will be described and justified about their participation. The validity will explain the actions of the researcher and how to amass a trustworthy capstone project to be used in benefiting life skills students and optimizing their role in our community.

Purpose

The purpose of the capstone research is to provide data to support that an academic (traditional) curriculum or a functional (transitional) curriculum is more effective for the life skills students to be successful in their post-secondary life. Speaking

with multiple educators, administrators and staff throughout the past few years, the topic of creating a school store and performing work experiences has brought out a wide range of differing opinions.

- Opinion #1 - A functional curriculum is beneficial for the life skills students.

The opinion is shared by some educators that a functional curriculum is a positive experience for life skills students to derive in a closely observed world. Observing these students being an integral part of the school community in a work setting can be exciting. Getting the students to simply smile, talk and interact with their peers and adults can raise self-determination and self-confidence, as well as giving them something to look forward to. A number of the life skills students have communicated that the hands-on activities and experiences created in this functional curriculum are the only reason they come to school every day. They feel more confident about the jobs they are performing and are comfortable taking additional risks to improve their skill set. The essential employment skills they are acquiring can lead to them becoming an asset to an employer.

- Opinion #2 - A student only needs the academic curriculum during school hours.

The belief is that life skills students need only academic curriculum during school hours to equip them with solid reading and math skills for work-related knowledge after high school. Time spent on other activities will take away from valuable learning that could potentially increase their performance on the state standards. School provides the only opportunity to gain the math and English skills believed to contribute to the student being productive after graduation. Spending additional monies on “field trips” and having “babysitters” on a job shadowing experience is not using instructional time efficiently. Bus rides to CBI’s and exploring local establishments are wasting valuable time in a

classroom working on academic skills they are going to need for the rest of their life. The philosophy that practicing how to work or having fun is reserved for after they graduate, not while taxpayer money is being spent for teachers to teach.

- Opinion #3 - Life skills students need both an academic and functional curriculum.

A third philosophy exists that a combination of an academic and functional curriculum will be the most beneficial. During my literature review, I have analyzed many articles that stated a combination of the two curricula is proven to be the best for the students' all around education. A perfect balance maximizes the students' best chance for success in the post-secondary world. It also supports the desire of the few students that want to explore a trade school or college. Neglecting one of these curricula is doing a disservice as an educator or educational institution. It is the school's duty to provide the students with a variety of tools, skills and knowledge to allow for their success in an already complicated situation.

The goal is to use the data collected to support one of these beliefs to give the students the best opportunity to gain employment, keep employment and be a productive part of the community. The information will also provide solid data for the designated budget. For example, decisions on whether to purchase additional textbooks or supplementals versus the purchase of store and cleaning supplies can be answered once the data is completely collected.

Over the years, a specific room at the WMAHS has been designated for life skills students and the curriculum has included differentiated instruction in math and English. Some students have experienced inclusion in the specialty area classes. Starting last year,

the implementation of real-world life lessons and teaching of skill sets have begun. The special education teaching staff accepted the modifications to the curriculum and displayed a desire to assist students in whatever capacity is needed for success. These may include the steps to begin teaching skills for the school store. The teachers see the benefit in preparing these students for skill sets to allow them to function and be competitive in an outside of school job setting. They were eager to adjust time in their school curriculum to include practicing customer service with etiquette. Such skills as taking an order and providing correct change to the customer are valued. Along with the components to the traditional curriculum, these newly introduced skills can complete an education by producing a well-rounded student who can contend with interviews and securing future employment.

In an attempt to validate any of the opinions, the researcher created three guiding research questions to investigate.

- What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?
- Does effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes?
- What data can the teachers and staff provide to highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program?

The first question, “What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?” was created to directly address the transitional curriculum and the effect it can have on students preparing for their post-secondary life. Throughout the literature review, items such as Community-Based Instruction, soft skills

and the STARS group were examined in detail as the base practices for a regularly used functional curriculum. The STARS group stands for Schools Together as Athletes Reaching for Success. The goal is inclusion and allowing these students to join in sports that they may not experience otherwise. Soft skills are worked throughout the students' everyday existence. The importance of eye contact, a firm handshake or the ability to greet someone are important characteristics.

The second research question, "Does effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes?" was generated for the survey to attain the goal of collecting data and formulating a true spectrum of the traditional (academic) versus transitional (functional) programming in the life skills curriculum. The literature review touched on topics of employment programs, transition services, collaboration and goal setting that appropriately correlate with determining the effectiveness.

The third research question, "What data can the teachers and staff provide to highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program?" relies on staff feedback to validate the acquired knowledge and realistic comprehension of the program. Since most teachers' knowledge of the academic curriculum is solid, it is easier to relate the life skills curriculum to their own. During the literature review the popular topics of an academic curriculum featured Direct Instruction, Common Core curriculum, classroom configuration and common accommodations. The functional curriculum recognized a hands-on approach to skill sets.

Setting & Participants

The setting for the capstone project is the West Mifflin Area High School located in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania. The high school is a suburban, public school with

870 students from grades 9 - 12. West Mifflin Area School District has a unique history, as Mifflin Township is one of the original townships of Allegheny County. Occurring over the past 200 years, the Township has had sections go independently, such as Munhall, Dravosburg and Pleasant Hills. The actual starting date for the district becomes complicated to decide. Some historians feel that the first schoolhouse built in 1898 is the beginning of the district. Others feel that when West Mifflin Borough changed its name from Mifflin Township, that was its beginning. The change was due to a duplicate location with the same name located in the center of the state, named after the first governor of Pennsylvania, Thomas Mifflin. Currently the district uses 1984 as another key starting date for the district. West Mifflin Area High School building structure was originally built as West Mifflin North High School in 1961 overlooking Kennywood amusement park. Previous to 1961, students attended Duquesne High School, which is currently a nine-minute drive from today's current site. The district's other high school, West Mifflin South, was established in 1963 across from the Allegheny County Airport. Previous to 1963, some students attended Clairton High School until West Mifflin South High School was completed. In 1984, West Mifflin North High School Vikings merged with West Mifflin South High School Spartans to create West Mifflin Area High School Titans at the North High School site. Today's high school serves students from the boroughs of West Mifflin and Whitaker and the city of Duquesne. The entire area consists of generational families that have blue collar ties with steel mills and manufacturing jobs and is historically intertwined with the immediate neighbors.

Table 1*Enrollment Percent by Student Groups*

A deeper breakdown of the West Mifflin Area High School statistics regarding the percent of enrollment of specific student groups was taken from Pennsylvania Department of Education (2020) are as follows:

Enrollment Percent by Student Groups	
Economically Disadvantaged	53.8%
English Language Learner	1.7%
Special Education	21.1%
Foster Care	1.7%
Homeless	1.3%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.2%
Asian	0.9%
Black	26.6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0%
Hispanic	2.2%
White	61.9%
2 or More Races	8.2%

Currently there are 19 students in the life skills program with two teachers and three paraprofessionals. The class has expanded this year to include two classrooms, one being adjacent to the school store. This expansion is from a reduced number of current students going to Mon Valley Vocational Tech School located in Jefferson Hills, PA which is approximately a 15-minute ride. The incoming freshman class also had zero students start the year attending the Vo-Tech school, which is a decrease from the previous years. The additions to the curriculum including tasks, CBIs, and employment opportunities enhances their school experience and has brought an influx of students back to participate in our program.

Community Demographics

The current population of West Mifflin is 22,464 people with 9,509 households in the borough. Households with children were 26.8%, 13.7% had a female householder with no husband present. The population included 21.5% under the age of 18, 6.9% from 18 to 24, 26.2% from 25 to 44, 23.8% from 45 to 64, and 21.6% who were 65 years of age or older. The median family income for a household was \$46,192 and the unemployment rate is 6%.

The current population of Whitaker is 1,338 people in 560 households in the borough. Households with children living in them were 28.9%, 15.7% had a female householder with no husband present. The population included 23.4% under the age of 18, 6.4% from 18 to 24, 30.0% from 25 to 44, 23.2% from 45 to 64, and 17.0% 65 or older. The median family income for a household was \$39,250 and the unemployment rate is 4.3%.

The current population of Duquesne is 7,332 people in 3,179 households in the city. Households with children living in them were 28.1%, 27.2% had a female householder with no husband present. The population included 28.3% under the age of 18, 9.6% from 18 to 24, 24.3% from 25 to 44, 18.6% from 45 to 64, and 19.2% who were 65 years of age or older. The median family income for a household was \$25,898 and the unemployment rate is 4.3%.

The researcher holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education and a Master Degree in School Administration. Additionally, the researcher's educational career began in 1997 as a middle level instructor, 2006 as a building principal and 2018 as a central administrator. Previous experience directly working with life skills students

began in 2012 when the transitional curriculum was introduced at South Allegheny School District in McKeesport, PA. In 2012, a highly motivated high school principal and tenured special education teacher took the task of instituting a brand new functional curriculum, using an empty lab room with gas, electric and water connections. Throughout the first few years, opinions varied. Discussions centered around whether implementing a non-traditional style of educating the life skills students would be successful. During the first six years the positive demeanor from the students, and success in accomplishing skills, acknowledged the enjoyment for this new curriculum. Also, their distinctly observable actions displayed increased confidence that led to them taking more chances. The program was perceived by many to be successful, but unfortunately, not by all. Skeptics viewed this method as ‘play time’ and time taken away from direct instruction and academics learned from a book. When the researcher was hired as the Director of Curriculum & Instruction for the West Mifflin Area School District in 2018, it was observed that the life skills program was being operated through an academic curriculum. The scenario allowed itself varying opinions on moving towards a functional curriculum. Regrettably, no solidifying data was kept at South Allegheny High School to use as a baseline, other than non-recorded perceptions. The researcher’s goal was to not follow that same pattern. Before adapting changes to the life skills curriculum, recorded collective data would be studied. This was the basis of constructing the capstone project.

Research Plan

The research plan began in November 2020 by collecting qualitative data through interviews. The data from the individuals most intimately connected to the life skills

program was crucial. The focus was on the first research question of “What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?” The researcher held semi-structured interviews with key individuals that manage the School to Work program in order to adapt a proactive way to start the process. The interviews began with several “base” questions that allowed for any additional inquiries, depending on the answers. Continuing interviews with outside employers allows the researcher to modify the curriculum based on their needs. This allows the LS students the opportunity to gain employment within their companies while meeting the need of improving their experiences at school. The goal was to acquire information, optimize job opportunities and enrich our LS students’ lives, while improving the initiative.

The research continued through December 2020 utilizing a survey that focused on the second research question of “Does effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes?” The researcher collected data to formulate a true spectrum of the traditional versus transitional programming by reaching out to a larger group. The survey consisted of both open-ended and Likert scale questions. The data collected was to utilize the original 5 groups, as well as all high school special education teachers, all paraprofessionals, 3 guidance counselors, the department heads, and any potential employers for the program.

The last section of research concluded in January 2021 through a questionnaire that focused on the third and final research questions of “What data can the teachers and staff provide to highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program?” The questionnaire was an inexpensive, quick and effective way to gather opinions from all high school staff, students, stakeholders and parent volunteers. The

questionnaire investigated if the high school is a more advantageous place than the vo-tech school for the LS student. With the introduction of the functional life skills curriculum which includes essential skills mimicking a vo-tech instructional day, keeping the students at their home location could prove helpful. Teachers, administrators, staff and parents were surveyed on Microsoft Forms to examine their data on the effectiveness of the program. Assuming that only 12 months is available for conducting an action research plan, time would be a major factor. Lastly, learning if a new program would benefit the students in gaining post-graduation meaningful employment.

The capstone project will have moderate fiscal implications on the high school as the data is recorded and investigated. With a portion of the life skills budget being spent on minor purchases of paint, decorations and supplies, there is the possibility of spending a larger amount. Art department has been utilizing a screen press unit for several years and will be initiating classes to allow life skills students to train for use in the school store. Purchasing cash registers that mimic local businesses would have been an expense, however, our teacher team has applied for and received a grant. The school store teacher team consists of one teacher in each of the five departments; STEM, Life Skills, Business, Art and Tech. Ed. Due to Covid-19 restrictions the fiscal implications of training staff has been minimal to zero cost on the district. The creation of this team has led to several no-cost training options through video feed in Microsoft Teams. Further social media has been used to introduce the parents and community to the school store as a learning environment by posting it on the Titan TV YouTube channel. Also, the team has applied for private, state and federal grants to further this initiative. Many of the team members have previous work experience with the equipment. Moving the program to a

full transitional curriculum would include additional expenses on Community Based Instruction that includes, but not limited to, multiple trips to community locations. For example, purchasing a transportation vehicle to allow students to make regular trips to local stores to buy supplies, visit local retailers to explore work environments and transfer students to job shadowing as they transition to permanent employment. Purchasing a multi-passenger vehicle would encompass wear and tear, gas and insurance. Additionally, the transformation to this new approach would coincide with an increase in adding appliances to the classroom. Further attention given to the transitional curriculum would lead to a decrease in instructional time.

An academic curriculum decision would include purchasing updated materials to assist with math and English skills along with remediation. This can include new software, electronic devices and other educational supplementals. The cost of the academic curriculum would be most cost friendly over a long time period.

Research Design, Methods & Data Collection

Risks to participants will be minimal and will only include a certain population of the student body. The names will not be disclosed as I am studying a collection of students in the life skills program, not any individual. My interviews, surveys and questionnaires will be distributed to adults directly in relation to this program, while allowing the option of opting out.

My selection of subjects will be equitable due to the fact that the research collected will be on the life skills student program as a whole. At no time will an individual be studied. The idea is to research the program to discover if it enhances the

life skills students' opportunities for gainful employment post-secondary while producing a more productive citizen.

Each participant will use their signature as consent on all forms for all named documents to be kept on file as long as required. Adult volunteers will be completing the surveys, questionnaires and interviews and will be able to opt out, if necessary. At no time will the research name or use personal identifiers of the adults. No personal identifying factors will need to be shared. All paper data will be collected and stored in my office in a secure location unless moved to University premises. All technology data will be kept on a protected computer file.

When compiling a list of participants to take place in the data collection, it started with the most familiar individuals with the program. As the collection progressed, the participants with less familiarity were included and the questions became increasingly generalized.

The first research question, "*What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?*" was presented in an interview form (see Appendix C). Ten individuals were interviewed using six semi-structured common base questions that allowed the opportunity to elaborate on any additional inquiries. This portrays a quality technique in compiling qualitative data collected through the open-ended format. The additional open-ended primary questions elaborated on the individuals' knowledge of the history of the school or program. Also, on any experience dealing with the community or off-site experiences, particularly in Community-Based Instruction. Finally, the interviewees presented their outlook on the program and elaborated their vision for improvements as the school moves forward. Collectively, they

added that more time for a dedicated transition coordinator would be beneficial.

Additional participants were included to the original interview cohort as well as every West Mifflin Area High School educator that has interaction with the special education students. This also incorporated any potential employers for the program.

The second research question, “*Does effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes?*” was presented in a survey form (see Appendix D). The goal of the survey was to collect data and formulate a true spectrum of the academic versus functional programming in the life skills curriculum. A total of 22 responses were collected from the participants for the survey. The survey contained 9 questions, four were short answer, three were Likert scale questions and two were multiple choice.

The third and final research question, “*What data can the teachers and staff provide to highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program?*” was arranged in a questionnaire form (see Appendix B). The data collection desires to accumulate a broader viewpoint and will include; all high school staff and administrators, all paraprofessionals and the life skills program parents. The questionnaire contained fifteen questions and was completed by 41 participants. Ten of the questions were Likert questions that contained 5 points and ranged from strongly disagree to no opinion/don’t know to strongly agree. The “no opinion/don’t know was added because of the number of individuals that declined from the voluntary survey, due from their lack of knowledge, that might have misled the results.

Validity

The capstone project stresses credibility in the data results from the participants by acquiring in-depth knowledge. This included detailed note taking through interviews to capture the usefulness of all explanations regarding the researcher's questions.

Transferability was present when all the imperative information was documented in a detailed fashion to collect the true conversation with the participants. Continuing the interviews through an additional survey and questionnaire promotes a gathering of triangulate data from multiple resources. Varying methods reinforces a technique of collecting data that will allow the researcher to minimize any misleading information. The survey and questionnaire permits the researcher to gain data in a factual manner. Using these methods reinforces the dependability and confirmability in qualitative data analysis.

The researcher did not indicate any bias throughout the process. The goal is to disclose descriptive validity by finding out what curriculum is the most beneficial in order for the students to be successful after graduation. After the interviews, all the remaining data was collected through Microsoft Forms and housed in Microsoft Excel. The participants were told that all participation is voluntary and information will be kept secure and remain anonymous. All the collected answers will be kept confidential and will remain secure.

Potential Contributions

West Mifflin Area School District's current Director of Pupil Services (Special Education) has been in her position for three years and has had a lengthy special education teaching career at the district's high school. The two teachers that perform the

duties in the special education life skills classrooms have had long tenures with excellent evaluations. All three of these key individuals are respected individuals in the district. The Director of Pupil Services has reported to the researcher that the life skills program has been in existence for over 10 years at the high school. The academic curriculum has dominated education during that period. The Director was extremely accommodating in the modifications to the curriculum and displayed a neutral demeanor regarding the curriculum with the students' best interest as the goal. The two veteran teachers have had an abundance of training in the academic curriculum over their careers, and have been collecting additional professional development in the functional curriculum since 2018. The veteran teaching staff has not had substantial training with life skills students and a functional curriculum. So far, the staff participation has greatly increased, mostly corresponding with the school store and the increase of inclusion during the past year.

Summary

Exploring the components of the life skills program was acknowledged in this chapter. The paper introduced how the researcher performed the methodology of the capstone project by investigating which type of curriculum is more efficient for its life skills students. The two curricula, functional versus traditional lends the question if one is more effective than the other or a combination of the two can be more beneficial to the life skills student. The chapter continued to provide the background and purpose of the program by using competent literature review with reliance to the three research questions. These three questions posed that simply modifying the curriculum excluded functional curriculum benefits. Modification is adapting a skill to fit the individual students need. Each student could have various changes, including a teacher reading a

test to the student or using less questions. The questions focused attention toward both advantages and inadequacies of both curricula. Both curricula have important skills for each student to learn and study. While one's philosophy is sticking with the math and English skills throughout the 12 years of schooling the other includes soft skills and functional job skill sets. Participants were close to the program and asked to assess effectiveness in order to optimize success post-graduation. The ultimate goal is to have opportunities for these students to become successful contributing members of society. The idea is to expose them to a program that gives the student the ability to utilize these to apply for jobs. The participants were intelligibly reported in detail for the comprehensibility of the reader. Participants included teachers, staff, aides, parents and future employers. Data collection came from each diverse group that answered the interview, survey or the questionnaire. The research plan, design, methods and data collection were illustrated in its entirety for full disclosure of the steps completed. Chapter 4 will describe the results of assessing the effective preparedness for the life skill program at West Mifflin Area High School and assist in forming a comprehensive plan moving forward.

COVID-19 Impact on the Study

On March 13, 2020, the West Mifflin Area School District closed for two weeks, proceeding to provide students a remote learning experience until the end of the school year. During the summer of 2020, the district was unsure as to how the 2020-2021 school year would start. To be prepared for a potential virtual learning experience, hundreds of laptop devices were purchased to make the entire district a 1:1 initiative. Fortunately, over the previous two years, the high school was already a 1:1 school and took advantage

of the Schoology Learning Management System in all classes, including the life skills classes. The superintendent decided to rearrange the school calendar by delaying the start of school until the day after Labor Day, September 8, 2020. The change was focused on allowing the teachers to participate in professional development. This included additional training on Schoology and Microsoft Teams to prepare staff for periods of remote learning that could be relevant during the upcoming school year. Even though the life skills teachers were prepared to teach remotely, they wanted their plan to include a functional curriculum. They accomplished this by making videos for students to complete tasks, such as sweeping the floor or washing the dishes. During the school year, a large number of the life skills students took advantage of coming to school to participate in both the functional and academic curricula and continue performing life skills objectives.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis and Results

This chapter will reveal the results of the questionnaire, survey and interviews presented to the participants of the West Mifflin Area High School. The fifteen item questionnaire answered by 41 participants will be analyzed in detail regarding the effective preparedness for the West Mifflin Area life skills program to optimize post-secondary success. The 22 participants' surveys and 10 participants' interviews will be summarized and shared as the school begins to create a comprehensive plan for upcoming school years. By using graphs, the data collected will showcase the responses of each individual exposed to the education of the life skills program. The data collected will remain focused on the benefits of an academic curriculum and a functional curriculum.

Data Analysis

During the analysis the researcher attempted to make the data collection as bias-free as possible. Each question addressed positives and negatives of each curriculum equally with the goal of gaining the most accurate responses. The researcher's objective was to create questions to maximize accuracy in the data collected and analyzed.

To ensure that the participants did not hold a predetermined bias toward the subject, I explained that I am collecting data for my doctorate dissertation at California University of PA. The data analyzed will be on the topic of the effectiveness of a life skills curriculum at the high school level. In addition, if an individual has little or no knowledge of the life skills program, they can choose the "Don't know/No opinion" response. My research is distinguishing the variations, disadvantages and advantages to changing the current traditional life skills curriculum to a transitional curriculum and the

impact it has on post-secondary success. The questions will ask specifics about the impact on the success of the student in obtaining gainful employment post-secondary. Prior to the survey, questionnaire and interviews participants were told that their unbiased answers will be instrumental to this research. The data will assist me in discovering if a transitional (functional-school store) curriculum is more, the same or less effective than a traditional (academic-classroom) curriculum for success of life skill students after graduation. Reiterating that their name will not be disclosed during this project and their answers should be informative based. There are no right or wrong answers, just what you feel or think. Revealing these opinions will be the basis of my research.

Results

This section will exhibit the figures for each of the questions and the percentage of the responses collected for the researcher's questionnaire. There are 14 Likert Scale questions and one optional short answer question. Each question will have a brief abstract written below covering the results, along with any other notable items. Each answer will be collected to create a comprehensive plan for the life skills program. Eventually, we will use this information to educate and include all students at the high school level. Future determinations regarding the life skills program at the lower grades will be taken into consideration as well.

Figure 1*Employment Skills Through CBI*

Figure 1 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students leaving the building during the school day to partake in an off-site learning experience. The CBI is a popular learning instrument in the functional curriculum. The results were reported as Strongly Disagree was 2.4%, Disagree was 2.4%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 22%, Agree 39%, Strongly Agree 34.1%. While analyzing Figure 1, 4.8% responded in a negative position. The analyzed research suggests that the participants feel that the students are learning skills specifically to enhance employment opportunities, while neglecting traditional skills taught in the classroom. The 73.1% of positive answers suggests that there is a significant number that believes CBI's are quality employment instruction. The time spent at an off campus site could enhance the chance for each student to become more marketable for their future.

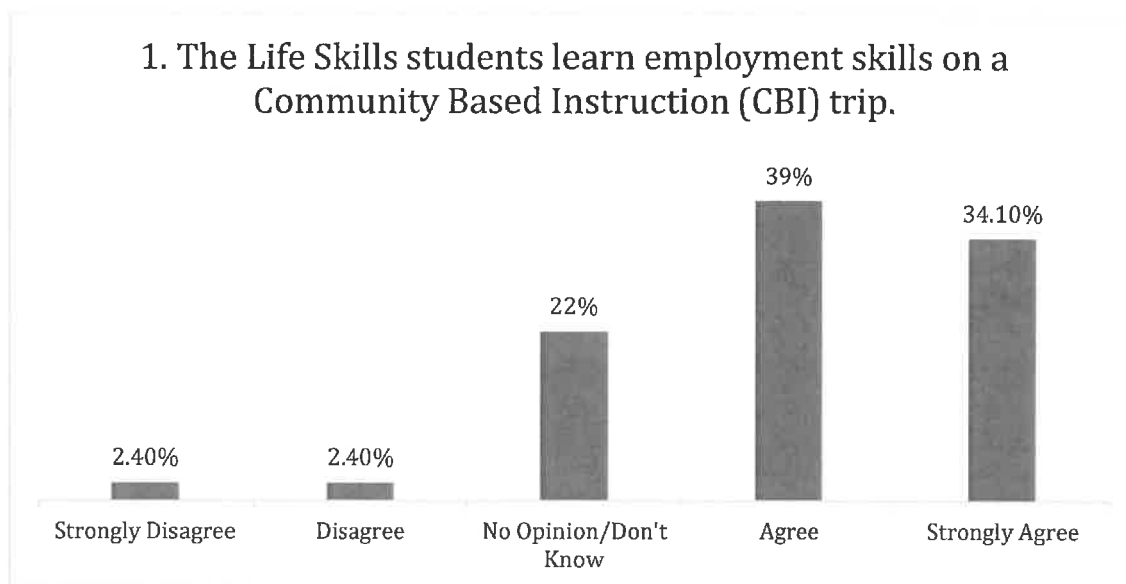


Figure 2*Academic Curriculum for Future Employment*

Figure 2 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students learning career instruction in the classroom using the academic curriculum for future employment. The academic curriculum contains Direct Instruction, extra time to complete assignments and other common accommodations. The results were reported as Strongly Disagree was 2.4%, Disagree was 31.7%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 29.3%, Agree 31.7%, Strongly Agree 4.9%. While analyzing Figure 2, 36.6% responded positively, with 34.1% responding negatively. The researcher notes that it may not be that the participant feels that the students are not learning, but specifically learning skills to enhance an employment opportunity.

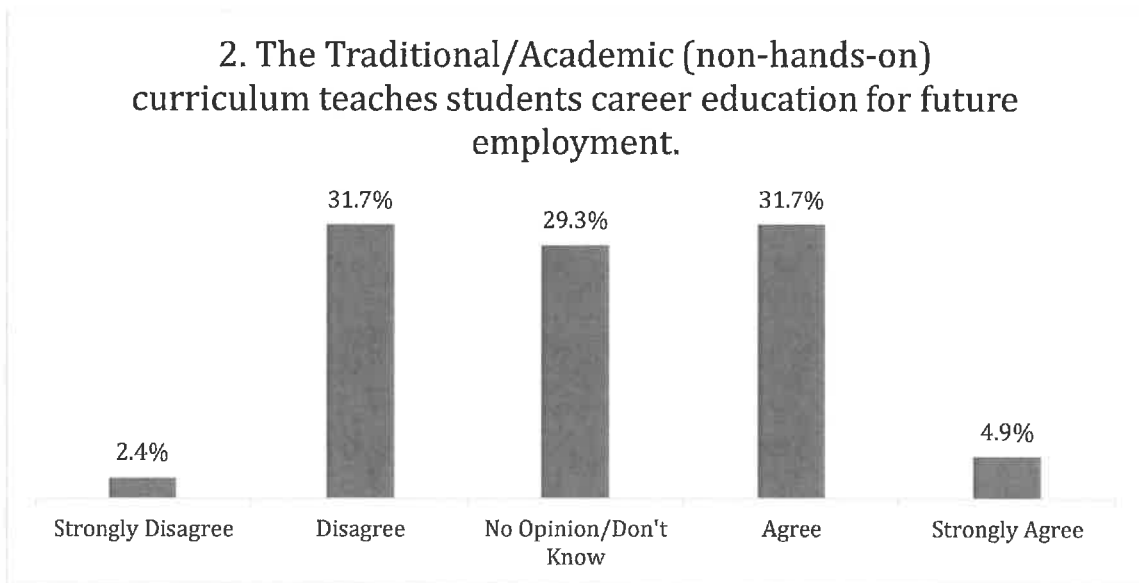


Figure 3*Functional Curriculum for Future Employment*

Figure 3 overwhelmingly reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students being career educated while using the transitional/functional curriculum. This method leans toward skills to assist in getting employment. The functional curriculum key attribute is strengthening a student's career readiness. The results were reported as Strongly Disagree was 0%, Disagree was 0%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 27.5%, Agree 32.5%, Strongly Agree 40%. While analyzing Figure 3, no participant responded in a negative position. The analyzed research suggests that the participants identify the functional curriculum with assisting the life skills students in helping to get a job after graduation. The skills learned become valuable traits that boost a student in becoming a marketable candidate.

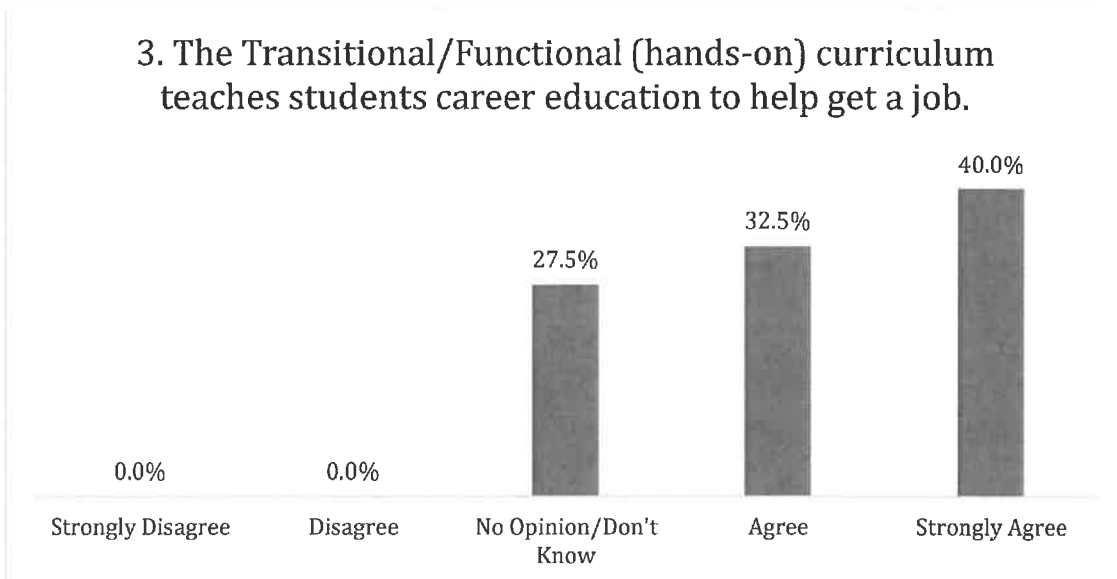


Figure 4*Functional Curriculum in Career Readiness*

Figure 4 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on current lessons being related to a specific career readiness skill set. The skill set through the functional curriculum is centered on soft skills that are reinforced at the school store. Each student will have opportunities to practice these skills daily at the on-site school store or adjacent classroom. The results were reported as Strongly Disagree was 0%, Disagree was 2.4%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 26.8%, Agree 39%, Strongly Agree 37.1%. While analyzing Figure 4, the research suggests that it may not be that the participant feels that the students are not learning, but specifically learning skills to enhance an employment opportunity.

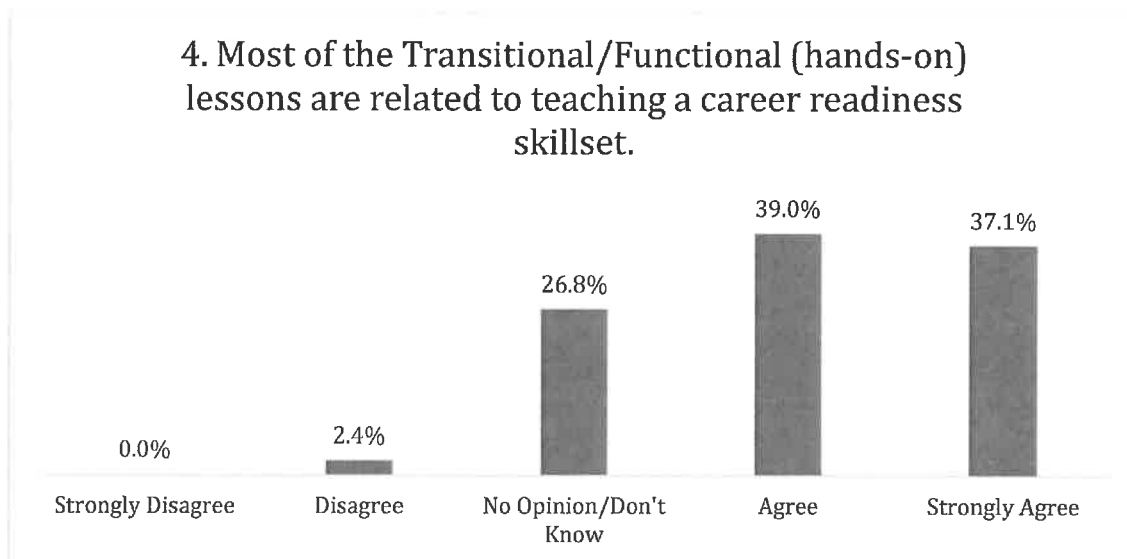


Figure 5*Student Opportunities to Do Work-Study*

Figure 5 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students leaving the building during the school day to partake in a work study or School to Work program. These programs were developed to work closely with a cohort of potential employers. Any job release program transpiring at the high school indicates an opportunity for a functional curriculum. The results were reported as Strongly Disagree was 2.4%, Disagree was 0%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 26.8%, Agree 43.9%, Strongly Agree 26.8%. While analyzing Figure 5, over one quarter of the participants did not know that a School to Work program exists and has existed for quite some time. This may indicate that the School to Work has not been utilized to its full potential.

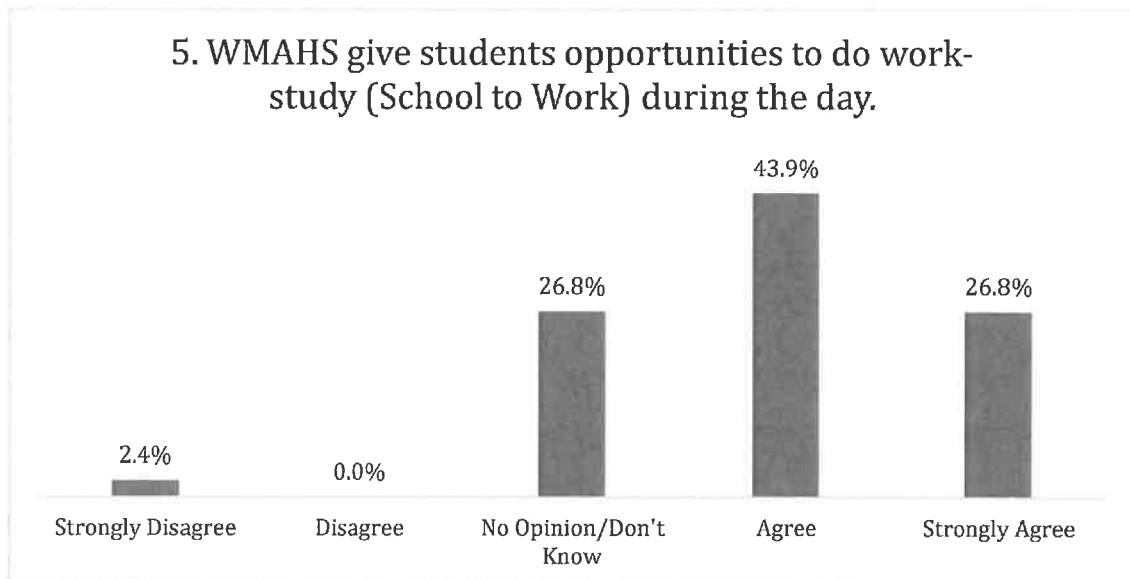


Figure 6*Functional Math Preparedness for Employment*

Figure 6 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on employment preparation through a math functional curriculum. This example is using a cash register, completing a mathematical problem dealing with measurement or completing other numerical tasks in the store. Students practice these tasks by measuring ingredients for recipes, counting change during a transaction or while purchasing items for the school store. The results were reported as Not at all prepared at 0%, Not very well prepared at 0%, Don't Know/No Opinion at 41.5%, Somewhat prepared at 41.5%, and Well prepared at 17.1%. While analyzing Figure 6, it was clear that 58.6% feel that specifically for math, the functional curriculum prepares the students for employment.

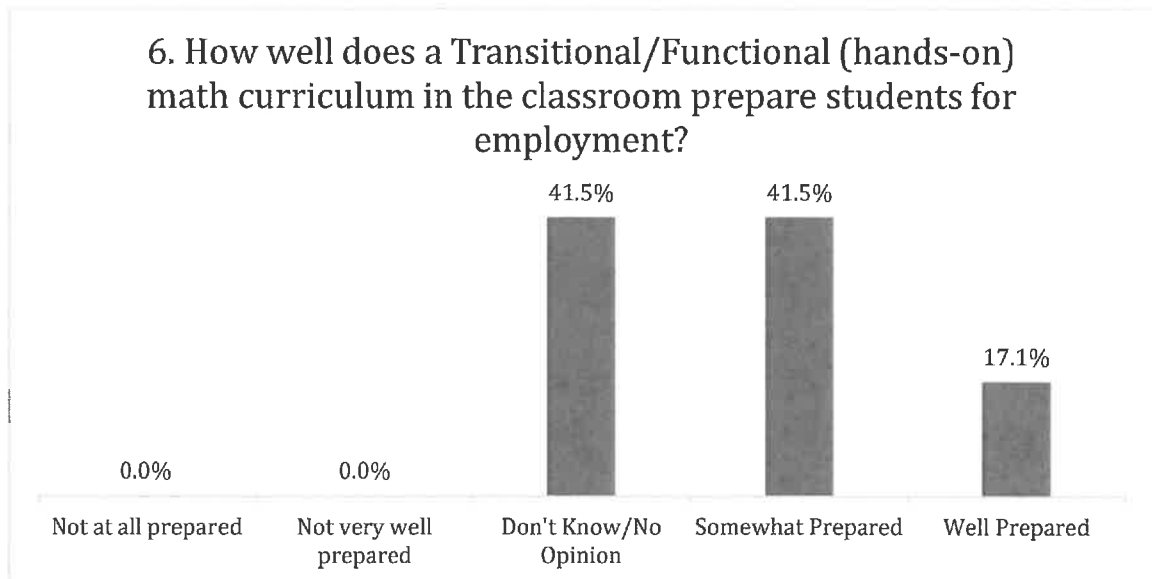


Figure 7*School Store Training for Employment*

Figure 7 directly reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students working on a functional curriculum specifically in the school store. The store is becoming a popular destination for both students and staff. The students are exposed to both math, English and social skills. The functional curriculum advances such things as the importance of eye contact, greeting customers and using a person's name. These are all examples of learning instruments in the functional curriculum. The results were reported as Not at all prepared was 0%, Not very well prepared was 0%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 29.3%, Somewhat prepared 36.6%, Well prepared 34.1%. The analyzed research suggests that there is a significant number that believe the store is a positive asset for career readiness.

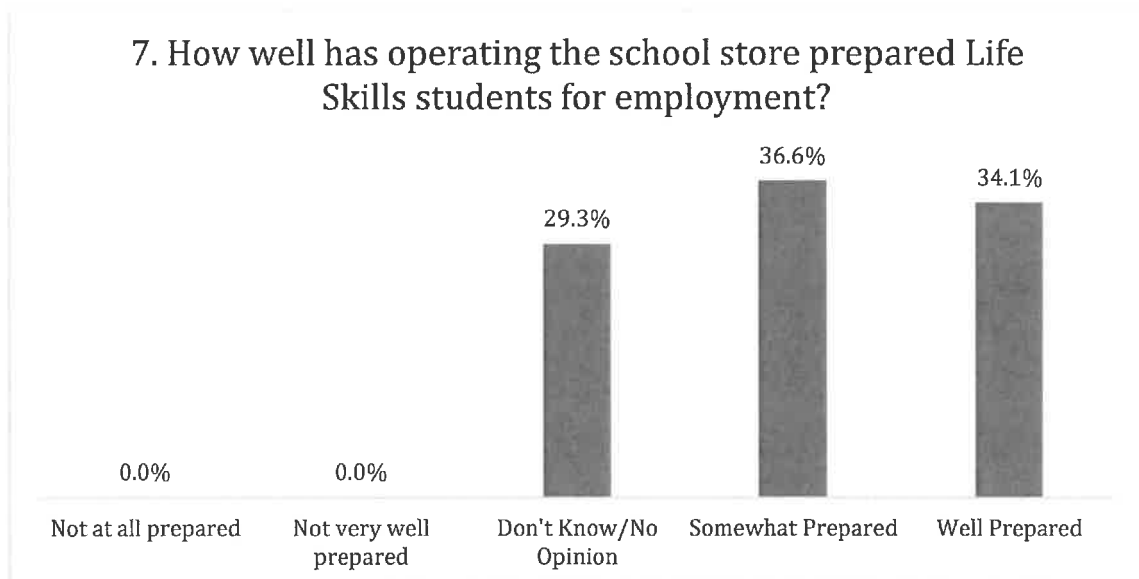


Figure 8*Functional Curriculum Gaining Employment*

Figure 8 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on student preparedness with success gaining employment. The lessons in a functional curriculum have centered on career readiness by having the student working primarily at the school store. The results were reported as Not at all prepared was 0%, Not very well prepared was 5%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 30%, Somewhat prepared 40%, Well prepared 25%. While analyzing Figure 8, research suggests that a vast majority feel that students are getting the education they need to be an employable participant in the community.

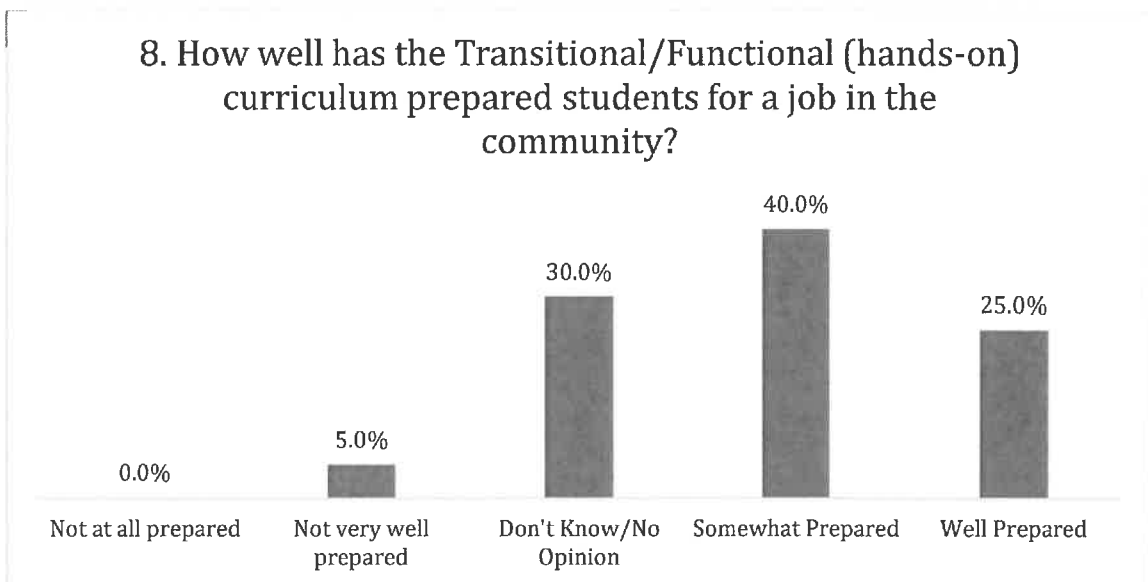


Figure 9*Readiness After Completing Functional Curriculum*

Figure 9 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students acquiring life skills, specifically everyday skills and social skills through a functional curriculum. An example would be cleaning up the store after business hours by wiping down counters or cleaning the coffee pots. The results were reported as Not at all prepared was 0%, Not very well prepared was 0%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 41.5%, Somewhat prepared 36.6%, Well prepared 22%. While analyzing Figure 9, research suggests that most participants feel that there is preparedness for the students.

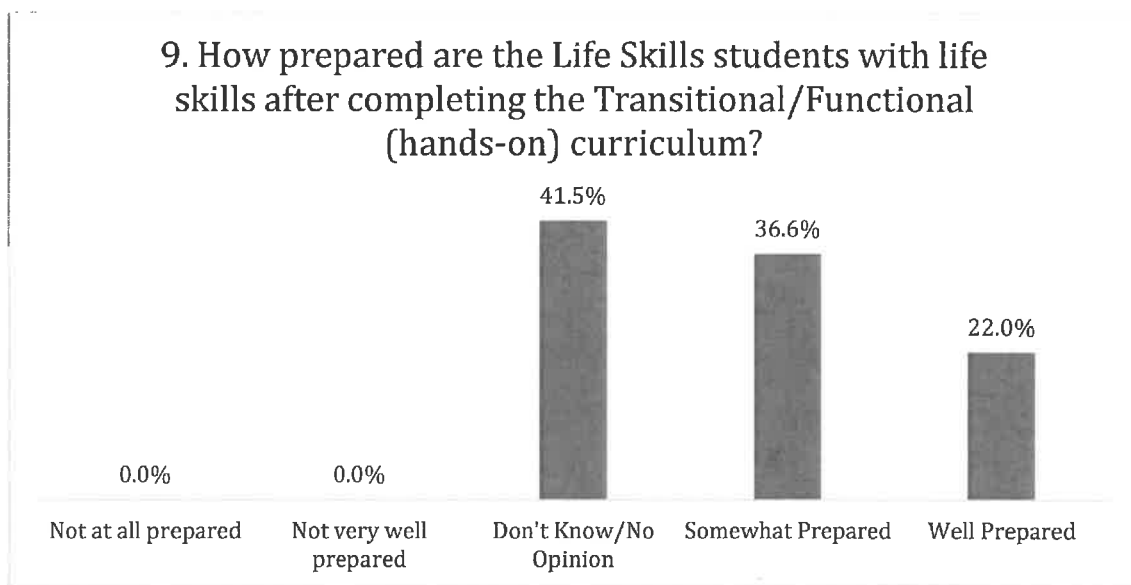


Figure 10*Readiness After Completing Academic Curriculum*

Figure 10 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students acquiring life skills, specifically everyday skills and social skills through an academic curriculum. This would be completed in a traditional classroom setting with direct instruction and/or small group. The results were reported as Not at all prepared was 2.5%, Not very well prepared was 22.5%, Don't Know/No Opinion was 45%, Somewhat prepared 25%, Well prepared 5%. While analyzing Figure 10, research suggests that 25% of the participants feel that there is not appropriate preparedness for the students.

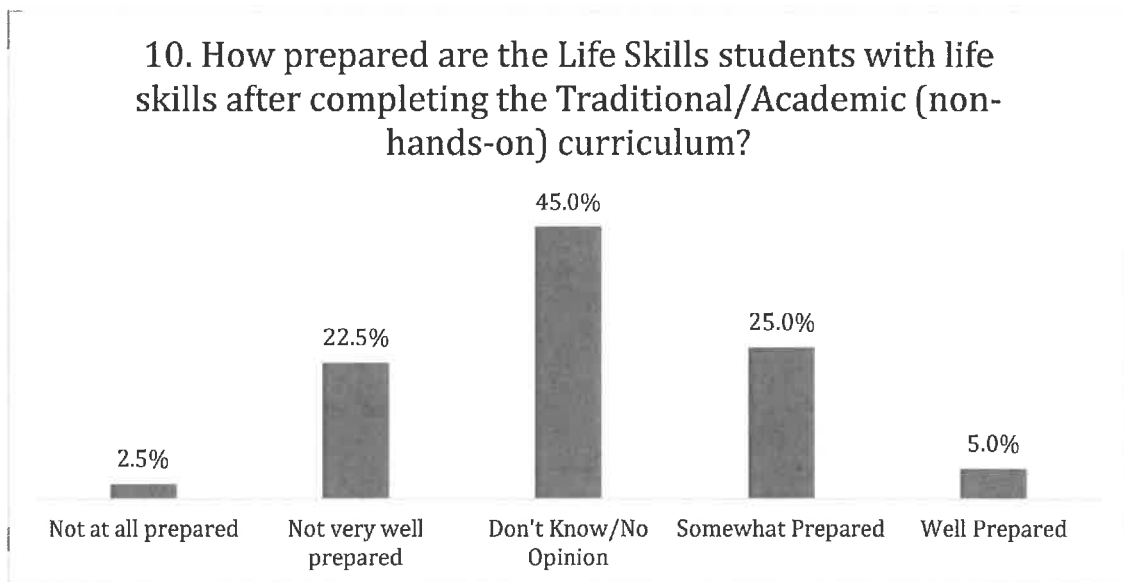


Figure 11*Participation & Attendance Using Functional Curriculum*

Figure 11 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on student increase of participation and attendance. The affirmative answers are from the individuals that directly interact with the life skills students. It was reported that the introduction of a functional curriculum increased attendance and participation because the students enjoyed the interaction of this program. During COVID 19, students attended class with participation, unfortunately, that is not a true account due to the fact that students were not in the building, rather just logging on to their computer from home. Sadly, this data still needs to be accounted for in the data collection. The results were reported as Yes 12, No 1, Don't know 16, and Results affected by Remote Learning 12. While analyzing the questionnaire data it may be different from the quantitative research and definitely altered by the remote learning offered by the school.

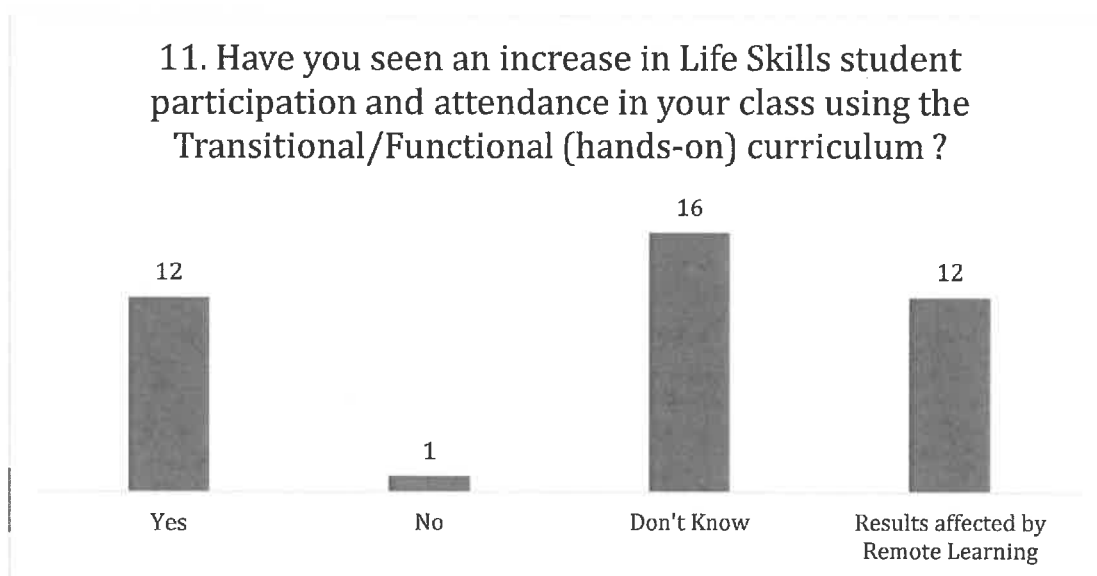


Figure 12*Functional Curriculum Affecting Registration at Vo-Tech Schools*

Figure 12 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students leaving the building during the school day to partake in the off-site vocational technology schools. The vo-techs have a strong functional curriculum, utilizing their tools to allow students to become efficient in a skill set. Additional research indicates that the curriculum at the Vo-tech schools' resembles the West Mifflin Area High Schools' functional curriculum. The other answers reflect that the participant was unaware that a student is part of a Vo-Tech program. Hence, the discrepancy in an accurate depiction of attendance. The data collected provided to the researcher that 3 students had returned from off-site Vo-Tech schooling. The results were reported as Yes 3, No 5, Don't Know 33. While analyzing Figure 12, it is not overwhelmingly clear to the participants about vo-tech attendance. This is not surprising, but was essential to fully comprehend the participants' conceptions.

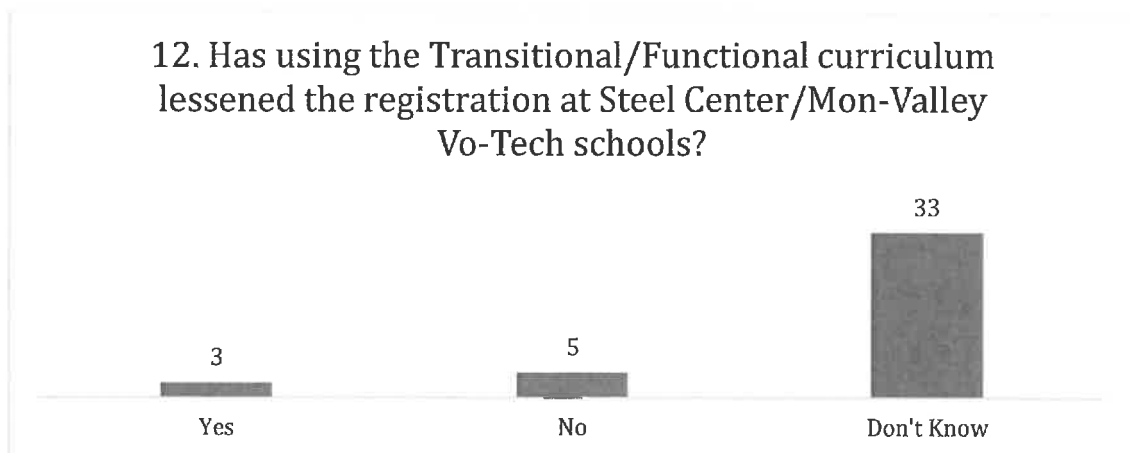


Figure 13*Student Confidence Completing Functional Curriculum*

Figure 13 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on the students' self-confidence as part of the functional curriculum. The results were reported as Yes 28, No 0, Don't Know 13. The analyzed research suggests that there were zero conceptions of students not gaining confidence with this program. The larger conception was that students did gain confidence when participating in the functional curriculum.



Figure 14*Student Confidence Completing Academic Curriculum*

Figure 14 reflects the results of the participants' perceptions on students' self-confidence as part of the academic curriculum. The results were reported as Yes 13, No 8, Don't Know 20. While analyzing the research suggests that 19.5% feel that there is a lack of feeling confident after completing an academic curriculum. There is still an overwhelming group that does not know whether the academic curriculum breeds confidence.

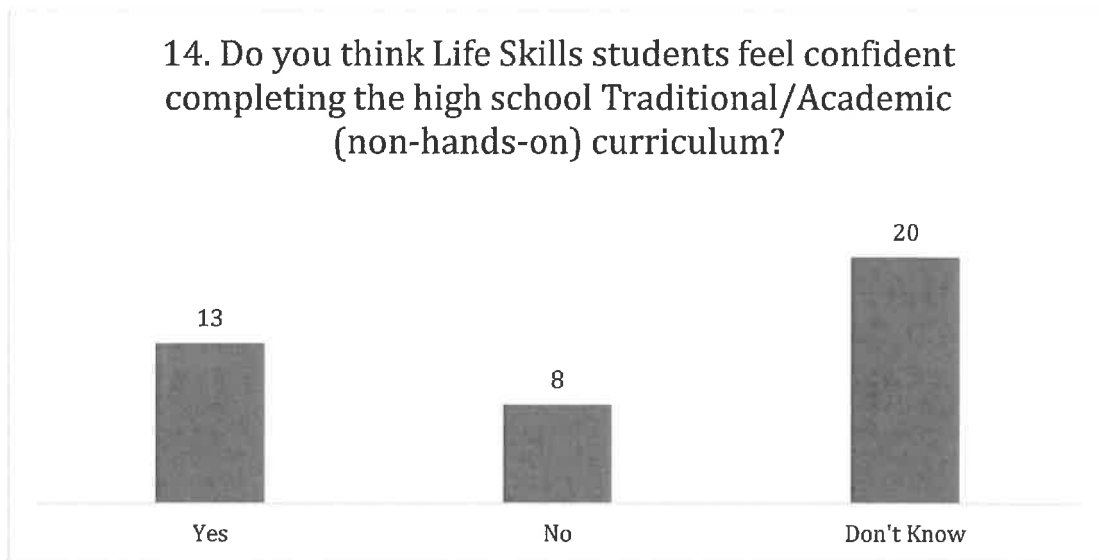
**Figure 15***Advantage or Improvement to the Transitional Program*

Figure 15 shows the actual item from the questionnaire with the number of responses. It was optional for the participant as 51.2% partook in the question.

15. Name an advantage and an area of improvement to the transition (hands-on) program.
(optional)

[More Details](#)

21

Responses

Latest Responses

"Defintely enhances their social skills. Would like to see life skill stude...

"Builds skills and confidence in addition to social skills"

Figure 16

Specific Advantages or Improvements

Figure 16 displays the various optional answers given regarding the specifics of advantages or areas of improvement of a functional or transitional Curriculum. Out of the 41 participants filling out the questionnaire, 21 took advantage of the optional item.

ID	Name an advantage and an area of improvement to the transition (hands-on) program. (optional)
6	Continue to grow and adapt our transitional functional curriculum to jobs our LS students can do and are interested in after graduation.
7	advantage- students are placed in real-life situations.
10	LS students take pride when they complete hands-on work. I feel with the technology that has been used for the pandemic, a lot of LS are lost. They need to see, actively practice, and be a part of the experience to gain the skill. The more senses that are used, the better.
11	The Transitional program provides real-world training to LS students, and provides them with marketable job skills.

12	Hands-on experience is always the best option when available.
13	Real life learning that prepares the students to be productive in society. This also provides these students a sense of self-worth and confidence moving forward as they are transitioning.
14	Visits to the school store helped me connect with the students. When I see them in class, I complement their performance or product and the students seem to perform more open. The hands on approach is creating better teacher/student relationships that in turn lead to better in class success.
15	I think our Life Skills program is great. It keeps getting better. With money we could offer more Community Based job training.
18	Functional academics is best in teaching Life Skills Support (LSS), as it teaches them real life aspects that they will use to live and work in society.
19	teach basic life skills to all students. how to write a check. how to change a tire. how to read a non digital clock. how to pay bills.
21	an area of improvement would be to have a dedicated transition coordinator
24	An advantage to the transitional program is that it is geared toward "real-life" experiences.
26	Life application - more job shadow opportunities that would give teachers ideas for program

- 29 students learn more than one skill and can develop what they like most.
Improvement can be more items and job positions within the store with a name tag and position on it.
- 30 I think there should be a balance with functional and traditional. Bringing traditional academics into the school store by using math and such helps to make the material relevant. Traditional academics could include learning functional skills through role playing. The program here could improve by expanding. The school store works on retail skills. Students would benefit by experiencing other opportunities such as building maintenance, grounds maintenance, food service, food preparation, etc. If functional learning includes a wide range of job types, students will have the advantage of trying different career paths. Parents would have the advantage of input from professional school staff when leading their child into a career. Teachers can observe and feel confident in which type of career suits the students' skills best, rather than relying on the students to choose what they think they want to do without experience.
- 31 I believe the transition style learning (hands-on) is better for life-skills students.
An improvement I would make would be to have an online ordering service and have the life skills students personally deliver the items so they can improve interpersonal skills, especially with adults.
- 33 In this program, the students have more opportunities to build character and communication skills necessary for future employment.

- | | |
|----|---|
| 34 | I feel as though giving hands-on experiences to the Life Skills students is one of the best things we can do for them as educators. They need to learn skills that will prepare them for life out of high school. |
| 36 | Giving students real life opportunities at the high school prepares our Life Skills Students for success. |
| 39 | Builds skills and confidence in addition to social skills |
| 40 | Definitely enhances their social skills. Would like to see life skill students, working small jobs/tasks in the school. |

Discussion

The collective data analysis is directly related to the high school's life skills curriculum. Each figure contains the participants' outlook on the program with relation to the investigator's three research questions. Although a significant amount of individuals participated in the questionnaire, additional numbers would continue to increase with the correlation. Presently, the number of participants clearly assist the researcher in creating a solid future plan with the data collected and assessed.

The mutual connection between discussion and action is the ability to assess the value of educators, staff and student opinions. A truly functioning hands-on curriculum needs proper support and acceptance. It requires time, patience, communication, proper work space and planning. Effective correlation considers every aspect. Correlation measures the variables to determine the best course of action to maximize success for each student.

Correlation of Data to Research Question 1

The correlation of data examined regarding the key components to a successful transitional life skills School to Work program is clear with the analyzed data. When attempting to triangulate the data collected, it is important to mention several responses during the interview process. Flexibility, exploration and staff buy-in were the most common responses for key components during the interview. When educating life skills students, it revealed that flexibility is a characteristic that is undoubtedly necessary. The scope of the word flexibility includes scheduling, CBI's, participation and attendance. Attendance is crucial because of the hands-on activities within a functional curriculum. It is a primary attribute of the teacher and paraprofessionals in the ability to redirect or refocus for the students to acquire mastery of a skill. The exploration of various hands-on activities is key because it allows students to find their interests in a safe supported environment. Staff buy-in was repeatedly mentioned due to the fact that it takes a certain type of educator to effectively educate a life skills student. Truly, only a select few teachers can comprehend the struggles that a life skills student deals with on a daily basis. Staff buy-in encompasses many aspects. Staff noted that the ability to have conversations opens up many more opportunities for communication. Students become actively engaged when answering questions about how their day was at the school store. Including discussions about purchases, skill enhancement and individual interests creates meaningful dialogue.

The functional curriculum did not have any negative answers over 5% throughout the entire research collection. During the survey segment, it was revealed that over 95% of participants felt the functional curriculum at West Mifflin Area High School

included key components that help these students become more marketable to employers. The reason for these results directly pertain to the school store. The survey showed that communication skills acquired during time spent performing hands-on activities were crucial components to the success of the life skills students. During the optional portion of the questionnaire, statements like “real world”, training and confidence were all mentioned.

Correlation of Data to Research Question 2

The correlation of data examines if effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes. Examples of critical answers during the interviews centered on student self-confidence with basic communication skills such as shaking hands, appropriate clothes and following directions. Each individual interviewed sided with specifics on how the transitional program enhanced the students’ life skills while increasing opportunities to gain employment. Throughout opinions of this method of preparation, it was clearly stated that the school is effectively preparing the students for life after high school. The survey results were 86.3% felt that the students had proper training to become a productive employee. Another point was that 95.5% felt that the functional curriculum was making the students more marketable to employers. Analyzing Figure 13 in the questionnaire, the results reported that not one individual felt that the life skills students did not acquire confidence after completing the functional curriculum. Questionnaire Figure 14 reported that 13 participants felt that the academic curriculum assisted students with confidence versus 8 participants disagreeing.

Correlation of Data to Research Question 3

The correlation regarding what types of data teachers and staff provide to

highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program was described in numerous figures in chapter four. During the interviews, one noticeable response was that the students actually need both to obtain full success. During the ten interviews, there were notable amounts that stated at the high school level, students should have been academic heavy during K-8th grade, and at this point moving towards a functional curriculum as their primary curriculum. Notwithstanding, there was not a total dismissal of the academic curriculum, only a smaller dedicated time spent. For the survey, the question, “Comparing the two, traditional (academic) versus transitional (functional), which one optimizes effective preparedness for future employment post-graduation?”, had a response of 100% for a functional curriculum. Still there were some negatives towards the functional curriculum, as one example response was “One disadvantage is the ability to assess students and monitor their progress within the state standards. While their IEP goals are being followed, there is no link or correlation to the standards.” This point will have to be discussed and addressed as the life skills curriculum moves forward.

All of the interviewees answered that the students need a functional curriculum, however, Figure 1 displays the staff’s thoughts on Community Based Instruction. The analysis of this graph indicates that the participants identify the CBI as an instrument for increasing the tools and skills for life skills students gaining employment. This topic had pre-capstone opinions that the CBIs consisted as more of a pleasurable field trip. The results reinforce that this is a quality piece of the functional curriculum at the high school. For Figures 2 and 3, the data revealed a positive percentage of 36.6% for the academic curriculum and 72.5% for the functional curriculum in educating the students in career

readiness for future employment. This is a direct correlation with Figure 4 as the data shows that 76.1% relatively agree that the functional curriculum lessons are related to teaching a career readiness skill set. Reviewing Figures 9 and 10, the data revealed a positive percentage of 30% for the academic curriculum and 58.5% for the functional curriculum in the preparedness of students after completing each curriculum. Analyzing Figures 13 and 14, the data showed a positive percentage of 31.7% for the academic curriculum and 68.3% for the functional curriculum for witnessing students' confidence level after completing each respected curriculum.

Summary

Chapter 4 centered on the results of the interviews, survey and questionnaire. The focus was to determine the best method to implement in the West Mifflin Area high school's life skills program. The answers were highlighted using graphs and went into depth with the staff questionnaire to complete the triangulation of collected data. The replies will be carefully weighed when considering between a transitional (functional) or traditional (academic) curriculum. This allows for the West Mifflin Area School districts life skills program to be enhanced by using data-driven information. The purpose was to calculate the answers to render what perspectives were held amongst the two curricula. Collectively, every response provided the researcher with a more favorable view for the functional curriculum than the academic curriculum. However, the participants also furnished opinions to include pieces of both curricula. Each research question was carefully addressed to build a transparent view of the participants' opinions. Within this chapter the researcher has collected a significant amount of comprehensive data. This information will be utilized to help formulate recommendations based on the results of

this chapter of the capstone project.

Therefore, to summarize this chapter, many steps have been coordinated.

Assessing the West Mifflin Area School District's School to Work program has been tedious. Reevaluating an entire way of teaching to include a functional aspect is no longer an option for districts. The PDE believes that providing additional areas to encompass the PA Career Standards will allow many students in the life skills program to thrive post-graduation.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is increasing the demands placed on districts, schools, administrators, teachers and students. With this comes evaluations of districts and their personnel to determine whether the students are deemed college or career ready. PDE has expanded the requirements for a student to graduate by adding more career readiness options. This may include teaching them daily life skills, such as paying bills to performing work related skills like running a cash register. For life skills students to capitalize on these options, it is necessary to offer a functional curriculum to meet the requirements for graduation, enhancing their opportunity to be productive members of their community. A student with a learning disability can become frustrated throughout their school career if they are not provided the essentials to become successful members of society post-graduation. This frustration can get worse over time. It is the goal of any educator to minimize or eliminate the barriers that can derail a student's learning path. Schools should be challenging and offer many tasks that require a degree of effort to accomplish. This does not mean that students can't have fun or enjoy their time. It is apparent that today's students have many more obstacles in their lives than what was visible in the past. Some student's time at school is the only positive routine they experience. It is the job of today's educators to not just prepare students for college or post-secondary work, but to teach, counsel, cheer, care and support them emotionally and educationally. The educator's job is to equip all students to achieve in today's stressful, difficult, competitive and ever-changing world. By incorporating additional lessons in a functional curriculum, life skills students increase their chance of being

successful. Adding life skills, such as greeting people or completing a transaction, to their lessons increases their opportunity to be productive post-secondary. The goal is to have students work hard while still enjoying their scholastic career.

It is the objective of this capstone to find the most effective preparedness through a curriculum to optimize post-secondary success. The project exposed an abundance of data that allowed the researcher to produce a sound conclusion and make quality recommendations. Data collected through the literature review, interviews, surveys and questionnaire gave the researcher a diverse number of viewpoints and factual data to utilize to systematically adjust the life skills curriculum for the West Mifflin Area High School students. As an educator the mission is to provide the best possible education to the students. This project allows the researcher to accomplish that ever-changing task. West Mifflin Area High School is currently working hard to enhance this curriculum, in-turn heightening the educational process for the families. When this transition occurs, it is not only beneficial to the students and their families, but to the whole community.

Conclusions

At the conclusion of the interviews, the first research question, “*What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?*” was examined. I was moderately surprised that the same three characteristics were mentioned by the interviewees. Flexibility was found to be the number one most repeated answer. Personnel thought that the whole school needs to display flexibility for all our life skills students. This key trait is imperative during the scheduling process to accommodate students to have periods dedicated to being mobile. The schedule dictates how students can obtain a functional curriculum throughout their day, while still meeting the needs of

their IEP. Also, the administration needs to put effort into correctly assisting the teachers with their budget expenditures in creating an interactive classroom and completing Community Based Instruction opportunities. These things have been reviewed throughout the literature review section of the capstone as the base of a true functional curriculum. Teacher acceptance is another major key component that is the cornerstone of any major initiative. Fortunately, for West Mifflin Area High School, the staff is very accepting of every student and wants to invest time to optimize their day. Specifically, when the life skills staff was approached about the changes to the day and curriculum there was minimal hesitation. These teachers are the individuals that will be most affected by the changes. The group was excited to participate in this challenge as the benefit to the students is a lifelong transformer. Some modifications will include schedule changes, inclusion of STEM rooms and additional skills being taught.

When the surveys concluded, the second research question, “*Does effective transition programming for life skills students improve employment outcomes?*”, was reviewed. Improving self-confidence for every life skills student scored high across the results as a key component. Without confidence, students will struggle with any task presented to them. Self-confidence leads directly into self-determination. By developing their skills utilizing a functional curriculum to enhance basic soft-skills both can be achieved. For example, communication or appropriate clothes to wear to an interview needs to be taught during their time at school. Learning to smile, make eye contact and shaking hands are a necessity to success. A life skills student needs time to develop these soft skills before an employment opportunity is presented. The staff realizes proceeding forward without these skills can lead to unnecessary hardships or failure. The

development of soft skills is the most looked for characteristic by employers, defined by the review of literature.

The conclusion of the questionnaire, the last research question, “*What data can the teachers and staff provide to highlight the success or inadequacies of the curriculum for the life skills program?*” was analyzed. Most teachers teach similarly to a teacher they have observed in their educational career. During college, teachers’ education was centered on a quality lesson plan, bell-ringer, direct instruction, independent assignment, review and assessment. With that ingrained into their craft, I was pleased to observe how the staff comprehended how important hands-on and student-led learning is to achieve success today. While evaluating the results of the questionnaire, it was clear that the participants thought positively of the functional curriculum. Further mention that the academic curriculum, although not as many as the functional curriculum, still received positive results. One can make an argument that both curricula are needed for life skills students to obtain full success. With the functional curriculum focusing on collaboration and team-building and the academic curriculum focusing on small group instruction and cognitive grade level instruction to student’s abilities, it reveals a recipe of success for a student. Adding the last part of a quality School-to-Work initiative that includes transitional service and planning envelops a complete educational experience for the students.

Much has been learned throughout this year-long process at the high school. Through the triangulation of data collected, the district must continue to effectively deliver the balance of functional and academic curriculum. The best way to improve knowledge and instruction is aggressively developing a solid professional development

plan. The six imperative items are formulated from the data collected in Table 1. Having teachers and paraprofessionals comprehend what a true functional and academic curriculum is and how it enhances learning in any classroom needs to kick-off the schedule of activities. The school's participation in the PDE's Teacher in the Workplace will assist in having teachers exposed to the needs of today's businesses, to prepare the students for life after high school. Improving the CBI effectiveness will dismiss the perception of "fun field trips" and rebrand as a scholastic educational event that reinforces the functional curriculum. Once the staff is exposed and properly educated, the program can continue moving forward with a newly improved School to Work program. The altered School to Work program will include opportunities for job shadowing, interning and the option of gaining elective credits. The most difficult part will be the complete engagement for the staff to be exposed to this style of educating students. The need to reinforce that a healthy balance is the most effective way to make this a complete success is imperative. Undoubtedly, there will be a segue into eliminating 'too much too soon' mentality while still accomplishing the yearly goals. Lastly, devising a rubric to use for assessing soft skills for all students, but specifically the life skills students, will be created to enhance the curriculum.

Table 2*Professional Development Activities*

The start of the capstone and introduction into a larger scope of the functional curriculum was rather inexpensive. Since the budget and finances were factors in moving towards a functional curriculum, the project started out only spending on the basics. The district wanted to study the data of the project with the current expenditures before making a major financial commitment.

Professional Development Activities		Location - High School
In-service Dates	Activity Focus	Participants
August	Functional vs Academic	Teachers/Paras
August	Teacher in the Workplace	Career Readiness Team
August	CBI Effectiveness	Life Skills Teachers/Paras
February	School to Work	Special Ed. Teachers/Paras
February	Balancing the 2 Curricula	Teachers
May	Assessing Soft Skills	Special Ed. Teachers/Paras

Table 3*Budget Starting Functional Curriculum*

Paint supplies included paint, brushes and other standard necessities. The team decided that a clean, colorful and bright atmosphere was a key starting point that would allow the students to gain ownership of the new alterations. The most significant cost was the coffee supplies that included a new corporate size Bunn coffee maker, coffee, cream and other products to start. Luckily for the program, there was a vacant classroom to use that had adequate electric outlets to handle those needs. The team also secured used donations in the form of a counter, refrigerator cooler, and shelving from a defunct Rite-Aid. Because of the success experienced, the team feels confident in purchasing larger priced items. A kitchen-like area that includes a work island, industrial stove/oven, and embroidery machine can be purchased with few reservations to move the functional curriculum forward to enhance student achievement. When any decision making takes place in the future, the team asks the question, “Is this how business X does it?” or compare to any data that one of our partners have shared.

Budget Starting Functional Curriculum		
ACCOUNT	DESCRIPTION	BUDGET
10-1210-890-000-30-00-03-8431	Paint Supplies	\$200.00
10-1210-890-000-30-00-03-8431	Laundry Supplies	\$40.00
10-1210-890-000-30-00-03-8431	Coffee Supplies	\$2,125.00
TOTAL		\$2,365.00

Limitations

When presenting the surveys during the second phase of the triangulation of data collection, the number was lower for participation than what was predicted. While examining the reasoning for the survey participation, it was discovered that a considerable amount of people did not participate because they did not feel confident in their knowledge in the life skills curriculum. Since this was a deterrent in participating in the survey, I decided to include an additional answer in the questionnaire that was labeled “Don’t Know/No Opinion”. This additional answer could be used as data for the capstone, but to assess topics of professional development needs to occur in the upcoming school year. Looking closer at Figure 10, 45% of participants did not know or not have an opinion on the preparedness of life skills students with life skills after completing the academic curriculum. That percentage is almost half the participants who did not answer positively or negatively, in regards to the traditional curriculum. Upon deeper review, the participants answered “Don’t Know/No Opinion” mainly due to the fact that there is not an official rubric to properly assess those skills during classroom time.

Another limitation is the battle of the COVID world pandemic that affected a small number of students’ attendance that normally would never be mentioned. Studying Figure 11, 12 of the 41 participants answered, “Results affected by Remote Learning” for the question of “Have you seen an increase in life skills student participation and attendance in your class using the traditional/functional (hands-on) curriculum?”. Continuing to examine Figure 11, 16 of the 41 participants answered, “Don’t Know/No Opinion”. If not during the pandemic, I feel this question would have had a more

affirmative answer. The pandemic has affected attendance and participation across the board.

Recommendations for Future Research

After thoroughly reviewing the data, stakeholders feel that the students are being given additional opportunities with the modification to a functional curriculum. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the high school to continue and expand on a variety of hands-on experiences. To adopt a method to allow further skill training is crucial to accomplish the goal of a fully educated student. The School Store Team will be rebranded as our Career Readiness Team to increase additional segments to our Life Skills Students. Furthermore, eventually Career Readiness will include other departments of special needs students, then finally include our regular education students.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) offers a program for special education students to gain employment and have the opportunity to earn a small salary as part of the learning process. The district became aware of this program before the pandemic occurred, and after dispensing the vaccine, it is in the best interest of our special education department to join forces with this program. The program entails choosing a preferred student to be named School Store Manager. These responsibilities can include a serious time commitment. This is looked upon as a paid internship, exposing the student manager to a controlled work environment and setting within this functional curriculum. This individual student must display mature characteristics, self-confidence and other qualities learned throughout the functional curriculum. The student can be selected through an interview process to continue the career readiness education. The district can then hire the student with a minimal hourly salary which can last

anywhere from 9 weeks to a full school year. The money that the district spends will be reimbursed by OVR as part of their program.

Discussions with the Director of Food Service and Director of Building and Grounds have taken place in the past to address the issue of the lack of substitute employees. Moving forward, the life skill students that have displayed proficiency in the functional curriculum will be allowed to participate in these positions. Jobs can be taken at the middle or elementary schools or at the high school. The positions are not limited to one of the schools, they may have opportunities to work at each level. These will be based on available openings and comfort level for each applicant. Upon completion of a probationary period, these students can become permanent employees of the cafeteria or janitorial staff for the district. This will give them a safe and comfortable environment while learning real world skills, as they make money. Additionally, it will give them experience to venture off to other positions or employment, depending on the self-confidence and skills gained during their work segment.

The district will purchase a 15 passenger van through Access billing/funding through PDE provided to the district for enhancing the life skills program. A van can transport students to numerous CBI experiences, including trips to local businesses to view how specific jobs are completed. Traveling to a local hotel to witness their cleaning process and visiting the big box, life skill friendly stores, such as Target and Wal-Mart to view various positions, are two realistic opportunities for the students. Weekly, the van can be used to take students to Gordon Food Service (GFS) or Sam's Club to make coffee and food purchases for the school store.

At the present time, the district has a greenhouse. This fully functioning room can

be rebranded as an outdoor STEM room for this program. Currently, the greenhouse is in the infancy stages of being cleaned and organized due the fact that it sat unattended for a substantial amount of time, until the potential was realized by the researcher. The options are limitless. Students performing tasks such as growing food and flowers through the aquaponics system to sell in the school store is one option. Second, digging out a pond in the adjacent area of the greenhouse to start an ecosystem of fish and other aquatic-based lifeforms would be a choice. Cleaning, scraping, priming and painting the STEM room will grant opportunities to use functional curriculum skills to prepare for employment. The outdoor STEM room can expand to include the mid-level life skill students, as well. This option would allow participation in and transition for a mid-level student to successfully sample the high school program. Future ventures could include elementary students to properly assimilate to a functional curriculum by planting some flowers or other small exploratory tasks.

Creating a local job fair for the life skills students would enhance the opportunity in gaining local employment. The Career Ready Team is pursuing plans to invite all the local employers to the school to start building relationships. This will help integrate their suggestions to enhance the program as we move forward. Inviting Kennywood, McDonald's, etc. to a high school fully functioning school store and outdoor STEM room Open House will educate these employers on the skills being performed by our students. While at the open house, the opportunity for volunteer sign-ups of interviewing, job shadowing or ultimately employment would be greatly increased. Positive dialogue between our teachers and potential future employers is critical. This partnership can solidify West Mifflin Area High School as a producer of quality employees in the

community.

The academic curriculum was viewed by a significant group as having some positive qualities, keeping this available and valid would need to continue in some aspects as the curriculum moves forward. The district would have to readjust the classroom lessons to focus on the activities and experiences offered to be completed in the functional curriculum. One example may be a math lesson focusing on adding and subtracting numbers can align with comparing the difference in prices of coffee and supplies. Performing the task of comparison shopping either different stores or different brands brings the lesson into a functional curriculum. This allows the students the opportunity to comprehend what goes into working with a budget and makes it a real life job related experience.

The aforementioned future actions directly relate to all three of the research questions. These actions correlate with the key components in a successful transitional life skills School to Work program. Each example is based on improving employment outcomes and builds on the successes already experienced by the students. The Career Ready Team will evaluate and review these components monthly, assessing them both academically and economically.

A future endeavor would be to delve into past students and employers by surveying and interviewing these groups, one to three years after graduation. This would allow the researcher to acquire the factual evidence in the truest form in relation to the quality of a functional curriculum. The longevity of performing this research can be difficult, but is feasible due to the multitude of employment opportunities in the West Mifflin area. By building relationships with the local businesses in the area, we can

remain vigilant in continuously relying on their feedback about the functional curriculum. We can collaborate with them depending on their suggestions about the advantages and strengths of the West Mifflin Area School District life skills program. The researcher can work directly with past students to gather advice as to what aspects of the functional curriculum are helpful in obtaining and keeping employment. This future research can be reviewed annually.

Naturally, the topic became a positive conversation throughout the district as the capstone was taking place at the high school. The life skills staff believes this could enhance the program for all of the students. The middle school life skills program has a new and energetic teacher that has a desire to improve the students' curriculum. Aligning the high school and middle school curriculums could prove to be a substantial advantage for the future. It would be wholly beneficial to examine the growth of 9th grade students until their graduation. To accomplish this completely, adding a quality feeder program at the middle school level would allow the students to achieve maximum growth entering, and eventually exiting, the high school. Newer research questions can focus on the effectiveness at the middle school, and ultimately the elementary life skills programs in determining an appropriate balance, per age group, that is appropriate between the functional and academic curricula.

Another perspective is to expand the functional curriculum to all students at the high school level. A research question of how effective the functional curriculum for all students' success could be an example of how schools can adjust to improve the education in career readiness. The key here is optimizing an education. Inclusion into hands-on activities in the high school setting can culminate a broader experience.

Producing a student that is well rounded in both academia and job related skills can further their ability to be contributing members after graduation. Reiterating that the focus needs to be centered on the percentage of time being spent on functional activities versus academic activities.

Summary

This project allowed the researcher to achieve the result that a functional curriculum is a positive representation in the goal of increasing the opportunity in students optimizing post-secondary success. Much time was spent in evaluating the budget, instruction, curriculum, assessment and career readiness of the school. Beneficial evidence is already recognizable with local citizens and businesses. Throughout the last year, the activities performed by the life skills program has become part of everyday vocabulary, with the excitement continuing to grow. I have witnessed through my visits to the school store, the improvement in communication from the students and the pride they take performing their tasks. The teachers can incorporate the learning into classroom discussion and the students can easily relate to the topics. The correlation has made it easier for the students to grasp some of the material because they have a comprehension of what it takes to accomplish such tasks. Feelings of struggling to have the connection with the students and the assignments are in the past. Both sides have expressed more confidence when interacting and dealing with academic situations and each other. The life skills teachers are now saying it feels less like work and more like fun!

The final part in effectively preparing the West Mifflin Area life skills program to optimize post-secondary success is properly balancing the academic curriculum into movement towards the functional curriculum. Since September 2019, the researcher has

been preparing to take on the task of making a better educational experience for the students. Acquiring knowledge from the California University of Pennsylvania's Doctor of Education program to complete this capstone project has been extremely beneficial. The courses during this time have led to multiple changes within this program thus far. The evidence unveiled through this project provides factual data to study to improve the quality of the education a student acquires. An abundance of hours was spent during the literature review to educate the researcher in the various educational parts of a quality life skills program. Time was spent appropriately representing both the functional and academic curricula, making sure that both were correctly researched. Research questions were created to investigate specific ideas and gather information for both curricula. Concluding that the corresponding data favored both curricula for being a positive part, to varying degrees, in a life skills student's school career. The substantial data was collected over several months in a triangulation process. One on one interviews were performed with the individuals having the most intimate knowledge of the students and the curriculum currently being used. Surveys covering the next group were distributed, and finally the questionnaire was sent to all stakeholders of the school. The collected data was interpreted, in a non-biased manner, in effort to do the best for students and remove any predetermined conceptions. The upcoming goals and comprehensive plan has begun to be created, acting accordingly to the results, and assisted by a solid professional development plan. All of the work performed to complete the capstone is critical in forming the life skills students into quality interactive community members that will contribute for years to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Questionnaire and Informed Consent Disclaimer

Explanatory Statement: To collect the research for this project studying Effective Preparedness for the West Mifflin Area Life Skills Program to Optimize Post-Secondary Success, I will be utilizing surveys, questionnaires and interviews. A brief collection of Likert scale and open-ended questions will be asked to obtain many viewpoints from teachers, staff, administrators and parents. A thorough look into the traditional vs transitional program will be studied to determine the best path to take for the advancement of the life skills student into productive employees.

- The data will be used to determine the benefits vs disadvantages of each program to assess whether to move forward with the change in programs.
- All information will be conducted by me and I will be the only person examining the answers. If there are any questions or concerns, please contact:
 - Name: Jeff Solomon
 - Email: Solomonj@wmasd.org
 - Phone: 412-477-5509
 - Faculty advisors name and contact info:
 - Dr. Kevin Lordon
 - Lordon@calu.edu
- All participation is voluntary and all information will be kept secure and remain anonymous.
- All participation may be discontinued at any time and data will be shredded.
- Any collected answers will be kept confidential and will remain secure.
- The level of risk is minimal and will only include answers about the program.
- All data collected will be kept in a secure location in my office or on a locked file in my computer, unless the information is moved to University premises.
- For electronic/website surveys participants can discontinue form and information will be discarded

*The California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board has approved this research from 00/00/2020- 00/00/2021.

Appendix B

Questionnaire of Traditional vs. Transitional Curriculum

Life Skills - Traditional (Academic) vs. Transitional (Hands-on) Curriculum Questionnaire

* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. The Life Skills students learn employment skills on a Community Based Instruction (CBI) trip.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know/No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. The Traditional/Academic (non-hands-on) curriculum teaches students career education for future employment.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know/No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. The Transitional/Functional (hands-on) curriculum teaches students career education to help get a job.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know/No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. Most of the Transitional/Functional (hands-on) lessons are related to teaching a career readiness skillset.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know/No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. WMAHS gives students opportunities to do work-study (School to Work) during the day.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know/No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. How well does a Transitional/Functional (hands-on) math curriculum in the classroom prepare students for employment?

Not at all prepared	Not very well prepared	Don't Know/No Opinion	Somewhat prepared	Well prepared
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. How well has operating the school store prepared Life Skills students for employment?

Not at all prepared	Not very well prepared	Don't Know/No Opinion	Somewhat prepared	Well prepared
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. How well has the Transitional/Functional (hands-on) curriculum prepared students for a job in the community?

Not at all prepared	Not very well prepared	Don't Know/No Opinion	Somewhat prepared	Well prepared
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. How prepared are the Life Skills students with life skills after completing the Transitional/Functional (hands-on) curriculum?

Not at all prepared	Not very well prepared	Don't Know/No Opinion	Somewhat prepared	Well prepared
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. How prepared are the Life Skills students with life skills after completing the Traditional/Academic (non-hands-on) curriculum?

Not at all prepared	Not very well prepared	Don't Know/No Opinion	Somewhat prepared	Well prepared
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. Have you seen an increase in Life Skills student participation and attendance in your class using the Transitional/Functional (hands-on) curriculum?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Results affected by Remote Learning

12. Has using the Transitional/Functional curriculum lessened the registration at Steel Center/Mon-Valley Vo-Tech schools?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

13. Do you think Life Skills students feel confident completing the high school Transitional/Functional (hands-on) curriculum?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

14. Do you think Life Skills students feel confident completing the high school Traditional/Academic (non-hands-on) curriculum?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

15. Name an advantage and an area of improvement to the transition (hands-on) program.
(optional)

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.

 Microsoft Forms

Appendix C

Name: _____

Date/Time: _____

(What items are key components to a successful transitional life skills school to work program?)

How has the transitional program enhanced the students' life skills?

Is the transition program effectively preparing the students' ability to gain employment?

What other skills would be beneficial to implement to the program?

How did you feel about the curriculum for the traditional life skills program?

Was the program more or less productive than the new program?

Other/¹Notes

¹ Director - Secretary - LS 1 - LS 2 - Para 1 - Para 2 - Principal - Asst. Prin 1 - Asst. Prin 2

Appendix D

Life Skills - Traditional Vs Transitional Curriculum Survey

Goal: To collect data and formulate a true spectrum of the Traditional (Academic) vs. Transitional (Functional) programming in the Life Skills Curriculum.

1. What are the advantages to the current Transitional (Functional) life skills curriculum?

2. Is the Transitional curriculum advantageous to the success of the students' post-graduation employment?

Yes

No

3. What is a major concern or disadvantage to the current Transitional curriculum?

4. What is the benefit of utilizing a Traditional (Academic) curriculum designed to give students real life skillsets for employment?

5. Are there any weaknesses with the Traditional curriculum?

6. Comparing the two, Traditional vs. Transitional, which one optimizes effective preparedness for future employment post-graduation?

Traditional (Academic) curriculum

Transitional (Functional) curriculum

7. Are the skills taught in the Transitional curriculum conducive to a student becoming a good employee?

Strongly Agree

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

8.Utilizing your knowledge of the Transitional program, have the students had proper training to become a productive employee?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- No Opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9.Will the Transitional curriculum and skills taught make the students more marketable to employers?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- No Opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Appendix E



California University
of Pennsylvania

Proposal Number _____

Date Received _____

IRB Review Request

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is required before beginning any research and/or data collection involving human subjects

Submit this form to instreviewboard@calu.edu or Campus Box #109

Project Title: Effective Preparedness for the West Mifflin Area Life Skills Program to Optimize Post-Secondary Success

Researcher/Project Director Jeffrey E. Solomon

Phone # 412-477-5509 ***E-mail Address*** sol6834@calu.edu

Faculty Sponsor (if researcher is a student) Dr. Kevin Lordon

Department Educational Leadership

Anticipated Project Dates 9/2020 ***to*** 5/2021

Sponsoring Agent (if applicable) _____

Project to be Conducted at West Mifflin Area School District

Project Purpose: *Thesis* *Research* *Class Project* *Other*

Keep a copy of this form for your records.

Required IRB Training

All researchers must complete an approved Human Participants Protection training course. The training requirement can be satisfied by completing the CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) online course at <http://www.citiprogram.org> New users should affiliate with "California University of Pennsylvania" and select the "All

Researchers Applying for IRB Approval” course option. A copy of your certification of training must be attached to this IRB Protocol. If you have completed the training within the past 3 years and have already provided documentation to the IRB, please provide the following:

Previous Project Title _____

Date of Previous Project IRB Approval _____

Please attach a typed, detailed summary of your project AND complete items 2 through 6.

1. *Provide an overview of your project-proposal describing what you plan to do and how you will go about doing it. Include any hypothesis(es) or research questions that might be involved and explain how the information you gather will be analyzed. All items in the Review Request Checklist, (see below) must be addressed.*
2. *Section 46.11 of the Federal Regulations state that research proposals involving human subjects must satisfy certain requirements before the IRB can grant approval. You should describe in detail how the following requirements will be satisfied. Be sure to address each area separately.*
(text boxes will expand to fit responses)

a. *How will you insure that any risks to subjects are minimized? If there are potential risks, describe what will be done to minimize these risks. If there are risks, describe why the risks to participants are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.*

Risks to participants will be minimal and will only include a certain population of the student body. Their names will not be disclosed as I am studying a collection of students in the life skills program not any individual. My interviews, surveys and questionnaires will be distributed to adults who will have the option of opting out.

b. *How will you insure that the selection of subjects is equitable? Take into account your purpose(s). Be sure you address research problems involving vulnerable populations such as children, prisoners, pregnant women, mentally disabled persons, and economically or educationally disadvantaged persons. If this is an in-class project describe how you will minimize the possibility that students will feel coerced.*

My selection of subjects will be equitable due to the fact that the research collected will be on the life skills student program as a whole. At no time will an individual be studied. The idea is to research the program and discover if it can be enhanced to help the life skills students to become gainfully employed post-secondary and become productive citizens.

c. *How will you obtain informed consent from each participant or the subject's legally authorized representative and ensure that all consent forms are appropriately documented? Be sure to attach a copy of your consent form to the project summary.*

Each participant will use their signature as consent on all forms for all named documents to be kept on file as long as required.

d. *Show that the research plan makes provisions to monitor the data collected to insure the safety of all subjects. This includes the privacy of subjects' responses and provisions for maintaining the security and confidentiality of the data.*

Adult volunteers will be completing the surveys, questionnaires, and interviews and will be able to opt out, if necessary. At no time will the research name or use personal identifiers of the adults. No personal identifying factors will need to be shared. All paper data will be collected and stored in my office in a secure location unless moved to University premises. All technology data will be kept on a protected computer file.

3. Check the appropriate box(es) that describe the subjects you plan to target.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adult volunteers	<input type="checkbox"/> Mentally Disabled People
<input type="checkbox"/> CAL University Students	<input type="checkbox"/> Economically Disadvantaged People
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Students	<input type="checkbox"/> Educationally Disadvantaged People
<input type="checkbox"/> Prisoners	<input type="checkbox"/> Fetuses or fetal material
<input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant Women	<input type="checkbox"/> Children Under 18
<input type="checkbox"/> Physically Handicapped People	<input type="checkbox"/> Neonates

4. Is remuneration involved in your project? Yes or No. If yes, Explain here.

5. Is this project part of a grant? Yes or No. If yes, provide the following information:

Title of the Grant Proposal _____

Name of the Funding Agency _____

Dates of the Project Period _____

6. Does your project involve the debriefing of those who participated? Yes or No

If Yes, explain the debriefing process here.

7. If your project involves a questionnaire or interview, ensure that it meets the requirements indicated in the Survey/Interview/Questionnaire checklist.

California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board
Survey/Interview/Questionnaire Consent Checklist (v021209)

This form **MUST** accompany all IRB review requests

Does your research involve **ONLY** a survey, interview or questionnaire?

YES—Complete this form

NO—You **MUST** complete the “Informed Consent Checklist”—skip the remainder of this form

Does your survey/interview/questionnaire cover letter or explanatory statement include:

(1) Statement about the general nature of the survey and how the data will be used?

(2) Statement as to who the primary researcher is, including name, phone, and email address?

(3) **FOR ALL STUDENTS:** Is the faculty advisor’s name and contact information provided?

(4) Statement that participation is voluntary?

(5) Statement that participation may be discontinued at any time without penalty and all data discarded?

(6) Statement that the results are confidential?

(7) Statement that results are anonymous?

(8) Statement as to level of risk anticipated or that minimal risk is anticipated?
(NOTE: If more than minimal risk is anticipated, a full consent form is required—and the Informed Consent Checklist must be completed)

(9) Statement that returning the survey is an indication of consent to use the data?

(10) Who to contact regarding the project and how to contact this person?

(11) Statement as to where the results will be housed and how maintained? (unless otherwise approved by the IRB, must be a secure location on University premises)

(12) Is there text equivalent to: “Approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective nn/nn/nn and expires mm/mm/mm”? (the actual dates will be specified in the approval notice from the IRB)?

(13) **FOR ELECTRONIC/WEBSITE SURVEYS:** Does the text of the cover letter or

explanatory statement appear before any data is requested from the participant?

(14) FOR ELECTONIC/WEBSITE SURVEYS: Can the participant discontinue participation at any point in the process and all data is immediately discarded?

**California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent Checklist (v021209)**

This form **MUST** accompany all IRB review requests

Does your research involve **ONLY** a survey, interview, or questionnaire?

YES—DO NOT complete this form. You **MUST** complete the “Survey/Interview/Questionnaire Consent Checklist” instead.

NO—Complete the remainder of this form.

1. Introduction (check each)

- (1.1) Is there a statement that the study involves research?
- (1.2) Is there an explanation of the purpose of the research?

2. Is the participant. (check each)

- (2.1) Given an invitation to participate?
- (2.2) Told why he/she was selected.
- (2.3) Told the expected duration of the participation.
- (2.4) Informed that participation is voluntary?
- (2.5) Informed that all records are confidential?
- (2.6) Told that he/she may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty or loss of benefits?
- (2.7) 18 years of age or older? (if not, see Section #9, Special Considerations below)

3. Procedures (check each).

- (3.1) Are the procedures identified and explained?
- (3.2) Are the procedures that are being investigated clearly identified?
- (3.3) Are treatment conditions identified?

4. Risks and discomforts. (check each)

- (4.1) Are foreseeable risks or discomforts identified?
- (4.2) Is the likelihood of any risks or discomforts identified?
- (4.3) Is there a description of the steps that will be taken to minimize any risks or discomforts?
- (4.4) Is there an acknowledgement of potentially unforeseeable risks?
- (4.5) Is the participant informed about what treatment or follow up courses of action are available should there be some physical, emotional, or psychological harm?
- (4.6) Is there a description of the benefits, if any, to the participant or to others that may be reasonably expected from the research and an estimate of the likelihood of these benefits?
- (4.7) Is there a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment that might be advantageous to the participant?

5. Records and documentation. (check each)

- (5.1) Is there a statement describing how records will be kept confidential?

(5.2) Is there a statement as to where the records will be kept and that this is a secure location?

(5.3) Is there a statement as to who will have access to the records?

6. For research involving more than minimal risk (check each),

- (6.1) Is there an explanation and description of any compensation and other medical or counseling treatments that are available if the participants are injured through participation?
- (6.2) Is there a statement where further information can be obtained regarding the treatments?
- (6.3) Is there information regarding who to contact in the event of research-related injury?

7. Contacts.(check each)

- (7.1) Is the participant given a list of contacts for answers to questions about the research and the participant's rights?
- (7.2) Is the principal researcher identified with name and phone number and email address?
- (7.3) FOR ALL STUDENTS: Is the faculty advisor's name and contact information provided?

8. General Considerations (check each)

- (8.1) Is there a statement indicating that the participant is making a decision whether or not to participate, and that his/her signature indicates that he/she has decided to participate having read and discussed the information in the informed consent?
- (8.2) Are all technical terms fully explained to the participant?
- (8.3) Is the informed consent written at a level that the participant can understand?
- (8.4) Is there text equivalent to: "Approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective nn/nn/nn and expires mm/mm/mm"? (the actual dates will be specified in the approval notice from the IRB)

9. Specific Considerations (check as appropriate)

- (9.1) If the participant is or may become pregnant is there a statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks, foreseeable or currently unforeseeable, to the participant or to the embryo or fetus?
- (9.2) Is there a statement specifying the circumstances in which the participation may be terminated by the investigator without the participant's consent?
- (9.3) Are any costs to the participant clearly spelled out?
- (9.4) If the participant desires to withdraw from the research, are procedures for orderly termination spelled out?
- (9.5) Is there a statement that the Principal Investigator will inform the participant or any significant new findings developed during the research that may affect them and influence their willingness to continue participation?
- (9.6) Is the participant is less than 18 years of age? If so, a parent or guardian must sign the consent form and assent must be obtained from the child
 - Is the consent form written in such a manner that it is clear that the parent/guardian is giving permission for their child to participate?
 - Is a child assent form being used?

- Does the assent form (if used) clearly indicate that the child can freely refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or coercion?
- (9.7) Are all consent and assent forms written at a level that the intended participant can understand? (generally, 8th grade level for adults, age-appropriate for children)

California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board
Review Request Checklist (v021209)

This form **MUST** accompany all IRB review requests.

Unless otherwise specified, **ALL** items must be present in your review request.

Have you:

(1.0) FOR ALL STUDIES: Completed ALL items on the Review Request Form?

Pay particular attention to:

(1.1) Names and email addresses of all investigators

(1.1.1) FOR ALL STUDENTS: use only your CalU email address)

(1.1.2) FOR ALL STUDENTS: Name and email address of your faculty research advisor

(1.2) Project dates (must be in the future—no studies will be approved which have already begun or scheduled to begin before final IRB approval—**NO EXCEPTIONS**)

(1.3) Answered completely and in detail, the questions in items 2a through 2d?

2a: NOTE: No studies can have zero risk, the lowest risk is “minimal risk”. If more than minimal risk is involved you **MUST**:

i. Delineate all anticipated risks in detail;

ii. Explain in detail how these risks will be minimized;

iii. Detail the procedures for dealing with adverse outcomes due to these risks.

iv. Cite peer reviewed references in support of your explanation.

2b. Complete all items.

2c. Describe informed consent procedures in detail.

2d. NOTE: to maintain security and confidentiality of data, all study records must be housed in a secure (locked) location **ON UNIVERSITY PREMISES**. The actual location (department, office, etc.) must be specified in your explanation and be listed on any consent forms or cover letters.

(1.4) Checked all appropriate boxes in Section 3? If participants under the age of 18 years are to be included (regardless of what the study involves) you **MUST**:

(1.4.1) Obtain informed consent from the parent or guardian—consent forms must be written so that it is clear that the parent/guardian is giving permission for their child to participate.

(1.4.2) Document how you will obtain assent from the child—This must be done in an age-appropriate manner. Regardless of whether the parent/guardian has given permission, a child is completely free to refuse to participate, so the investigator must document how the child indicated agreement to participate (“assent”).

(1.5) Included all grant information in section 5?

(1.6) Included ALL signatures?

[N/A] (2.0) FOR STUDIES INVOLVING MORE THAN JUST SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR QUESTIONNAIRES:

(2.1) Attached a copy of all consent form(s)?

(2.2) FOR STUDIES INVOLVING INDIVIDUALS LESS THAN 18 YEARS OF AGE: attached a copy of all assent forms (if such a form is used)?

(2.3) Completed and attached a copy of the Consent Form Checklist? (as appropriate—see that checklist for instructions)

(3.0) FOR STUDIES INVOLVING ONLY SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR QUESTIONNAIRES:

(3.1) Attached a copy of the cover letter/information sheet?

(3.2) Completed and attached a copy of the Survey/Interview/Questionnaire Consent Checklist? (see that checklist for instructions)

(3.3) Attached a copy of the actual survey, interview, or questionnaire questions in their final form?

(4.0) FOR ALL STUDENTS: Has your faculty research advisor:

(4.1) Thoroughly reviewed and approved your study?

(4.2) Thoroughly reviewed and approved your IRB paperwork? including:

(4.2.1) Review request form,

(4.2.2) All consent forms, (if used)

(4.2.3) All assent forms (if used)

(4.2.4) All Survey/Interview/Questionnaire cover letters (if used)

(4.2.5) All checklists

(4.3) IMPORTANT NOTE: Your advisor's signature on the review request form indicates that they have thoroughly reviewed your proposal and verified that it meets all IRB and University requirements.

(5.0) Have you retained a copy of all submitted documentation for your records?

Project Director's Certification Program Involving HUMAN SUBJECTS

The proposed investigation involves the use of human subjects and I am submitting the complete application form and project description to the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects.

I understand that Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is required before beginning any research and/or data collection involving human subjects. If the Board grants approval of this application, I agree to:

1. Abide by any conditions or changes in the project required by the Board.
2. Report to the Board any change in the research plan that affects the method of using human subjects before such change is instituted.
3. Report to the Board any problems that arise in connection with the use of human subjects.
4. Seek advice of the Board whenever I believe such advice is necessary or would be helpful.
5. Secure the informed, written consent of all human subjects participating in the project.
6. Cooperate with the Board in its effort to provide a continuing review after investigations have been initiated.

I have reviewed the Federal and State regulations concerning the use of human subjects in research and training programs and the guidelines. I agree to abide by the regulations and guidelines aforementioned and will adhere to policies and procedures described in my application. I understand that changes to the research must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented.

The project and researcher adhere to all of the district's approved COVID-19 procedures. These procedures have been filed and approved at the state level. If any changes are made to the COVID-19 safety procedures, the project will be modified appropriately to meet all safety requirements. If the study needs to be revised due to COVID-19 restrictions, a request for permission will be submitted to IRB.

Professional (Faculty/Staff) Research

Project Director's Signature

Student or Class Research

Jeffrey E. Solomon

verbal

Student Researcher's Signature

Dr. Kevin Lordon -

Supervising Faculty Member's Signature

ACTION OF REVIEW BOARD (IRB use only)

The Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed this application to ascertain whether or not the proposed project:

1. provides adequate safeguards of the rights and welfare of human subjects involved in the investigations;
2. uses appropriate methods to obtain informed, written consent;
3. indicates that the potential benefits of the investigation substantially outweigh the risk involved.
4. provides adequate debriefing of human participants.
5. provides adequate follow-up services to participants who may have incurred physical, mental, or emotional harm.

Approved [_____]

Disapproved

Chairperson, Institutional Review Board

Date

Appendix F**Conditional Approval from the Institutional Review Board**

Institutional Review Board
California University of Pennsylvania
Morgan Hall, 310
250 University Avenue
California, PA 15419
instreviewboard@calu.edu
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Jeffrey,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled “The Effective Preparedness for the West Mifflin Area Life Skills Program to Optimize Post-Secondary Success” (Proposal #19-076) has been approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board as submitted.

The effective date of approval is 8/19/20 and the expiration date is 8/18/21. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

- (1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)
- (2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects
- (3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).
- (4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 8/18/21 you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu

Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, PhD.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix G

Emails Pertaining to Revisions and Final IRB Approval

Mail - SOL6834 - SOLOMON, JEFFREY E - Outlook - Google Chrome
 outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink?popoutv2=1&version=20210301002.04

Reply all Delete Junk Block

IRB Approval (19-076)

InstReviewBoard
 Wed 6/19/2020 10:18 PM
 To: SOL6834 - SOLOMON, JEFFREY E

Approval_19-076.docx
 14 KB

Dear Jeffrey,

Your proposal has been approved by the IRB. Please see the attached approval form for additional information. Thank you.

Jewelein Stevenson
 Institutional Review Board - Graduate Assistant
 California University of Pennsylvania

From: SOL6834 - SOLOMON, JEFFREY E <SOL6834@calu.edu>
 Sent: Tuesday, August 18, 2020 5:14 AM
 To: InstReviewBoard <instreviewboard@calu.edu>
 Subject: Re: RFI #19-076

Thank you!

Jeffrey E. Solomon

IRB Approval (19-076)

From: InstReviewBoard <instreviewboard@calu.edu>
 Sent: Monday, August 17, 2020 10:40 PM
 To: SOL6834 - SOLOMON, JEFFREY E <SOL6834@calu.edu>
 Subject: RFI #19-076

Dear Jeffrey,

Please see the attached form requesting additional information regarding your study. Revise and resubmit. Please let us know of any questions that you may have. Thank you.

Jewelein Stevenson
 Institutional Review Board - Graduate Assistant
 California University of Pennsylvania

From: SOL6834 - SOLOMON, JEFFREY E <SOL6834@calu.edu>
 Sent: Thursday, August 13, 2020 10:42 AM
 To: InstReviewBoard <instreviewboard@calu.edu>
 Cc: Lordon, J. Kevin <lordon@calu.edu>; SOL6834 - SOLOMON, JEFFREY E <SOL6834@calu.edu>
 Subject: IRB Submission

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you!

Jeffrey E. Solomon

Reply Forward

Type here to search 6:11 AM 8/19/2020