ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE WORKPLACE: GETTING HIGH SCHOOLS

STUDENTS PREPAREDFOR EMPLOYMENT AFTER GRADUATION

A Doctoral Capstone Project

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

Department of Education

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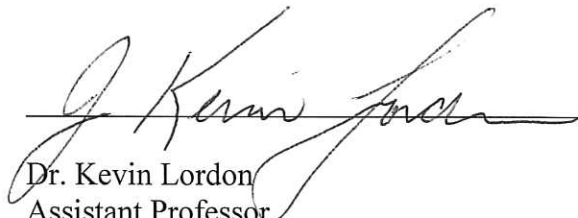California University of Pennsylvania

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When I started this process it was during the COVID shutdown when I thought I had a lot of extra time; however, shortly after beginning the program everything started back up again. I was back to running both of my children to sporting events, being a full-time wife, mother, and administrator. When everything felt overwhelming, I was able to pull through with the support of some special people.

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Abstract

Across the United States, high school seniors are surveyed during their final year to determine their plans after graduation. Many Jeannette City School District students have three options: to enter the workforce, join the military, or continue on to post-secondary education. Based on these surveys about 25% of the students do not pursue a career or college. As a district, we would like to increase the opportunities for students to engage in employment within the community. By creating partnerships within the local community and providing more appropriate training, our students will be better prepared for employment. The researcher developed three questions to guide the capstone project in preparing the students to enter the workforce. This action research will use quantitative data for this project, such as interviews and rating scales. The researcher interviewed teachers and employers to determine if the students were adequately trained and prepared for future employment.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

One of the most important decisions for high seniors is what they are going to do after graduation. For some students, this is something they have been planning for years, and for others, they don't have a clue regarding their future plans. At this point in their life, students need to understand the impact of their decision; therefore, they need the appropriate information to understand the lasting outcome. Unfortunately, many students in our school district decided not to work or pursue post-secondary education.

Background

Each year, the Jeannette High School seniors are surveyed to determine which path they plan to pursue after graduation. The data from the past three years is very informative. During the 2018-2019 school year, 51 students were surveyed. Thirty-seven students wanted to continue with post-secondary education; however, only 13 students continued with college. During the 2019-2020 school year, 66 students were surveyed and 17 went on to college, and in 2020-2021, 57 students were surveyed and 14 went on to college. In three years 174 students graduated from Jeannette School District and 44 students continued with post-secondary education. Nine students enlisted in the military and 121 students either went to work or didn't pursue anything after they graduated.

As the Director of Special Education, many of the students who were not exploring any path after graduation were students with disabilities. It was important to ensure all students were being educated about colleges and careers, including students

with disabilities. The leadership team decided we needed to provide more support in the district to support everyone's needs.

Identification of the Capstone Focus

Jeannette School District is trying to find ways to educate students on the different jobs in the community and the skills needed to obtain employment. The district recently hired a Career Counselor to assist in educating students on options after graduation and provide the information to make an educated decision. The class is aligned to state standards and educates the students on college, career, and military paths while teaching soft skills and developing portfolios.

The students were given an interest inventory at the beginning of the school year to determine which careers were most appealing to them. Enterprising, realistic, social, and investigating were the top areas among our students. Once specific careers were determined, guest speakers were invited into the building to speak to all of the juniors and seniors. Students had the opportunity to listen to the speakers in small groups and ask any questions they may have had. After the guest speakers were finished, the staff took the students on tours of the local companies within the community to explore exactly what the job requirements were needed.

While in the classroom, students learned how to create resumes, complete applications, manage money, and learn the soft skills that are always taught while on the job. Students could then take these skills and apply them in the workforce daily. The class also allowed the students to research specific careers to gain a deeper understanding of the skills needed for employment.

Research Questions

To prepare our students for employment, the school needed to understand what areas needed more focus. The research was conducted through rating scales and interviews focusing on the following three questions:

1. Does exposing students who are not on a college readiness path to workforce options increase their engagement in the classroom?

2. What impact does exposure in the workforce options have on students' desire to pursue post-high school employment?

3. What are the teachers' perceptions on the student application of soft skills taught within the class?

Expected Outcomes

The most important expected outcome of the research is to ensure the courses offered by Jeannette School District adequately prepare the students for employment. In order to do so, information from the teachers and employers can be gathered through interviews. This information is critical in understanding what the school needs to focus on during the instructional time throughout the school day and will then be used to revise the course for next year. These interviews will also allow teachers to tailor the content of the courses specifically toward the interest of the students. Thus two paths for the courses will be determined by the students' data one on college and the other on careers. The students in those classes can take the information and apply it in the community when they are working. Employers are also hoping the students learn the soft skills to be successful in the workforce, as these skills are essential to maintain longevity with

employers. With interventions such as these, the school can ensure the student understands these skills and can apply them in all environments.

Fiscal Implications

The action research does not positively or negatively impact the school district since the classes and staff have already been accounted for in the budget. All of the offered classes are part of the course catalog for the school district; therefore, there isn't any additional cost for the courses the students take. The district already hired staff, and their salaries are accounted for in the budget. The content of the courses may need to change to ensure the school district is preparing the students adequately, which may result in different materials for the next school year. Still, materials are accounted for in the annual budget.

Employers in the community are already established businesses, so additional money would not be required for these businesses. If students are successfully hired, the company should have already budgeted for the employees. The time that employers give up for guest speaking and tours is voluntary. Overall, the employers should acquire no additional cost for this research. The students will be provided information and explore different workplaces in the community.

The partnerships that the school and employers develop will also be at no cost to either party. When the students hold internships, apprenticeships, or participate in work release, they will still receive an education and gain work experience at the school district's expense. If an hourly wage is provided for the work, the employer will be responsible for the salaries and any other compensation that they must provide. As a district, we are discussing giving the students credits for working during the summer and

after school; however, it has not been finalized as to specific criteria. Students would be responsible for the transportation to and from their place of employment daily.

Summary

Getting students to commit to either a college or a career after school is valuable to the school, students, and employers. The research will better prepare the school on how to educate the students on what is needed for employment. The information from employers will be used to structure what is taught in the classroom moving forward. Community partnerships will continue with the intent to have students become knowledgeable about the different careers and obtain skills to be successful. Over the years, schools have used a variety of techniques to educate and train students for employment. This has been beneficial for all stakeholders. Most importantly Jeannette School District would like to have more students employed after graduation.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Throughout high school, students often wonder what their next steps will lead them into the future. Usually, three options are available to high school students to obtain a job, join the military, or attend college. Too often, schools prepare students for college because this is the path that is thought to be valued. However, due to low college enrollment and increased vocational jobs school districts have been looking to direct students to alternate paths. In order to adequately prepare students for the workforce, school districts need to have resources available for students who wish to join the workforce. Research has shown that students are better prepared for the workforce when their instructors align academic skills and business needs in daily instruction (Beer et al., 2018). By including functional skills in day-to-day teaching, teachers can show students that career and technical schools offer different opportunities to high school graduates. With better preparation and introductions to community businesses, school districts can shape their curriculum to meet the needs of students' future occupational paths.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), 3.1 million students between the ages of 16-24 graduated from high school from January through October 2020. Of those students, two million were enrolled in college; meaning over one million students chose other directions after graduation. The unemployment rate for high school graduates who were not enrolled in college was fifth in the United States in 2020; seven and a half percent of high school dropouts were jobless as of October 2020. In 1995, the United States ranked first among other countries for college completion; however, it dropped to tenth place in 2016.

These unemployment rates, paired with the decline in college graduate, are a clear indication that students need to better prepare for alternative to a college education (Nation's Report Card, 2015).

A survey conducted in 2005 indicated that 39% of high school graduates were not successfully prepared to engage in entry-level work, and 45% of graduates had minimal preparation for jobs on the entry-level (Peter D. Hart Research Associate, 2005). Educators believe that inadequate standards have promoted a significant gap for high school students. Schools have focused on what is required to be taught and not what should be taught; therefore, schools are focusing on the wrong topics to incorporate in daily instruction. With many students entering the workforce, schools should focus on the skills needed to be gainfully employed.

As previously mentioned, high school students lack the knowledge and skill set needed for success once they graduate high school and enter both college and the economy (Carnevale et al., 2010). Due to the lack of preparation, policymakers pushed for increased participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Hernandez-Ganges & Fletcher, 2013). STEM has become a required class in many school districts. Students who engage in these programs can adequately prepare for work after graduation. Moreover, many educators and policymakers discovered that many states set their standards too low and varying standards from state to state. New school standards were established in 2006 that focused on post-secondary education requirements.

The updated learning outcomes were released in June 2010, which provided anchors for college and career readiness. The new standards define clear expectations for

what teachers need to teach and what students should do. Teachers should be trained and

prepared to introduce the latest measures such as text collaboration, reading, and

challenging math expectations for all students. The common core standards provide the

exact expectations for all students regardless of where they live (Rothman, 2012). The

standards are taught in both schools and Career and Technical Centers.

     While changing curriculum can help prepare students for their paths post-

graduation, so can work-based learning. Work-based learning enables students to apply

what they know in real-world experiences, not just simulated situations (Papadimitriou,

2014). Examples of these programs are apprenticeship, job shadowing, internships, and

mock interviews (Cahill, 2016).When students have the opportunity to work on these

skills in a non-stressful environment, and they can focus on how to perfect them. If

students are not allowed to practice before engaging in the real opportunity, they will

never know what to expect. When students are allowed to be interns with different

companies, they can remain gainfully employed after the internship. School counselors

and college and career counselors play an intricate role and getting students prepared for

the workforce player.

     Research has shown that students who work less than 20 hours per week during

the school year have a small or no effect on outcomes for the students, such as GPA or

attendance. However, students who work more than 20 hours per week negatively affect

those outcomes (Lillydahl, 1990). When students take on more responsibilities outside of

school, they tend to forget school's priority and focus on work more than school. This

can cause students attendance to decline and homework to be neglected.

While students are working, they need a good balance between work and school; therefore, they can still maintain the status of a productive student and employee. Students should be exposed to work during high school before they graduate to gain the whole experience. Working during school promotes and prepares students in various ways in and out of school; however, students should do it in moderation. Integrating career-relevant instruction throughout high schools is a great way to prepare students for the careers they may encounter after graduation. Frequently students lose engagement in school when transitioning from elementary to high school because they find more engaging activities other than attending school. One way to keep students engaged in career-relevant instruction (CRI) which helps by including examples of how the core subjects are used in specific jobs and careers. CRI is a protective investment for later engagement and high school students and prevents dropout in the future (Woolley & Bowen, 2007).

The most critical resource that employers have to contribute to the growth and development of high school students is access to the workplace. Work-based learning provides students a variety of ways to participate and engage in internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and school-based enterprises (Heyward, 2019). Employers can give students the opportunity to job shadow and promote exposure to work. Employers could also provide internships and other forms of workplace learning for students in high school (Swartz, 2016). In the United States, the structure of our high schools and the role they play in our culture makes it almost impossible to get students to spend time at a workplace three days a week. Apprenticeships in the United States are not structured for high school students; they are geared for after high school.

Schools need to restore a better balance between the academic purposes of our education system and career purposes to support the notion that all students do not need to attend a four-year college. Schools need well-structured work and learning programs to motivate and engage students inside and out of the classroom (Swartz, 2016). Work-based learning builds the essential soft skills needed to be successful, communicate, reliable, and promote teamwork. Students are put in situations where they can practice academic and technical skills in real-life situations (Heyward, 2019). The more practice students can have, the better prepared they will be when employed full-time after graduation. A variety of experiences will assist in building a diverse repertoire for their resume.

Clearly, there are many methods that school districts can use in order to better prepare their students for the workforce. Five in particular, namely the increased role of families and the administration, changes in curriculum, vocational schools, work-based learning with local employers, and work-based learning with organization will be discussed below.

Preparing Students for the Workforce: The Role of Counselors, Administration and Career Programming

In order for above programs to work, students must be prepared and have the appropriate guidance in order to choose the best path. However providing students with all necessary information is a considerable undertaking while adhering to the federal guidelines creates limited instructional time. Schools are taking on more responsibilities, which make critical problems that hinder the support schools can provide students to enter the workforce, creating a low number of students. Some counselors are

overburdened by a high student-to-teacher ratio, which is expected because schools are always looking to cut costs. Since counselors do not have a direct caseload to be responsible for, administration tends to add more to counselors' responsibilities. Too often, counselors are responsible for many students in high school, which then spreads the counselors in various directions; therefore, it limits the number of time the counselors have. Schools have to prioritize the students' needs (National Association for College Admission Counseling & American School Counselor Association, 2015). Counselors usually focus on what is in front of them daily, not the long-term goals, limiting the amount of time they can focus on students in the workforce. Losing focus does not happen intentionally; however, counselors do not prioritize assisting students outside of school because it is not an immediate problem.

Another problem that takes up ample time is complacency and truancy, focusing on enforcing mandatory attendance policies. Truancy is becoming more common, and it is not easy to get the students back in school once they are home for extended periods. Schools are now providing consequences for the truant students which are pushing students out of school more (Scott et al., 2020). Schools must implement truancy charges to ensure students attend school regularly; however, it does not always work because the charges are on the parents, not the students. The counselors are the ones working on truancy plans and meeting with parents.

Schools need to find ways to provide meaningful instruction for all students. Schools cannot wait until a student to begins to struggle to offer flexible education options; these students may be on the path to dropping out. These students have fallen so far behind that getting them back on track is extremely difficult (Scott et al., 2020).

Falling behind has been especially true during the past two years due to COVID when students began to learn online. Students are not completing work, and the schools cannot contact them to provide other learning options. Counselors have been the point of contact for those students who are struggling.

Counselors should encourage students to pace themselves during high school due to many students taking on more personal and academic responsibilities. They should also guide the students to focus on their goals and implement best practices based on their strengths and goals (Paolini, n.d.). Counselors can provide a variety of workshops for parents and students to explore colleges; work on the admissions process determines which majors or minors students want to pursue (Paolini, n.d.). When parents understand the process, and what is expected, they can help prepare their children for the next steps. Parents also need to know that every student is different and that different options are available.

School counselors assist students in selecting appropriate courses when scheduling and determining their preparedness and readiness for post-secondary opportunities (Hines et al., 2011). Counselors can set up career fairs for the students to attend and develop mentorships for students within the community along with scheduling tours. School counselors may engage the families in different workshops that address the variety of options those students have available to be gainfully employed within the community. School counselors should set up meetings with parents to collaborate and establish open communication and trust among all stakeholders. Community venues should be selected as neutral locations when holding meetings with parents to ensure that everyone feels comfortable. Centrally located sessions would also help families who lack

transportation (Bryan et al., 2013). Another option would be to hold meetings virtually, eliminating the transportation obstacle. During these meetings, community agencies could participate so the parents could connect and ask any questions. School counselors can administer interest inventories or personality assessments to provide more information to students regarding careers. These meetings will guide the students in the right direction for which jobs would be best for them (Paolini, n.d.). When students graduate, they should have developed communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership skills. As they seek employment, future employers are looking for students who are flexible, creative, and receptive to feedback (Paolini, n.d). Students who are gainfully employed over the summer and work more intensely for extended periods in high school have higher lifetime wealth thanks to humiliation. Summer employment for teenagers is helpful because it offers full-time jobs that might not be typically available to high school students (Painter, 2010).

According to Scott et al. (2020), schools can also offer flexible learning models that allow students to learn the same material in a variety of different ways. Not every student learns the same way; therefore, providing a variety of options can help meet the needs of most students. Schools can look for ways to give students' academic credit for the hours they worked during school time, which will reduce the number of credits they would need in other content areas. It is also a way to motivate students to attend school regularly and be productive at work. Students might have to produce pay stubs for verification and reflect on how the work experience was relevant to the school.

Another meaningful attempt to reach various students is aligning college and technical education classes or assisting students toward graduation goals. Expanding

credit options will provide additional ways to receive the credits they need for graduation without sitting in classes every day. If the content could be incorporated in the workplace and the curriculum is aligned with skills needed to work, students could go to school for half of the day and work the other half of the day.

According to Feygin et al. (2019), students should begin career exploration by taking aptitude surveys and interest inventories in ninth grade or when entering high school. Checklists allow students to explore different career interests and eliminate specific jobs they do not want to pursue. By researching careers, students will understand the field they would like to purse. While in school, students should practice self-advocacy skills by increasing their responsibility when taking on leadership opportunities as they present themselves in and out of school. If students obtain good leadership skills, those skills could be practiced while at work. Employers can assist with shaping students into positive leaders. Students must graduate from high school being prepared to enter the workforce due to the competitiveness of those working after school. Being a student-athlete or participating in clubs will help develop leadership skills for students. When students are part of a team, they learn how to deal with adversity and support those around them.

High schools could also share data about the different hourly wages associated with jobs in the community. Students would understand how salaries differ by career and educational level. Students need to know that their income could vary depending on their education and training. Not all jobs pay the same rate and offer the same benefits. High school students should also understand the cost of living and how to maintain a budget without the assistance of their parents, calculate their monthly income, and determine

how much money to allot for their bills. Schools should teach these skills to ensure someone is educating students on how to live independently and relate to different careers.

Kansas State Department of Education (2019) indicates school districts should implement portfolios to assess and document student experiences. Portfolios would develop the employability skills they acquired during high school. The students could keep a collection of their work over an extended time, both academically and career-related, to use as a reference or create a portfolio. The portfolios would promote self-reflection and give the students greater ownership in assessing their skills and abilities. Students may also reference the portfolio during job interviews or fill out applications and add artifacts with job-related information.

According to Heyward (2020), many states leave schools and districts on their own to identify the right programs and credentials for their students. Communities have to identify their industry partners by centralizing the job market. Employment data can identify high-wage, high-demand careers and disperse the funds to online courses in individual school districts. Schools can partner with community colleges to host bi-monthly meetings with secondary and post-secondary directors to continue to grow a list of potential employers. Local school districts could also offer work-based learning, where students can use it for school credit (Heyward, 2020). Schools can also incentivize college and career preparation by providing bonus points to students who achieve both regularly. Students can improve their grades by working while going to school simultaneously. Heyward (2020) also indicates that students who complete advanced courses can increase high school graduation rates and higher wages. Students can be

presented with the opportunity to take advanced courses in high school to reduce the number of classes they would have to take in college. When students are exposed to advanced classes in high school, they develop a more profound knowledge of specific topics and apply it in various environments both in and out of school.

Preparing Students for the Workforce: Family Engagement

Parents can work hand-in-hand with counselors and school administration to ensure success for the children. All high school students need to stay focused on the end goal, which is graduation. Schools can determine in ninth grade who will continue down the path of graduation or struggle. The ninth grade will set the stage for preparing for college or careers. During this time, family involvement declines, and students are left to do a lot independently (Simon, 2004). If the students fail one course, the probability of graduation decreases by 20%, failing two classes could result in 50% (Mac Iver & Messel, 2012). Many families are unaware of the data and the effects of early failure in ninth grade because they have not been aware of it. Families also fail to understand that daily attendance, grades, and credits must be promoted to the next stage. Explaining the importance of school to students and families will create a mutual understanding that it is a team effort for students to be successful.

High schools need to engage families more to assist with student success in high school. Often, it is perceived that high school students do not need the support and have to make decisions on their own. During high school, family engagement declines, and the students are often left to make decisions independently; however, this is a time that students need the most support. Family involvement can be influenced by teachers, principals, and other administrators (Epstein, 2011). If a family member had a problem

with someone in the school, they might not want to participate in school events or stop communication with school personnel. It is vital to continue trying various ways to get families involved because if one way doesn't work, another way might. Different types of outreach programs have been associated with higher levels of family involvement (Simon, 2004). Parents work a variety of shifts and have additional responsibilities at different times of day; therefore, schools try to accommodate in various ways. If families realize that you are trying to work with them, they might work together with the school more often.

Parent involvement enhances academic achievement, educational outcomes, maintaining peer interactions, and high graduation rates. Counselors can provide information on the financial components of college and career readiness. When schools improve the family partnerships, the discipline numbers decrease (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Students take more responsibility for their actions when they know their family holds them accountable. If families are engaged with school and students, the students want to produce better results. Families who show reinforcement for their children tend to be well-behaved students with good attendance and adequate grades. Family engagement is more than focusing on one specific event. Engagement is having the students accept and identify with the role of a student in all aspects (Jeynes, 2010). When students know and understand what is expected, they are more likely to do what is needed to succeed. When families lack engagement, students are aware and take the least resistive path. This could look different for each student, but schools need to realize that it is the school's responsibility to engage the families.

Some high schools provide family centers to promote communication with one another. The centers are at specific locations in the community for the school staff to provide resources to the families assisting in student success in high school. Family centers can deepen the awareness of high school engagement and provide a more significant hand in helping the students' high school years be successful (Mapp et al., 2008). The family centers need to be open and provide families support without judging their situations. Every family is different and requires different resources. If the families do not feel supported, they will leave, and the students will lose family involvement. School counselors can meet with agencies to network for students' personal growth.

Overall for students to be successful, it takes a team approach from the school, family, and community. With better preparation and introductions to community businesses, school districts can shape their curriculum to meet the needs of students' future occupational paths. Schools need to prepare students for the future, families need to support and guide the students, and communities need to provide opportunities for development and growth. High school students are trying to find their way but still need guidance and support.

Preparing Students for the Workforce: Classroom Instruction

Aside from the school administration taking steps to increase workforce readiness, teachers can provide an additional level of preparedness in the classroom. As previously mentioned providing students with mentorships, internships, and school-based opportunities will help students establish soft skills needed to be successfully employed. However students tend to lack soft skills because they were never taught. If students understand soft skills and apply them appropriately, they will be more successful.

Students who participate in work-based learning are also practicing being good employees with everyday interactions. Research suggests work-based learning is most effective when combined with Jobsite matching, pay, and alignment with career pathways that focus on the students' interests. School districts need to create partnerships to offer work-based learning and provide relationships between students and employers (Heyward, 2020). When students build relationships, they feel more comfortable and want to perform their best. Some students may be accustomed to meeting workplace norms around timeliness, stress, and behavior. Students should be exposed to soft skills in their classroom to obtain the necessary skills employers are looking for in employees. Providing students with a mentor can be additional support for students to navigate unfamiliar norms. Mentors will provide guidance and support during the job experience. Students may also benefit from a group of young people such as a cohort hired together to social network within the workplace (Chalmer, 2019). When students have other peers to collaborate with, they will share positive and negative experiences.

Collaboration among students about the transition after high school can take a variety of directions. Determining what someone wants to do and exploring various options will open several doors throughout the exploration of careers. Ten schools from Arkansas were selected to determine if the students felt that schools promoted career readiness efficiently. The readiness course focused on the soft skills needed in various post-secondary pathways. Students from one specific high school went on field trips to local employers to understand the community's real high wage, high growth positions (Steedle, 2020). The field trips provided firsthand experience and learning opportunities for everyone involved. Once the field trips were completed, the students had to review

what they learned and determine if they felt they could be successful in a particular career. Exposure to different curricular and career exploration will assist with selecting the proper job.

According to Hirsch (2017), students need exposure to a guided curriculum emphasizing communication skills which would allow students to demonstrate the relevant skills they learned and apply them to real-life situations. Students would be more likely to engage in class discussions and practice their skills. Schools could see an increase in attendance if the students found the instruction relevant and engaging.

According to Scott et al. (2020), schools should screen students in middle and high school to determine the number of adult responsibilities the students need for paid employment annually. By screening students, an opportunity is presented to ask their interests and competencies to pair them with better options. Suppose students have a better understanding of their responsibilities, the school assists in providing the proper support and instruction. When schools offer greater student engagement and have a deeper understanding of the students they serve, they tend to adapt their programs to reach the needs of all their students. Creating a more inclusive, positive culture may also enhance the environment for all school staff (Scott et al., 2020). One size does not fit all; therefore, schools should provide options to meet the needs of all students.

High schools can enhance learning about academics and jobs in the everyday experiences of core academic subjects. Classes in school can focus on introducing and teaching soft skills, teamwork, communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. When students learn these skills, schools can apply them in different situations. The students could be participating in mock interviews in collaboration with human resource

professionals as a guided tool. The human resource professionals could explain which skills are critical for entry-level jobs. Entry-level jobs are a great starting point and lead students into higher-paying jobs. Many students do not know how to communicate information successfully in a job interview because they never practiced nor were taught the proper way to interview. Students need to be exposed to more details to understand what employers are looking for before they venture out on these opportunities (Hirsch, 2017).

Career exploration should happen across multiple sectors, beginning in schools and continuing into colleges, community-based organizations, and out-of-school service providers. The explanation should incorporate knowledge and self-understanding to understand their strengths and interests and build off them. Students who engage in career exploration will start to understand the different careers available to them to explore various options. Career exploration could be embedded within the school curriculum that the students are taught. Teachers could administer inventories to narrow down specific interests or courses of study they want to pursue. Students would also learn the prerequisite skills needed for particular jobs and apply the skills outside of the classroom (Chamler, 2019). Less than 20% of our students transition smoothly from high school to college or career opportunities (Cass, 2018). The number of students who continue their education at the college level is a low percentage and is often the most prepared students. Additionally, many states focus on college readiness and limit the amount of time on careers. Several colleges have increased their cost, and college enrollment has declined in the last decade (Nietzel, 2019). Therefore, schools need to better prepare all students for whatever comes next after high school.

A systematic strength in schools is dual enrollment, allowing students to enroll in college courses. Dual enrollment has steadily gained transactions in many states over the last two decades. Students are willingly participating in systems that will provide college credit. Forty-seven states have established laws enabling dual enrollment, and approximately 80% of American high schools have incorporated dual credit instruction as part of their curriculum (Kilgore & Taylor, 2016). Dual enrollment has afforded low-income students the ability to take courses and graduate from community colleges with significant economic benefits. Students are completing semesters of college before graduating high school. Schools across the country are working with community colleges and two or four-year universities to partner and develop similar curricula (Heyward, 2019). When schools parallel their curriculum with colleges, they give students more opportunities to participate in higher education which could end with several college credits.

Preparing Students for the Workforce: Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Career and Technical Education (CTE) is an excellent example of an institution which provides students and adult with skills for vocational jobs while still in high school. Career academics are one of the school's most common initiatives that integrate core academics and career technical education. Vocational-Technical Schools were started in the early 1900s to prepare students for blue-collar jobs. The programs taught students through hands-on projects that made learning practical (Heyward, 2019). In today's society, technical education has rebranded how parents view career and technical centers from the vantage point of their own schooling experiences. Many years ago, career and technical schools had a stereotype that did not entice students to enroll.

Parents associated the career technical education (CTE) programs with non-college-bound students with entry-level, low-wage jobs (Hernandez-Gantes, 2016). In the 21st-century high quality, world-class career technical programs are necessary for various capacities. CTE must address elements of a high-quality curriculum in an authentic assessment to prepare students for careers and continuing post-secondary education (Stone, 2017). All students should have mastery of core academics to ensure readiness for post-secondary education. Along with academic preparation, students need to be employable and obtain technical skills to succeed in their chosen careers (Achieve, 2016). Technical skills are geared towards specific knowledge and skills required to succeed in particular fields. Being creative and problem-solving are examples of employability skills students need to have.

Students can attend CTE for half of the day and take high school classes the other half of the day. The Association of Career and Technical Education states that career readiness is defined as students being able to apply academic knowledge in the workplace and possess employability skills and job-specific technical skills. Students should be explicitly taught these skills and use them successfully in the workplace and school. Additionally, College and Career Readiness Success Centers want students to understand the significance and importance of success in English and math classes. Students should demonstrate critical thinking, problem-solving, social and emotional learning, perseverance, and citizenship to be well-rounded individuals in and out of the classroom (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2010). If students can master the skills mentioned above, they should successfully obtain and sustain employment for an extended time.

Recent changes to CTE programs, such as updated curricula and technology, keep students current with occupations and deepen their academic learning while expanding their options after graduation. For example, programs like informational technology and biomedical technology prepare students for living-wage careers that are in demand and prepare them for employment, not jobs. Currently, CTE programs are shifting their instruction focus to educating students for college and careers. Many Career and Technical Education programs partner with two-year institutions to encourage students to take college courses and earn credits (Heyward, 2019). As students graduate from school, they will have acquired the skills from each program and accumulated college credits. CTE programs let the students drive their own educational experiences and create problem-based, project-based, and place-based programs to prepare students for an ever-changing workforce. These same programs focus on soft skills and understanding the importance of success at work and in life (Heyward, 2019).

The last three qualities that Career and Technical Education programs focus on are equity, community resources, and sustainability. For example, CTE programs understand the value of connecting careers with learning to ensure students are not excluded from career technical education opportunities and provide students with what they need to succeed. Additionally, students are associated with social support in the community to ensure the value of career-connected learning in school and the workplace. CTE centers engage the community by collaborating with employers to provide learning experiences that end with skills recognized by different industries. Each program offered by CTE is built to last with a long-term impact (Heyward, 2019). Students who

participate in the Career and Technical Education programs are being trained to be successful in school and the workplace.

Preparing Students for the Workforce: Community Engagement

Along with vocational schools and CTE programs, schools can enhance workforce readiness even more so: by allowing students to gain authentic work experience while attending high school. The U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) provided data indicating that 26.59% of high school students went to college and worked simultaneously, 22.4% entered the workforce without going to college, and 10.84% did not enter the workforce or go to college. These numbers represent a low percentage of the overall high school population. Students need to be better prepared to enter the workforce and maintain employment as a school district. Suppose students know what skills are required to be successfully employed and demonstrate those skills. In that case, they will build their resume with job experience providing students training opportunities while the school started many years ago.

In the 1980s, General Motors initiated a training program for mechanics and dealers at Delta Community College in Michigan (Dougherty & Bakia, 1999, pp. 17-18). General Motors created an automotive service educational program for high school students, which allowed them to take automotive classes focused on General Motors vehicles only while in school. If the students completed the program successfully, they could secure a job with a General Motors dealership to earn an income (Dougherty & Bakia, 1999, pp. 17-18). During the same time, there was also a federal initiative in the 1980s called the Perkins Act, which provided grants to states for curriculum development, equipment purchases, and leadership development to provide students the

knowledge to enter into technical occupations and careers. Most of these grants were given to the manufacturing sector all over the nation (Jacobs & Worth, 2019). The contributions assisted students with entry-level skills in technical education programs by teaching students with hands-on learning in the classroom.

In 1988, the American Association of Community Colleges created partnerships with employers focusing on initial technical training and retraining students who required additional support the job training provided and having the students apply their skills in the workforce (American Association of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 39). Students were offered vocational training by various employers and were then employed after the training was complete with those companies. Both the students and employers benefited from those partnerships.

Later in the 1990s, a federal initiative linked community colleges and high schools, which developed new alliances that provided occupational skills and career knowledge for future opportunities (National Assessment of Vocational Education, 2004, pp. 171-172). By connecting these schools, students were provided the opportunity for dual enrollment. Dual enrollment is when the students are high school students and take college courses for college credit. Dual enrollment continues to be utilized in most high schools. Students can receive college credits while still in high school at a lower cost. Dual enrollment has been a perk for all parties involved to enhance the courses offered during high school. While college courses are available, students are still working and completing their school work.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), shows that food service and retail employ the most significant number of youth and young adults. In Massachusetts, young

adults, ages 16 to 24, make up 34% of the labor force, while 47% are unemployed, with jobs available. In Boston, there is no comprehensive support system to help young people create a pathway that leads to long-term success with employment. Students collect these essential documents, such as resumes, letters of recommendation, etc., to form a portfolio of options that can help them enroll in post-secondary education or training. Students will collect artifacts that can be referenced for future job opportunities. Students will acquire the credentials needed to find a career that offers a family-sustaining wage and benefits (Chalmers, 2019). Students need to be gainfully employed and earn an income to support themselves and their families. If students are prepared during high school and apply for competitive employment, they should obtain a higher-paying job that will help them after high school.

After surveying several high school students in a Boston school, it was commonly discovered that most young people did not feel that their high school experiences prepared them for career or employment. Students did not have access to explore career options while in high school and gain meaningful experiences to apply those essential skills. Students also felt that schools focused on college instead of the post-secondary pathway. During high school, classes focused on content that was not relevant for students who didn't want to attend college; therefore, students lost interest in class which led to students missing school more frequently. Several students also explained that their schools failed to provide real-world skills to navigate college or career options (Chalmer, 2019). If students are not offered situational experiences, they will not know what is expected and lack the skills to enter the workforce. Schools need to better prepare students for both college and career pathways. As schools move forward, they need to

explore all options, understand what their students want to do after high school, and ensure that the preparation is appropriate for everyone.

One of the most widespread developments and workforce programs has been guided pathways. Guided pathways were implemented to assist students with achieving their college goals. Guided pathways required more workers to hold post-secondary credentials, which students need to have a certification in that trade. The completion rate for these programs for young adults ages 25 to 34 was twelfth in the United States, behind other advanced countries (Bailey et al., 2015). Guided pathways started with the end goals and redesigned programs to ensure students would achieve their goals. This process took the students some time to complete the plan, but it was achievable if they stuck with the objectives. According to Jacobs (2017), workforce programs have created career pathways for students for many years; however, guided pathways required workforce educators to integrate courses with liberal arts programs (sociology, psychology, or philosophy). These programs measure success by the degrees or certificates students obtain at the end of the course. Once a student receives a certificate, they can then begin working.

When students are in high school, they can gain experience by job shadowing to determine if a specific job is intriguing. Sterling van der Spuy created a job shadowing initiative called an Education Edge in Tennessee. He worked with 138 school districts developing practical work-based learning activities for students and schools. The focus was on middle school and high school students. The students were paired with employers in the community to complete the job shadowing program. While shadowing, the students learned what skills were necessary for future employment soft skills and could ask

questions during the shadowing experience (Lozada, 2001). Students and employers could use the occasion to prepare for further education and future employment.

In Chicago, a high school created a career education program focused on 21st-century skills and academics. The school used the transition career curriculum for soft skills development, reinforced those skills, and simulated in the workplace environment. The program required 96 hours of job skill training in construction activities to complete the program. All the selected students went through a complete hiring process and had to submit an application, interview, and provide attendance and discipline records from high school. Each student was also required to provide several letters of recommendation to be hired. The program permitted students to incorporate their academic skills into real-world situations (Joyce, 2008). Students had to participate in real-world experiences, which demonstrated that they were prepared to handle a position outside of the classroom. The more they practice, the more comfortable they feel when they go through the process of being hired for a real job.

The program consisted of role-playing to teach students how to navigate the systems in the workplace, attain resources, and gain more followers. The lesson plans that the teachers provided included vocabulary, videos, role-play scenarios, and assessment. All the students needed to complete the assignments and keep track of their completion. After the program hours were completed, the students wrote thank you letters and outlined the key concepts they learned during the internship (Joyce, 2008). The entire process engaged the students in the complete hiring and working process. Students felt they had a better understanding of successfully obtaining employment after completing the program. All of the experiences that were learned were documented and collected for

reference. School districts across the United States are looking to provide more work experience to promote students in the workforce during high school. For example, Madison Park Technical Vocational High School in Boston realized that they needed a program that educated students on obtaining employment after graduation. Therefore, they implemented a process for first-year students to spend one day in each of their 20 disciplines offered at the school. The disciplines ranged from construction to computers. After exploring all 20 professions, they selected six programs to dig deeper. Students then had to spend three days a week at each shop for further investigation. The students were to make a final selection by December of that school year. Students were able to have a detailed preview of what it would be like to work in each specific area. First-year students and sophomores would have a rotating schedule, and juniors and seniors would alternate one week of academics with one week of full-time vocational education to enhance their skills and knowledge of a particular skill (Donovan, 2021). The program recommended bringing back recent graduates to discuss and explain how the jobs are working for juniors and seniors in the same field to students who have selected the same area. Providing current students the opportunity to connect with alumni would motivate their younger peers and make the program more robust. Students would have open conversations on any questions or concerns in a particular program. When students collaborate with peers, they ask questions and open up more than with an adult (Donovan, 2021).

Madison Park Technical Vocational High School encouraged promoting co-op programs to increase student awareness of the available programs. Co-op programs allow the students to go to school and work during the school day. Students could gain more

knowledge about the programs by visiting the school's YouTube channel. They could also show prospective employers the quality of work being done by students in the program. Lastly, Madison Park encourages a summer employment project organized by current students to develop a database of potential co-op employers that have worked together previously. All students would have access to the previous students' information and could reach out to the other students if they desired to. Schools can find many ways to support students in and out of the school. Students can learn from employers and create new and existing relationships within the business community (Donovan, 2021).

For job shadowing to succeed, schools need to be prepared and well organized with goals in mind. Flexibility is the key to making job shadowing beneficial for everyone involved. As things come up, the employer may need to change what the student may encounter during the shadow. Students should keep an open mind because they need to know all aspects of the job. Schools need to get parents and mentors involved in organizing the job shadows to establish a supportive environment for students while completing their shadowing. If the parents are not supportive, students may have difficulty getting to and from the job shadow. Parents need to let the students explore various options to make an informative decision. Schools need to connect the job shadowing experience and the school curriculum to provide background information. After the experience, the students should reflect on their job shadows to identify the pros and cons of the job (Lozada, 2001). Too often, students do not want to pursue a career after they realize what it involves; therefore, many options should be presented to the students. By giving a variety of options for the students, they can decide which career is

best for them. Schools need to take on more responsibilities to ensure all students have

enough information to make an educated decision about their future.

Effectiveness of Partnerships

Aside from working with employers in the community, school districts can take

partnerships even further and work with bigger organization on a larger scale. According

to Scott et al. (2020), schools can benefit from partnerships with nonprofit organizations

and government agencies in various ways. They could create full-fledged community

schools to narrow collaborations and offer mentoring or family support. The critical

component of this engagement and community relations is to provide support during the

school day rather than depending on in-person after-school programs. Schools should

utilize all available resources to engage students and families, especially in the

community. The partnerships take a team effort and ensure everyone is on the same

page.

School districts can also partner with businesses and industries within their

community to offer summer employment programs to increase year-round employment.

If the students work during the summer, they are more likely to continue the job

throughout the next school year. Students could participate in work release during the

school year if they meet the required criteria. Transportation issues arise for students who

do not drive to get to and from; the community can offer free rides for young people

(Scott et al., 2020). Districts could also provide a list of ways students could receive

transportation within the community. When looking for employment, entry-level jobs are

highly needed; therefore, school districts can help recruit students to apply for these jobs

by exposing students to what is available. Schools could bring people who represent these

businesses to speak to the students to provide tours or informal meetings to explain the needed skills.

According to Wagner (n.d.), the state of Wisconsin created a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to provide students internships and job shadowing opportunities in auto dealerships to learn more about car repair, customer service, and ethics in the workplace. They were hoping to employ 400 students. The schools in Wisconsin must have business/education advisory groups to maintain their industrial certifications. They also created partnerships focusing on peer-to-peer-related leadership support, the talent pipeline, training solutions, and sector awareness. Partnerships between technical colleges were established as well as job seeker training programs. Youth apprenticeship programs were established in Wisconsin to provide academic and technical instruction and on-the-job training for students in high school.

In California, schools build partnerships that bring K-12 school districts together with workforce development, businesses, and community-based organizations. The goal was to increase the number of graduates through the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence initiative. When making adjustments, the program had to change the values, beliefs, and funding (Alvardo & Vargas, 2019). By making these changes over three years, the program had strengthened the existing K-12 district, expanded the number of students, smoothed transitions, and helped higher education and employers. Linked learning created career pathways to prepare students for college. The program integrates rigorous academics, career and technical teaching, work-based learning, and comprehensive support services (Alvardo & Vargas, 2019). Linked learning established new partnerships with diverse perspectives. These partnerships were essential to expand

opportunities and address any barriers to ensure all students of all backgrounds were
successful. Leaders reached out to a broader range of stakeholders and built trust. Linked
learning built confidence through consistency, showing up to meetings, following
through on commitments, and developing relationships (Alvardo & Vargas, 2019). Once
Linked Learning understood the importance of partnerships, the initiative was more
successful. If stakeholders build relationships and share the same vision, they can
collaborate to ensure student success in all environments. Students need to carry over the
skills they learn outside of school and the workplace.

Students tend to fall into the summer's learning loss during the summer.
According to Jones and Jones (2020), high-quality summer learning programs will help
low-income students overcome the gaps so they can continue to improve their academic
outcomes, graduation rates, and access to employment. A Pittsburgh-based youth
program, Youth Enrichment Services, created a summer initiative to connect young
people to meaningful early work experiences ranging from vocational trades and
customer service opportunities to camp counselors and apprenticeships. Students who
attend the summer camp can gain work experiences, future employment opportunities,
and post-secondary education.

Looking Ahead: Ensuring Success in the Workplace

College and career readiness activities have been created into standards that many
high schools must teach throughout the school. Students are to collect artifacts to
demonstrate their knowledge of the criteria for career readiness. In Battle Creek,
Michigan, the Calhoun Area Career Center (CACC) took the standards and developed a
plan so all students will graduate from high school ready to pursue a career or attend

college (Tchorzynski, 2017). Programs were designed to meet the needs of all students, so each program looked different based on the jobs the agenda focused on. Students had the opportunity to select the program they wanted to attend and learn the skills for the specific career. Research has shown that many states are looking at providing ways to support the students to ensure they are college and career-ready after graduation by providing a variety of ways to expose students to colleges and careers that might be of interest to them.

Recently high schools are creating small learning communities that focus on career opportunities as a framework for learning and instruction. These communities are referred to as career academies to engage the interest of students. Some examples of career academies include healthcare, technology, hospitality, and finance. When developing a career academy, several guidelines have been implemented to make them successful. Such policies involve private sectors interacting with the students and providing internships. Use cohort scheduling to assign teachers to stay with their students over some time. Another procedure would be creating a central goal to fully prepare students for higher education (Smith, 2008). The benefits of career academies are that teachers know the students in the school and know one another in each of their academies. Upperclassmen are used as mentors for incoming ninth-grade students, and the staff work to maintain a supportive environment. Career academies intend to provide a successful transition from school to work (Smith, 2008).

Having students be fully employed and sustaining employment is an important goal for students to obtain. To be successful at your job, you must enjoy what you do, such as maintaining career satisfaction. Career satisfaction focuses on the practical

orientation of the person towards their career or work (Gattiker & Larwood, 1988).

Career satisfaction is only one facet of a person's satisfaction. Employees can be satisfied

with their jobs but may not be confident with workplace conditions (Rose et al., 2012).

Employees with higher career satisfaction tend to develop motivated and committed

workers (Gattiker & Larwood, 1988). Today, it is challenging to find people who want to

work, let alone be committed to their job. If employees enjoy working and can produce

what the company is asking them to do, they should sustain employment. By educating

students on the required skills needed to be employed, we are setting the students up to

have an advantage over other potential candidates.

Many employers worry that young people today do not have the 21st-century

skills to compete in a competitive work field. They lack problem-solving and

communication skills that are essential to succeed in the workplace. Educators and

employers attempt to prepare young people for careers better; however, their perceptions

of the challenges differ (Cahill & Jackson, 2015). American education systems are not

adequately preparing young people with the skills they need to succeed upon entering the

workforce. The most productive economies in the world have realized that building a

talent pipeline requires planning, public/private partnerships, and the opportunity for

young people to participate and gain meaningful work experience (Hoffman, 2015).

When schools and businesses develop a robust pipeline, they increase the number of

qualified workers for specific positions. Employers are not sure that young people

acquire the skills and obtain the qualifications aligned with the company's needs.

Employers could create internships that allow students to train in the required skills and

observe the students before committing to hiring them (Cahill & Jackson, 2015).

Young people tend to bring innovative ideas in new perspectives to their workplaces. Employers are pleased with these ideas as they use them to stay competitive and keep pace with evolving changes. Young people also contribute to conversations by discussing technology and the digital world. Employers can create diverse applicants by reaching out to schools in the community. Students tend to display energy and enthusiasm when engaged in meaningful work-based learning (Cahill & Jackson, 2015). When schools work with the community, they strengthen and encourage economic growth. Creating a skilled workforce will contribute to economic development and hopes to reduce unemployment, increase consumer spending and attract new businesses and the surrounding areas (Cahill & Jackson, 2015).

Employers are looking for a trained workforce with a post-secondary degree or certificate and an increase in digital technology skills. According to Heyward (2019), most jobs available are middle-level skills that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. More jobs demand a higher level of digital skills to keep up with the changing labor market. Employees need to be team players and have the ability to manage time effectively while in the workplace. Most recently, employees have been required to be lifelong learners in which they continue educating themselves with specific content. Employees are asking that the company pay for the continuing education by requiring continued education.

Summary

With increased support systems at home and at school, paired with better preparation and introductions to community businesses, school districts can shape their curriculum to meet the needs of students' future occupational paths. Schools can engage

students in the workplace by providing students the opportunity to participate in work release, co-ops, internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing while students are still in high school. Teaching career education in the workplace standards will expose students to all the skills needed to sustain a career. Soft skills are crucial in and out of the classroom; therefore, students need to learn and practice them regularly.

When students are exposed to a variety of careers and can explore all the available options, they will hopefully find the right career path. Schools are responsible for giving the students the knowledge and skills to be employable after graduation. With the collaboration of businesses in the community, students and schools can develop partnerships that will benefit everyone involved.

Chapter III

Methodology

Students are graduating high school every year, and deciding what they want to do after graduation is essential in their lives, as it will define them for many years to come. Jeannette School District is trying to assist students in making the best decision by providing the information and skills needed for students to be successfully employed. About 25% of students attend college, and 25% work; therefore, the other 50% are not confident about what they want to do. Each graduating class has anywhere from 45-60 students who graduate annually , so it is essential to educate the students as much as possible so they can decide what they want to do after graduation.

As a school district, we are working with the local community to educate the students on the different available jobs and the needed skills to obtain the jobs. We have partnered with several companies to provide tours and information regarding entry-level positions in the community. Staff is working on revising specific skills taught in class, giving a better understanding of what is vital in successfully employed. These skills are aligned with the Career Education and Work Standards provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education; therefore, students can also collect the required artifacts for graduation. Students learn how to create resumes, portfolios, and establish online accounts on website (such as PACareerLink) to house their essential information for applying for jobs. The students are exposed to different careers in the surrounding community by listening to speakers come into the school and talk about specific jobs. Once the students learn about the different opportunities, they are provided the chance to

attend a field trip to the facility to tour and ask any questions they might have pertaining to the job.

Chapter II discusses how schools can embed the standards within daily instruction. The literature review examined a variety of research outlining the different options available for students to be exposed to careers in high school. Several options to assist students were increased support from the school administration and the families, attending the trade and technical centers, career education in the workplace, and various types of partnerships. The research explored different paths for the students to engage in while still in high school, for example, work release, co-ops, or apprenticeships. Each topic provided specific ways to engage the students in real-world situations to encourage continued growth in careers. Allowing students to participate in work activities will provide valuable information in the students' career selection in the future. Too often, students think they want to pursue a specific career, but once they realize what is involved, they tend to change their minds.

All of the information in the previous two chapters guided the research for the capstone project and set the framework for how Jeannette School District can better prepare students in high school. This chapter will explain the setting and participants, interventions and research plan, design, method, and data collection.

Purpose

This research aims to determine how to get students gainfully employed within the community and sustain employment to be successful members of society. Providing options for the school district to assist with educating the students is one way to ensure students are successful. Jeannette School District is a small district that graduates

approximately 45-60 (depending on enrollment). 25% of the high graduates attend college, and 25% enter the workforce; therefore, 50% don't have any plans after graduation. As a school district, it was necessary to develop a way to get more students interested in exploring the different careers in the community and ensure they could be successfully employed.

Through research, the researcher gathered information from the teachers at the high school and employers to understand better what the school needs to focus on during the instructional time throughout the school day. The school district will use the information to revise the courses available for next year. Two paths will be created determined by the students' data; one will focus on college and the other careers. Students will be assigned an approach and stay on that path throughout high school. Those teachers teaching the courses will have more information on which direction they train and prepare the content, which is more meaningful for the students; therefore, the teachers can design the content specifically for the students' interest. If a student wants to attend college, they will focus the classes and preparation on college; if they intend to work, their courses will prepare them for work. All students will learn how to live independently and manage their finances appropriately.

The desired outcome of the research is to ensure the courses offered by Jeannette School District adequately prepare the students for employment. The students will use the information and apply it in the community when working. Employers are also hoping the students learn the soft skills to succeed in the workforce. Soft skills are essential in maintaining longevity with employers and providing customer service. Too often, students don't realize there is an appropriate way to interact with the public, and their

behavior can significantly impact the business. The school needs to ensure the student understands these skills and can apply them in all environments.

To prepare our students for employment, the school needed to understand what areas they need to focus on. The researcher conducted the research through rating scales and interviews focusing on the following three questions:

1. Does exposing students who are not on a college readiness path to workforce options increase their engagement in the classroom?

2. What impact does exposure in the workforce options have on students' desire to pursue post-high school employment?

3. What are the teachers' perceptions on the student application of soft skills taught within the class?

The research project used mixed-method research to gather data to understand better what the district can do to better prepare students for the workforce. Several teachers and the school career counselor were interviewed to determine what skills are beneficial and can be changed to meet the students' needs better. Community employers were also interviewed to gather information on how the school can better support the workforce students. The interview questions were given at the beginning of the second semester and after the third grading period. Teachers and employers were both given a rating scale (Appendix E) on how the students apply soft skills in various environments. The rating scale consisted of five questions rating the questions from one to five, five being the highest score. The researcher collected quantitative data through this action research project.

Setting and Participants

The school district has a total enrollment of 934 students in kindergarten through twelve grade. Table 1 breaks down the enrollment by grade, and Table 2 shows the number of staff per building. The enrollment has been declining over the past several years. The district usually maintains over 1,000 students; however, due to Covid, more students are attending cyber schools.

Table 1

Student Enrollment by Grades

Grade	Male Tally	Female Tally	Total
K5F	37	42	79
1	32	32	64
2	27	36	63
3	42	39	81
4	41	37	78
5	32	34	66
6	31	46	77
7	37	37	74
8	53	35	88
9	46	34	80
10	40	28	68
11	22	33	55
12	32	29	61
DISTRICT	472	462	934

Table 2

Staff per Building

School	Teachers	Total
Elementary	40	40
Secondary	35	35
Counselors	3	3
Central Administration	4	4
Total		82

The district has three counselors, one at the elementary school and two at the secondary level, one being a career counselor. The central administration supports the entire district, and the librarian and music teacher split time in each building.

Jeannette School District is in Jeannette, PA, Westmoreland County. Westmoreland County has a total of 17 school districts; Jeannette has the second least enrollment in the county. The town covers 2.39 square miles with a population of approximately 9,250 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2019). Table 3 provides data based on the city in 2019. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the student demographic district-wide. Looking at the tables listed below it is important to understand that Jeannette City School District operates on a smaller budget as compared to the surrounding school districts,

generating $19,860,000 revenue per year. Of this, $1,438,000 comes from federal,

5,599,000 local, and 12,823,000 for state funding.

Table 3

Jeannette City Demographics

Males	50%
Females	50%
Median age	41.6
Median income	$39,808
Per capita income	$25,550
Median house/condo value	$91,696
white	78.2%
black	11.6%
Two or more races	7.7%
Hispanic	1.6%
Asian	0.5%
American Indian	0.09%

Table 4

Student Demographics

Grade	Hispanic	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian	Black	Multiracial	Pacific Islander	White	Total
K5F	2	2	0	9	25	0	43	79
1	3	2	0	8	12	0	42	64
2	3	0	0	10	14	0	39	63
3	1	1	0	7	16	0	57	81
4	5	1	1	10	21	0	45	78
5	3	1	0	9	13	0	43	66
6	1	0	0	9	18	0	50	77
7	1	0	0	12	15	0	47	74
8	3	0	0	15	17	0	56	88
9	3	0	0	10	10	0	60	80
10	1	0	0	9	16	0	43	68
11	3	0	0	9	8	0	38	55
12	0	0	0	13	7	0	41	61
DISTRICT	29	7	1	130	192	0	604	934

All of the data listed above shows the demographics that make up the school and the city. The average median income and housing indicate that Jeannette is struggling for steady employment; therefore, this research was essential to support the community to ensure students are gainfully employed. Creating partnerships with the local employers will keep the residents in the town and engage students, which will assist with continued support for the community. Jeannette is a city with a strong community bond that supports the school and extracurricular events. It is essential to focus on extracurricular activities, but just as important to prepare the students with the necessary skills to graduate.

The students were given a career interest inventory at the beginning of the school year to determine their interests. Each student completed the survey in the English class through a website. All students completed the same survey to ensure the information remained consistent among all classes and students. Each student has access to their results and could review the data before sharing it with the teacher.

Once the surveys were complete, the school district used the data to select guest speakers to come into the school and present to the students on different careers in the community. Guest speakers were from various occupations such as maintenance, lawn care, machinist, medical field, occupational therapist, physical therapist, and retail. Some of the guest speakers already worked in places that employed our students, and others did not. Those companies that employed our students were surveyed to gather more information to sustain employment and create more interest to apply with their company.

Community employers and staff in the high school voluntarily participated in the research by answering ten interview questions and rating student performance on a scale

from one to five, five being the highest. The interviews were conducted to gather more information on what our school district can do to better support the students in the community and sustain employment. The data will restructure the courses for the next school year.

The researcher also went on to interview five staff at the high school. Of the volunteered interviewees, two were English teachers, two were special education teachers who co-teach with the English teacher, and one was career counselor. All five staff were interviewed in the privacy of their room or office to maintain confidentiality. The answers were recorded for accuracy in interpreting the data. Employers in the community who were interviewed were managers in the following field: hair salon, restaurant, gas station, health care, and personal care assistants. Each employer's interview was conducted in the privacy of their office and recorded for accuracy. Everyone also completed a rating scale to rate how the students apply soft skills within the school and work environment. Informed consent was given before the teacher and employers conducted the interview, reviewed, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). The consent provided clear answers to the following questions:

- What will I be asked to do if I take part in this study?

- Where will this study take place?

- How long will the study last?

- What happens if I don't want to participate?

- Can I quit the study before it ends?

- What are the risks?

- How will I benefit from participating?

- Will my responses be kept confidential and private?

- Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?

The last statement on the consent states: I have read this form. Any questions I have about participating in this study have been answered. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that taking part is voluntary. I do not have to participate if I do not wish to do so. I can stop at any time for any reason. If I choose to stop, no one will ask me why. This statement allows anyone to withdraw from the research if they so desire. All participants signed the consent and were willing to permit their data to be used in the study.

Intervention and Research Plan

The researcher did an extensive literature review that focused on three specific research questions. Throughout the study, it was evident that students need to be more engaged in the classroom and be allowed to explore different options other than a full day of academic instruction. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), the number of students who participated in the labor force continues to decline. The unemployment rate for high school graduates who were not enrolled in college increases annually. Seven and a half percent of high school dropouts were jobless in October 2020.

Looking at that data, local school districts need to become more creative and provide school-age students with more opportunities to become more engaged in the workforce. One way the research indicates this is by having students participate in work release or co-op options. When students are released early from school and can go to work the second half of the day, they learn the importance of time management and maintaining a schedule. The students are responsible for completing all of their work on

time and gathering any additional assignments that they might be missing. Students have

to begin advocating for themselves because they are not in school all day and need to

know whom to talk to for additional support.

The local Career and Technical Centers (CTC) can provide seniors with co-op

opportunities to attend the Career. Technical Centers will attend their classes for half of

the day and work in the same field the second half. This option allows students to

continue to learn the skills of the trade and be paid simultaneously. CTC programs let the

students drive their own educational experiences and create problem-based, project-

based, and place-based programs to prepare students for an ever-changing workforce.

These same programs focus on soft skills and understanding the importance of success at

work and in life (Heyward, 2019).

In any environment, soft skills are critical for students to learn and practice;

however, it is one of the significant areas students lack. In a world of technology,

students are having difficulty learning and utilizing soft skills effectively, making it hard

for employers to hire successful candidates. Students lack proper communication, such as

phone and email etiquette, which can reduce employers' amount of business. Soft skills

need to be taught and practiced in the classroom and applied in simulated situations,

which students can then carry over in the workplace. Once the students understand the

importance of soft skills and learn to use them daily, they will be more likely to be hired

for employment.

Preparing students for the workforce should incorporate role-playing to teach

students how to navigate the systems in the workplace, attain resources, and gain more

followers. The teachers' lesson plans should include vocabulary, videos, role-play

scenarios, and assessments that students may encounter while working. When students are exposed to real-world situations, they will learn how to respond and react while working. Students will become familiar with the necessary skills and apply them regularly in the classroom and on the job. It is valuable for students to understand what is acceptable in the workplace; because once they start a job, they might realize that their employer may not permit their behavior at home or school.

Preparing students for the workforce in the classroom was part of the research plan for this capstone. Table 5 indicates the three research questions, the type of data used to answer the research questions, and the data collection timeline.

Table 5

Data Collection Plan and Timeline

RESEARCH QUESTION(S)	TYPES OF DATA TO COLLECT	DATA SOURCES	TIMELINE FOR DATA
Does exposing students who are not on a college readiness path to work force options increase their engagement in the classroom?	Quantitative	Comparison between pre/end of year teacher interviews.	January –pre March-post
What impact does exposing work force options have on students desire to pursue post high school employment?	Quantitative	Pre/end of course teacher interviews	January –pre March-post
What are the employers perceptions on the student application of soft skills taught within the class?	Quantitative	rating scale for teachers and employers	January March

All of the interviews and rating scales participants were classroom teachers that taught high school students English Language Arts. Each English class focused on preparing students for the workforce using college and career standards. The teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the second semester and again at the end of the semester. The interviews were conducted in their classrooms with no one else but the teacher present. The researcher asked ten questions on how well the school prepares the students for the workforce. Each teacher also rated the students using a rating scale from one to five, indicating how well the students utilized soft skills in the classroom. Five ranked the students at their best, and one was the worst score they could receive.

Five different employers within the local community were also interviewed via Google Meets to determine what Jeannette School District could do to better prepare students for employment. All of the interviews were completed in the privacy of an office with no other staff present. Each interview was ten questions and took an average of 20-30 minutes per interview. Employers were also asked to rate the students on their ability to apply soft skills in the workplace effectively.

The researcher wanted to determine what skills students were learning in school. If they were adequately prepared for employment, can students apply soft skills in various environments, and how can the district change what is taught for better workplace preparation? Classroom instruction is being provided regularly, but is the instruction enough for the students to maintain employment? With the data from the interviews, the researcher intends to restructure the way the students are taught and the provided content.

Research Design, Methods of Data Collection

The researcher conducted qualitative research for this action research project because they provided information based on their perceptions. The participants were asked several questions regarding their experiences when hiring and interviewing high school students and how the school district can prepare better students for the workforce. A qualitative data purpose is to understand and interpret phenomena in natural settings to generate hypotheses. Qualitative data collections are observations, interviews, or evaluations (Hendricks, 2017). The discussions used for this research were solely based on the interviewee's viewpoints based on their experiences. Yin (2015) describes a five-phase cycle when interpreting qualitative data, first compiling the data to ensure it is documented. The data must be broken down into smaller parts looking for patterns in the data. Reassembling the data must be done to determine if any components are related to one another. All data must be interpreted, which will tell the story of interviews. Lastly, conclusions are drawn from the interpretation of the data.

Before conducting any research, approval was received from the Institutional Review Board of the California University of Pennsylvania. The IRB formal letter, Appendix B, was provided to move forward with the research and collection of data. Then five interviews (Appendix C) were conducted with five different teachers at Jeannette City School District. Five were conducted with community employers (Appendix D) that have hired or are willing to hire high school students. These interviews took place at the beginning of the second semester (January) to provide a baseline of the students' skills indicating where they were and what they had to work on. All of the interview questions pertained to the amount of time the students are engaged in daily

instruction, relevant content, gainfully employed, amount of time students' work, and providing students the skills to be used. The employer survey focused on the interview process, the candidates' credentials, and how the school can better prepare students for employment. All ten interviewed people were also given a rating scale to rate student employees on their social skills. The rating scale consisted of five questions scoring the students from one to five, one being the lowest and five being the highest on their ability to understand and apply social skills in the workplace and school.

Another survey was completed with the same ten people at the end of the third quarter (end of March) to determine if the students improved in any areas from the first round of interviews. The students participated in a career class to assist with the essential skills to be successfully employed. These skills were taught with the intention that the student could utilize the skills across environments. The researcher was looking to areas where the school district can strengthen the skills taught in the building.

Validity

Triangulation is when multiple forms of data are collected and analyzed. Creditability, dependability, and confirmability are the three components established through triangulation. Hendricks (2017) defines credibility as the plausibility of the research findings for the studied content. Dependability is the degree to which research results would replicate with the same or similar participants. Confirmability shows that results accurately represent what occurred rather than the results of the researcher's bias, motivation, or interests (Hendricks, 2017).

This action research used multiple data sources to ensure the validity of the project. Due to using qualitative data, which is based on participants' perception, all

participants needed to use factual information occurring in their classrooms and their businesses. The interviews and the rating scales data were collected and documented to understand what the Jeannette City School District can do to prepare students after graduation.

Each interview followed the five-phase cycle, starting with compiling the data, dissembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the results determining the common themes on preparing high school students to enter the workforce. Each interview was conducted with only the interviewer and interviewee for confidentiality. All interviews were recorded with consent from each interviewee to ensure their answers were properly documented. The interpretation of the data will be shared and used to reshape the courses that Jeannette City School District offers students in the future, such as adding additional classes, establishing a career and college path in which students can determine their path and the classes are most beneficial for their post-secondary decisions.

Summary

This chapter explained why the research was collected and how the data was analyzed. The specific focus was on the setting and participants of the district. Jeannette City School District has a total enrollment of 934 students in kindergarten through twelve grade with a low percentage of students moving on to post-secondary education or entering the workforce. As a district we are dedicating more time to educate our students on the jobs that are available in the local community and teaching the soft skills that are needed in facets of life.

Mixed method research was conducted to gather data to have a better understanding of what the district can do to better prepare students for the workforce. Several teachers and the school career counselor were interviewed to determine what skills are beneficial and what can be changed to meet the students' needs better. Community employers were also interviewed to gather information on how the school can better support the workforce students. Interview questions were given at two different times during the second semester. Teachers and employers were both given a rating scale on how the students apply soft skills in various environments. The rating scale consisted of five questions rating the questions from one to five, five being the highest score. With the data from the interviews, the researcher intends to restructure the way the students are taught and the content that is provided

Chapter IV will analyze the data and interpret the results to understand student engagement better. The outcome of the data is to assist Jeannette City School District in reshaping classes to prepare students more effectively for entering the workforce after graduation.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis and Results

Does exposing students who are not on a college readiness path to workforce options increase their engagement in the classroom? What impact does exposure to the workforce options have on students' desire to pursue post-high school employment? What are the teachers' perceptions of the student application of soft skills taught within the class? The previous chapters have explained and provided information to answer the questions above. This action research provided data to support Jeannette City School District in ensuring they are properly preparing students while they are in high school. Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to the problem (Stinger, 2014, p.1). The approach is a series of steps in which the action researcher reflects, acts, and evaluates (Hendricks, 2017). All of the qualitative data collected through this research will be used to assist the students at Jeannette High School to prepare for employment after graduation and provide guidance for the courses that will be offered. The administration will ensure staff and students will have a better understanding of how to prepare students with effective soft skills. Specifically, the researcher targeted three key groups for this research: students, school staff, and community employers. Students were provided with a survey, while school staff and employers were interviewed. The results of these approaches are highlighted below.

Each student completed the survey in their English class through a website. All students completed the same survey to ensure the information remained consistent among

all classes and students. All students have access to their results and could review the data

before sharing it with the teacher.

All the students in grades 10-12 were surveyed, and the results accounted for the

top three choices in the results. Table 6 showcases the results of the interest survey. The

areas that the students showed the most interest in were realism, enterprising, and

investigative. Auto mechanic, firefighter, electrician, and airline pilot are realistic careers;

32 students selected that area as high interest. Forty-five students selected enterprising,

the most popular; some examples are sales and purchasing, hospitality, beauty, customer

services, legal practice and support, and business administration. Lastly, the third-highest

category was artistic, with 22 students showing interest in careers such as; graphic

designer, fashion designer, illustrator, animator, and cake decorator.

Table 6

Interest Inventory Results
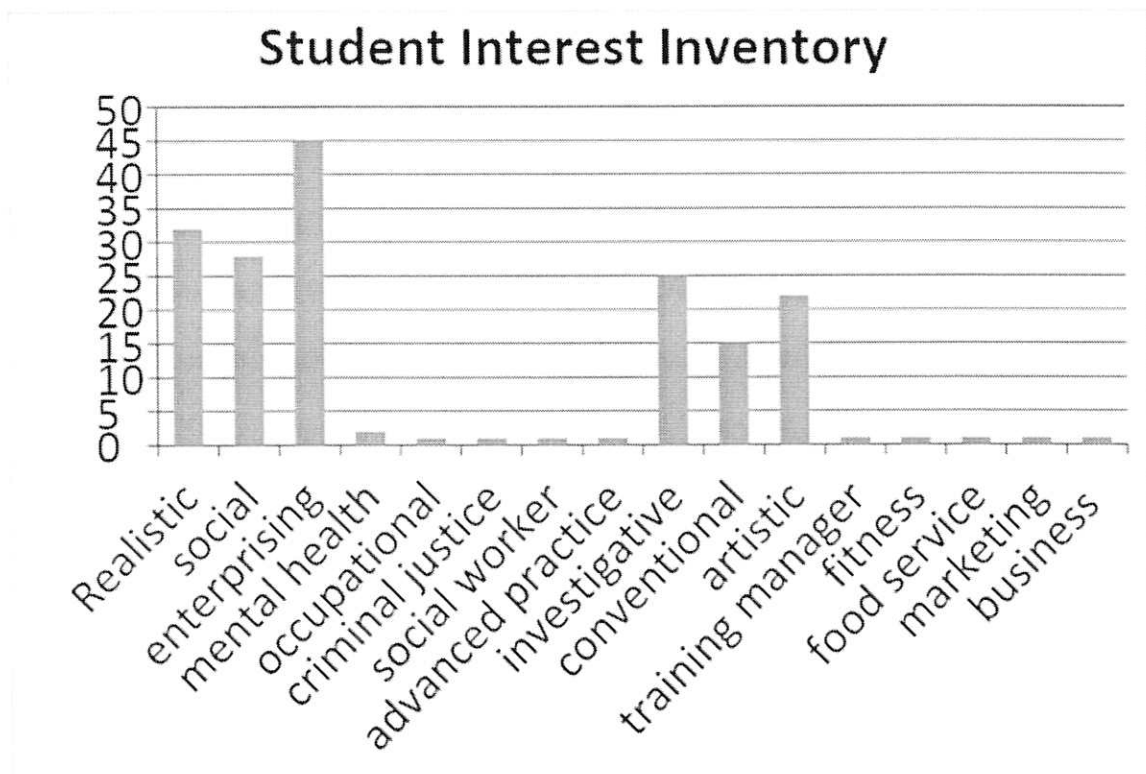
The classroom teachers that surveyed the students were also interviewed to determine what skills are beneficial and can be changed to meet the students' needs better. Community employers were also interviewed to gather information on how the school can better support the workforce students. Below is a further description of these interviews, as well as the results.

Data Analysis

The researcher collected quantitative data through this action research project. Several teachers and the school career counselor were interviewed to determine what skills are beneficial and can be changed to better meet the students' needs. Community employers were also interviewed to gather information on how the school can better support the workforce students. The interview questions were given at the beginning of the second semester and after the third marking period. Teachers and employers were both given a rating scale on how the students apply soft skills in various environments. The rating scale consisted of five questions; the questions involved ratings from one to five, with five being the highest score.

The teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the second semester and again at the end of the semester. The interviews were conducted in their classrooms with no one present but the teacher. The researcher asked ten questions about how well the school prepares the students for the workforce. Each teacher also rated the students using a rating scale from one to five, indicating how well the students utilized soft skills in the classroom. Five ranked the students at their best, and one was the worst score they could receive.

Results

Interview with Employers

Interviewer: How many people have you interviewed in the past three months?

Interviewee #1: 15

Interviewee #2: I would say probably ten.

Interviewee #3: It's good timing because we just filled a slot, so I'd probably say between 15 to 20 people for front desk staff.

Interviewee #4: I think about four for an assistant stylist and receptionist. My assistants are also required to be receptionists in the evenings because a lot of times that position is a high school student.

Interviewee #5: We haven't had that many, but I would say in the last three months, you've probably had a good five or six.

Interviewer: What is the age range of those you have interviewed? Are any high school students?

Interviewee #1: 15 and above

Interviewee #2: Yes, you have to be 16 to work here, so I would interview anyone from 16 to 80. Looking at my team, I would say maybe 30% would be high school kids.

Interviewee #3: 18 to 25 years old. We do but it's usually for entry-level front desk staff.

Interviewee #4: 16 to 20, because they can be going to beauty school. My stylist ranges from 17 to 25. I am trying to aim more toward the younger crew.

Interviewee #5: If it's a recent graduate, I typically will push them to sub first before they take a permanent position as a personal care assistant.

Interviewer: Approximately how many hours do they work a week?

Interviewee #1: Around 20 hours and they can select the days and times that work best for them.

Interviewee #2: I would say on average, 25 hours a week. If they work more than five hours, they have to take a half-hour lunch break.

Interviewee #3: Approximately 20-30 hours.

Interviewee #4: It depends if they're on work release or not but they can be here from 4 to 8, so I'm going to say 4-8 hours, probably eight on Saturday around 20 hours a week.

Interviewee #5: It depends on the position and what the client requires.

Interviewer: Do the candidates have the credentials you are looking for?

Interviewee #1: Someone who is interesting in coming to work, leaves their cell in their pocket or car, follows directions, and is respectful, reliable, and dependable. If they do that, they get more time on the schedule.

Interviewee #2: Yes, someone who has a pleasant personality, so I would say friendly. I am looking for someone who gets along well with others and who is flexible. People who are hardworking and dependable; if they're not dependable, they aren't showing up on time. When I'm interviewing someone, I look for someone who is smiling, has eye contact, talks a lot, and has confidence. The hardest thing about interviewing is if you're interviewing someone who's just sitting there not saying anything at all, so you want them to be open, be honest, and talk.

Interviewee #3: Anybody that's had some work experience, entry-level positions, or just work experience in general. If they've worked at McDonald's or if they've had an opportunity to work in any capacity, that gives me as the interviewer some insight as to

what their work ethic is, what their goals are, and certainly that they're able to maintain the work environment respectively.

Interviewee #4: Some of the students I've hired in the past don't even know how to turn on a washing machine, how to mop properly, or any basic skills.

Interviewee #5: I would say that just knowing what the job responsibilities are in and of itself of a personal care assistant. When I'm interviewing them and asking questions I honestly tell them what the job entails itself. I want them to know what they could deal with such as dealing with toileting or aggressive students.

Interviewer: What areas can candidates grow in when preparing for interviews? Employment?

Interviewee #1: People who know their availability and are less nervous. I try to get on their level during the interview to make them comfortable.

Interviewee #2: Give them some basic interviewing skills. The school can prepare the students for an interview by stressing to them that being dependable is most important. When a manager is making a schedule, they're depending on you to be there and so are other employees.

Interviewee #3: From an interviewing standpoint, a lot of times I think practicing or having the ability to be one on one with an employer in the community is just like a practice session. So they can hone in on their skills when they're sitting in front of an employer. I think that's a suggestion that I would make for a lot of them, because a lot of times when they come in in that demographic from 18 to 25, they don't have a lot of experience interviewing. I think the nervousness of all of it going on around them starts to get the best of how they respond to questions. Sometimes it could be intimidating, I

think the more experience you have sitting in front of people for an interview, it makes it a little bit easier to answer questions proficiently and successfully.

Interviewee #4: In my business, I'm okay with them coming in for an interview and jeans, but at least look presentable. Communication is important. You have some that are talkative and can handle an interview and then you have some that are talking to you like their brother or sister, with no professionalism.

Interviewee #5: Learning and understanding how to interview, such as important skills in everyday life.

Interviewer: How can high schools assist in preparing students for employment?

Interviewee #1: Preparing them to be less shy, use interviewing as a tool, and eye contact.

Interviewee #2: These parents give their kids everything and don't make them work for anything. So the kids that I'm working with now are so used to getting everything they want, and they don't have to work for it.

Interviewee #3: Well, you know it is twofold. I think that the conversation is about practice; if there's some way or the ability for mock interviews to be established and set up as practice. Have students polished enough that when they sit in front of us and when we're asking those interview questions at the entry-level, they can answer? I find that they can't articulate exactly even some of the basic information, and it is not because they're not smart enough to do it. My biggest recommendation would be to set up a system in which they can bring in outside employers for a day and you put them all in the auditorium representing the medical community, maybe somebody representing the technical community, plumbing, retail, and all of the areas where entry-level positions

seem to be the heaviest. Setting up mock interviews with seniors. I think that would be extremely helpful and you could even bleed it into the grades below that because there's never too much practice.

Interviewee #4: A communication class and doing mock interviews, being able to teach basic telephone skills. We all know it's a text world, and I accept that because we're in a completely different type of generation. I think they need to realize certain situations warrant a phone call, not a text.

Interviewee #5: Reiterating the importance of attendance and email etiquette I've noticed a lot of adults and even younger people will email as if they're texting. That's going to help so much in dealing with the importance of email. The importance of being properly dressed and phone etiquette.

Interviewer: Do you feel work release would benefit students to be more gainfully employed?

Interviewee #1: Yes, it should be encouraged.

Interviewee #2: A lot of the students go to vo-tech and they come into the store. We could use the students over lunchtime because we get really busy, so we could bring them in over lunch if they were on work release.

Interviewee #3: I'm an academic person, I think academics are important. So I do have some reservations about taking them out of the school to be on work release during the day. I do see the role of work release to allow them to come out into the community and get that experience that they need. So to answer the question, I think it's a" yes" answer in terms of giving them the ability to go out and get some experience in the communities. It is probably going to be helpful.

Interviewee #4: In my world, yes. A lot of students will go to vo-tech, but there are some students in my industry as long as there's a manager and somebody else can get their hours in with us. In certain cases, it does benefit them.

Interviewee #5: I don't know, because we don't use work release. If they were thinking about being a substitute, there are half days.

Interviewer: Are you likely to hire people from the local community?

Interviewee #1: Yes, hiring locals is good for the community because transportation is an issue so students walk to work.

Interviewee #2: Yes, that is mainly who applies at the store. I didn't get people that live far away to apply at my store, because I think we have so many stores everywhere.

Interviewee #3: Yes.

Interviewee #4: Yes, 100% I hire from the community because it is easy for them to get to and from work. If someone needs a ride, I have taken them home before.

Interviewee #5: Yes, I want people from the local community. My first thought is, "what district do you live in? Do you have kids in the district?" I want to make it as easy as possible for them, so I absolutely look for people in the community.

Interviewer: Please identify specific skills employees should obtain for employment.

Interviewee #1: Students with a good work ethic and ambition to learn.

Interviewee #2: Your basic skills such as counting money. We have a very good training program for new hires. When you come into the store, you have to have basic skills of counting and cleaning.

Interviewee #3: It's really difficult to give you a direct answer other than just the experience they need. The most basic level such as phone etiquette, being able to answer a telephone, proper dress, and respect for others and your fellow employees.

Interviewee #4: Communicating with others and basic skills as mentioned above.

Interviewee #5: I think that a major hindrance for us is that people just don't know the job of a PCA. You don't have to be a teacher, you don't have to have a teaching certificate and a lot of people still don't know about the job.

Interviewer: Do you have any other suggestions for schools to assist with preparation for employment?

Interviewee #1: Students should practice mock interviews.

Interviewee #2: If someone doesn't have transportation, maybe transportation.

Interviewee #3: It's really hard for them to communicate well. Any type of communications course or classwork is going to be extremely important.

Interviewee #4: Mock interviews to practice their delivery and communication with others.

Interviewee #5: Getting the district to make more of an effort to get that information out there to the parents that this job exists. It's here in your district, you may have parents that stay at home during the day while their kids are at school. Come earn some extra money, you don't have to have a teaching degree.

Interviews with Teachers

Interviewer: Explain how the students demonstrate engagement during daily instruction.

Interviewee #6: We try to just maintain a positive rapport with the students. We will often talk about the students' jobs for those who are working. Then we dovetail it into whatever academic skills we are working on. Lately, we've been trying to line up academics with career skills such as resumes and job applications. It is really important to make the content relevant to their world and their life.

Interviewee #7: I make sure I have an icebreaker activity to start each lesson. It's an eye-opening experience when we start talking about a topic and the students are not familiar with it. I'm pretty good at seeing which kids are engaged and when kids aren't paying attention. Those are the kids I call on to read their answers or to read something out loud for the rest of the class.

Interviewee #8: Our class is a little bit tough because we have to play the recording of the guest speakers.

Interviewee #9: About 50% of the students participate and provide feedback when asked questions. Students are asking questions when the guest speakers are presenting.

Interviewee #10: The classroom teacher always keeps the students engaged because he asks them questions and they stay attentive. The students will answer his questions because he uses real-world situations and that's what prompts them to answer back.

Interviewer: Approximately how much time are the students actively engaged during instruction. How long is a class period? How many students are in the class?

Interviewee #6: The class is 40 minutes long and we have 20 students in class. The students are engaged from bell to bell. Sometimes we're finishing a conversation and pausing for 30 seconds when the bell rings because they want to finish. It may not always be 100% academic, but it's always engaging.

Interviewee #7: 40-minute classes. There are eleven students in my 11-grade class. I probably have them engaged in half the class, and then they complete individual work a lot more. They have an assignment or watch a video after I talk to them for 15-20 minutes. I give them a worksheet, and they have to get it done by the next class.

Interviewee #8: 80% of the time the students are engaged in a 40-minute class with 16 students.

Interviewee #9: Forty minutes per class period with 21 students in the class. For the students who are paying attention, they are engaged for about 25 minutes.

Interviewee #10: Forty minutes. I'd say the students are engaged for at least 30, 35 minutes because it takes a few minutes to get in and get them situated. We have 13 students in the class.

Interviewer: Are the students who participate in work release more attentive and academically progressing than those who are not on work release?

Interviewee #6: I do think the ones that are working stay engaged. We have made a strong effort to talk about careers in English class. I do feel like some of those kids at work are not big fans of school, but they're very engaged in that class. Since we're always talking about work, they're sometimes the contributors in a class.

Interviewee #7: I don't have any students currently that aren't work release but I have a bunch of juniors that are working. About a third of the group have part-time jobs at either fast food places, construction, or a nursing home. They work about 10 hours a week, multiple nights and some weekends. I've noticed they seem to be not as engaged as other students who don't work. I'm not surprised because they're working until 10 or 11 o'clock.

Interviewee #8: No students are on work release, but most work after work. Students are attentive but are often tardy.

Interviewee #9: A lot of students are working part-time jobs. The students in honors English are more engaged than those in her other classes.

Interviewee #10: None of the students are on work release, but several students are working. I would say some students are more attentive, but others don't show any interest.

Interviewer: What topics do you feel the students show the most engagement in your class?

Interviewee #6: Again, it probably does go back to work. We're asking them to give us input or feedback about their world, whether it's working, or if we're trying to relate to something in a story that we're reading. We'll try to come up with real-world examples that they might be familiar with. They're always willing to share their experiences as it relates to the assignment that we're working on.

Interviewee #7: When we talk about different types of topics such as colleges, jobs, incomes, and dealing with co-workers.

Interviewee #8: The students seem to be into this career and guest speakers. We tie any topic to careers and real-life experiences.

Interviewee #9: Seniors are interested in Memoirs and short stories and connecting to real-world experiences.

Interviewee #10: Some students are engaged, but most of them are. The way information is presented helps keep the kids involved.

Interviewer: Is the content relevant to assisting students to obtain gainful employment?

Interviewee #6: We have stories that we read that we try to make a life lesson. It's more of an enjoyable kind of reading. We dovetail some sort of life lesson into the activity. Then we go back and forth between that type of story and the actual points.

Interviewee #7: Yes, that is my main goal. I constantly make connections to schoolwork, college, and how it's all tied into their profession, no matter what field it is. We go over the soft skills such as time management, communication, creativity, work ethic, leadership skills, conflict resolution skills, organizational skills, and flexibility. I cover one of these lessons a week and reflect on how to practice these skills.

Interviewee #8: Yes, we have been transferring content to focus on employment.

Interviewee #9: Writing professional emails, cover letters, resumes, and thank you notes.

Interviewee #10: No, the content doesn't pertain to employment.

Interviewer: Are any of your students gainfully employed? Approximately how many hours per week do they work?

Interviewee #6: I would say probably 30 to 50% of the kids are employed. Some of them work daily, so maybe anywhere from two to five hours after school.

Interviewee #7: About 1/3 of juniors are employed and work from 10 to 20 hours.

Interviewee #8: More than half of the students work and work around 15 hours per week. Some work full-time hours.

Interviewee #9: The majority of students have a job, about 60% of the students work a minimum of 15 hours a week.

Interviewee #10: Only one student is working.

Interviewer: Have any of your students interviewed for employment within the last three months? How many students and many interviews?

Interviewee #6: I can't say specifically, I would guess they have, but I just can't say 100%. We've talked about how you should conduct yourself during an interview and what you should do by providing examples.

Interviewee #7: I don't think so. We do a lesson on interviewing skills such as watching a video about what not to do and what to do. Then we go over some scenarios and examples in class. I know we are discussing having mock interviews in the future.

Interviewee #8: No one has brought it up if they have been interviewed. We will show a video and eventually work on interviewing skills.

Interviewee #9: None that I know of. I haven't taught any interview skills in class.

Interviewee #10: I don't know that. I think one student interviewed for a position at Wendy's.

Interviewer: What has hindered your students from gaining employment?

Interviewee #6: More and more kids come to class that lack conversation skills, so we have to help them understand proper communication.

Interviewee #7: I think it's more of effort and motivation coming from their set of values and core beliefs. The lack of practice or participation and awareness as to what you are doing after graduation.

Interviewee #8: Now they're in a unique situation where they don't have trouble getting jobs right now. Unlike 10 years ago, we had to concentrate on getting that first job. You had to work hard to even get a job at McDonald's.

Interviewee #9: Students are not motivated to work, not even for money. Students are seeing their parents not working, so they think they don't have to work.

Interviewee #10: Some don't have transportation so they will work close to home.

Interviewer: Have your students been exposed to different types of employment within their community?

Interviewee #6: We have been pushing to expose the students more by taking them on several field trips in the communities. Next, we try to share all their current working experience as much as possible. I feel that it helps to build their confidence level by sharing the things that they're doing at their job, so I think it's helping the entire class understand what jobs are out there.

Interviewee #7: We are having local businesses come in to speak to the upperclassmen as well as having some lunch tables for guest speakers. We are working on field trips this spring to multiple factories around the area.

Interviewee #8: Not really, but now we are heading back in that direction with field trips to local companies.

Interviewee #9: Volunteer in the community (firefighters and EMTs). The career speakers have also helped the students learn about different jobs.

Interviewee #10: No, the 10th graders have not been exposed to employment.

Interviewer: What are the common types of employment students are seeking? Are those skills provided in school?

Interviewee #6: We have some students who go to the vo-tech school. One student is working to be an electrician, and he helps his dad with his dad's Electrician Business. The students are just interested in making money. They will tell you who's paying the most and right now it is Wal-Mart. The one thing I pointed out to a student the other day is the manufacturing plant that we're going to go see starting pay might be about the same; but this place is willing to pay benefits, paid time off retirement, and they're willing to train

and help you get a certification. It is more like a long-term career path. We try to help them understand the difference and whether it's Wal-Mart or any employers that we're talking to, it's those soft skills they need. Soft skills such as: how to interact, be on time, punctual every day, communicate, and self-advocacy.

Interviewee #7: I would say a lot of the students, particularly the girls, are very interested in the medical program. A lot of them want to be doctors, nurses, and radiologists. Those students who don't want to go to college are looking for jobs in the local community.

Interviewee #8: Wal-Mart, Target, or Five Below. They know what all those places pay, and Target pays a little bit more. Students don't factor in why they might pay more but they work five hours less a week. If they can make the same amount working five hours less, it's a no-brainer.

Interviewee #9: Fast food and retail are the main areas of employment for students. The students are learning the skills needed by on-the-job training.

Interviewee #10: Most of these kids will work at fast food or small mom-and-pop restaurants.

Information Gathered from the Interviews

The rating scale was given to five teachers and five community employers. All ten people completed the rating scale. Table 7 includes all five statements and the results for each question when answered by the employers in the community. Table 8 provides the same information for the teachers who rated the students on their soft skills.

Table 7

Employer Rating Scale: Soft Skills Application

Statements	1.Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5. Strongly Agree
The students understand soft skills.	40%	20%	0	20%	20%
Students are applying soft skills appropriately	20%	20%	40%	20%	0
When using soft skills, students can engage with other coworkers	20%	20%	40%	20%	0
Students can sustain appropriate conversations with adults.	40%	0	0	40%	20%
Students can follow a schedule and can manage their time appropriately.	0	40%	0	40%	20%

Table 8

Teacher Rating Scale: Soft Skills Application

Statements	1.Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5. Strongly Agree
The students understand soft skills.	0	20%	60%	20%	0
Students are applying soft skills appropriately	20%	20%	40%	20%	0
When using soft skills, students can engage with other coworkers	0	40%	20%	20%	20%
Students can sustain appropriate conversations with adults.	20%	0	0	80%	0
Students can follow a schedule and can manage their time appropriately.	20%	20%	40%	20%	0

The same staff was interviewed in late March to determine if anything had improved or declined with the students, but the results were the same. Each person interviewed indicated enough time didn't pass to see significant changes in the students and their behaviors; therefore, the data above indicates both interviews.

Discussion

Looking at the expected outcomes from chapter one, the researcher was hoping to determine if the courses offered by Jeannette School District adequately prepare the students for employment. The results from the interviews indicate that the school needs to continue and provide coherent instruction to better prepare the students for employment by adding more opportunities to work and understand how to apply soft skills in a variety of environments. Exposing the students to more real-life situations such as mock interviews would also help with adequately preparing the students when they go on an interview. Basic communication skills are another area that was discussed as a weakness for students in high school that can be taught in school to assist with employment sustainability.

The information gathered from the rating of students' skills was very clear; the students who are employed lack the appropriate soft skills, and have a difficult time managing their time and carrying on adult conversations. Teaching soft skills has not been an area that our district has focused on which is indicated by the data above. Thus, these findings can inform Jeanette School District on how to move forward in teaching soft skills, so that their students are better prepared for employment.

Summary

All of the data that has been provided by the interviews and the rating skills will be used by Jeannette City School District to assist in shaping the courses and preparation for the upcoming school years. Students will start to look at which path they want to pursue and the coursework will prepare them for college or the workforce.

The fifth and final chapter of this action research will provide a more specific recommendation that the district can utilize in enhancing the curriculum at the school level. Plans will be provided based on the data gathered by the researcher including limitations that have influenced the data and the district.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

Graduating from high school is the beginning of a new chapter for many students, and deciding what they want to do is one of the most difficult questions they will have to answer. The research conducted for this project was intended to help students explore options post-graduation. This chapter will explain the recommendations and conclusions of the research questions that were the focus of this project and indicate what future research can be conducted to continue to support students after graduation, and teachers as they prepare lessons and activities to support the students become productive members of society after graduation.

Conclusions

This research focused on three different research questions to assist the students and staff at Jeannette City School District in better preparing students after they graduate. All three questions provided answers on how to engage community partners to employ students in high school.

Several employers and teachers were interviewed on the students' skills indicating where they were and what they had to work on. All of the interview questions pertained to the amount of time the students are engaged in daily instruction, relevant content if they are gainfully employed, the amount of time that students work, and providing students the skills to be used. The employer survey focused on the interview process, the candidates' credentials, and how the school can better prepare students for employment. All ten interviewed people were also given a rating scale to rate student employees on their social skills. The rating scale consisted of five questions scoring the students from

one to five, one being the lowest and five being the highest on their ability to understand and apply social skills in the workplace and school. The researcher collected quantitative data through this action research project.

Research Question #1 Conclusions

The first research question of this project was: "Does exposing students who are not on a college readiness path to workforce options increase their engagement in the classroom?" The interviews with the teachers indicated that the students who had connected instruction to real-life situations had more engagement than those who participated in higher-level academic instruction. If students planned on attending college they were more attentive and participated in-class discussions that aligned the content to the standards.

Despite the interviews providing answers for how to improve classroom engagement, there are some limitations to these conclusions. For instance, the teacher interviews indicated some students didn't participate in any capacity. However, this was always the students' behavior before the research was conducted. Most of these students were students who already failed the class for the first semester.

The time of day and the teacher also played a factor in the amount of active engagement during the class. Certain teachers were able to engage all the students regardless of the content; whereas, other teachers didn't have a strong rapport with students which limited the amount of class participation and discussion.

Research Question #2 Conclusions

The second question this research was centered on was "What impact does exposure to the workforce options have on students' desire to pursue post-high school employment?" Throughout the school year, our students were exposed to guest speakers and field trips to community employers. Fourteen different guest speakers from fields ranging from health care, machine shops, credit unions, landscaping, and forestry spoke to the juniors and seniors giving them pertinent information about jobs and the qualifications needed to obtain employment. The students had the opportunity to ask any questions they had to deepen their knowledge of the jobs.

After the guest speakers, the students were able to participate in eleven field trips to see these jobs in action. While on the field trips, they explored the workplaces, spoke with current employers, and gained knowledge of the specific jobs that are available. The staff, who went on the field trips, guided the students to explore all options and ask follow-up questions so the students to make an educated decision if they wanted to apply.

These excursions ended up being very successful in exposing students to potential job opportunities. Following the final field trips, several students had applied for jobs, were interviewed, and were offered employment. Two students were offered full-time work after graduation with full benefits. Three students had applied and interviewed with a factory in the community, with the intent to gain full-time employment over the summer. Two students were able to use the community employers as co-ops through the local Career and Technical Center and will work part-time during their senior year.

The impact of exposing students to the workforce is powerful because the students are obtaining knowledge they didn't have before. Once the students were aware of what is available and the specific work involved, they were able to determine if they felt they could be employed.

Research Question #3 Conclusions

The third and final question that was explored was, "What are the teachers' perceptions of the student application of soft skills taught within the class?" Rating scales providing scores on the students' ability to utilize social skills were completed by the teachers and provided meaningful information that indicates both that students need to work on their soft skills and that teachers need to do a better job of teaching soft skills in class.

Teachers expressed that the application of soft skills is reducing each year, due to the students' environment outside of school. Students will tend to act differently depending on the audience that is around at specific times. The research also indicates that enough time is not spent on teaching soft skills during class time.

The focus in schools is so often just on the standards that the basic skills are overlooked. The rating scales that the employers completed indicated that high school students lack many soft skills such as communication, phone etiquette, following schedules, and showing up to work daily. A common trend for community employers is for applicants to apply for the job and receive an interview, but they end up being a no-show, no call to the interview.

The data supported the results of the project by indicating schools need to better prepare the students for the workplace, but the researcher was hoping for more

partnerships and students employed. The three research questions were answered by the research methodology: with the ten interviews with teachers and community employers that the researcher conducted. However, all of the results were not what the researcher had hoped for at the beginning of the project. The first research question provided data that the students were only motivated by the content of the class and the teacher, not the rigor of the content. Students didn't seem to express an interest in what the class's content was, only how it was presented. Each grade level of students didn't vary the result either, the common factor was the specific teacher who was more engaging in presenting the content.

The second question looked at the impact that presenting workforce options to students have on their desire to pursue post-graduate employment. This question had the most effective results once the students were exposed to jobs in the community and understood what the different job qualifications are. After the students listened to the guest speakers, they became more interested in different jobs that they may not have been exposed to before the class. Each presenter was able to answer any specific questions that the students may have had to pertain to the job. Several students were able to be gainfully employed by touring several of the companies once they had a better understanding of the type of work they had to do. Research question three which asked if the students could effectively apply soft skills was not the anticipated outcome, because all interviewees indicated that the students do not have nor apply soft skills appropriately.

Once the researcher looked at all of the data and analyzed the results, it was concluded that the school district will need to explore different options next school year. An immediate change will be to create two distinct paths for the junior and senior classes.

One path will focus on classes offered for those students who want to go to college. Each class in this pathway will provide content that is aligned with the standards and provide rigorous instruction that students can carry over into college. Students can take dual enrollment classes to start accumulating college credits, which will reduce the number of classes students will need to take in their first year of college. The second path will be a career path for those students who want to enter the workforce. This path's classes will focus on creating a portfolio with resumes, applications, references, and additional information to assist with obtaining employment. The students will be able to utilize the portfolio when applying for a job and reference the content on an as-needed basis.

These improvements were identified after conducting the interviews with teachers and community employers; however, several fiscal implications were considered at the beginning of the research and were addressed throughout the research. All of the offered classes are part of the course catalog for the school district; therefore, there isn't any additional cost for the courses the students take. The district already hired staff, and their salaries are accounted for in the budget. The content of the courses may need to change to ensure we are preparing the students adequately, which may result in different materials for the next school year. Still, materials are budgeted for in the annual budget.

Additionally, employers in the community are already established businesses, so additional money would not be required. If students are successfully hired, the company should have already budgeted for the employees. The time that employees give up for guest speaking and tours is voluntary. Overall, the employers should acquire no additional cost to participate in this research. The students will be provided information and explore different workplaces in the community.

The partnerships that the school and employers develop will also be at no cost to either party. When the students hold internships, apprenticeships, or participate in work release, they will still receive an education but also gain work experience at the school district's expense. If an hourly wage is provided for the work, the employer will be responsible for the salaries and any other compensation that employers must provide. As a district, we are discussing giving the students credits for working during the summer and after school; however, it has not been finalized as to specific criteria. Students would be responsible for the transportation to and from their place of employment daily.

All of the fiscal implications were integrated within the cost of the staff and support; therefore, no additional costs will have to be accrued by the district to continue implementing the changes that arose from the research. The district can continue to grow the number of guest speakers and tours to better prepare and educate the students on jobs in the community.

The community employers welcome the tours and the students by providing merchandise for the students to take home as a reminder of their business; so the extra expenses have been on the community employers. Several employers have also expressed that their companies will pay for continuing education for those students who are employed and sustain employment for an extended amount of time.

Another effect of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the limited number of employees companies can obtain for employment, so companies are offering many different types of incentives to hire and keep employees. Several of the guest speakers discussed the lack of employees during their presentations and highlighted many of the company's incentives in trying to appeal to high school students. Higher pay rates, health

benefits, continued education, and sign-on bonuses were several that consistently came

up in the presentations. Colleges are also waiving application fees this year in hopes of

attracting more students to apply. Letters of recommendation, SAT scores and required

GPAs are also optional this year for acceptance into colleges.

Limitations

Inquiry data is used to gather information from participants about their

knowledge, beliefs, past experiences, feelings, opinions, attitudes, or perceptions

(Hendricks, 2017). In this action research project, the researcher used inquiry data by

interviewing staff from the school and local employers in the community. The interviews

assisted with answering the why questions by providing the effectiveness of the

intervention and reflective planning (Hendricks, 2017).

Structured interview questions were prepared for the interview which guided

those participants being interviewed. If the research used semi-structured interview

questions were utilized, the interviewees would have been able to speak about related

issues that were important to them. This could have provided more information on how to

support the students in and out of the classroom.

Restricting the research to only interviews and rating scales limited the

information that was available to the researcher. Obtaining more information on the

specific content taught in class and the implication of skills outside of the classroom

would have provided additional information on what is needed to better prepare students

for the workforce. The rating scale was useful but didn't provide in-depth information on

the benefits or limitations of soft skills. Many of the employers indicated that students

were lacking soft skills, but didn't elaborate because the rating scale only focused on the questions asked.

Both the interviews and rating scales focused on adults, but including the students in the research would have provided a different outlook on the results. They could have provided firsthand information on what improvements could be done in the school to keep them more engaged in class and make it meaningful. Students could have explained what causes them to lack the use of social skills in school and the workforce. Obtaining the information would have provided better suggestions for changes within the school.

Conducting the research in a small school district was beneficial because the staff who were interviewed worked with all of the students in high school, which gave valuable information. Each teacher could answer the interview questions with a specific student in mind and provide detailed information on what has been effective and ineffective. The career counselor has met with each student to discuss plans and worked on individual plans that benefit each student.

All of the seniors this year were able to explore a variety of options and come up with a plan for after graduation. Each student has a plan to attend college or enter the workforce. Many students who plan on working have already established jobs for the summer which hopefully will carry over after summer is over.

It was interesting to find out that some parents are hindering their students from working because of the social security that is received. Parents feel that if the students start making money that it might hinder the amount of social security they receive. With the correct information and resources, the students were hopeful that they could change their parent's minds.

Recommendation for Future Research

Once the researcher finalized and analyzed the data, several things became apparent for future research. The most relevant suggestion would be to continue what has begun within the school district, but start with freshmen to secure and develop detailed plans for the students. If the staff were better prepared to start this project with underclassmen, it would have provided a better outcome in the future. However, the seniors are all benefiting by either being enrolled in college or being gainfully employed after graduation.

The course that the teachers taught to prepare the students also needs to be informed by in-depth research to alter the course material. Students who want to enter the workforce need to practice more intently the specific skills that will be beneficial in multiple environments. Setting up mock interviews with a variety of employers would provide life situations that would ensure students are well versed with interviewing skills. Delivering opportunities for the students to gain communication skills is another area in which the students can grow. So often, they communicate via technology that they have a difficult time sustaining an intelligible conversation. The interviews indicated that communication is an area both the students and the school can improve on to support the students' employment.

Soft skills are essential for maintaining employment, but the majority of students tend to lack soft skills. Managing basic things such as schedules, communication, and proper etiquette scored low on the rating scale. As educators, we look past basic skills that should be practiced at home, but with limited communication and increased use of cell phones, the basic skills are becoming obsolete. Jeannette City School District will

move to incorporate these skills into the career class that our students are required to take. The district will need to ensure the staff has the knowledge and skills to teach soft skills within the curriculum. Professional development will be provided for those teachers teaching the career content to be better prepared.

At the end of the course, the students and staff will evaluate and provide feedback to determine if the content was beneficial and relevant for the students to enter the workforce. The feedback will be used to reflect the content moving forward for future classes.

As this research concludes, the researcher would like to explore other research topics and questions to continue to make the best changes for the school district to ensure the students can be successful after graduation. Other research questions that could be considered are:

- How can the school keep working collaboratively with the community?
- Can the school provide more opportunities throughout high school to guarantee students are aware of all of the available options after high school?
- Do parents have a concrete understanding of the support available for students?

The research can drive a variety of directions in which the school wants to go, but as a small district, it is important to keep the focus on the students and what can support their long-term goals. Obtaining the right staff will also play a factor in the amount of information the student retains; however, it will come down to how willing the students are to pursue a career after graduation.

There are steps the district can take to allow the implementation of these pathways to go smoothly. Ensuring the proper staff member teaches each course will improve the amount of student engagement in the classes. Students will be more productive if the teacher can relate the content to real-world situations. Data indicated that students who are employed did not actively engage in discussion as much as those not employed if the content was not relevant.

Moreover, all of the students will learn soft skills and learn to apply them in a variety of environments. The intent would be that each student would learn how to communicate effectively, both in verbal and written forms. After looking at the data, the researcher had a better understanding that the students need more support and guidance in understanding the importance of soft skills and how they affect their employability. Specific skills need more focus and practice than others; however, each student has a different understanding of each skill. Employers indicated that soft skills are hindering high school students from being employed in the community; therefore, schools need to do a better job teaching the skills in the classroom.

Most of the improvements, like those listed above, would be within the instruction and classroom environment; however, some tangible improvements would have to be made to improve the students' job readiness skills. The students would need access to a Chromebook or another device to keep their portfolios up to date with accurate information. All of the students created online accounts through PACareerlink to research available jobs in the community and start to apply for employment. Each student is responsible for updating the information and maintaining their username and password. Employers can access the students' information and credentials online and seek out

qualified candidates. Hence, regular access to the laptop device is necessary. Moreover, during the pandemic, it became apparent that families lack internet access and can't afford the fees associated with the internet; therefore, finding ways to provide families with information on how to access the internet was essential. Due to the socioeconomic status of our district, many families were able to obtain internet access for free or at a discounted rate. Once students graduate from high school they will need to access the internet to keep up with their online portfolio. Hence, regular access to the laptop device with an internet connection is necessary.

Maintaining the maintenance of the school vans is another critical improvement that needs to happen to transport the students on field trips to explore and tour local community employers. Each van can hold ten passengers, which limits the cost of renting buses to take the students on community trips. Teachers can drive the bus and transport students throughout the school day; therefore, substitutes are not necessary due to the strategic scheduling. Student transportation is not only important for taking students on tours, but students need transportation to participate in work releases. Jeannette City School District permits seniors to leave early if they are gainfully employed; however, a limited number of students participate in work release due to a lack of transportation for students. Families don't have the luxury of having at least one vehicle and if they do, the parents are usually in need of using it. The district is looking at educating the student on how to use public transportation within the community. Some of the community partners interviewed indicated that they can assist with carpooling to and from work if needed.

Summary

Chapter V looks at the overall outcome of the research and the recommendations that should continue to be investigated as this project continues to grow and develop. The research has laid a foundation, but more research must be completed to move to the next step. The conclusions of the data were not exactly the results that were desired due to not having more time to work with the school and community partners. The career class that the students took didn't provide enough information to support the students in the workforce as anticipated. Moving forward, the criteria and outline for the career class need to provide explicit details on integrating more real-life situations for the students to experience.

The project provided the Jeannette City School District and the students the opportunity to expand their options for high school students after graduation by providing more options in the community. Many local partnerships were established to ensure collaboration with our school district will continue in the future. Each partnership has already hired one or more of our students for summer or full-time employment, therefore giving our students some direction after graduation. More students are employed this year than in the past.

As the year and project concluded, changes are being made to continue but enhance what was implemented this year. The intent is to grow the number of community partnerships to provide a wide range of opportunities for the students so every student can find a job that interests them. Students can also explore a variety of tours to companies and colleges during the school day to better educate themselves on where they would like to be after graduation.

All of the participants in the research were cooperative with the interviews and provided honest feedback. The feedback will be used to assist the Jeannette City School District is preparing for continued growth in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Consent

Dear Faculty Member,

As an educational professional at Jeannette City School District, you are being asked to participate in a research study on enhancing opportunities in the work force for high school student at Jeannette High School. Your participation in this study will help the researcher learn more on how to get students actively employed after graduation.

What will I be asked to do if I take part in this study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to (1) participate in two interviews (pre- and post) regarding students exposure in college readiness preparation and (2) a rating scale.
The pre- and post-intervention interviews will ask you questions pertaining to how the students are engaged in the class and does their desire to work increase after the skills. The rating scale will identify if the students are able to apply the soft skills they were taught.

Where will this study take place?
Interviews will occur at the high school in the teacher's classroom or conference room.

How long will the study last?
The study is projected to last approximately 16 weeks, which includes pre- and post-interviews. Total participation time will vary. Each interview is expected to take 20-30 minutes.

What happens if I don't want to participate?
Your participation is voluntary; you can choose whether you want to participate in the study or not. There will be no penalty if you choose not to participate.

Can I quit the study before it ends?
You can withdraw from the study at any point by notifying the researcher. There will be no penalty should you choose to withdraw. The researcher will not ask you why you opted to withdraw.

What are the risks?

There are minimal risks to this study. However, participants are reminded that they are not required to answer any questions of which they choose. Participants can also stop their participation at any time without question.

How will I benefit from participating?

If you decide to be in this study, you will assist the researcher in better understanding how to provide students with the skills needed to enter the workforce.

Will my responses be kept confidential and private?

Yes, the interview responses collected from you will be kept confidential, which means only the researcher will see or have access to it. No names will be reported in the report of the findings. Data will be stored in an office with that remains locked at all times.

Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Denise Kubistek, at kub0632@calu.edu or at 724-523-6522. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Kevin London, Assistant Professor at California University of Pennsylvania, at london@calu.edu.

I have read this form. Any questions I have about participating in this study have been answered. I agree to take part in this study, and I understand that taking part is voluntary. I do not have to take part if I do not wish to do so. I can stop at any time for any reason. If I choose to stop, no one will ask me why.

By signing below, I agree to participate in this study. By doing so, I am indicating that I have read this form and had my questions answered. I understand that it is my choice to participate and I can stop at any time.

Signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective nn/nn/nn and expires mm/mm/mm.

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Formal Letter

Proposal Number
Date Received

California University
of Pennsylvania

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: : Enhancing opportunities in the workforce for high school students

Researcher/Project Director _____ Denise Kubistek _____

Phone #_____ E-mail Address_____

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

Department Education _____

Anticipated Project Dates_____ 08/2021 ____ to ____ 08/2022 _____

Sponsoring Agent (if applicable)_____

Project to be Conducted at   _Jeannette City 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(ses)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.*

A limited number of Jeannette City School District graduates enter the workforce after graduation. As a district, we would like to increase the opportunities for students to engage in employment within the community. The district will establish a college and career class for student to participate in daily. The class will teach soft skills and provide information on how to gain employment as well as participate in job experiences.

Teachers and employers will be interviewed before and after the class to determine if the class and job experiences provided assistance for the students to maintain employment. The interviews will be kept anonymous during the process.

- Does exposing students who are not on a college readiness path to work force options increase their engagement in the classroom? Comparison between pre/end of year teacher and employer interviews.
- What impact does exposing work force options have on students desire to pursue post high school employment? Pre/end of course teacher interviews
- What are the teachers perceptions on the student application of soft skills taught within the class? Pre/post rating scale

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.*

This research project incurs very minimal risk to participants. There are minimal risks to this study. You will not be asked questions of a sensitive nature. The interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable as some people do not like to volunteer information/feedback that could perceived as negative or complaining. Volunteer participants will complete a pre and post interview and teachers will also complete a rating scale at the end of the class. As stated, participation is voluntary. Participants may opt out of any question(s) of which they choose. Questions in the interview seek to determine the participant's opinions regarding student preparation and do not solicit otherwise personal information. Total time for completion of the survey and both interviews totals 30 to 60 minutes.

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.*

Only adult teachers will be included in this study and personally identifying information will not be collected. Participants will be provided anonymity for the interview portion of the study and may opt-out of the interview if they so desire. This study does not focus on vulnerable populations and no students will be involved in this project.

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.*

Participants will be provided with paper consent forms to be completed for each component of the project: questionnaire, interview, and observation.

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.*

The interview responses collected from you will be kept confidential, which means only the researcher will see or have access to it. No names will be reported in the report of the findings. Data will be stored in an office with that remains locked at all times. All interviews will be conducted in person or through Zoom and the results will be recorded for research purposes only. Each interview will take place in a room where no one has access to see in the room. The researcher will ensure that the interviews are done on a rotating schedule so each interviewee cannot identify one another.

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

☒ *Adult volunteers*	☐ *Mentally Disabled People*
☐ *CAL University Students*	☐ *Economically Disadvantaged People*
☐ *Other Students*	☐ *Educationally Disadvantaged People*
☐ *Prisoners*	☐ *Fetuses or fetal material*
☐ *Pregnant Women*	☐ *Children Under 18*
☐ *Physically Handicapped People*	☐ *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 <u>survey, interview or questionnaire</u>?
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:
[x_] (1) Statement about the general nature of the survey and how the data will be used?

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

[_x] (3) FOR ALL STUDENTS: Is the faculty advisor's name and contact information provided?

[x_] (4) Statement that participation is voluntary?

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

[x_] (6) Statement that the results are confidential?

[x_] (7) Statement that results are anonymous?

[_x] (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)

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

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

[x_] (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)

[x_] (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)?

[x_] (13) FOR ELECTRONIC/WEBSITE SURVEYS: Does the text of the cover letter or
explanatory statement appear before any data is requested from the participant?

[x_] (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 <u>survey</u>, <u>interview</u>, <u>or questionnaire</u>?
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:
[x_] (1.0) FOR ALL STUDIES: Completed ALL items on the Review Request Form?
Pay particular attention to:

    x_] (1.1) Names and email addresses of all investigators
        [x] (1.1.1) FOR ALL STUDENTS: use only your CalU email address)
        [x] (1.1.2) FOR ALL STUDENTS: Name and email address of your
        faculty research advisor

    [_x] (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)

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

        [x_] 2a: NOTE: No studies can have zero risk, the lowest risk is
        "minimal risk". If more than minimal risk is involved you MUST:
            [x_] i. Delineate all anticipated risks in detail;
            [_x] ii. Explain in detail how these risks will be minimized;
            [x_] iii. Detail the procedures for dealing with adverse
            outcomes due to these risks.
            [x_] iv. Cite peer reviewed references in support of your
            explanation.
        [x_] 2b. Complete all items.
        [_x] 2c. Describe informed consent procedures in detail.
        [x_] 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.

    [x_] (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:

        [_x] (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.
        [x_] (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").

[x_] (1.5) Included all grant information in section 5?
[x_] (1.6) Included ALL signatures?

[x_] (2.0) FOR STUDIES INVOLVING MORE THAN JUST SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR QUESTIONNAIRES:
 [x_] (2.1) Attached a copy of all consent form(s)?
 [_x] (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)?
 [x_] (2.3) Completed and attached a copy of the Consent Form Checklist? (as appropriate—see that checklist for instructions)
[x_] (3.0) FOR STUDIES INVOLVING ONLY SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR QUESTIONNAIRES:
 [_x] (3.1) Attached a copy of the cover letter/information sheet?
 [_x] (3.2) Completed and attached a copy of the Survey/Interview/Questionnaire Consent Checklist? (see that checklist for instructions)
 [x_] (3.3) Attached a copy of the actual survey, interview, or questionnaire questions in their final form?

[x_] (4.0) FOR ALL STUDENTS: Has your faculty research advisor:
 [x_] (4.1) Thoroughly reviewed and approved your study?
 [x_] (4.2) Thoroughly reviewed and approved your IRB paperwork? including:
  [x_] (4.2.1) Review request form,
  [x_] (4.2.2) All consent forms, (if used)
  [_x] (4.2.3) All assent forms (if used)
  [_x] (4.2.4) All Survey/Interview/Questionnaire cover letters (if used)
  [_x] (4.2.5) All checklists
 [_x] (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.
[x_] (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.

Professional (Faculty/Staff) Research

_____

Project Director's Signature

Student or Class Research

_____   _____

Student Researcher's Signature   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 C

Teacher Interview Questions

Instructions: The following questions are part of my capstone project. Please answer the questions based on the students in your college and career readiness class. Answers will be kept anonymous.

1. Explain how the students demonstrate engagement during daily instruction.

2. Approximately how much time are the students actively engaged during instruction. How long is a class period? How many students are in the class?

3. Are the students who participate in work release more attentive and academically progressing than those who are not on work release?

4. What topics do you feel the students show the most engagement in your class?

5. Is the content relevant to assisting students to obtain gainful employment?

6. Are any of your students gainfully employed? Approximately how many hours per week do they work?

7. Have any of your students interviewed for employment within the last three months? How many students and many interviews?

8. What has hindered your students from gaining employment?

9. Have your students been exposed to different types of employment within their community?

10. What are the common types of employment students are seeking? Are those skills provided in school?

Appendix D

Community Employer Interview Questions

Instructions: The following questions are part of my capstone project. Please answer the questions based on the students in your college and career readiness class. Answers will be kept anonymous.

1. How many people have you interviewed in the past three months?

2. What is the age range of those you have interviewed? Are any high school students?

3. Approximately how many hours do they work a week?

4. Do the candidates have the credentials you are looking for?

5. What areas can candidates grow in when preparing for interviews? Employment?

6. How can high schools assist in preparing students for employment?

7. Do you feel work release would benefit students to be more gainfully employed?

8. Are you likely to hire people from the local community?

9. Please identify specific skills employees should obtain for employment?

10. Any other suggestions for schools to assist with preparation for employment.

Appendix E

Rating Scale

Rate the students on a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest)

1. The students understand what soft skills are

    (lowest) 1   2   3   4   5 (highest)

2. Students are applying soft skills appropriately.

    (lowest) 1   2   3   4   5 (highest)

3. When using soft skills, students are able to engage with other peers.

    (lowest) 1   2   3   4   5 (highest)

4. Students can sustain appropriate conversations with adults.

    (lowest) 1   2   3   4   5 (highest)

5. Students are able to follow a schedule and can manage their time appropriately.

    (lowest) 1   2   3   4   5 (highest)