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## How 9-12 Grade Students Find Success in Elective Courses in the United States

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HOW 9-12 GRADE STUDENTS FIND SUCCESS IN ELECTIVE COURSES IN THE  
UNITED STATES

A MASTER'S THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY

LAURA DOBERSTEIN

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

AUGUST 2022

HOW 9-12 GRADE STUDENTS FIND SUCCESS IN ELECTIVE COURSES IN THE  
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APPROVED

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AUGUST 2022

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relentless, tenacious desire to put forth my best effort and to be the best version of myself.

Thank you.

## **Abstract**

Learning is social, emotional, and academic. Piecing together these elements in conjunction with applying scientific research based on these areas will help to ensure a basis for which students may be successful in the classes they choose to take in high school, or their elective courses. Research shows that student success stems from students having their basic needs met in order for them to be able to focus on other information being presented to them and their ability to absorb and apply that information to what they already know. Students must also be supported both academically with provided support by the educational learning community, and emotionally by the educational learning community, and their greater community as a whole. When these elements come together and are introduced to a positive learning environment, the outcome of student success is almost guaranteed. That being said, the definition of student success is one that continues to remain as vastly defined as the number of unique human beings on this planet. This thesis reviews existing research and literature on these subjects to help answer the question: how 9-12 grade students find success in elective courses in the United States.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly fast-changing, complex and diverse world, student success maintains a prominent pillar of measurement in school communities across the United States of America. This thesis presents an overview of literature on student success, describing the adolescent psychology and basic needs at this stage of life, elements that define student academic success, including basic needs, educational supports, combined with social emotional success dealing with relationships between teachers, support staff, and their peers. This thesis also covers background research on high school electives in the United States, types of electives most commonly offered in the United States, benefits of offering elective classes at the high school level, and potential setbacks of offering elective courses at the high school level. The thesis concludes with findings centered around student success and how they find success when choosing their elective courses based on their own intrinsic motivation versus peer acceptance, how elective courses are meeting students' academic and social emotional needs, and how students are finding success in these elective courses.

### *Defining Questions*

As an unseasoned high school elective teacher pondering their thesis subject matter, the desire for the thesis topic to be relevant to the author's teaching practice was paramount to gain the most out of the research and thesis writing experience. It was important for the author to try to figure out a question that became a beacon at the end of their second year of teaching: How do 9-12 grade students find success in elective courses in the United States? Students are empowered to select their own elective courses in high school, yet a number of

them continue to fail those classes that they chose to take. Why? Was the subject matter just not that interesting to them after they spent a small amount of time in the class learning about what it was they were really going to be uncovering in the class? Did they not enjoy their teacher's disposition or the way they chose to teach the class? Did they not associate with the subject? Were there things going on in their lives outside of the academic setting of school that was impacting their success? All that to be said, how could we as teachers involved in professional learning communities do the best we could to set these students up to be the most successful students they could possibly be?

### ***Significance of the Problem***

Why does it matter if there is an understanding of how high school students find success in elective courses in high school? Student success is one of the most sought-after outcomes by which teachers and schools consider themselves successful, and are then measured against themselves. But when the definition of success can vary so vastly from person-to-person, one can only hope to understand how high school students become successful in their elective courses by first trying to identify and understand the individual factors that contribute to making a student successful in those elective courses. If students, parents, and schools do not all try to understand the individual factors that contribute to student success, they will not ever fully recognize the part they play in influencing success. Once they begin to understand the factors, then they may learn what they could be doing to increase student success, and could be limiting the amount of success they are enabling based on their role. By reviewing this thesis and what exists in prior research and literature, the author of this thesis hopes to bridge roles

and responsibilities that students, teachers, and their support network play in contributing to high school students' finding success while taking their elective courses.

### ***Definition of Terms and Ideas***

The following terms are defined for clarification purposes and to aid in the understanding of the research presented.

**Adolescence** - the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult.

**Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT)** - is one of the mini theories of Self Determination Theory (SDT) that describes that humans tend to experience intrinsic motivation when their three basic psychological needs are fulfilled.

**Center for Disease Control and Prevention** - The US agency charged with tracking and investigating public health trends.

**Core classes** - Generally, the core courses in high school include the following:

Math: Three to four years (algebra, geometry, calculus)

English: Four years (composition, literature, speech)

Social science: Three to four years (history, sociology, psychology, political science, geography, economics)

Science: Normally three years (earth science, biology, chemistry, physics)

**Education Support Professionals (ESPs)** - keep students healthy, safe, supported, engaged and challenged so they are ready to learn.

**English Learner/English Language Learners (EL/ELL)** - a student who uses another language in addition to or other than English.

**Geographic Information Systems (GIS)** - is a system designed to capture, store, manipulate, analyze, manage, and present all types of geographical data.

**IEP (Individualized Education Programs/Plans)** - lays out the special education instruction, supports, and services a student needs to thrive in school. IEPs are part of PreK-12 public education.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** - is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. The IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

**Maslow Hierarchy of Needs** - is a motivational theory in psychology that explains the five different levels of human needs. This theory created by Abraham Maslow is based on how humans are inspired to satisfy their needs in a hierarchical order. Starting from the bottom going upwards, the five needs are physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

**SAT** - Scholastic Aptitude Test taken typically by students in their 11th grade year of high school. Many colleges and universities use the results from this exam to consider a prospective student during the admission process.

**Sociodemographic characteristics** - include age, education, religion, employment, marital status, income levels, migration background, race, and ethnicity.

**The American Academy of Sleep Medicine** - a professional society for the medical subspecialty of sleep medicine which includes disorders of circadian rhythms.

**The National Education Association** - the nation's largest professional employee organization that is committed to advancing the cause of public education.

**U.S Department of Health and Human Services** - a Cabinet-level government department that provides health and human services and promotes research in social services, medicine, and public health.

**USDA** - The United States Department of Agriculture, a federal agency that plays a major role in rural development, particularly housing. It also oversees and implements programs related to the farming, ranching, and forestry industries and regulates food quality and safety, and nutrition labeling.

**Whole Student** - The whole student approach to education draws from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as foundational tenets for educators to provide students with a strong, supportive learning environment. Everyone on the education team plays an essential role in helping students reach their full potential.

### **Main Thesis Question**

How do 9-12 grade students find success in elective courses in the United States?

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Student Success*

#### Literature Research Procedures

To find the literature and information for this thesis, searches of Education Journals, RefWorks, Google Scholar, and online Education websites were conducted for studies and publications from 1985-2022. The key words that were used in these searches included “student success,” “student success with electives,” “social and emotional skills,” “success in high school,” “academic achievement,” “high school elective courses,” “behavioral brain science in adolescents,” “choosing electives,” and “traditional high school electives”

#### Adolescent Psychology and Basic Needs

“Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more important than the outcome” - Arthur Ashe.

To understand what it takes for students to be considered successful, it is important to review the research and data related to adolescent psychology and what the basic needs are for this age of student. Santrock (2010, p.31) ruminates that adolescence involves the transition from childhood to adulthood. It begins around ages 10 to 12 and ends around 18 to 21. Adolescence starts with rapid physical changes, including height and weight gains and development of sexual functions. Adolescents intensely pursue independence and seek their own identity. Their thoughts become more abstract, logical, and idealistic. Along with the rest of the body, the brain is changing during adolescence. Connections between neurons become “pruned” as children and into adolescence. This pruning results in “fewer, more selective, more

effective connections between neurons than they had as children” (Kuhn, 2009, p.153). This pruning indicates the activities adolescents choose to engage in and not to engage in influence which neural connections will be strengthened and which will disappear (Santrock, 2010, p. 36). During this time, scientists have discovered that adolescents’ brains undergo significant structural changes (Giedd et al., 2009; Jackson-Newsom & Shelton, 2010). The corpus callosum, where fibers connect to the brain’s left and right hemispheres, thickens in adolescence, and this improves adolescents’ ability to process information (Santrock, 2010, p. 36). Santrock (2010, p. 36) also stated that in adolescence there is further development of the prefrontal cortex, or where the highest level of the frontal lobe is located, which contains the part of the brain involved in reasoning, decision making, and self-control. However, the prefrontal cortex does not finish maturing until the emerging adulthood years, or approximately 18 to 25 years of age, or later. It must be stated that though this part of the brain has not yet fully developed, or matured, that the amygdala, or the seat of emotions such as anger, matures earlier than the prefrontal cortex. Leading researcher Charles Nelson (2011) pointed out that although adolescents are capable of very strong emotions; their prefrontal cortex hasn’t adequately developed to the point at which they can control these passions. This means that the brain region for putting the brakes on risky, impulsive behavior is still under construction during adolescence (Giedd et al., 2009). Another way of thinking about this area of development, as stated by Dahl (2004, p.18) is the early activation of strong, “turbo-charged” feelings with a relatively unskilled set of “driving skills” or cognitive abilities to modulate strong emotions and motivation. This developmental disjunction may account for increased risk taking and other



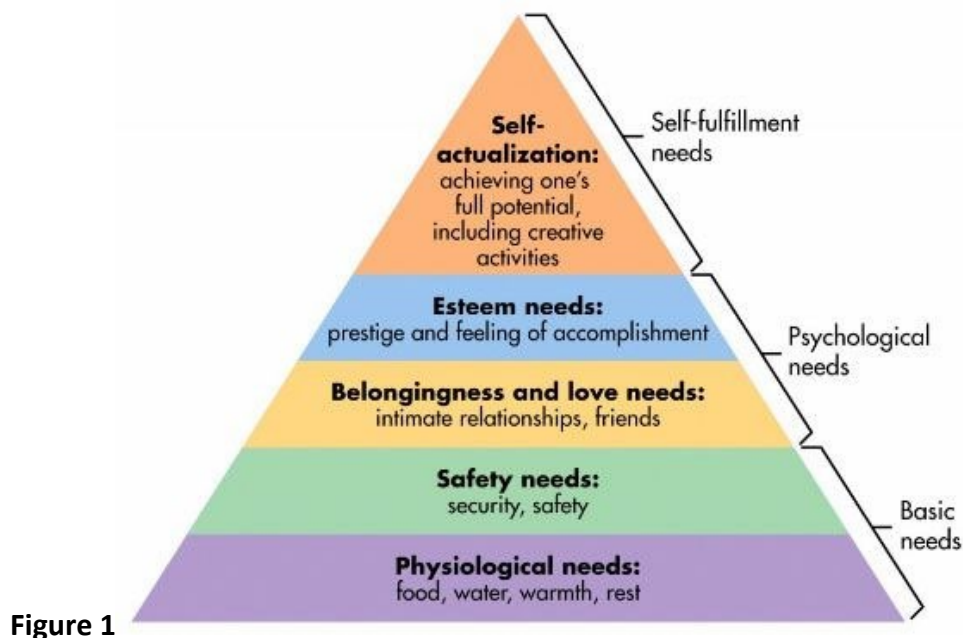
problems in adolescence (Steinberg, 2009). “Some things just take time to develop and mature judgment is probably one of them” (Steinberg, 2004, p. 56).

Much research about how the brain develops around adolescence has been connected to basic psychological needs. Ryan and Deci (2017) developed the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) stating the argument that individuals have a limited set of basic psychological needs, the satisfaction of which is essential for flourishing and well-being. Although the list of psychological needs is and has always been open for additions, their set was limited to three: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and willingness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When satisfied, one experiences a sense of integrity as when one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings are self-endorsed and authentic. When frustrated, one experiences a sense of pressure and often conflict, such as feeling pushed in an unwanted direction. Relatedness denotes the experience of warmth, bonding, and care, and is satisfied by connecting to and feeling significant to others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness frustration comes with a sense of social alienation, exclusion, and loneliness. Competence concerns the experience of effectiveness and mastery. It becomes satisfied as one capably engages in activities and experiences opportunities for using and extending skills and expertise (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When frustrated, one experiences a sense of ineffectiveness or even failure and helplessness. Ryan and Deci (2017) highlighted these three psychological needs were distinguished and derived from both inductive and deductive bases. These broad needs first emerged inductively from research showing that experiences of competence and autonomy were essential to developing and maintaining intrinsic motivation. They found that people experienced greater enjoyment and had more interest in an activity when it was tied to the

person receiving positive feedback. This took care of the individual's need for competence.

These three needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence), each uniquely but also in interactive ways, appeared to be essential for individuals' well-being across ages, contexts, and cultures. This stage of psychological well-being appears to be a crucial starting point, a sturdy platform for an individual to have hope of becoming successful.

Typically in the United States, high school students in grades 9-12 are between the ages of 14 and 18 years of age. After understanding the brain science reviewed above, the next phase of this literary review turns toward reviewing the needs of adolescents during this phase of their lives while they are high school students. In 1943, Abraham Maslow, a famous social scientist and a psychologist, developed a theory of motivation which is based on the hierarchy of needs. Maslow stated that people are all motivated to fulfill certain needs. Some needs take precedence over others, these are our basic needs. Until these basic needs are satisfied, we aren't able to fulfill our higher needs. According to Maslow, there are five kinds of needs depicted visually in Figure 1 below: physiological needs (food, shelter, clothing), safety needs (job security, insurance plan), social/belonging needs (love, affection, friendship, acceptance by group), esteem needs (self-respect, self-confidence, status, recognition, approval, appreciation), and self-actualization needs (desire to become the most that one can be) (Mcleod, 2020). Maslow described the order of needs must be met by first starting at the base of the pyramid (physiological needs) and working one's way up to the top, or highest level of the pyramid of needs. Maslow estimated that only 2% of people ever become fully self-actualized.



Dr. Purushothaman (2020, p.1) has done an eloquent job of breaking down these needs using student-centered language and objectives. They are acquired through social learning and their satisfaction is necessary for the psychological well-being of an individual. He defined these important student socio-psychological needs:

1. Needs for security: Adolescents need emotional, social and economic security in addition to physical security. Those who lack the feeling of security may become unstable. The need for social security is associated with man's desire for companionship.
2. Need for Love: Affection or love is one of the most basic psychological needs of adolescents. Adolescents have a strong desire to love and to be loved. Those who are not loved will not have deep proper attitudes and concepts concerning their own worth. Proper love will strengthen the individual's feeling of security.

3. Need for approval: There is a craving for recognition in adolescents. Their ego gets satisfaction when they are recognized and approved. The adolescents desire they are a center of attraction for the opposite sex and their abilities, intelligence and capacities should be recognized by others. Teachers should find out the field in which the adolescents can shine very well and which helps them earn admiration from others.

4. Need for freedom and independence: Adolescence is a time when the individual is striving to wean themselves away from the control of parents and elders. They want the right to give expression to their feelings, emotions and ideas. They feel annoyed and unpleasant when restrictions are imposed on them.

5. Need for self-expression and achievement: Every adolescent has an inherent desire for the expression of his potential. They may have a poet, musician, painter etc. hidden within them and they want to get adequate opportunities for the expression of their potential. Adolescents experience satisfaction when they succeed and failure makes them depressed and disappointed. Hence school curriculum should be appropriate for every student so as to permit achievement for all.

Psychological developments during the age of adolescence touch many other areas of adolescent life. Areas of their lives like their social and emotional skills. Social and emotional skills influence how well people adjust to their environment and how much they achieve in their lives. The development of social and emotional skills is important not only for the well-being of individuals, but also for wider communities and societies as a whole. The ability of citizens to adapt, be resourceful, respect and work well with others, and to take personal and

collective responsibility is increasingly becoming the hallmark of a well-functioning society. (Chernyshenko et al., 2018) Social and emotional skills not only influence life outcomes directly (for example, good social competence helps people successfully negotiate job interviews), but they also have persistent and cumulative effects on other attributes, including cognitive skills. For example, good social competence can help children adapt better to the school environment, gain higher status among their peers and consequently achieve more in school. This greater school achievement translates later into better occupational status, health, and general well-being (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). Chernyshenko et al. (2018) cautions that better cognitive skills will not compensate for inadequate social and emotional skills. It is therefore critically important to expand the traditional policy focus on cognitive skills and to embrace a more holistic approach by better supporting children and adults in developing and nurturing social and emotional skills.

Another item worth connecting to this topic is the element of an adolescent's physical health. The National Society of High School Scholars (2019, p.4) simply stated that, "you cannot have academic success in high school if you are not healthy enough to experience it fully, so make sure you always prioritize your health." They also remind adolescents of some health tips to help ensure academic success. Tip number three reminds students to make time to exercise, eat balanced, nutritious meals, drink plenty of water, and sleep. Take a rest when you really need it, carve out time for mindfulness in your day, and spend time with friends and family. They also went on to remind students that your body and mind work best when you take good care of them, so do not sacrifice your health for the sake of a good grade. You know when you can work harder and when you should take a break, so listen to yourself and learn your own

signals (National Society of High School Scholars, 2019, p.4). Per the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), children and adolescents who do not get enough sleep have a higher risk of obesity, diabetes, injuries, poor mental health, and problems with attention and behavior. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (2016) has recommended that teenagers aged 13–18 years should sleep 8–10 hours per 24 hours. Based on the national sample of data taken from their 2015 study, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that about seven out of ten teenagers (aged 13 to 18 years) (72.7%) did not get enough sleep on school nights. In order to get the sleep they need, are typically students who stick to a consistent sleep schedule during the school week and weekends. This means going to bed at the same time each night and getting up at the same time each morning. Adolescents whose parents or guardians set bedtimes are more likely to get enough sleep due to the routines being created and the body adjusting to those routines. Other successful student sleepers have relied on limiting light exposure and technology use in the evenings. This may include parents or guardians limiting when their children may use electronic devices (sometimes referred to as a “media curfew”). This may also include parents or guardians limiting where their children may use electronic devices (for example, not in their child’s bedroom).

In addition to reviewing adolescent psychological science as well as the appropriate amount of sleep for adolescents, it is important to also review the food health recommendations for this age group to holistically understand what contributes to successful students at the most basic level. In (main reference to the) U.S Department of Health and Human Services, the average teenage male should consume about 1800 to 3200 calories per day to remain in good health, while the average teenage female should consume 1600 to 2400

calories per day to remain in good health. Adolescents' bodies are rapidly growing and they require the necessary fuel to get them through their seven to eight hour school day. So, it is important for both students and schools to understand what kind of nutrients a growing high school student requires to be successful in the classroom and feel their best. According to the Institute of Medicine and the USDA (2022), adolescents should proportion about 45% to 65% of carbohydrates, about 10% to 30% of proteins, and only 25% to 35% of fat for their calorie intake per day. Ultimately, with the knowledge of key players in their nutrition, students should come to understand the great importance eating well has on their life, especially their academic life!

### ***Academic Supports For Success***

All students learn differently and have different learning styles and needs. Legally, each public school in America must have systems in place to provide every student with a quality education. In order to achieve this, schools have processes in place that include Individualized Education Programs/Plans (IEPs). An IEP lays out the special education instruction, supports, and services a student needs to thrive in school. IEPs are covered by special education law, or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). They're created for eligible students who attend public school, which includes charter schools. Belsky (n.d.) stated that there are many benefits to getting an IEP. The process begins with an evaluation that shows a student's strengths and challenges. Students must have one or more of the 13 conditions that are covered under IDEA, which includes learning disabilities like dyslexia and needs services to thrive in school. Families and schools use the results of the evaluation to create a program of

services and supports tailored to meet the student's needs. Having an IEP gives students, families, and schools legal protections, too. It lets families be involved in decisions that impact their student's education. Part of a student IEP is the Annual Goals section. The goals listed here should consist of academic and functional skills that the student can reasonably accomplish during the school year. Each is broken down into shorter-term objectives. The IEP also contains a section called progress reporting where the IEP states how the IEP team, or group of educational professionals, will keep track of the student's progress toward their annual goals. The supplementary aids and services section of the IEP specifies what accommodations the student will get in school — like a seat at the front of the class. It also details any modifications the student will receive. These modifications are changes to what's expected of the student— like less homework, or fewer questions on a test, and so on. This section will also include information about any assistive technology the student may need.

Another educational support present in American public schools is English Language (EL) resources for students whose main language may not necessarily be English. Many schools will place children in an EL program if their non-English speaking family recently immigrated to the United States or if a foreign exchange student needs extra help learning the language. But many EL students enrolled in the U.S. public school system are actually U.S. citizens with limited proficiency in English (Morin, 2020). EL programs are designed to give students special attention while learning and practicing English so they can integrate the language into a regular classroom. Per Morin (2020, p.1), The amount of time that a student will spend in an EL program will depend on their level of comprehension of the English language:



- New students who know little or no English may spend most of the school day in an EL class in the beginning.
- Teachers will integrate the kids into a regular classroom as they become more proficient.
- Students who understand and can speak basic English may begin with only an hour or two in an EL program per day and spend the rest of their time in regular classes.

EL teachers' primary area of focus is teaching the students how to speak, read, and understand English, but their reach is not only limited to these important aspects. Many EL programs go beyond language as well. Many will help students adjust to American society and culture through different lessons, activities, and experiences throughout the school day and year.

Other areas where schools may implement student supports often cater to student-led tutoring for school subjects. In some instances, schools may choose to partner with outside organizations, extending their reach into the community to assist with supporting the students in their schools. Organizations may include tutoring and homework help, to counseling, physical, or mental health services. In the past two years, the author of this thesis has seen many students take advantage of these educational services and supports, especially homework help and tutoring services. After the pandemic forced many schools into online teaching and learning, several students fell behind in completing their homework, or even passing their classes. These offered academic supports helped students get caught up in their classes and feel more in control of their education. At all levels, the support systems in schools

use student data to direct decisions. Administrators meet with school improvement and department teams to review state and local data reports. The school improvement teams used data to make decisions and set priorities (Cooper et al., 2005).

Academic success also envelops the idea of the “whole student,” In order for students to succeed, we must meet their developmental needs and consider all the different factors that impact their experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. The whole student approach to education draws from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as a foundation for educators to provide students with a strong, supportive learning environment. Everyone on the education team plays an essential role in helping students reach their full potential. Teachers, Administrators, and education support professionals (ESPs) meet the needs of the whole student on many levels, ensuring their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. To see and understand all the elements that are included in the whole student method of thought, review Figure 2 below:



**Figure 2**

The whole student method aims to have all of the items shown in blue to be living in harmony with one another in order to make each student feel all of the items listed in green, enabling them to be the best, most successful versions of themselves at school. One may think that it is the teacher's responsibility alone to provide and be all things to every student, but The National Education Association (n.d., p.1) outlined the following areas where educational professionals that make up an educational community are entrusted to providing academic support to students which support them in many ways, including their social, emotional, and relational areas of their lives:

- Health and student service professionals are key players in counseling, psychological and social services, and physical health services.
- Food service, custodial, and transportation staff play distinct roles in keeping students safe and healthy through nutritious meals and a clean school environment.
- Paraeducators provide direct services to students and assist in the classroom, often for our most vulnerable student populations with special needs.
- ESPs are involved in their local and professional communities. They frequently serve in more than one school site and act as a liaison between schools, as well as between school staff and community agencies.
- ESPs establish, develop and maintain connections with students and parents, fostering a positive school climate for all.

### ***Social, Emotional, and Relational Success***

Learning is social, emotional, and academic. Emotions and social relationships affect learning. Positive relationships, including trust in the teacher, and positive emotions—such as interest and excitement—open up the mind to learning (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Negative emotions—such as fear of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt—reduce the capacity of the brain to process information and to learn (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Students' interpersonal skills, including their ability to interact positively with peers and adults, to resolve conflicts, and to work in teams, all contribute to effective learning and lifelong behaviors. These skills, which mature into the development of empathy, awareness of one's own and others' feelings, and learned skills for communication and problem solving, can and should be taught to enable students to be successful in life after high school. Adolescents actively construct knowledge based on their experiences, relationships, and social contexts (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). By doing so, students dynamically shape their own learning and are constantly comparing new information to what they already know in order to learn and process new information. This process works best when students engage in active, hands-on learning, and when they can connect new knowledge to personally relevant topics and lived experiences (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Effective teachers act as mentors: setting tasks, watching and guiding children's efforts, and offering feedback. Providing opportunities for students to set goals and to assess their own work and that of their peers can encourage them to become increasingly self-aware, confident, and independent learners (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Because students learn when they feel safe and supported, and their learning is impaired when they are fearful, traumatized, or overcome with

emotion, they need both supportive environments and well-developed abilities to manage stress. Therefore, Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) indicated that schools provide a positive learning environment—also known as school climate—that provides support for learning social and emotional skills as well as academic content. Two recent reviews of their research, incorporating more than 400 studies, have found that a positive school climate improves academic achievement overall and reduces the negative effects of poverty on achievement, boosting grades, test scores, and student engagement. The elements of school climate contributing most to increased achievement are associated with teacher-student relationships, including warmth, acceptance, and teacher support (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Data provided by Cooper et al. (2005) showed that student participation, engagement, and eventual success were powered by connections and relationships. There were close connections between principals and teachers, faculty members and students, and students and other students between the curriculum, instruction, and assessments; and, in many cases, between the school and community. These connections started with simple but intentional acts of caring and were then built into good relationships.

Chang et al. (2010) was compelled to affirm that academic engagement and success can be forged through adolescents' relationships with nonkin adults. Findings from the Christensen et al. (2021) study backed up this reasoning and provided the unique potential influence of teacher and coach mentors on youths' later academic outcomes, as well as the associations between youth sociodemographic characteristics and coach mentorship. These results provided the basis for future research investigations that examined how community-based natural mentors could provide the most support to and develop the most impactful relationships with

their young protégé. In the North Carolina schools that Cooper et al. studied (2005), success was seen as comprehensive and was based on caring relationships among faculty members and students. All of the schools' mission statements cited elements of lifelong learning, reaching high potential, and belief in students' capabilities to succeed. Although they recognized the importance of test scores, members of these school communities defined their accomplishments broadly, reporting that their schools are places where students, teachers, and community members were "invited" to succeed. Participants in Cooper et al.'s (2005, p.7) study attributed their accomplishments to those inviting climates rather than to any specific program or strategy. One of the administrators explained: "[The key to success is to] surround yourself with good people and support them and direct them.... See, I don't think there's a special program that's going to solve your problems. I think it's special teachers that will help the problems because I have found that the caring, passionate, inviting teacher, even if the kids are academically average, will produce good results." A key aspect of the success at all 11 schools studied and reported in Cooper et al (2005) was the development of support systems for both students and teachers. Each of the schools featured an extensive safety net to support students who might otherwise fall through the cracks in the system. One of the administrators at Grimsley said, "A safety net for students who are struggling or who are underachieving must be implemented to ensure student growth. The role of administration is to monitor, support, and tweak programs constantly" (Cooper et al., 2005, p.9). The schools in Cooper et al. 's (2005) study all chose to offer a wide range of options for tutoring for their students, providing a student "safety net." New knowledge about human development from neuroscience and the sciences of learning and development demonstrates that effective learning depends on secure

attachments; affirming relationships; rich, hands-on learning experiences; and explicit integration of social, emotional, and academic skills. A positive school environment supports students' growth across all the developmental pathways—physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional—while it reduces stress and anxiety that create biological impediments to learning. Such an environment takes a “whole child” approach to education, seeking to address the distinctive strengths, needs, and interests of students as they engage in learning. Given that emotions and relationships strongly influence learning—and that these are the byproducts of how students are treated at school, as well as at home and in their communities—a positive school climate is at the core of a successful educational experience. School climate creates the physiological and psychological conditions for productive learning. Without secure relationships and supports for development, student engagement and learning are undermined (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Human relationships are the essential ingredient that assist with healthy development and learning. Supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults are foundational for healthy development and learning. Positive, stable relationships can buffer the potentially negative effects of even serious adversity. A student's best performance, under conditions of high support and low threat, differs from how he or she performs without such support or when he or she feels threatened. When adults have the cultural competence to appreciate and understand adolescent's experiences, needs, and communication, they can offset stereotypes, promote the development of positive attitudes and behaviors, and build confidence to support learning in all students (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018, p.4) go on to explain that, “Development is malleable. The brain never stops growing and changing in response to experiences and

relationships. The nature of these experiences and relationships matters greatly to the growth of the brain and the development of skills.” Optimal brain architecture and effective learning are developed by the presence of warm, consistent relationships; empathetic back-and-forth communications; and modeling of productive behaviors. The brain’s capacity develops most fully when children and youth feel emotionally and physically safe; when they feel connected, supported, engaged, and challenged; and when they have robust opportunities to learn—with rich materials and experiences that allow them to inquire into the world around them—and equally robust support for learning.” Variability in human development is the norm, not the exception. The pace and profile of each child’s development is unique. Because each child’s experiences create a unique trajectory for growth, there are multiple pathways—and no one best pathway—to healthy learning and development. Rather than assuming all children will respond to the same teaching approaches equally well, effective teachers seek to personalize different supports for different students. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) caution that schools should avoid prescribing learning experiences around a mythical average. When schools try to force all children to fit one sequence or pacing guide, they miss the opportunity to nurture the individual potential of every child, and they can cause children (as well as teachers) to adopt counterproductive views about themselves and their own learning potential, which undermine progress. We know that the school environment is not without its own stressors, but schools can buffer the effects of stress by facilitating supportive adult-child relationships that extend over time; building a sense of self-efficacy and control by teaching and reinforcing social and emotional skills that help students handle adversity, such as the ability to calm emotions and manage responses; and creating dependable, supportive routines for both



managing classrooms and checking in on student needs (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). In Wolpert-Gawron's 2018 nationwide survey, students reported that they need to be more connected to the adults in the schools. We talk so much about differentiating learning for students, but it is important to consider differentiating teachers and schools too. It helps our students to connect with school if they learn that there are many diverse personalities on hand for them to learn from. Electives, many times, reflect the interests of the teachers that teach them as well as the students that choose them. This permits a student to automatically have a self-selected connection to the adult in the room.

The author of this thesis believes that a teacher or coaching mentor can be a natural factor of a student's success in their chosen elective classes. If a student prefers the temperament and or teaching style of one teacher over another, chances are the student will desire to take more elective courses offered by the teacher they prefer versus one they would not prefer to have to teach their classes. In this author's experience, having a teacher that you enjoy learning from goes a long way toward opening a student's ability to enjoy their classes and what they are learning. This author feels that the best conditions for student learning happen when a student feels like they are in a safe environment to learn and explore the subject matter, and where they can show up as their most authentic selves every day. A balance of a student feeling safe, enjoying the person teaching them, and an interest in what they are being taught are fundamental factors to set the stage to enable student success in their elective courses. These relationships made between students and teachers also often extend into the community both during and after high school. Concluding their research, Cooper et al (2005, p.11) summarized that at all of the schools reviewed, strong community

connections provided an important layer of support for students and teachers. A parent in the Lakewood school community summarized the importance of these connections by saying that "This is a great school. It's our community school. I can walk in here as a parent and know all of the teachers and most of the students." A second community member added, "I don't have any children attending Lakewood, but I can tell you about the school, its teachers, and kids. It's a big part of [our community]."

While this thesis writer has reviewed what literature and research have said about students forming relationships with their teachers, we must also review the importance of students forming and enriching relationships with their peers and how these relationships contribute to a student's well-being and academic success. Most would agree that few things impacted their school lives as much as their relationships with their peers—friends, acquaintances, or otherwise. Peer relationships play an important role in children's school lives, and relationships with peers become even more influential as children enter adolescence (*Positive Peer Relationships*, 2019). Research on positive peer relationships often distinguishes between friendship and peer acceptance. High-quality friendships involve not only companionship, but also caring, validation, and support. In addition to spending time together, good friends feel comfortable opening up to each other and are motivated to resolve conflicts that arise. Peer acceptance, sometimes referred to by researchers as popularity, focuses on how much students like or like to spend time with their classmates, and has been found to affect students' sense of belonging in school and their academic achievement (*Positive Peer Relationships*, 2019). According to *Positive Peer Relationships* (2019), both quantity and quality of relationships matter for adolescents. Students with a large number of friends at school are

less likely to be lonely, and more likely to like and be engaged at school. Peer acceptance, friendship, and friendship quality all matter in terms of reducing an adolescent's chance of loneliness. Positive peer relationships also help make adolescents more resilient, even when they face difficulties at home, speaking to the earlier point of being able to air their problems, concerns, and experiences and problem-solve with their peers. The author of this thesis wondered if there was a certain number of friends that students should try to obtain. Being a somewhat shy, introverted teen, I had smaller groups of friends with small numbers of peers in each group. *Positive Peer Relationships* (2019) assured this author that in fact, having just one close friend can be enough to protect kids from the negative effects of being treated badly by other peers. Similarly, research shows that adolescents with at least one reciprocal friendship have higher self-esteem than those without one; on the other hand, having greater numbers of friendships doesn't seem to further increase self-esteem (*Positive Peer Relationships*, 2019). Linking together the earlier topics of student physical health and emotional health, *Positive Peer Relationships* (2019) found that positive peer support also predicts adolescents' health and well-being and their emotional and behavioral engagement with school, an effect that increases over time.

### ***High School Elective Courses***

It is common to infer that teachers want their classes to be engaging, especially teachers who will mostly, if not wholly, teach elective courses. These courses are not specifically required by the school, district, or state standards, but school courses that a student can select from among a list of alternative courses. Although students have the freedom to decide which

elective courses they take, they are required to take a specific amount of elective classes for course credit as a district graduation requirement.

### ***History of Elective Courses in United States Education***

This section will cover: the history of elective courses in United States public education, different types of elective courses most commonly offered in the United States, benefits of electives to students, as well as setbacks of offering elective courses in high schools across the United States.

To understand the present-day offering of elective courses in high schools, it is important to review the origins of elective courses. The origins of elective course discussion and implementation can be traced back to 1893, when the influential Committee of Ten, a blue-chip panel of educators, issued a report proposing that all public high-school students receive a strong, liberal-arts education (Mirel, 2020). In 1918, another National Education Association (NEA) group, this one called the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, issued a manifesto that turned the fundamental belief of the Committee of Ten on its head (Mirel, 2020). It called for expanded and differentiated high-school programs, which it believed would more effectively serve the new and diverse high-school student population (Mirel, 2020). Jeffrey Mirel (2020) summarized this commission's final report, the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education proponents believed that requiring all students to follow the same academic course of study increased educational inequality. The proposed solution to these problems was curricular differentiation, a policy that allowed students to follow programs and take courses suited to their interests, abilities, and needs. As a result, the Cardinal Principles team endorsed a new "comprehensive high school," which would offer students a wide range

of courses for them to choose from to add to their education. High schools during this period seemed torn between balancing the important aspects of both the Committee of Ten and Cardinal Principles. The schools that chose to do this maintained strong academic programs, but they also offered enough vocational and elective courses for students to have some curricular choice. In effect, the nation's urban high schools, which served increasing numbers of young people from poor and immigrant families, were arguably providing the best academic and vocational education available in the United States at that time (Mirel, 2020).

Following the Committee of Ten and the unveiling of the Cardinal Principles, high schools saw academic course registration fall to 62 percent (Mirel, 2020). The most telling aspect of that shift: Health and Physical Education (PE) courses increased from 4.9 to 11.5 percent of total course-taking nationwide (Mirel, 2020). These courses were entertaining, relevant to young people's lives outside of school, required little or no homework, and, for PE, were amenable to high student/teacher ratios (Mirel, 2020). Over the next half century, health and PE was the fastest-growing segment of course-taking. By 1973 it was second only to English in the percentage of student course-taking nationwide (Mirel, 2020). Mirel (2020) went on to explain that as these less-demanding, nonintellectual courses proliferated, a new "movement" was born, the Life Adjustment Movement, a federally sponsored curriculum reform effort that began soon after World War II. According to Charles Prosser, the father of Life Adjustment, only 20 percent of American young people could master academic content; another 20 percent were capable of doing vocational subjects; and the remaining 60 percent needed courses in subjects like health and PE, effective use of leisure time, driver training, and knowledge of such "problems of American democracy" as dating, buying on credit, and renting an apartment

(Mirel, 2020). During this time, Cooper et al. (2005) noted that connections were made through the recognition that not all students were immediately college bound and that they might hold interests outside of traditional core subjects. As a result, workforce development programs and industry co-op programs were implemented. These developments are still much in place today in many schools across America.

Following the Great Depression, when the youth labor market declined, increasing high school enrollment, between 1950 and 1970, the number of students in grades 9 through 12 more than doubled, from 6,397,000 to 14,337,000, from 76.1 to 92.2 percent of 14–17-year-olds (Mirel, 2020). Citing these enrollment increases, defenders of the comprehensive high school, primarily school superintendents and professors in schools and colleges of education, declared that the institution was functioning well (Mirel, 2020). Clearly, they argued, the relevant, less-demanding curriculum was attracting larger numbers of students and keeping them in school longer. As one education leader in Detroit put it, “We are trying to keep the dropout rate down and keep youngsters in school as long as possible by offering interesting, attractive, and constructive courses” (Mirel, 2020, p.6). In the midst of this timeframe, sociologist James Coleman identified this generation of students as “the adolescent society.” In his now-classic 1961 study *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education*, Coleman identified a series of problems that resulted from the separate society that high school had created for teenagers. Most troublesome, he said, was that within the new adolescent society peer groups often superseded adult authority in shaping behavior (Mirel, 2020). Mirel (2020) offered his perspective that in a sense, the rise of this important peer group dovetailed nicely with the changes that educators had introduced in high schools

over the previous 30 years: namely, downplaying the role of academic subjects and promoting the subjects and activities that appealed to teenage interests and lifestyles. The confluence of institutional and cultural anti-intellectualism, which was incessantly reinforced by similar messages in films, television, and music, would bedevil American high schools for the rest of the century (Mirel, 2020). Offering these appealing courses in high school also impacted school leaders offering academic credit for other elective courses offered by the school, such as providing English credit for students working on the school newspaper or yearbook. Mirel (2020) felt that this action further diminished the role that academic courses played in high-school education.

One last important element to the history of high school elective courses during the 1960s and 1970s was the shift of ownership to deciding and selecting courses from the guidance counselors and other educational professionals onto the students and their parents and guardians. Mirel (2020) pointed out that this shift greatly expanded student choice and enabled educators to duck accusations that they were responsible for reproducing inequality, since course and program selection now rested with students and their parents rather than with educators. As detailed by Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David Cohen in *The Shopping Mall High School* (1985), the schools came to resemble education shopping malls, with students searching for bargains (that is, courses that were easy, relevant, and satisfied graduation requirements). The thesis author drew the following parallel from the past elective course experience to how students select their elective courses today. In this author's experience, students tend to select their elective courses, or any courses they take for that matter, on the following factors: class and teacher difficulty/rigor, classes they have in common with their

friends, classes to achieve the credit they need without needing to take the purely academic courses to fulfill a graduation requirement (taking yearbook or photography to receive an art credit while not being enrolled in a purely art class). In many schools across the country, graduation standards are in place to ensure that students are receiving the most well-rounded education they can overall. Often this is shown by schools setting up different categories by subject area which students need to take and successfully pass enough core and elective classes to receive those course credits toward their graduation standards.

During the Reagan administration, the elective course pendulum swung back. The administration's 1983 manifesto, *A Nation at Risk*, reintroduced several key ideas from the report of the Committee of Ten, which assumed that academic courses had greater educational value than other courses. *A Nation at Risk* decried the "cafeteria style curriculum" of American high schools, rejecting curricular differentiation, the animating idea of Cardinal Principles (Mirel, 2020). By 1986, 45 states and the District of Columbia had raised high-school graduation requirements, 42 had increased math requirements, and 34 had boosted science requirements. These changes reduced the choices that students could make in their course selections and thus marked a dramatic shift away from the policies of the previous half-century (Mirel, 2020). In most urban high schools, there are minimal or no electives, music, or arts courses in the freshman and sophomore years. Only in the last two years of high school, after the standard tests are over, does a period become available for electives. But sadly, any elective that requires continuity and a progression of skills, like music and the arts, are no longer possible (Russell, 2017).



Mirel (2020, p.9) wrote in favor of this shift, citing an educational crisis that has been apparent for many years. He went on to say that high schools have been “selling students short” for decades, offering too many options and too many watered-down courses. They have sustained a culture of low expectations on both sides of the teacher’s desk”. The author of this thesis disagrees with this statement. Many elective classes, especially Career and Technical Experience (CTE) courses maintain a high level of rigor because they are taught by educators who have come directly from the industry and still have close ties to the work and relationships made in those industries. CTE courses prepare students for life after high school. Students in these classes get their hands on equipment that is used in the industry as a stepping stone to lead them to a potential career. All this aside from the fact that many states carry statewide teaching standards that must be included in these elective courses in order to maintain potential funding and to show student mastery of the objectives of taking that elective course. This author believes that with the expectations of standards and rigor in place today, that students are getting a very high level of concentrated experiences in the elective courses they choose to take in their high school careers.

### ***Types of Elective Courses***

Where does that leave us today? Devotta (2020) describes that public high schools in the United States offer a variety of elective courses and the availability of these courses depends on each particular school's financial or funding situation. Some states and schools require students to earn a few credits of classes considered electives, this commonly applies to foreign language and physical education. Devotta (2022, p.1) broke down the offered electives into the main categories listed below:

- Visual arts- drawing, sculpture, painting, photography, film studies, and art history
- Performing arts- choir, drama, band, orchestra, dance, and instruments
- Vocational education- woodworking, metalworking, computer-aided drafting, automobile repair, and agriculture.
- Computer science/information technology - word processing, computer programming, graphic design, computer club, web design and web programming, video game design,
- music production, and film production
- Journalism/publishing- school newspaper, yearbook, television production
- Foreign languages - French, German, Italian, and Spanish are the most common.
- Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Latin, and Korean are less common.
- Business Education- Accounting, Data Processing, Entrepreneurship, Finance, Business, Information and Communication Technology, Management, Marketing, and Secretarial
- Family and consumer science/health- nutrition, nursing, culinary, child development, and additional physical education and weight training classes
- Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps and gun clubs and shooting teams
- Drivers' education- Some schools allow a student to take it during school as a regular course for credit and in other schools, they offer the classes after school.

The number of elective courses students take varies by district and grade level, as do the courses offered. But the classes students choose can help communicate their unique academic

journey, says Jenn Curtis, founder of FutureWise Consulting and co-author of “The Parent Compass” (Tetreault, 2022). To put it simply, electives are any classes that aren’t one of the “core” subjects. The core classes, as mentioned above, are language arts/English, math, science, foreign language, and social studies/history. Most classes within those fields wouldn’t be considered an elective. For instance, both Honors English and Advanced Placement English Literature are core classes, and generally wouldn’t be considered electives (Tahraoui, 2016). Of course there will still be gaps in the desire of what is taught to high school students versus what students emerge from high school knowing. I’m sure many people have joked alongside friends, stating, “*well, I wish we would have learned THAT in high school!*” In a 2018 web post, Slauer compiled a list of things individuals wished they had been taught how to do in high school, most of which fell under a general label of “practical knowledge.” Slauer (2018, p.1) stated, “There are many great high schools around the country, but few of them teach those subjects students could really use once they graduate.” While much weight is placed on standard subjects such as math and science, there should also be an urgency around teaching kids practical advice that will help them ease into adulthood. Many of the compiled list contained topics involving money: Learning how to budget and save money would lead to students potentially being smarter about their finances in the future. Teaching students what taxes are and how to pay them, due to the fact that many Americans use the help of professionals and professional services to complete their taxes. Slauer (2018) points out, “As such an integral, unavoidable part of adulthood, taxes should be part of the high school curriculum” (p.1) How to write a check and balance a checkbook could also prove useful for managing their money as they start to make a name for themselves in the workforce and in society. Learning information about

loans and how interest works are also important skills that the average American must know in order to make good personal choices into adulthood, especially when it comes to paying off things like student loans. An understanding of how interest works from a young age would help students manage their money — and their debt — better. How to build credit and properly use credit cards. Having a credit card is necessary toward building good credit, and if students were taught this in high school they would be more inclined to get one, understand how to use it and start building credit when they are young to set themselves up for a more successful financial future. Some additional items from the list How insurance works. Insurance is a daunting concept that many people avoid, but that is necessary in myriad situations. Slauer (2018, p.1) commented, “If teachers broke it down to high school students early, they would have a better grasp of it when they need it.” Relative to insurance, deductibles are crucial to understand when it comes to insurance, and many people don't know how to choose the best insurance plan for themselves as a result. How to buy a car or a house. When students dream of getting their first car, they often don't know what it entails besides forking over the money. But there are many mistakes that can be made when buying a car, as well as when buying a house, which is why students should know how it all works ahead of time. Related to purchasing a home, a mortgage is an important part of becoming a homeowner which involves interest and taxes as well. Tips on how one is assembled and how to pay one off would help in the long run. The last two items on Slauer's (2018) list include routine life events that all Americans may come into contact with frequently throughout their lives: How to write a resume and cover letter. Both pieces are some of the most important aspects of a job application. Knowing how to write a great resume and cover letter can make or break a job opportunity, and can even make or

break your chances of getting an interview. Learning how to vote and how politics work, both on a local and national level is beneficial knowledge for students because often young people don't realize the power their vote truly holds. In this day and age, learning about mental health in addition to physical education, about managing and maintaining their mental health, as well as helping others that may be struggling is important as all students will grow older and interact with people on a daily basis. These skills can help themselves, as well as others, cope with daily activities and events in their lives. Many of the topics included in Slauer's (2018) list are being addressed in today's various business and economics elective courses. Over time, these topics have grown and changed with the growing and changing economic, social, and political climate of our nation.

### ***Benefits of Elective Courses***

Education experts say high school electives – classes students choose that allow them to explore beyond the core curriculum – are one way to help high schoolers figure out what matters to them (Tetreault, 2022). Psychologist and coach, Regine Muradian, who works with students on their learning and study skills says electives can help ease a student's schedule with a course they may enjoy. By offering students the time to focus on new and emerging passions and talents, they can also help point to future careers. "Electives can also increase a student's desire to learn," she said (Tetreault, 2022, p.1). Electives provide an opportunity for students to pursue more specialized interests outside the core, and explore a variety of different academic pursuits. For instance, students may be able to further pursue the arts by taking an elective course in photography, ceramics, or drama. Similarly, a student may be able to explore their passion for writing from a different angle by enrolling in a journalism or creative writing class.

Electives are a way to either try something completely new, or to further develop an interest (Tahraoui, 2016). Electives can provide many basic mental skills and perks that students might not find in a regular classroom like the ability to express creativeness (Clark, 2018).

Characteristics like this can be essential in many common lines of work, such as the obvious theater of course, but also in art or design, or other careers that require unique ideas and creative thinking. Clark (2018) indicated an additional bonus of elective courses is that a student may leave the realm of academics and look forward to future jobs or a college education. Electives show students what each career path may entail as well as lets them choose which ones they might want to take. That way, even if a student decides that their elective is dull or does not want to do it for a career, they always have a permanent skill to carry on to other classes or even to a job. Not all electives are for everyone but with such a large selection to choose from and so many benefits to them, it would be a waste to not try as many as possible. Students who discover academic interests in high school and college are better prepared for satisfying careers. Interest is a powerful motivational process that energizes learning and guides academic and career trajectories (Renninger & Hidi, 2015). At the very least, elective programs can play a large role in a school's goals in preparing our students for college and career. Being able to select classes based on credit requirement and interest reflects the same process that they will see again in college (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018). This author has noticed a positive "push" to teach more topics in elective classes that focus on employability and teamwork skills that prepare students for working with others, higher education, or the workplace to make their post-high school path a little smoother. It is enjoyable that students can make something and see their results right away, or make

something and receive feedback on their work knowing how they might make some changes to make something even better the next time around. Often in elective courses where hands-on skills are required, skills gradually build upon themselves, making it evident for students to see how far they have come learning the new skill, and how much they have improved within the duration of the elective course. When students are interested in an academic topic, they are more likely to go to class, pay attention, become engaged, take more courses, as well as process information effectively and ultimately perform well (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Having the opportunity to develop personal passions makes for a more meaningful and impactful education, says Cindy Chanin, founder of Rainbow EDU Consulting (Tetreault, 2022). Chanin went on to say “Electives relate and build upon an interest and underscore who the student is and what they are about,”(Tetreault, 2022). In the early high school years, “students don’t always know what they want to do, which is natural, but this is a time for exploration.” “In the later years, 11th and 12th grades, students start to hone in on their interests, and electives can play a significant role in completing the picture of a student’s academic story” (Tetreault, 2022, p.1). In some cases, electives can bolster a student’s college application. Some students may use their elective slots to dive deeper into subjects beyond graduation requirements. This can open up doors for students that they didn’t even know were possibilities to earn a livelihood after high school. As students begin thinking about college, they can fill those elective slots with honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes in their particular field of interest. For example, students interested in going into the medical profession might take advanced biology or anatomy. But honors or AP courses aren’t the only electives that can build on a student’s core skills. Classes in subjects like debate, photography, robotics, world languages, theater, speech,

leadership or music can all enhance students' high school education. (Tetreault, 2022).

Additionally, students can also take electives that provide them with a break from an otherwise rigorous schedule, to pursue interests they otherwise might not. Even if a student doesn't plan to pursue a career as an artist, taking an art class in high school can be an enjoyable and enriching experience nonetheless. This option is particularly suited to students in freshman and sophomore years, as taking these kinds of electives early on can help students discover new interests they may continue to pursue (Tahraoui, 2016). While all elective course offerings may not lead directly into a career for all students, it is important to keep in mind that a main bonus is that students can really learn a nice skill that they can take with them out of high school (Clark, 2018). This author believes that an alternative perk of elective courses is to give students a break from their core classes and help students find what they really like in life, or, what they don't like. Trying different elective courses in high school should help students figure out what classes they would like to take more of in high school, as well as which classes they might not want to take. This author is partial to the elective courses that allow students to get their hands on industry-specific equipment so they can really picture themselves using the software or equipment in their daily lives, or at the very least, experiment with something they might not usually get the chance to experience for themselves. Clark (2018) felt that elective courses have less rules and requirements for their classes due to not being part of the core classes. He felt that allows teachers to have less restrictions on how they teach their subject. This led him to believe that students can also utilize the lack of requirements to allow themselves to experiment with the class, while still juggling the pressure and struggle of academics. The author of this thesis disagrees with Clark's initial commentary here. Based on personal teaching



experience in the state of Minnesota, there are still state standards that must be taught and demonstrated they have been learned by students in all elective courses to ensure that academic rigor is being met across the state. There has been much time and reflection dedicated to ensuring these state standards are in place and that students are capable of demonstrating their knowledge of these standards within my elective classes each school year for each elective class being taught. Electives can do double duty as vehicles for core content standards. Teachers can help ensure that electives are not thought of as inferior to core classes by guaranteeing that they help carry the weight of teaching literacy along with core classes (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018, p.4). Elective teachers can provide evidence of the learning happening by doing three key things:

1. Encourage annotation when students read texts related to the elective topic.
2. Utilize pre- and post-assessments to show growth in related informational reading comprehension.
3. Fold in writing and oral presentations to help students communicate the elective's content.

Yearbook, robotics, film society, photography, world languages, theater, speech and debate, music appreciation, and current events—all of these classes can tap into reading, writing, listening, and speaking. And all of them attract a variety of students while adding a self-selected layer of engagement to those students' learning of core standards (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018). It comes down to the statistics. According to a profile of SAT data found in research performed by Chen (2020, p.3),

“Students with coursework/experience in music performance and music appreciation scored higher on the SAT: students in music performance scored 57 points higher on the verbal and 41 points higher on the math, and students in music appreciation scored 63 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on the math, than did students with no arts participation.”

So, while scoring higher on standardized tests is evident here, it may offset the weighted grading theme reviewed in the next subsection of this literature review.

Elective teachers play an important role in helping students learn, focus, and achieve. Elective classes reveal the skill sets of some students that might not be obvious in their other classes, helping them see their strengths and affording them opportunities to be of value to their classmates. Reaching performance goals or learning a new language requires students to be organized, to set goals, and to evaluate if they’re meeting those goals (Rambo, 2021). I’ll know that my job is done right each time a student comes up to me and says, “We were talking about this in history class,” or “Can I go ask my math teacher if I did this right?” (p.4). The students are making the connections between the arts and their academic classes, and I no longer feel like I’m stranded on my little elective island (Rambo, 2021, p.4).

Brady and Post (2020, p.5) made a stark proposal: Make every required course at the high school level elective. And if, say, five or more students submit a request for a class not offered, work with them to design and offer it. Combining this proposal with Clark’s (2018) beliefs about elective courses having less rules and restrictions, educators could be in a very unique position to meet students where they are at and teach them what they want to learn and are more naturally curious about. Brady and Post (2020) have strong feelings about what

kids should learn, which is why they would choose to put them in charge of their own education. Experience assures them that students will get where they need to go, and do so more efficiently than will otherwise be possible. Experience also tells Brady and Post (2020) that won't happen as long as students are fenced in by a random mix of courses required because they've always been required, by courses based on elitist conceits, by courses shaped by unexamined assumptions. The core's boundaries are far too narrow to accommodate the collective genius of adolescents. Taking a look around at the problems today's students face and how they work out solutions to those problems is staggering; both that these types of problems and situations exist, but that adolescents are resilient and brilliant to come up with solutions to solve them. A recent Gallup poll of a half-million students in 37 states found that the longer kids stay in school, the less engaged they become. That's the reverse of what ought to be happening (Brady & Post, 2020). To combat this disengagement, Brady and Post (2020) suggested project learning, but project learning with a twist—moving beyond textbook and lecture abstractions and putting school subjects to meaningful, real-world work. The school and its site model the larger world in every important respect. If teachers treated it as a hands-on laboratory and had students use math, science, language arts, and social studies to describe, analyze, and improve the school, disengagement would either end completely or be radically reduced. The core subjects would be better taught, and learners would take with them a comprehensive sense-making template they'd use for the rest of their lives (Brady & Post, 2020). This is effectively how many elective courses are taught today, offering many student-choice opportunities for hands-on learning and experiences in their classes. In a nationwide survey Wolpert-Gawron (2018, p.2) conducted of sixth through 12th graders, they asked what

engaged students the most as learners. Across the nation, student choice ranked high in results. And according to education researcher Robert Marzano, choice “has also been linked to increases in student effort, task performance, and subsequent learning.” Brady and Post (2020) went on to boast that their idea for more hands-on learning will eventually trigger a “performance explosion.”

The fact is, while many consider electives the “B story” in a school, they can, in fact, set the tone for a school and play a huge role in student engagement. And because they are highly engaging, electives play a role in keeping our students in school—especially those reluctant learners and ones who struggle academically (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018). Wolpert-Gawron (2018) went on to explain that this very quality—student choice—seems to be one of the factors that make electives vulnerable. The vulnerability aspect came from the idea that students get to choose the elective classes they want to take in their course schedule. Classes that remain unchosen, or chosen in too little number to run a full section of that course can have greater long-term consequences for teachers and students. If select elective courses are not chosen term after term, year after year, they may end up written out of the elective course offerings for the school. This decline of elective courses would trickle down to the teachers that teach those elective courses, causing them to need to fill their schedules teaching more sections of other courses, or to forgo employment opportunities where the elective courses they teach are in lesser demand. Electives matter—and they matter most when we become full participants in the professional learning communities of our schools (Rambo, 2021). If the reasons uncovered above do not explain the full benefits of offering elective courses to high school students, in research completed by Chen (2020), elective courses are not only shown to benefit children and

students academically; these courses are proven to help students socially and behaviorally as well. According to World Music Central and the Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, “Secondary students who participated in band or orchestra reported the lowest lifetime and current use of all substances (alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs).”

### ***Setbacks of Offering Elective Courses***

While researching what literature had to say about high school students finding success in elective courses, there was not a lot of research or articles discussing negative aspects of offering high school elective courses. More research is needed in this area to provide a more well-rounded area of study for the topic.

As the demands and requirements for high school students are shifted towards core classes and standardized tests, such as English, math, and science, high schools across the country are losing money and funds for elective courses. As a result, programs in the arts, music, and other creative realms are dwindling (Chen, 2020). According to the elective music association World Music Central, another cause of the declining elective courses is due to the increased testing demands that are required by “No Child Left Behind,” in addition to other state and local assessment tests. As schools are in danger of being closed or losing funding if their students do not pass assessment tests, schools across the country are dropping elective courses in order to more strongly focus on core classes and test prep courses (Chen, 2020). However, based on statistics and information from World Music Central, while programs are declining, a Gallup poll in 1993 revealed that over 95% of Americans think electives, specifically music, are essential and beneficial for a child’s development (Chen, 2020, p.3). Tahraoui (2016, p.4) described one negative aspect of high school elective courses as follows: Although there

are many benefits to enrolling in an elective course, one reason students may be wary of doing so is that electives are typically not weighted—that is, on a 4.0 scale, an A in an elective course is typically worth 4 points, rather than the 4.5 or 5 points that honors and Advanced Placement classes are sometimes worth. While Tahraoui (2016, p.4) mentioned the non-elective grade weighting, they went on to mention that additionally, GPA and class rank should not be the only factors students consider when developing your class schedule. Focusing solely on these considerations when choosing classes can take a lot of the joy out of school, and prevent students from pursuing true interests. Students should note that college admissions officers consider the context of their GPA/class rank when evaluating this component of their application. If the reason their GPA is slightly lower than it could've been is because they might have taken classes they were genuinely passionate about and enjoyed, colleges are unlikely to hold it against them in the admissions process. Suffice it to say, that this could be one additional element students would need to consider and or defend when applying to post-high school educational programs.

Even though students often get to choose their own high school elective courses they take, some students still do poorly, or even fail these elective courses. Editorial Staff (2017, p1) highlights seven reasons why high school students might fail their elective courses:

1. The wrong program. Quite often parents and students feel pressure to enroll in the most highly academic programs available. In reality, many highly intelligent students are very successful in more vocational programs and can earn a very respectable income after graduating from community college or an apprenticeship program.

2. Substance abuse issues. Amazingly, many parents and students don't make the connection between substance use and failure. Parents are often unaware of their teen's use of alcohol or drugs or they fail to connect what they imagine to be "social use" with failure. Likewise, many teens who use alcohol or drugs believe themselves to be merely using socially and do not see how regular use can trigger depression or sap motivation.
3. Peer influences. Who a person chooses to associate himself or herself with says more than many young people think. Over time the wrong crowd can significantly change a student's choices about the best use of free time, the desirability of a high school diploma, or even how to interact with authority figures.
4. Safety issues. Bullying in schools is as prevalent as it ever was. A student who develops an attendance problem or illness that keeps him or her home may be trying to avoid someone. For many students, there is such an overwhelming feeling of failure associated with being a victim that they are unwilling to talk to parents, even though they are regularly communicative.
5. Over-committed. It is difficult to do many things well. Some students try to work full-time hours outside of school and still find time for family and friends. This can be a recipe for disaster. It is far better to pare down one's responsibilities to a manageable number in order to do fewer things well.
6. Inadequate rest and nutrition. Many of us have been known to "burn the candle at both ends" in cases of necessity, but it is shocking how many students routinely deprive themselves of a good night's sleep in order to get some extra time video-gaming, talking

on the phone or using social media. Students who routinely cheat themselves out of a good night's sleep are too tired to function at school or develop attendance issues.

7. Learning Differences. There are many high school dropouts with better than average intelligence. In many cases, these individuals can succeed when information is presented to them differently or they are allowed different ways of demonstrating their knowledge about the material they are learning.

Joseph (2021) thoroughly explained 20 different reasons why high school students fail and solutions for them. The most poignant and relevant to why students may still fail their chosen elective courses could be simple laziness. This is one of the major reasons for failure. When a student is lazy, they may find it hard to get up and do important things like reading the notes given by the teacher, completing assignments, and carrying out research to expand their knowledge about that particular subject. Some students even find it difficult to attend their classes regularly. Procrastination and lack of time management skills also can play a part in students failing their classes. When students wait until the last minute to complete assignments, most often they end up with little or no quality, which typically results in poor performance and grades. Overconfidence is a more subtle connection to student failure. As much as confidence is good, a student must be very careful not to cross the thin line from confidence to overconfidence. It is one of the common attributes that make students fail. The reason for this is that a student might become so full of themselves that they miss out tiny details that are crucial.

Overconfident students sometimes think they know more than their teachers. While this might be true in some cases, an overly confident student will not believe he is wrong when



he is. Just because a student may be brilliant doesn't mean they will notice every twist to a particular question or topic. Missing enough small details could result in a student assuming they know all there is to know about their chosen elective course subject, ignoring further information and instruction, thereby failing the class due to applying their actual limited knowledge. Opposite of overconfidence is low self-esteem, or students that find it difficult to believe in themselves at all. Joseph (2021) also defines students simply lacking interest in their course, or having a mindset of failure before they even set foot inside the classroom. Joseph (2021) cited over-committed students as the result of some student failure. For example, if a student decides to take many core Advanced Placement classes along with their couple of required elective courses, there can be a connection made between the amount of time and effort the student will choose to spend on those classes versus elective courses, typically valued at less credits toward graduation. Joseph (2021) also indicated that friends and friend groups have the power to either discourage or motivate you. If your friends don't care whether you pass or fail your classes, you will care less about your grades too. So, what other elements can become barriers to student success? Duckworth et al. (2019) summarized evidence that nearly all students experience conflict between academic goals that they value in the long run and nonacademic goals that they find more gratifying in the moment. Most students need to exercise self-control to succeed in academic contexts because students recognize the value of academic work for their future, but in the moment in which they are completing it, they typically do not enjoy it (Duckworth et al., 2019). Limiting distractions is another element that many authors referenced through this author's literature review Duckworth et al. (2019, p.378) commented, "Although the academic duties of students are quite similar across generations,

the digital distractions that now compete with them have evolved dramatically in recent years.” In studies Duckworth et al. (2019, p.378) covered in their research, students reported spending more than seven hours per day on their personal cell phones. In another study, 92% of students admitted to sending or receiving a text message during class. Students aged 13 to 18 now spend more than five and half hours per day using entertainment media, including television, video games, laptops, cell phones, and tablets, *excluding* reading time. Often, when students are on screens, they are also multitasking with academic work. While doing homework, for example, many teenagers simultaneously check their social network accounts (50%), watch television (51%), and send and receive text messages (60%) (Common Sense Media 2015, p.378). Although the majority of teenagers believe that multitasking has no impact on their work (Common Sense Media 2015), in fact, multitasking typically slows learning (Bowman et al. 2010, Grace-Martin & Gay 2001, Kraushaar & Novak 2010, van der Schuur et al. 2015). So, why do students do it? Technologic and social media distractions provide an escape from academic work. One could connect the concept of being successful as a student today to having self-control and responsible use of technology, especially social media, in regards to being able to know when is an appropriate time to use it and when it should be put away in lieu of completing assignments and preparing for tests and presentations. But the choice between schoolwork and easier, more immediately rewarding diversions is a perennial challenge for students. This may be why self-control predicts academic achievement at every level of schooling (Duckworth et al., 2019).

Student attendance is another element that contributes to student success. For students to succeed academically, they must be present and engaged at school. Nationwide,

approximately 6.8 million— or one in seven students miss 15 or more days during the school year. By most definitions, these students are considered ‘chronically absent.’ Research shows that chronic absenteeism can affect academic performance in later grades and is a key early warning sign that a student is more likely to drop out of high school (Rafa, 2017). Therefore, chronic absence is a proven sign of academic risk, as students who miss school are less likely to learn or understand material, and meet key academic milestones. Further, since students who already face significant academic challenges are disproportionately affected, persistent chronic absence has the potential to exacerbate the achievement gap (Rafa, 2017).

There is great potential to make headway in closing that gap, improving graduation rates and providing a higher-quality education to all students, if issues of chronic absenteeism are addressed effectively (Rafa, 2017). Of course chronic absenteeism has longer lasting effects in a student’s life. They are more likely to experience poverty and diminished health, and have an increased risk of being involved in the criminal justice system (Rafa, 2017). Although today’s students are highly ambitious, many students may not fulfill their expectations, not because they are unwilling to work hard for grades or believe that school is unimportant to their future lives, but because they lack important information that would help them form effective strategies for successfully navigating their educational experiences in high school and the transition process after graduation (Schneider et al., 2003).

It is important that students have some kind of idea what education is needed to get them where they want to go. Prior research clearly demonstrates that one important predictor of social mobility is how much schooling an adolescent expects to obtain (Schneider et al., 2003). Students who expect to attend college are more likely to graduate from high school and

enroll in postsecondary school than students with similar abilities and family background characteristics who expect to obtain only a high school diploma. Occupational aspirations are another component of ambition. When consistent with educational expectations, such aspirations demonstrate an adolescent's knowledge of the world of work and educational pathways to different occupations (Schneider et al., 2003). Not knowing how much education is needed for a given occupation makes it difficult to construct realistic plans for reaching one's goals. Ambitions formed in adolescence can have lifelong significance, influencing career choices as well as future earnings (Schneider et al., 2003). When researchers have examined student course choices, some have concluded that students have little action in determining what classes they will take in high school. Clearly schools play a role in course selection by determining what courses will be offered, establishing the procedures for allowing students into certain courses, and creating a climate whereby teachers and counselors are encouraged to adopt either a universal (advocating college for all students) or a selective (recommending college for a chosen few) approach to student counseling and academic planning (Schneider et al., 2003). But if researchers place students entirely on the receiving end of school policies, teacher and counselor predilections, and parent influence, they underestimate the role students play in their own educational careers (Schneider et al., 2003).

### ***Student Success in Elective Courses***

#### ***What Defines Student Success***

The definition of student success is vastly different depending on the lens you happen to be viewing "success" through. Administrators may see student success as mostly academic

success; passing grades, good school attendance, limited disciplinary interventions required, etc. While students see success as more social-emotional things like fitting in with their peers, earning a lot of wealth and material possessions. Ultimately, students and administrators don't always agree on what success looks like—and this disconnect can prevent advisors from supporting students in the way they need to be supported (Nazerian, 2020).

In this author's opinion, this would not be a thorough literature review if one did not look up the definition of the word in question. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines success as the, "degree or measure of succeeding, favorable or desired outcome; also: the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence" (Cho, 2018, p.1).

The ambiguity of the term "success" can lead high school students and their parents to define it in a number of ways. Whether it be when getting straight A's, making the varsity team, or gaining acceptance into the top Ivy League school. How do high school students actually define the success that everyone is trying to achieve? (Santoro, 2013, p.1). With numerous self-help books and articles outlining the process of being successful or examining the genetics behind one's own accomplishments, being successful seems simple, almost inevitable. However, if everyone has an individual goal that they are aiming to meet, how can anyone actually define success for any individual, other than themselves? (Santoro, 2013). In terms of high school students, from an educator's perspective, success may be when their students all pass their classes, or get A's on the final. Standardized test scores are often used to measure students' academic success. Although factors that affect student success involve teaching techniques, classroom dynamics, and study skills, there are other factors outside the classroom

that could influence students' overall academic performance. Oftentimes, these factors are overlooked or easily deemed uncontrollable by educators. Prior studies have identified and examined such factors; however, Chew et al. (2020) used the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to analyze and display spatial patterns of these external factors, such as household income and average household size, which were not previously possible. Utilizing GIS and variations of demographic and lifestyle data allows us to take a closer look into understanding the factors that positively or negatively correlate with academic achievement. The results of their study indicated that two parent households and spending on health insurance had a positive effect on student academic achievement. In addition, students that were surrounded by educational businesses scored higher on the SAT. They also learned that diversity, household size, and multigenerational households had more negative impacts on students' SAT scores. But often, there are no standardized tests for elective high school courses, so there is not much, if any data from testing to bolster or deflate any of the mentioned factors Chew et al. mentioned that were used in their study.

To a parent, success could be when their high schooler makes the honor roll. Students' peers may decide that success is growing up to be rich and famous, while others disagree because they think that they will be successful when they have a family and established career (Santoro, 2013, p.1). "For students, success consists not just of good grades and steady progress toward graduation, but a holistic sense of fulfillment," Annie Yi, Associate Director of Product Marketing at EAB (Nazerian, 2020). The point is, there is no right or wrong in defining success. The subjective term is different for each person in their lifetime as they strive for different goals. You may view success differently from your parents and friends, and vice versa.

The important thing to remember is to not let anyone bring others down because of “success” or “failure”. Success can equate to many different things, but only the individual can determine whether they have truly been successful, and know what is best for themselves on their journey (Santoro, 2013). While the research above makes its way toward an understanding of how to define success, Messersmith (2007, p.1) felt that we must “redefine what student success means beyond the acquisition of basic skills, support the time it takes to experience success, and develop sophisticated ways to measure it.” Messersmith (2007) also reminded us that Philosophers have debated for centuries about what it is to be an educated person. He is not convinced we can agree on what it is to be successfully educated, but we must individually have some vision in mind if we are to be able to determine whether we have hit the mark. In his research, Messersmith (2007) even extends his definition of student success to encompass a student’s life after graduation as the “ability of a student to support himself or herself in this society after completing the educational process. Our value and belief systems are strongly based on economics and accumulation of material wealth.” While he considers post-graduation factoring into student success, Messersmith (2007) was also quick to point out the ability to support oneself economically is a goal of the educational process, but it is not the only goal. If it were, we would not need schools; we could easily achieve success by matching students with professional mentors and letting them learn on the job. In their research, Cho (2018) highlighted the differences between three different student profiles and what success could look like to them. In Cho’s opinion (2018), the word success is typically associated with wealth, power, and luxury. People like Bill Gates, LeBron James, Mark Cuban, Jay-Z, and many others among the world’s “elite” are often associated with such concepts. But how does this correlate

to students? Does that mean that a student driving a Ferrari is better than a student who has a 4.0 and 1600 on the SAT or a student who's an All-American athlete? The commonality between all of those three respective students is that habits were developed which allowed the growth of those students. So the question still remains: How does an ordinary student become successful? Stepping aside from the academic definition of student success (grades, GPA, attendance), Ken Messersmith (2007, p.3) suggested that student success could shift its meaning for students to have the ability to:

- understand the rights and responsibilities that allow us to function as contributing members of our democracy.
- cooperate and collaborate with others in work, social, and family settings.
- make independent decisions based on reasoning supported by facts gathered and analyzed by students.
- relate in a positive and constructive manner with family members and other members of the world community.
- take responsibility for one's own actions and act supportively and compassionately toward others.

### ***Elective Course Selection: Intrinsic Motivation or Peer Acceptance***

Motivation is a primary area of research in psychology. Understanding why people engage in certain behaviors while avoiding others lies at the heart of such psychological inquiry (Ferrer-Caja and Weiss, 2002). Researchers have developed different theories and theoretical frameworks in their attempts to understand motivation. One particular type of motivation that



has been extensively studied is intrinsic motivation. *Intrinsic motivation* refers to doing an activity for its own sake; in contrast, *extrinsic motivation* refers to engaging in an activity to obtain some separate goal (Ferrer-Caja and Weiss, 2002). Ferrer-Caja and Weiss (2002) proposed a model that integrated social-contextual factors, individual differences, intrinsic motivation, and motivational outcomes. According to the model, social-contextual factors were directly related to individual factors and were indirectly related to intrinsic motivation and motivated behaviors like effort and persistence (Ferrer-Caja and Weiss, 2002). The author of this thesis has asked her elective course students their “why” for taking that specific course. The results ranged from wanting to take a class with their friends, needing to fulfill an art credit toward graduation requirements, wanting to learn more about the subject/interest, and their guidance counselor just “placed” them into the course without their consent. Asking students their “why” for enrolling in the course helped identify why they were there and their motivation for taking the course. Asking this question assumes that the students knew in fact why they chose and enrolled in the course in the first place, which may not always be the case. The study conducted by Ferrer-Caja and Weiss (2002) found that students in elective courses reported higher levels of self-determination, or more simply, the more self-control they have over their lives. In part, this is not surprising because those students made the choice of enrolling in those specific elective courses. It is possible, however, that they had more actual choices in those elective classes and that the teachers promoted more autonomy in these courses, as compared with mandatory core classes. Students with certain characteristics (i.e., high perceived competence or task-goal orientation) and motives (i.e., more intrinsic motives) might have chosen to enroll in these elective courses and, as a result, created an environment

that fostered learning and improvement and enhanced the students' initial characteristics (Ferrer-Caja and Weiss, 2002). Summarizing the Ferrer-Caja and Weiss (2002) research, the results of this study indicated that students who perceived that their classes emphasized learning and participation reported that they used effort and self-improvement as criteria to evaluate their success. These students felt that they participated in the classes for the enjoyment, fun, and excitement of the activities as well as to learn and improve their skills. Furthermore, as rated by their teachers, they put forth effort, chose challenging tasks, and persisted after failures. Students who viewed their class as emphasizing competition and norm-referenced criteria, in contrast, reported that they adopted social comparison as a means to assess their success. Finally, students who perceived that their teacher was flexible and allowed them to set goals and organize their own activities viewed themselves as having a choice in the class. Ultimately, Ferrer-Caja and Weiss (2002) stated that enhancing intrinsic motivation should, in turn, translate to students' choice of challenging tasks, and exerting greater effort and persistence in activities.

### ***Elective Academic and Social Need Fulfillment***

According to interviews with more than 200 students by EAB's Student Success Collaborative, "They [students] want to become strong candidates for careers in their chosen fields, emerge as competent and trustworthy adults, look back on their time without regrets, and make their mentors and family members proud" (Nazerian, 2020, p.1). Strong et al. (1995) extended the meaning of success as the idea that students who are engaged in their work are energized by four goals:— success, curiosity, originality, and satisfying relationships. These four

ideas help begin and maintain a student's path toward success while in school. If this author had to re-order those four ideas into a more natural sequential order, they might become first, curiosity, where one leads with a question they would like to have answered in their elective class of choice. Second, originality, where the student might take their exploration of their inquiries into their curiosity and question(s) they had in the first place. Through their exploration, a student may seek to have more original thoughts and opinions on what they are curious and learning about, causing them to seek their own meaning and understanding of what they are curious and learning about. As humans are social creatures, satisfying relationships would be a natural objective students would like to obtain while in their high school elective courses. Finding other peers with similar interests and viewpoints to whom they may relate to is an important step for adolescents during this time in their development. Once a student has taken an elective course and has had some of their questions answered, have learned more about their course subject, and feel they have an understanding of that subject, is where the fourth and final step can be placed, success. Deci and Ryan (2000) formally identified the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs, arguing that support for and satisfaction of these needs accounts for a broad variety of phenomena across developmental periods, cultures, and personality differences. Basic psychological needs were broadly defined as critical resources underlying individuals' natural inclination to move towards increasing self-organization, adjustment, and flourishing (Ryan 1995).

Messersmith (2007), Cho (2018), and Nazerian (2020) all recognized that to be successful in school and in life there are common things that define success. One item consistent with all the advice tips, guides, and lectures about success is having the right habits.

Habits are developed throughout the course of life, habits are the bricks that build the house of character, work ethic, confidence, and all those words used to describe successful people.

Habits are a reflection of your actions and your decisions in life, they are the foundation of being successful. You may be asking now, how do you develop successful habits? The answer to developing successful habits is to set clear, specific goals that are important to you, and lastly, create a pattern of consistency. The author of this thesis would like to point out that modern goals for today's teachers and students is for both parties to set goals, the teachers setting learning targets and student outcomes for the lessons and activities they oversee in their classrooms, while students set their own goals for the month, trimester, semester, or school year. This author also believes that students are often most successful when these goals are partnered with a created pattern of consistency. Oftentimes, this is enabled by the educator who ensures the daily and weekly agendas are written on a white board in the classroom, and/or posted to the school's learning management system. Establishing consistency can also be accomplished through these agendas, classroom routines, and the process of how things are accomplished in the classroom on a day-to-day basis. Cho (2018) explained that consistency results in success because being consistent allows one to rely on the experience and repetition of the habits that are being developed. It can be as complex as finding the cure for cancer or can be as simple as complementing one person every day, but being consistent will allow those successful habits to happen second nature. What can schools do to help ensure student success? Cooper et al. (2005 (p.4-5) provided a culmination of research concentrated from 1996 to 2002 stating the following elements that educators should do to help to ensure student success:

- Design a high quality, connected curriculum along a continuum across grade levels and subject levels that complements assessment
- Use a variety of instructional strategies that collectively encourage higher-level thinking skills
- Integrate assessment into instruction
- Continue professional development to incorporate technology into lesson plans
- Connect learning across grade levels and subject areas.
- Understand that small class sizes are most effective for "creating a climate of support and caring"
- Maintain a system of accountability
- Allow students to evaluate teachers periodically and permit staff members to evaluate the performance of the principal and the administration for the purpose of a complete accountability system
- Maintain and sustain a safe school climate with written plans that are articulated and available to the school community.

Neither principals nor teachers make successful schools by themselves. Students and parents also have to share the power, purpose, and pride of high performance. (Cooper et al., 2005)

### ***Students Finding Success in Elective Courses***

So going back to the question; How can a student be successful? Cho (2018) neatly packages up this question by stating that students must have the right habits and develop

patterns of consistency. These two factors are what separate most successful students from their peers, regardless of what field or goal they may be working towards.

Another facet of student success Cho (2018) pointed out is that as compensation for hard work, most high school students expect an extrinsic reward, one that is tangible or physically given to one for accomplishing something. College seems like a distant shore, therefore, it does not seem relevant. However, my outfit for tomorrow, the amount of likes on social media , hanging out with friends, and the instant gratification of receiving a text or snap are all immediate. When students are interested in an academic topic, they are more likely to go to class, pay attention, become engaged, take more courses, as well as process information effectively and ultimately perform well (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Students who discover academic interests in high school and college are better prepared for satisfying careers. Interest is a powerful motivational process that energizes learning and guides academic and career trajectories (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Both research thesis predicted that interest equates to traditional measures of educational success, including future course taking and performance. One way that teachers trigger interest is to structure learning activities in ways that catch their student's attention. They create lessons and activities that activate students' prior knowledge, while also encompassing their relative and relevant world and current experiences as much as possible. When these items have been taken into effect, the next reasonable step would be to try to personalize a student's existing individual interests by presenting instruction in the context of their interests. For example, to teach math to a musician, talk about the mathematical principles inherent in music (Harackiewicz, et al., 2016). If a student was able to have teaching related to their interests, one might assume that the student would be more

likely to understand the teachings much more than if they had not had the learning connected to something they already knew, understood, and were interested in. Student interest is essential to academic success (Harackiewicz, et al., 2016). The point is that the definition of success that school has set is much different from the perceptions high school students have. Success must be defined by each individual because they are one of a kind with a unique personality that has the ability to change the world; which directly agrees with Santoro's thoughts on the definition of student success.

### CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To support student achievement, attainment, and behavior toward their elective classes, former research and literature suggests that schools, students, and their support networks come together to provide a system of support for the student to be able to achieve the most success. What that success looks like will be different based on those same unique factors that are supporting the student. No two people's definition of success may look exactly the same. Similarities may be evident, especially between students that share or have common supports and life experiences to draw upon during their years in high school.

Schools may help support students by providing a supportive environment by creating a positive school climate in their building. This includes encouraging and fostering strong positive relationships and community both inside school and within the proximate community. These relationships should include sustained relationships that foster attachment where the student may feel safe physically, emotionally, and feel a sense of belonging and purpose. Typically these relationships can and are provided by a caring, culturally responsive learning community where all students are known and valued for being their true selves. Learning communities can achieve more success from students by providing students opportunities that allow for continuity in relationships, consistency in practices, and predictability in routines that reduce anxiety and support engaged learning through things like advisory systems and homeroom classes, coached sports, and advised clubs. Schools should also be able to integrate and provide social and emotional learning that fosters skills, habits, and mindsets which enable academic progress and productive behavior. Teaching students things like basic coping mechanisms will



better prepare students for when they need to lean on these skills through high school and beyond. Ultimately, these self-reflection and restorative skills should lead students to learn responsibility for themselves and their community. I would be remiss if I did not also include that schools should of course provide productive teaching strategies that support motivation, competence, self-efficacy, and self-directed learning. These items combined feature meaningful, relevant work that connects the students' prior knowledge about the subject and actively engages them in rich, engaging, motivating tasks. As part of the student motivation piece, being immersed in a classroom environment should encourage students to ask questions and lead them to the next level of learning opportunities (scaffolded learning) to practice and apply their learning. In order for students to be successful, they need to receive feedback, as do all humans when performing a task and desiring to know if they are meeting the task objectives. Teachers can do this through providing learning assessments along the way during the process as more informal, formative assessments like check-ins, exit tickets, "think-pair-share" activities, and more. These types of assessments allow the teacher to understand how the student is processing new information being learned, what item(s) may need to be re-taught, and what items the students have already mastered. Teachers should also include more holistic, summative assessments like graded tests, quizzes, essays, portfolio projects, etc. to measure what has been learned and understood by the students. In the real world, it is common to receive feedback from a superior and then have the opportunity to revise work to improve upon it. Engaging these practices in our high schools will set students up for success as they work their way through the learning process associated with the feedback process. Within the elements I described above as things that schools and teachers can do to help ensure

student success, individualized support for each student is also crucial for student's success. These supports can look like so many different things, and could frankly be its own thesis topic in and of itself. That being said, these individualized supports enable healthy development of the whole student. They respond to student needs, and address any learning barriers students may face along the way of their learning while in school. These supports cover each student, meaning there may be a need for some students to have access to integrated services within the school with other learning professionals to help the student "get where they need to be," while other students on the other end of the spectrum may need more enrichment activities to challenge their minds and apply their knowledge in more extensive and complex ways than other students. Well-designed, collaborative learning opportunities that encourage students to question, explain, and elaborate their thoughts and co-construct solutions sets up students for success not only in high school, but life after high school, which I feel is ultimately the greatest goal in teaching: prepare students to be successful not only in the here and now of high school, but what lies beyond that time in their lives. Looking into the not too distant future, learning communities should look to teaching the whole student and ensuring that each student has support both inside and outside the classroom to support their healthy path to a more productive future after high school.

### ***Limitations in Research***

"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose" - Zora Neale Hurston.

More research is needed on any setbacks of offering elective courses in United States high schools. Based on the research, there were not many, if any points of view relating to

drawbacks of offering elective courses to high school students. This leads this author to believe that there may not be many, if any negative drawbacks to offering elective courses to high school students. One area that could benefit from receiving further research would be to consider if offering too many elective courses in high schools has any potential consequences or setbacks. A leading question for this research could be whether or not offering too many elective courses waters down the experience for students based on the availability of teachers with that skill set available to teach said courses. The findings from this research should be shared with school districts and administrators to effectively affect their school class offerings, partnering with teachers, and then finally, offering the right amount of elective courses for the school based on these and other factors. Another topic that could use more research to make this thesis topic more robust overall would be to ask if students should be required to take a certain *type* of elective course during their time in high school? Accompanying that research question should also be, if elective courses are to be required, what are they, and then, what impact would that have on the student success rates of passing those elective courses. Researching this question would help to shine a light on the effects of having an elective course with student choice being a feature turning into a mandated requirement, where student choice may or may not be apparent.

### ***Personal Perspective***

“You'll never know everything about anything, especially something you love”- Julia Child.

I have sprinkled my thoughts and opinions throughout this thesis where I thought they would be most relevant and on-topic. After reading the articles, journals, and books I found

related to the topic of this thesis, I found myself agreeing with many of the theories starting with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as the fundamental building blocks from which to grow student elective success. Once those basic needs have been met, it is natural to me that a student could focus on the next objective in front of them. I also liked linking together the idea of Maslow and teaching the "whole child." I really feel that this is a parallel idea to what Maslow was simply stating as a basic human set of needs, whereas the whole child phenomenon revolves around each facet of the student's life, social, and communal circles works to support them so they may feel healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

While I did disagree with some research centered around "watering down education" by the idea that offering electives caused a lot of the educational integrity to vanish, I do understand that others' viewpoints on this are very subjective. So often, the quality and rigor of an elective class, or frankly, any class, comes down to the mentality and teaching practices of the teachers. How much do the teachers prepare for their classes and students? How much time and effort is spent creating and executing engaging lessons for their students? How much time and effort is spent providing feedback for their students based on the knowledge they showed they learned in the class? How strict or lackadaisical is the teacher when it comes to grading assignments and assessments? Is the teacher handicapped by district or state rules and regulations that might prohibit them from offering lessons, assignments, or other activities that could cause more students to become immersed in the elective classroom experiences?

When all is said and done with the conclusion of this thesis, I can understand why more and more thesis papers and scholarly journals are completed - the work of the evergreen student, seeking knowledge to better understand the world. To frame the Julia Child quote,

“You'll never know everything about anything, especially something you love,” (A Quote by Julia Child, n.d.) because there is always something new to discover, always new elements to combine in new ways and see what happens. I am excited as I look to the future and consider what experiences, assignments, and opportunities I may infuse into my classroom to combine with the many different students over the course of many years. It is encouraging to know I will be able to apply the learnings from this thesis as I embark upon my teaching career. I know I will keep learning and growing with my students, realizing how I can be the best teacher I can be in order to see them reach their full potential and look forward to successful futures after graduation.

It was encouraging to research many of the topics in this thesis and feel that I am on the right track so far in the early stages of my teaching career. So many of the things that were tested and mentioned in regards to elective teachers or tips for success I was able to check off my mental list as having already engaged in those practices. Through my teaching career, I hope I am able to help my students see how learning really is social, emotional, and academic, all rolled into one experience, and to see how the choices they make along with their support around them, they can achieve success through their elective courses.

### ***Professional Implementation and Sharing***

“As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it”- Antoine de Saint Exupery.

While completing the ‘Limitations in Research’ portion of this thesis, I, newly coming out of a teacher preparation program, was struck by the idea that I was not provided many techniques or insight for how to personalize student learning. While this may not effectively fit

into the Limitations section of this thesis, I believe it is important to state that with more attention and inclusion of this subject into teacher preparation programs, more teachers will be able to apply the strategies to make their subject matter more interesting and relevant to their students, causing a ripple effect of interest, and based on the research presented in this thesis, success.

After completing the research and writing for this thesis, I am encouraged to infuse even more student choice into the projects in my classes. I aim to better connect with the students who enroll in my courses so I can learn who they are and their interests so I can apply my course subject matter, my teaching, to those interests. By doing so, I hope to create a pattern of creating student interest, which would lead to those students enjoying and having success in my classes. Once those students have experienced that enjoyment and success, my hope is that they would tell others about their experiences in my courses, would enroll in more of my courses, and using both their own intrinsic motivation as well as peer acceptance, would encourage their peers to enroll in my courses as well over time.

I look forward to being able to share what I have learned through this thesis research with my colleagues by sharing about my teaching practice and experiences in the classroom after having applied what I have learned. I imagine that I will also be able to share my information and perspective with my peers through reflection on our own teaching practices through Professional Learning Communities/Teams. When topics like student choice and electives are brought up in these spaces, it will be a natural progression to be able to share my findings with them in hopes they will also be encouraged by teaching elective classes and helping students find success no matter their reason for enrolling in our classes.

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