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The April Dunn Act to Support the High School Graduation Rates of Students With Disabilities

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

DeCarlas O'Neal-Johnson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

The April Dunn Act to Support the High School Graduation Rates
of Students With Disabilities

by

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MA, Walden University, 2007

BS, Southern University at New Orleans, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2024

Abstract

The high school (HS) graduation rate of students with disabilities who have individual education programs (IEP) is historically low compared with their non-disabled peers. The problem was that a statewide initiative to improve the standard HS diploma graduation rate of students with disabilities, the April Dunn Act (the Act), was perceived as being inconsistently implemented and its results were not well understood. The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the Act and to better understand how the graduation rates for these students trended before and after the Act's implementation. The conceptual framework included intervention theory combined with the state's rules and requirements for the Act's implementation and maintenance. Publicly available archival graduation data were examined to answer the first research question related to how the graduation rates for students with disabilities and IEPs trended before and after the implementation of the Act. Overall, the graduation rates for these students trended up sharply 4 years after the Act's implementation. The second research question to explore how teachers perceived the implementation of the Act employed a purposive sample of 10 HS special education teachers. Thematic data analysis resulted in 8 themes related to (a) adequate training, (b) statewide assessment data, (c) community effort, (d) awarding HS credit, (e) continuous evaluation for newly eligible students, (f) progress monitoring, (g) intervention complexity, and (h) improved retention. Positive social change results when more students with disabilities earn a standard high school diploma because high school graduation provides a critical pathway to increased economic success and life satisfaction.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation my son, Caleb Christopher O'Neal Johnson, who was murdered 5 weeks prior to high school graduation on March 28, 2021. We both looked forward to graduating the year of 2021. As you would say, "Don't let obstacles stop you." So, I have continued to move forward with the edits of this dissertation after one of the deepest hurts a mother could suffer. To God, I give you all the glory! I am nothing without you! You continue to uphold me with your victorious right hand. It is because of you that have been able to complete all of my academic studies as I maneuver life. I asked, "Lord, hear my prayer, and do not pass me by." You have been there and still are. I say, "Thank you." I dedicate this dissertation to Ya'el and Yosef O'Neal Johnson, my 2 younger sons, who observed the importance of education in the way I have pushed them for holistic success to prepare them to be powerful professional men of God. To my sister, Dr. Danette O'Neal, thanks for pushing me to earn my doctoral degree. To my mom, "I love you so much." Thank you for instilling in me values and morals. You taught to pray in and out of adversity, and that I would succeed and have all God has for me. To my daddy, "I miss you so much." I say, "Thank you." I could have not asked for a better life. I work daily to live a life that would make you, mom, and God proud. To Caleb, Ya'el, and Yosef, this doctoral degree is dedicated to you all. I love you more than you know. Stay focused, and let nothing keep you from the destiny God has for you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Improving the graduation rates of students with disabilities is challenging both nationally and locally. Civic Enterprises (2017) provided an in-depth report of graduation statistics for many categories of students, including those with disabilities. According to the report, across the United States, graduating cohorts include only 12 to 13% of students with disabilities, and this population of students graduate less often than any other subgroup (Civic Enterprises, 2017). Thirty-three states reported graduation rates of special education students at less than 70%, with almost half reporting less than 60%. Louisiana was among the four lowest performing states (along with South Carolina, Mississippi, and Nevada) that reported graduating less than half of their students in this subgroup. For Louisiana, only 30% of students with disabilities graduated within 4 years of entering high school (Civic Enterprises, 2017).

In 2014, the Louisiana Legislature took action to improve the graduation rate of students with disabilities by passing a new public law known only as Act 833 (the Act). The Act provided alternative pathways for students with exceptionalities to attain a standard high school diploma. The Act evolved again in 2020, an event that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. On June 4, 2020, the state's governor signed Act 1, which renamed Act 833 the April Dunn Act, to recognize Ms. Dunn's devotion to the state's individuals who have disabilities (Office of the Governor, 2020). When Ms. Dunn passed away on March 28, 2020 from complications from COVID-19, she was serving in the Governor's Office of Disability Affairs. When he signed the new Act, the Governor noted that,

Although April was not able to earn a high school diploma, that did not stop her from learning and helping others. Because of April, countless students with disabilities in Louisiana now have a pathway to earn a high school diploma. She was a tremendous asset to our team and to the state of Louisiana. Her enthusiasm and passion for life made a difference in everyone she came in contact with, and her work improved the lives of all Louisianans, including those with disabilities. The April Dunn Act further cements her legacy as a tireless advocate, and I am honored to name Act 833 of 2020 after her. (Office of the Governor, para. 3)

While the April Dunn Act ensures alternate pathways to high school graduation for students with disabilities, its inconsistent implementation, as observed on students' assessment records, may have unnecessarily blocked students' use of those alternate pathways to graduation for many qualifying students. Evidence of inconsistent implementation can be found in the review of students' assessment records, which shows that students who qualified for the April Dunn Act were not identified and made to retake state assessments and repeatedly fail state assessments needed to graduate to earn a standard high school diploma (Special Education Coordinator, personal communication, January 21, 2020). The failure to identify qualifying students on time pushes high school graduation further to the future and causes those students with disabilities not to graduate within 4 years with their non-disabled peers, and in some cases, not to graduate at all.

According to DePaoli et al. (2018), within the United States, 65.5% of students with disabilities graduated within 4 years, 20 percentage points behind their general education peers. The same study reported that 30 states graduated less than 70% of their

special education population with Louisiana being one of these states. In 2016, Louisiana was among the three lowest states, which included Mississippi and Nevada, that graduated less than 50% of their special education students from high school (DePaoli et al., 2018). For example, in one of the largest school districts in the study state, the district of this study, data depict graduation rates of students with disabilities at a historical low of 17.84% graduating in 2008 (Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), 2008). Based on this data from DePaoli et al. and the LDOE (2008), less than 30% of students with disabilities graduated from high school earning a standard diploma for at least a decade.

In this chapter, I provide an explanation of a state-wide initiative, April Dunn Act (2020) aimed at increasing the graduation rates of students with disabilities. The process to earn a standard diploma, with the state assessment requirement connected to earning a standard high school diploma, is described in this chapter (LDOE, 2016). The research questions devised were in response to the problem and purpose of the study with intentions to address the gap in practice. The conceptual framework of the study is defined with a rationale for the design selection and the methodology which was used. Definitions are included to elucidate the terminology which has multiple meanings. This chapter explicates the assumptions that solidify what may be believed, but cannot be determined to be factual from the study. The scope and delimitations explain the boundaries of the study and the transferability of the results of the research. For clarity and discovery purpose, this chapter includes the limitations of the study and the potential biases which can possibly influence the outcome of the study.

The significance of the study is explained to identify how addressing the problem through research can contribute to the impact of social change. The results from this research provides data related to how-the graduation rate of students with disabilities earning a standard diploma has changed in the school district at four schools since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020). The results of this research also provide clarifying information on the implementation of the April Dunn Act from the teachers' perceptions. These findings increase the understanding of ways to improve the implementation of the April Dunn Act throughout the district. Positive social change results when more students with disabilities earn a standard high school diploma because earning a high school diploma is a pathway to increased economic success and life satisfaction (Henson, 2017).

Background

A concern in special education is that high school graduation rates of students with disabilities are significantly lower compared to students without disabilities. United States data showed that only 63% of students with disabilities graduated from high school in 2014, which was 20% lower than the national average for nondisabled graduates during the same year (Grindal & Schifter, 2017). While these data show a vast improvement from the historic low of only 18% of students with disabilities graduating at the turn of the century (LDOE, 2008), a 63% graduation rate for this population of high schoolers remained too low for the national education and political leadership.

Every Student Succeeds Act –ESSA (2015) set standards for students with and without disabilities to graduate within 4 years with their entering cohorts, and states had

to put into place criteria to help students with disabilities graduate by meeting alternative criteria. The development of ESSA (2015) required districts to be responsible for the outcomes and graduation of students with disabilities (Grindal & Schifter, 2017). Robison et al. (2017) suggested having interventions in place to mitigate high school drop out for students with disabilities and thereby facilitate the positive outcomes of better employability and security that come with graduating from high school. To increase graduation rates for students with disabilities, Civic Enterprises (2017) suggested establishing a standard diploma that is more achievable for all students. To have a standard diploma that is achievable for all students, alternative criteria for content mastery and state accountability assessment measures must be considered for students with disabilities.

Students working towards earning a standard high school diploma are required to pass course-aligned high school assessments. The laws that have made passing high school courses contingent on passing the state assessment has exacerbated the problem for disabled students, who pass the high-stakes tests less frequently than their nondisabled peers (Deutsch et al., 2020). Many students with disabilities were not successful at passing state assessments, causing them not graduate from high school (Deutsch et al., 2020). To assist in increasing the graduation rates for students with disabilities, the LDOE (2016) developed specified guidance for school districts to follow related to graduation options for students with disabilities through the provisions of Act 833 (2014). The Act's provisions included alternative criteria for meeting graduation requirements for students with disabilities who pass course exit tests and take, but fail

regular state testing. In 2020, Act 833 was renamed the April Dunn Act. Therefore, Act 833 (2014) will be referred to throughout the remainder of this study by its new name, the April Dunn Act (2020). Despite these state-lead efforts to create provisions that increase the graduation rates of students with disabilities, there is a gap in practice between the intent of the law and the effective implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities in graduating within 4 years earning a standard diploma as their nondisabled peers.

There are benefits to the implementation of the April Dunn Act when implemented appropriately. Overall, the April Dunn Act (2020) provides students with disabilities who pass the state-assessed high school courses, but do not pass the state assessment that aligns to the course, an opportunity to meet the assessment requirements using their individual educational programs (IEP). Students who need the April Dunn Act applied to meet the graduation assessment requirements will have an IEP determination meeting, and if qualified, will have the April Dunn Act applied on their behalf. To meet the testing requirement to earn a diploma, therefore, the students' IEP can be modified to include content goals and objectives to master for the course assessment(s) that the April Dunn Act (2020) will be applied for. These modifications will provide those students who can pass the course, but not the state assessment, an alternate means to earn their high school diploma.

Special education teachers play an integral role in ensuring that students that qualify for the April Dunn Act (2020) are identified immediately upon meeting April Dunn Criteria, and that the intervention process is implemented with urgency to meet

standard diploma graduation requirements. Since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (Act 833) in August of 2014, teachers have had to work with members of the IEP Team, such as the school counselors and content course teachers, to accomplish a host of tasks to support the graduation process for students with disabilities who struggle to pass state assessments. To implement the April Dunn Act for each special education student working towards earning a standard high school diploma, the special education teachers must (a) identify students to determine if they qualify for April Dunn Act (2020) based on middle school state assessment data in ninth grade, (b) monitor and track state assessment performance each semester for qualifying identification for those who did not qualify based on middle assessment data, (c) ensure interventions are provided to support skill mastery of content, (d) implement goals and progress monitor skill mastery for courses in which the April Dunn Act is applied on the students' IEP, and (e) follow the overall graduation course outline to track course requirements and course completion so that students are graduating, as suggested by ESSA (2015), with their entering high school cohorts within 4 years as their nondisabled peers.

The study state's Department of Education provided the criteria of how students qualify for the April Dunn Act (2020). In high school, students can qualify for the April Dunn Act based on middle school assessment data or high school assessment data. In middle school, students take state assessments, in each grade level, at the end of the school year in math, science, social studies, and English. In high school, all students earning a standard high school diploma, with and without disabilities, are required to take state assessments for the following enrolled courses: Algebra I, Geometry, English I,

English II, Biology, and United States History. The following criteria is set by the state of how students can qualify for the April Dunn Act in high school to promote earning a standard diploma. Louisiana's April Dunn Act was implemented as an alternative method to meeting requirements for academic promotion and high school graduation.

Table 1 below explains the student eligibility and criteria needed to qualify for the April Dunn Act.

Table 1*April Dunn Act Qualifying Criteria*

April Dunn Act graduation eligibility	High school student criteria
<p>Students receiving special education services who did not pass standardized-state test:</p> <p>Two of most recent three years (Grades 6th, 7th, and 8th).</p> <p><i>OR</i></p> <p>Two administrations of any End-of-Course Assessment/LEAP 2025.</p>	<p>Students may become eligible for Act 833 performance criteria if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They enter high school having not achieved at least a combination of Basic/Approaching Basic on Math and ELA - 8th Grade. • 6th and 7th Grades – At least Basic on any two of the four assessments: ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies. <p>within two of the three most recent years (6th, 7th, and 8th grades).</p> <p><i>OR</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They do not achieve a score of Fair, Good, or Excellent after two attempts of the same EOC Test; or not achieving Approaching Basic or above after two attempts of the same high school LEAP 2025 Assessment. <p><i>OR</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may become eligible if they entered a high school during or prior to the 2012- 13 school year, and did not achieve state-benchmark scores on a combination of one EOC Assessment and either/or: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) another EOC Assessment 2) High School LAA2 Assessment 3) Retest of an EOC Assessment.

Note. Act 833, Louisiana HB 1015 8 (2014), Renamed the April Dunn Act on Jun 4, 2020. Table reflects publicly available information published by the LDOE (see <https://www.louisianabelieves.com>).

The tenets of the policy exist in the requirements for qualification, implementation, and with the process of intervention to assist students in meeting graduation requirements for course completion and state assessments of correlating courses. If high school students do not pass the required state assessments that correlate to certain tested subjects, they will not be able to graduate from high school (April Dunn Act, 2020). This requirement to pass state assessments has caused many students with disabilities to not graduate from high school. Using the April Dunn Act as the basis for interventions may help students with disabilities who cannot pass state assessments, but pass the course, have an opportunity to meet the standards for high school graduation using alternate means. If the criteria are met using alternate means by meeting subject goals and objectives devised on their IEPs, then the students can earn Carnegie Credit for the course and satisfy the state graduation requirement.

The overall implementation criteria of the April Dunn Act (2020) is required to be completed by special education teachers as members of the IEP Team. Those criteria include, but are not limited to, the identification of qualifying students to ensure the students receive the course intervention supports needed to meet standard diploma graduation requirements. The teachers must have a system of monitoring assessment data each semester to identify qualifying students. The teacher must be aware of the students' Individual Graduation Plan to know when an IEP meeting needs to be held to apply the April Dunn Act for a course that has an aligned state assessment or an Industry Based Course (IBC) within 30 days of enrollment for their students in those courses. This

implementation process requires a tedious management system to avoid missing students who qualify and to meet the state guidelines of implementation.

Problem Statement

According to DePaoli et al. (2018), students with disabilities have historically graduated from high school at disproportionate rates compared to students without disabilities. The problem for this study was that a statewide initiative, the April Dunn Act (2020), formerly implemented as Act 833 in 2014, was enacted to improve the standard diploma high school graduation rates of students with disabilities, but its implementation was perceived as inconsistent, and its results were not well understood. There was a perceived gap in practice between the intent of the law and the consistent implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities in graduating within 4 years earning a standard diploma. One main concern that led to the passage of the Act was that less than 50% of the state's special education students graduated from high school (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Importantly for this study, DePaoli et al. (2018) noted in a study that there was a lack of evidence associated with interventions that purport to increase the academic success of students with disabilities. This gap in evidence was mirrored statewide in public schools (April Dunn Act, 2020). Teacher identification of students who qualify for the April Dunn Act and their administrative follow-through is key to the Act's success. A review of students' assessment records in the study district showed that students who initially qualified for the April Dunn Act were not identified for the Act's accommodations causing them to unnecessarily retake state assessments that they, in

turn, continued to fail, pushing them steadily further from graduation (Special Education Coordinator, personal communication, January 21, 2020). The lack of identification was evident in the review of students' assessment records and students' IEPs; it was noted that students repeatedly were administered the same state assessments after meeting the April Dunn Criteria. Once students meet the requirement of failing the same high school state assessment twice or, based on middle school data, do not meet a combination of at least Basic/Approaching Basic in math and/or English in eighth grade or score at least Basic on any two of the four assessments: ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies in sixth grade and/or seventh grade, within 2 of the 3 most recent years, students will qualify to meet April Dunn Criteria and are afforded the opportunity to meet state testing criteria by alternate means. Alternate means allow students to attain state test requirements by meeting aligned course goals and objectives specified on their IEPs, as an intervention, which are aligned to the state assessments. Once the students qualify, it is documented on the students' IEPs and students are able to progress towards passing courses needed to graduate to earn a standard high school diploma. However, all April Dunn identified qualifying students must pass each course and take all state assessments at least once to earn a standard high school diploma. As of the time that this research was completed, the Act's implementation had not been adequately evaluated for its intent to improve the standard diploma high school graduation of students with disabilities (Louisiana Act 833 Ad Hoc Committee, 2018; Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, 2018).

Due to the persistently low graduation rates for students with disabilities, in 2011 special education leadership in the LDOE (LDOE Education Program Consultant –

Special Education, personal communication, May 16, 2018) began a collaboration to create a framework for future interventions that could be implemented to increase the graduation rates of students with disabilities. The LDOE special education leaders collaborated with local and state politicians to create a bill to present to the Louisiana State Board of Education for approval as an intervention to increase the graduation rates of students with disabilities, resulting in the passage of Act 833 (2014), renamed the April Dunn Act (2020; LDOE Education Program Consultant – Special Education, personal communication, May 16, 2018). Since the Act’s passage, some statewide data have been requested by the state council’s Act 833 Ad Hoc Committee. For example, on August 23, 2018, the committee requested statewide data in four parts, including: (a) total number of students with disabilities (2014-2018), (b) number of students eligible for Act 833 inclusion (2014-2018), (c) number of students with disabilities exiting by each exit code, and (d) total number of students enrolled in every grade level (non-Carnegie earning) courses (Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, 2018). According to the information provided on the LDOE website in 2021, only parts of the requested data have been provided so far. In addition, the Committee did not request graduation cohort data for the years immediately prior to the Act’s passage, data that will be needed for pre- and post-Act comparisons. Finally, no data for the numbers of students with disabilities graduating with standard high school diplomas, within the population of interest for this study, were requested for the school district in question.

According to Welch (2017), many factors contribute to poor graduation rates for students with disabilities. Some of those factors have included inadequate special

education instruction, persistently low academic achievement, and academic motivation. Laws that have made passing high school courses contingent on passing state assessments have exacerbated the problem for disabled students, who pass the high-stakes tests less frequently than their nondisabled peers (Deutsch et al., 2020). This reality has pushed graduation out of reach for many students with disabilities thereby contributing to the disproportionate high school dropout rates for this population of students (Welch, 2017). No information has been gathered to determine how teachers are implementing the act through interventions in the classroom (Special Education Teacher – High School, personal communication, January 16, 2020). It is important to determine what is being done in classrooms to fully understand how the act is being implemented. Without a study of implementation, the impact of the state’s law April Dunn Act (2020), which was implemented to close the graduation gap identified by DePaoli et al. (2018), Deutsch et al. (2020), and Welch (2017), cannot be fully understood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act and to better understand how the graduation rate for students with disabilities and IEPs trended before and after the Act’s implementation. This study provides information on how the graduation rate of students with disabilities, earning a standard high school diploma, has changed in one of the largest school districts in the state since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. This study addresses the gap in practice between the intent of the law and the implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities in graduating

within 4 years earning a standard diploma as their nondisabled peers. Positive social change results when more students with disabilities earn a standard high school diploma because high school graduation provides a critical pathway to increased economic success and life satisfaction.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide the study.

RQ1: How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma at four high schools, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act?

RQ2: How do classroom teachers perceive the implementation of the April Dunn Act's statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma?

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks are used to provide direction to the research study and to explain concepts, coordinate ideas, and pinpoint relationships with which to construct a study (Varpio et al., 2020). The conceptual framework for this study was intervention theory (Argyris, 1970) as operationalized through the April Dunn Act (2020) and its predecessor, Act 833 (2014); laws implemented to support an increase in the standard diploma graduation rates of students with disabilities in Louisiana. Intervention theory evolved from social policy theory. Social policy is a civic policy and system in the areas of health wellness, criminal justice, injustice, education, and employment (Presidents and Fellows of Harvard University, 2006). Social policy aims to reform human welfare and to

accommodate humanistic needs for education, health wellness, housing, and fiscal preservation (Spicker, 2014). Conversely, intervention theory consists of analysis of the decision-making process to problem solve and intervene effectively to secure the desired outcomes. Intervention theory examines the effectiveness of different types of intervention. Intervention theory suggests that adequate intervention is dependent on having relevant and applicable knowledge that leads to a scope of clear and systematic options to realize pertinent outcomes (Argyris, 1970). Intervention theory aligned with RQ2 because it offers a way to conceptualize the thinking and behavioral processes that teachers use in their decisions related to their students and their students' IEPs.

Intervention theory explains the need for effectiveness in the implementation of intervention. Intervention theory (Argyris, 1970) states that efficient intervention depends on having relevant and applicable knowledge which offers a range of explicit and systematic opportunities to achieve targeted outcomes. Intervention theory is the premise of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act. However, teachers play a critical role in being proactive in the identification of qualifying students and then in the implementation of the Act with each qualifying student. When teachers have identified students with disabilities which have not been successful at passing state assessments, as stipulated in the April Dunn Act eligibility criteria, the intervention process begins by pursuing alternative methods of qualifying for graduation in accordance with the students' IEPs.

Nature of the Study

The tradition chosen was a multi-modal qualitative case study. A case study responds to how, what, and why questions (Rumrill et al., 2011). This design required the exploration of a phenomenon within context utilizing multiple forms of data collection (Alam, 2020). This design was selected for this study because more than one form of data collection was gathered for exploration. This study explored, with the intent to describe and identify trends, archival cohort graduation data of students with disabilities who graduated from four high schools earning a standard high school diploma and entered high school during school year 2009-10 and school year 2010-11, the 2 school years immediately prior to the Act's implementation, as well as school year 2014-15 and school year 2015-16, the 2 school years immediately following the Act's implementation. With these data, I described how the number of students with disabilities that graduated earning a standard diploma prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020) have trended before and after the Act's implementation. Qualitative data were also collected through an interview process with teachers who have taught high school students with disabilities for a minimum of 5 years. The years of teaching experience was required to gain teachers' responses that will reflect experience prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. The purpose of these interviews was to gain perspective information related to the implementation and ongoing inclusion of the April Dunn Act within the school district. This design was chosen as the most suitable approach for exploring how the Act has been implemented within the district. The design

clarified the interventions used by teachers who have been tasked with implementing and enforcing the April Dunn Act.

This study took a multi-modal approach for collecting data. Descriptive data in the form of cohort graduation rates were collected from three sources. The student information system known as JCampus, a system that contains all students' demographic, attendance, health, academic, behavioral, and special education records for the school district was used to determine qualifying pre-Act students with disabilities at the four high schools who entered high school in school year 2009-10 (Pre-Act Cohort 1) and school year 2010-11 (Pre-Act Cohort 2), as well as the post-Act qualifying students for school year 2014-15 (Post-Act Cohort 3) and school year 2015-16 (Post-Act Cohort 4).

Once the qualifying student cohorts had been established using the JCampus, a second data source was used to collect data on the actual graduation rates for those cohorts. The second data source was the Student Transcript System (STS). This system is managed by the LDOE. STS provided a collection of detailed transcript and high school diploma data, for public and nonpublic schools of interest, for students in Grades 8-12 who have taken courses for high school credit. The data in STS are logged into this state system from each local educational agency. These data depict how many students earned course credits sufficient to earn a high school diploma. An additional public data source, the LDOE website, LouisianaBelieves.com, was used to retrieve graduation data. This additional source was required to verify the accuracy of data retrieved from JCampus, the alignment of the results produced from the STS, and to validate the descriptive statistics reported in this research study.

Descriptive statistics were used with these data to address the first research question which sought to understand how the standard diploma high school graduation rate has trended since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. To gain teacher perceptions, I created and implemented an interview protocol aligned with the research questions. I used semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to pursue the collection of thick and rich data to answer the research questions. Closed ended questions provide limited responses. Therefore, semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were chosen to gather data to process information to gain a broader sense of how the Act was being implemented by the participants. I used the video technology platform, Zoom, to meet with teachers who volunteered to participate in the study. More information about how I identified teacher participants and collected data is provided in Chapter 3, Methodology.

Definitions

A list of terminology is included that provides supporting information related to the verbiage used in this study. These terms are noted to be used operationally throughout this study.

Accommodation: An accommodation is a change in standing education policy that removes barriers to instruction due to a disability without significantly altering the content (Columna et al., 2014). Typical changes include form of presentation, student response to learning, environment, time frame or scheduling that do not deviate from the objective (Columna et al., 2014).

Alternate assessment: Assessments that measure the progress of students with significant cognitive disabilities at mastering standards (LDOE, 2016).

Curriculum: Course of study offered within a range of knowledge and skills with instructional resources required for teaching and learning to achieve mastery of for successful grade promotion and graduation (LDOE, 2016).

Graduation pathways: Students with disabilities in Louisiana have an opportunity to pursue a traditional or alternative pathway to earn a high school diploma (LDOE, 2016). Eligible high school students who qualify for Act 833 can earn a high school diploma by completing graduation requirements utilizing alternate criteria (LDOE, 2016). Students with significant cognitive disabilities can also attain a high school diploma by completing alternate graduation requirements (LDOE, 2016).

Intervention: Interventions compliment accommodations or may be separate from accommodations. Interventions are time-delimited with the goal of producing student improvements in academic achievement or behavior (Pullen & Kennedy, 2018).

Modifications: Modifications are adjustments to instruction or academic learning expectations of the student (Columna et al., 2014).

Progress monitoring: A scientific practice utilized to assess academic performance and determine instruction effectiveness (Pullen & Kennedy, 2018).

Remediation: Process of providing instruction and practice in academic areas which are weak in order to strengthen academic performance in areas of need (Mitchell, 2019).

Assumptions

There was an assumption that all students who qualify for the April Dunn Act would be identified and that the implementation process will begin for each student once criteria were met. Professional development and ongoing teacher support are needed to make sure the April Dunn Act is being implemented appropriately. Students who qualify for the April Dunn Act are identified by school-based special education teachers, counselors, and/or the IEP Teams within the school district (April Dunn Act, 2020). The LDOE provided school districts training at the roll out of Act 833, now April Dunn Act, statewide in 2014. The training consisted of training district and school leaders as to the purpose, benefit, and the implementation process of the April Dunn Act. To support student implementation, documents and presentations were readily available and continue to be a support guide on the LDOE's website. Using the state training provided, district special education leaders provided support to school leadership and special education teachers on the purpose and implementation process of the April Dunn Act. Assigned school-based personnel have the ongoing task of analyzing students' annual state assessment records to determine if or when students may meet the qualifying criteria to use the April Dunn Act and implement the alternate criteria through the intervention process to meet high school graduation criteria to earn a standard high school diploma.

School attendance, inclusive of unauthorized absences, can have a negative impact on students with disabilities (Tonge & Silverman, 2019). There is a direct relationship between students attending class and student mastery of high school academic outcomes (Christensen, 2017). It is the assumption that students who enter with

the high school cohort within the study were present in school to engage in required courses to earn a standard high school diploma. To be promoted at each grade level in high school, students cannot have more than 20 days of unexcused absences per year (Louisiana Administrative Code, 2020). Those who have more than 20 days of unexcused absences may be retained. This policy can push graduation within 4 years with their entering cohorts out of range (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Scope and Delimitations

According to DePaoli et al. (2018), high school students with disabilities have historically graduated from high school at disproportionate rates compared to students without disabilities. The problem for the study was that a statewide initiative, the April Dunn Act (2020), was enacted to improve the standard diploma graduation rate of students with disabilities, but its inconsistent implementation by teachers has weakened the law's ability to help this population of students in the intended ways. To gain a deeper understanding of the April Dunn Act in practice, this multimodal study provided more than one teacher's perspective and used more than one type of data collection (Varpio et al., 2020). The influence of the April Dunn Act on the district within this study has yet to be determined. This study of the implementation of April Dunn Act provided information gained from the special educators' perceptions to improve practice and inform of the efficacy of the state of Louisiana at improving the graduation rates of students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma.

The population within this study consisted of students with disabilities working towards earning a standard high school diploma as their non-disabled peers. Those

students with disabilities working towards earning a standard high school diploma must complete the same courses as their nondisabled peers. The population that the participants in this research study discussed does not consist of students who have significant cognitive disabilities. The April Dunn Act (2020) was created only for students with disabilities working towards earning a standard high school diploma. However, earning a high school diploma is available for students with significant disabilities as well. Due to their cognitive deficits, the courses students with significant cognitive disabilities are required to take are Applied English, Math, Social Studies, and Science. The students with significant cognitive disabilities have an alternate set of standards they must achieve to earn a diploma (LDOE, 2016). These standards are aligned the content standards that the general education students must learn but lack the rigor of the content standards that the general education students are expected to learn. The diploma that students with significant cognitive disabilities earn does not meet the requirements to enter a college or university. Therefore, the graduation data and teacher perceptions of the implementation of the April Dunn Act was of only those students who qualify for the April Dunn Act and are working towards achievement of a standard high school diploma.

To the extent that other high schools in Louisiana mirror the context of the state's largest school district, the results of this study should be transferable. The results produced information that can be used to impact corrective adjustments, within state guidelines, to the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). Even though this research was completed in one of the larger school districts in Louisiana, the teachers'

perceptions focused on their individual implementation experiences. The study consisted of the perceptions of 10 special education teachers with a minimum of 5 years' experience of teaching students with disabilities. Teachers implement the April Dunn Act on an individual student-by-student case within the realm of the policy guidelines set for implementation. The graduation cohort data consist of data from only four of the 15 high schools within the school district as a sample size. The results of each schools' graduation data were identified individually. Regardless of the size of the district in which the study occurred, the emphasis was not on the entire district. Therefore, the results will be transferrable to high school special education teachers in practice as the school data was reported in isolation for each school making the data more transferable.

Limitations

A limitation within this multi-modal qualitative case study may be considered due to the sample size of teachers involved in the interview process. The sample size and the level of professional development the teachers within the sample may have received may impact the transferability and dependability of the research. The sample size of teachers involved in the interview process were 10 special education teachers. The teachers taught students with disabilities for a minimum of 5 years. Teachers with this level of experience were selected to assist in eliminating biases as these teachers would have experience prior to the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020) and post implementation of the April Dunn Act. Therefore, their perceptions of the implementation of the April Dunn Act consisted of their knowledge and experience prior to implementation of the Act and present knowledge of the implementation process of

utilizing the April Dunn Act to promote the earning of a standard high school diploma for students with disabilities. However, the population size of teachers providing their perceptions may be a limitation as it does not validate all special education teachers' perceptions who teach high school students with disabilities in Louisiana.

To implement the April Dunn Act (2020), special education teachers were provided varying levels of professional development. The training and support the teachers experienced to implement the Act directly affected the teachers' perceptions. This variability in the timing of received training may have led to biases in their perceptions. To address biases related to professional development which may have had an impact on the teachers' perceptions, there were questions in the interview asked related to the level training and support each teacher was provided. In the results of the study, the teachers' perceptions were categorized to include the teachers' level of training. This procedure helped to address biases to determine if their perceptions were related to sufficient professional development or the lack of sufficient professional development to effectively support teacher implementation of the April Dunn Act. However, there will continue to exist the fact that the interviews only address a small population of teachers compared the number of teachers required to implement the April Dunn Act within this large district, as well as within in the state of Louisiana. Researcher biases were not prevalent, nor had an impact on the research within this document. To ensure biases were not prevalent, nor impacted the research, the results of the research came directly from data gathered from the perceptions of the teachers through the

interview process and the graduation data of students who have graduated prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act.

Significance

This study is important because a review of students' assessment records initially showed that the April Dun Act had not been implemented fully since the state roll out date of the Act in August of 2014. This research study provided two forms of information. It provided both trend data to document any changes in graduation rates for students with disabilities before and after the Act's implementation, as well as insights into how the April Dunn Act has been implemented from the teachers' perceptions who work in the participating school district. Together, these two forms of data were used to clarify how the April Dunn Act (2020) had been implemented within the school district. Positive social change results when more students with disabilities earn a standard high school diploma because high school graduation provides a critical pathway to increased economic success and life satisfaction (Henson, 2017).

Summary

Graduation of students with disabilities is lower than that of their general education peers (Civic Enterprises, 2017). In one of the largest school districts in the state of Louisiana, the focus of this study, has historically struggled with the graduation rates of students with disabilities (LDOE, 2008). In this district, high school graduation of students with disabilities earning a diploma, with their entering cohorts, has been less than their nondisabled peers (LDOE, 2013). In the 2017-18 school year, only 39.3% of the students with disabilities graduated earning a high school diploma with their entering

cohort compared to 71.8% of students without disabilities graduating within this same entering cohort (LDOE, 2019). According to Welch (2017), many factors contributed to poor graduation rates for students with disabilities. Some of those factors have included inadequate special education instruction, persistently low academic achievement, and academic motivation.

Passing state assessments has been a requirement for all students earning a standard high school diploma in Louisiana. The laws that have made passing high school courses contingent on passing the state assessments have exacerbated the problem for disabled students, who pass the high-stakes tests less frequently than their nondisabled peers (Deutsch et al., 2020). This reality has pushed graduation out of reach for many students with disabilities; thereby contributing to the disproportionate high school dropout rates for this population of students (Welch, 2017). April Dunn Act (2020), House Bill Pub. L. No. 1015 was implemented by the LDOE to decrease dropout rates and increase promotion and graduation rates for students with disabilities.

The April Dunn Act (2020) is a policy, which was designed to offer an intervention formality, that can be used for students with disabilities who struggled to meet the state graduation requirement of passing state course assessments. Special education teachers play an integral role in ensuring qualifying students, for the April Dunn Act (2020), are identified and that the intervention process is implemented to meet standard diploma graduation requirements. The outcome of this multi-modal qualitative study determined how the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma, has changed since the implementation of the April Dunn Act

(2020) and how do classroom teachers perceive the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements to support students with disabilities.

The next chapter is a review of literature related to laws that govern the education of students with disabilities and graduation data from annual graduation national reporting sources. Historical Louisiana high school cohort graduation data are included in the literature review which reflects the state of graduation for students with and without disabilities for the last decade within the state and the school district in which the research study occurs. Additionally, the following section is inclusive of literature that documents the struggle students have encountered with graduating from high school earning a standard diploma. Lastly, the literature review consists of interventions that have been used or suggested to increase the graduation rates of students with disabilities earning a high school diploma.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to DePaoli et al. (2018), high school students with disabilities have historically graduated from high school at disproportionate rates compared to students without disabilities. The problem is that a statewide initiative, the April Dunn Act (2020), was enacted to improve the standard diploma graduation rates of students with disabilities, but its inconsistent implementation by teachers has weakened the law's ability to help this population of students in the intended ways. There is a gap in practice between the intent of the law and the effective implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities in graduating within 4 years earning a standard diploma as their nondisabled peers. A statistic that contributed to the passage of the Act was that less than 50% of the state's special education students graduated from high school (DePaoli et al., 2018). Importantly for this study, DePaoli et al. noted the lack of evidence typically associated with interventions that purport to increase the academic success of students with disabilities. This gap in practice was mirrored statewide in public schools (April Dunn Act, 2020). Currently, however, the Act's impact has not been adequately evaluated for its intent to improve the standard diploma high school graduation of students with disabilities (Louisiana Act 833 Ad Hoc Committee, 2018; Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, 2018).

According to Welch (2017), many factors contribute to poor graduation rates for students with disabilities. Some of those factors have included inadequate special education instruction, persistently low academic achievement, and academic motivation. Laws that have made passing high school courses contingent on passing state assessments

have exacerbated the problem for disabled students, who pass the high-stakes tests less frequently than their nondisabled peers (Deutsch et al., 2020). This reality has pushed graduation out of reach for many students with disabilities thereby contributing to the disproportionate high school dropout rates for this population of students (Welch, 2017). No information has been gathered to determine how teachers are implementing the act through interventions in the classroom (Special Education Teacher – High School, personal communication, January 16, 2020). It is important to determine what is being done in classrooms to fully understand how the act is being implemented. If this study is not conducted, the impact of the state’s law Act 833 (2014), which was implemented to close the graduation gap identified by DePaoli et al. (2018), Deutsch et al. (2020), and Welch (2017), cannot be fully understood.

Special education students have the lowest graduation rates of any subgroup (Civic Enterprises, 2017). According to Civic Enterprises (2017), special education students in many states make up approximately 13% of the high school graduating cohorts each year. Data reflect that four states, which include Louisiana, graduate less than half of their special education students within each high school graduating cohort. Based on the 2015 graduation cohort data, Louisiana was among the 33 states that reported high school graduation rates for special education students below 70% (Civic Enterprises). According to DePaoli et al. (2018), in 2016, 65.5% of students with disabilities graduated within 4 years; just 20 points behind their general education peers; 30 states graduated less than 70% of their special education population with Louisiana being one of these states. In 2016, Louisiana was among the 3 lowest states, which

included Mississippi and Nevada, that graduated less than 50% of their special education students from high school (DePaoli et al., 2018).

In one of the largest school districts in the state of Louisiana, the focus of this study, is in the southern portion of the state and has historically struggled with the graduation rates of students with disabilities (LDOE, 2008). In this district, high school graduation of students with disabilities earning a diploma, with their entering cohorts, has been exceptionally less than their nondisabled peers (LDOE, 2008). In school year 2017-2018, district data depict that this district continued to graduate less than 70% of students with disabilities (LDOE, 2019). In the 2017-18 school year, 39.3% of the students with disabilities graduated earning a high school diploma with their entering cohort compared to 71.8% of students without disabilities graduating within this same entering cohort; 10.2% dropped out (LDOE, 2019).

The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act and to better understand how the graduation rates for students with disabilities and IEPs trended before and after the Act's implementation. The study provides information on how the graduation rate of students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma has changed in one of the largest school districts in the state since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. The study addresses gaps in knowledge about practices related to the Act's implementation, as well graduation trends before and after the Act was implemented. This chapter consists of literature review based on historical graduation data in the state of Louisiana and the local district addressed within this research study.

The chapter will be inclusive of literature relating to laws that govern how educational services should be provided to students with disabilities. The literature included will also identify concerns of students with disabilities struggling to graduate from high school with interventions to improve the graduation rates of students with disabilities.

Literature Search Strategy

Online research was conducted electronically through Walden Library, Eric, Sage, and Google Scholar to gather information at the national and state levels. Local school district performance data and policy information was collected from the LDOE. Multiple key words were used to derived research data. Key phrases used included *high school special education, special education graduation, graduation and students with disabilities, dropout rates of students with disabilities, special education diploma, Louisiana graduation rates, Act 833, Act 833 Implementation, April Dunn Act, and Act 833 graduation data*. Additionally, the impact of the April Dunn Act on the local school district within this study was not found through research. The LDOE was contacted to determine if this data was available. Based on email response provided, the impact of the April Dunn Act since the implementation in 2014 has yet to be determined in the district of study (Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

It is important that qualitative doctoral research be grounded in conceptual frameworks to guide the study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016; Thomas, 2017). The framework that was used for this study was intervention theory (Argyris, 1970) as operationalized by the April Dunn Act (2020). In his explanation of intervention theory, Argyris (1970)

explained intervention as follows: “To intervene is to enter into an ongoing system ... for the purpose of helping” (p. 15). The passage of an education reform law in the state of Louisiana to help students with disabilities achieve higher rates of high school graduation and accrue the societal benefits that come with it reflects Argyris’s definition of an intervention.

The April Dunn Act (2020) was implemented with the intent to support improvement in the graduation rates for students with disabilities. Intervention theory was the supporting framework utilized for this study (Tamene, 2016). Intervention theory evolved from social policy theory. Social policy is a civic policy and system in the areas of health wellness, criminal justice, injustice, education, and employment (Presidents & Fellows of Harvard University, 2006). Social policy aims to reform human welfare and to accommodate humanistic needs for education, health wellness, housing, and fiscal preservation (Spicker, 2014). Intervention theory consists of analysis of decision-making, problem solving, and implementation of multiple interventions to achieve an outcome. Intervention theory examines the effectiveness of different types of intervention. The theory suggests that the effectiveness of an intervention depends on having knowledge of the intervention and application knowledge for access that coordinates with a range of clearly defined options to attain the desired outcome (Argyris, 1970).

The intervention theory applies to the Act 833 framework, as this act is a policy reform, just as intervention theory, which is designed to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities who struggled to meet graduation requirements. The April Dunn Act (2020) is designed to improve the human welfare as it relates to dropout prevention

of students with disabilities. Intervention theory consists of analysis of the problem and intervening appropriately to secure the desired outcome (Argyris, 1970). Intervention theory is the premise of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act. When it is determined that students with disabilities have not been successful at passing state assessments, as stipulated in the April Dunn Act eligibility criteria, the intervention process begins by pursuing alternative methods of qualifying for graduation in accordance with the student's IEP.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

There continues to be a gap of 21.1% nationally between the number of students with disabilities who graduate from high school in comparison to those without disabilities (DePaoli et al., 2018). However, in over 26 states, the graduation gap expands beyond the 21.1%, with some states having a gap between 49% and 52.7% (DePaoli et al., 2018). Due to these high percentages of students who are not graduating in 4 years, Every Student Succeeds Act –ESSA (2015) has made students with disabilities a top priority. ESSA has set standards for graduation, which states all students with disabilities should be on track to graduate from high school within 4 years upon entering. Retention rates of students with disabilities directly influence post-secondary outcomes of this subgroup of students (Prince et al., 2018). ESSA further explains that students with disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum just as their non-disabled peers. Theobald et al. (2019) discovered that students with learning disabilities that are included in the general education setting for instruction had higher rates of “on-

time” graduation, increased college rates, and employment opportunities than students with learning disabilities who did not receive instruction in the inclusion setting.

Additionally, ESSA set standards that states must put in place a standard diploma with alternate means of meeting graduation requirements, with modifications and accommodations, to increase graduation rates of students with disabilities. To adhere to this standard for students with disabilities, the state of Louisiana put in place alternate criteria to meet graduation requirements to earn a standard diploma (LDOE, 2016). The April Dunn Act (2020) is a policy implemented in Louisiana which was put in place to assist students with disabilities meet graduation requirements to earn a standard diploma.

High school graduation rates are determined by the rate of students who leave high school without graduating. The high school dropout rate is calculated by the number of students enrolled within the school year, the expected number returning the following year, and those who are not yet enrolled by October 1 of the following year (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Additionally, dropout rates are measured by graduation cohorts, which are determined by the number of students that enter high school in the ninth grade in comparison to the number of students graduating within a 4-year period from high school (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). These calculations are utilized by districts and states yearly to determine the rates of high school graduation and drop out percentages of all high school students.

Laws That Govern Special Education and Local Graduation

The Education of the Handicapped Act (1970), Public Law 91-230, was created by Congress to encourage all states to create educational programs for those with

disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), Public Law 94-142, stated that children with disabilities must have access to educational opportunities in a public educational system. Educational agencies were given the responsibility to provide educational services to all children with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), all students are to be provided access to the general education curriculum and are to be educated in an environment with the least restrictions. The U.S. Department of Education (2009) assured that students with disabilities have a right to a “free and appropriate public education” between ages 3 and 21. States have the option to extend the years of educational opportunity of for students with a disability. For example, in Louisiana, students with disabilities may stay in school until age 22 (Louisiana Administrative Code, 2020). However, the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA], 2015) states that all students, including students with disabilities, should graduate within 4 years of entering high school which many find to be contradictory to IDEA (U. S. Department of Education, 2009).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). The Every Student Succeed Act continues to hold each public school district in the United States accountable for each student’s academic achievement. However, ESSA provides a federal framework for states to set their own goals for student achievement. Darrow (2016) elaborated on ESSA with the meaning of the new standards and the implications of them for students with disabilities. Standards were set not only for state assessments and curriculum guidelines, but also for students with and without disabilities to graduate within 4 years with their entering ninth grade cohorts (Darrow, 2016).

According to ESSA, all students must have equal access to the general education curriculum. Additionally, all students with disabilities must be assessed using the same state assessments as their nondisabled peers, and are expected to master the state content standards with the exception of those students with significant cognitive disabilities. Those with significant cognitive disabilities are expected to be taught using alternate standards which are aligned to state content standards. Students with significant cognitive disabilities take an alternate form of state assessment as well (ESSA, 2015).

House Bill Pub. L. No. 1015 (2014) was voted on and introduced Act 833 (2014) in Louisiana to increase promotion and graduation rates for students with disabilities. The LDOE, along with state representatives, developed alternative criteria to meet graduation and promotion requirements for students with disabilities, who take state assessments, through a law implemented in Louisiana entitled Act 833 (2014), renamed the April Dunn Act (2020). The April Dunn Act applies to students with disabilities that are working toward a standard diploma just as their nondisabled peers which requires them to pass state assessments to earn a high school diploma. This law does not apply to students who have significant cognitive disabilities and are assessed using alternate assessments.

Louisiana provides guidance in the Louisiana Special Education Guidance for High School Students (LDOE, 2016) and in *Title 28 Education: Bulletin 1566 - Pupil Progression Policies and Procedures* (Louisiana Administrative Code, 2020). Within these documents contain guidance on how students should progress and earn credits for courses taken within students' educational careers. In 2014, the LDOE implemented 2 diploma options for all students, including alternate criteria to earn a diploma for students

with disabilities (LDOE, 2016). The April Dunn Act (2020) was implemented so that students with disabilities who passed general education courses, but could not pass the state assessment, were offered an alternate means to meet state testing criteria via the students' IEP. The diploma options and alternate means of meeting diploma requirements was implemented with the intent to increase graduation in the state of Louisiana.

The two diplomas offered are TOPS University and a Career Diploma with career pathways (LDOE, 2016). The main difference is with the Career Diploma as opposed to a TOPS University Diploma is that with the Career Diploma students have an opportunity to select a career pathway in which they work towards earning a certification while in high school. Twenty-four Carnegie Credits are required to earn a TOPS University Diploma and 23 Carnegie Credits are required to earn a Career Diploma.

Carnegie Credits are earned for courses the students take and will allow them to enroll in college with either diploma. Students with significant disabilities, who earn a diploma achieving Applied Credits cannot enter a university with those types of credits on their transcripts. There are career training programs available for students with significant disabilities. Previously, many students with significant disabilities would leave school with a Certificate of Achievement. A Certificate of Achievement is not a diploma, but only a certificate of completion of some high school courses which are not usually Carnegie Credit Courses. Diploma options and alternate criteria for meeting graduation requirements afford students with disabilities an opportunity to earn a high school diploma. However, earning a diploma for students with disabilities, with and without cognitive disabilities, requires graduation guidance of the high school counselors and

special education teachers to strategically enroll students in required courses and provide them academic support to graduate within the 4-year standard set by ESSA (2015).

Annual Graduation National Reporting Sources

There are multiple national reporting systems that report graduation data yearly with suggestions for improvement. National reporting agencies provide states and local districts a point of reference to align their individual states' performance to and to monitor states' progress educationally. The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) was established in 2004 by the United States Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.; U. S. Department of Education, 2004). This center is a resource that provides national data, trend information, and recommendations related to dropout prevention for students with disabilities. The University of Florida (n.d.), highlighted 4 goals published the NDPC-SD. The goals include: (a) increase awareness about school dropout, re-entering school, and high school graduation; (b) improve states' high school performance goals published in individual State Performance Plans, (c) assist state and local education agencies in creating or enhancing monitoring systems that track vulnerable students to reduce the frequency of quitting, and (d) assist students with disabilities by creating and evaluating models that improve education practices and school completion.

The Institute for Education Sciences (n.d.) is a federal agency, which collects, analyzes, and reports educational data nationally. Their responsibility is to publish statistical reports on educational data. The purpose of the publication produced by NCES

is to review high school graduation cohort and dropout data across the United States. According to the authors of the report produced, Stetser and Stillwell (2014) documents that each state, commencing 2011-12 School Year has been required to calculate in their Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR) and the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR). CSPR includes annual state performance of each state's educational system (U. S. Department of Education, 2020). ACGR is the rate of students entering high school yearly in comparison to the number that graduate within 4 years with their entering cohorts (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). This center maintains a record of cohort graduation data which can be used to provide knowledge of the current state of graduation progress for students with and without disabilities within each state.

An additional reporting source, *Building a Grad Nation* (Civic Enterprises, 2017), is a national research report which includes the graduation performance data from high school populations across the United States and makes suggestions to increase graduation rates. To increase graduation rates for students with disabilities, Civic Enterprises (2017) suggested establishing a standard diploma that is achievable by all students. To have a standard diploma that is achievable by all students, alternative criteria for content mastery and state accountability assessment measures must be considered for students with disabilities. *Building a Grad Nation Report* (DePaoli et al., 2018) produced an annual report on high school graduation and dropout rates and provides suggestions on how to increase graduation rates. In 2016, research showed that 65.5% of students with disabilities graduated within 4 years; just 20 points behind their general education peers;

thirty states graduated less than 70% of their special education population with Louisiana being one of these states (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Building a Grad Nation (Atwell et al., 2019) showed that the graduation rate improved for students with disabilities nationally during the 2016–17 academic year, up 1.6% to 67.1%. In 2019, graduation for this population increased nationally by another 1.1% to 68.2% (Atwell et al., 2021). The 2019 report noted that this population of students had the third-lowest graduation rate across the country, exceeded only by English Learners and the homeless population. During the 2016-17 academic year, 14 states reported decreased graduation rates while 26 states reported an increase of 1% or more. The lowest and highest states for graduating this population of students was Mississippi (36.4%) and Arkansas (83.8%). Overall, students with disabilities have a graduation gap of 19.8% when compared to their nondisabled peers. Data show one in every four students with disabilities do not graduate on time.

All of the agencies documented the state of education with focus on graduation rates of high school students. Many of them are government agencies or government funded to produce these annual reports. They each have the tasks of providing an overview of the public education system in the United States in moving students towards high school diploma attainment. The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities – NDPC-SD (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.) focuses on high school graduation of students with disabilities across the United States. DePaoli et al., (2018) focused on the graduation of all students and subdivided data by subgroups. Previously, Civic Enterprises (2017) made suggestions for improving graduation rates

annually as well. The Institute for Education Sciences (n.d.) is a federal agency, that collects, analyzes, and reports educational data nationally for all students. This journal is inclusive of data focuses on graduation data across the nation. All of these sources are beneficial in providing the public with the annual state of graduation nationally.

Historical Louisiana High School Cohort Graduation Data

Stetser and Stillwell (2014) researched national graduation cohort data and procedures. Their research explained how the calculations are used by districts and states yearly to determine the rates of high school graduation and dropout percentages of all high school students. Dropout rates are measured by graduation cohorts, which are determined by the number of students that enter high school in the ninth grade in comparison to the number of students graduating within a 4-year period from high school (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). The high school dropout rate is calculated by the number of students enrolled within the school year, the expected number returning the following year, and those who are not yet enrolled by October 1 of the following year (Stetser & Stillwell).

The LDOE (2008) produces School Performance Profiles for each school district annually. The target district of this research study is the largest school district in Louisiana. The target district shows that in school year 2006-07, 10.31% of students with disabilities graduated earning a diploma in comparison to the state average of 12.95% of students with disabilities graduating with a diploma statewide (LDOE, 2008). Yet, students without disabilities were able to graduate earning a diploma with 85.44% in the target district and at 83.76% statewide. Students with disabilities dropped out in the target

district at 20.62% in comparison to the statewide average of 28.97%. Students without disabilities had a dropout rate in the target district of 14.56% and state average of 16.24%.

The LDOE (2013) school performance data for the target district of research depicts that in school year 2011-12, 11.2% of students with disabilities graduated in the state of Louisiana with 11.2% graduating in the target school district with their entering high school cohorts. However, students without disabilities graduated 81.5% in this target district in comparison to statewide graduating 80% of students without disabilities. In school year 2011-12, 57.7% of the students with disabilities dropped out of high school in the target district in comparison to the state average of 29.7% for students with disabilities (LDOE, 2013). Students without disabilities had a dropout rate 18.5% in the target district and 20% statewide (LDOE, 2013).

LDOE (2019) data reflect in the annual School Performance Profile for the target school district that less than 70% of students with disabilities graduated within a 4-year period with their entering freshmen cohort peers in school year 2017-18 (LDOE, 2019). In school year 2017-18, 39.3% of students with disabilities graduated with their entering high school cohort earning a standard high school diploma (LDOE, 2019). Students without disabilities graduated at 71.8% with their entering graduating cohorts (LDOE, 2019).

Students with Disabilities Struggle to Graduate from High School

Samuels (2014) found that there were large graduation disparities for students with special needs. He compared the percentages of special education students who

graduate each year in relation to the general education population. Data reflect that states in the south have lower rates of special education graduates in relation to states in the north. It was found that certain states in the south have implemented programs to help increase high school graduation of students with disabilities. Henson (2017) completed a study with students with disabilities and their predictors of on-time high school graduation. His research focused on the external societal, educational, and monetary effects on students with disabilities who did not graduate from high school. Elbaum et al. (2014) discovered that graduation rates of students with disabilities, regardless of the size of the school district, were determined by multiple contributing factors. Socio economic factors for students with disabilities who did not graduate from high school was a major common contributing factor. Henson (2017) cited the need for educational reform in the form of a multi-tiered system of support interventions to assist in improving the graduation rates for students with disabilities. The results of Henson's research revealed common relationships among the on- time graduation variables and individual-level variables, such as attendance, behavior, and grades, for students with disabilities. Henson suggested implementing procedures for intervention before high school entry to increase the chances graduation within 4 years for students with disabilities and monitoring of the variables identified in Early Warning Systems (EWS) to identify those needing early intervention to increase the likelihood of on-time graduation. When students are identified using EWS, interventions are put in place to assist the students in area they may be struggling in related to attendance, behavior, failing grades, or at risk of having

failing grades. The overall purpose is to prevent high school dropout and increase the number of students earning a high school diploma.

Holopainen and Hakkarainen (2019) completed research related to the impact of reading and math on high school graduation for students with disabilities. Reading and math can be a common area of struggle for students with disabilities (Holopainen & Hakkarainen, 2019). As a part of the research, students were provided compulsory special education services in the areas of math and reading for middle and high school. These students were followed for a 5-year period. This research study depicts that females have struggled more in reading, and males struggled more in math and reading. The results of the research from Holopainen and Hakkarainen (2019) suggests that students who struggled in the areas reading and math experienced delayed high school graduation. This aligns with the research from Henson (2017), which suggested that students who are struggling to pass academic courses are at risk of not graduating from high school. Henson (2017) suggested having a system of monitoring those at risk of failing so that interventions can be provided to support students academically so that failures do not prevent students from graduating from high school.

The number of students with disabilities who struggle to graduate from high school has been a topic of research and has extensive data connecting students with disabilities to increased poverty and judicial matters (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Many students with disabilities who fail to graduate from high school often face the judicial experiences and rotations through the court system (Dewey et al., 2020). Mallett (2017) focused on how the dropout rates increased the pipeline-to-prison rates for students with

disabilities and noted the disproportionate impact on vulnerable children and adolescents. Welch (2017) studied the *school-to-prison pipeline* process for students with disabilities who ultimately drop out of high school and eventually enter the criminal juvenile justice system. Welch suggested that inadequate special education instruction, low achievement, and lack of motivation can lead to students with disabilities not meeting graduation requirements to earn a diploma. Research suggested that this reality has pushed graduation out of reach for many students with disabilities leading many students with disabilities to drop out of high school (Dewey et al., 2020).

Interventions to Increase the Graduation Rates of Student with Disabilities

Graduation rates remain a concern for students with disabilities as students with disabilities continue to graduate less students yearly than their general education peers (McFarland et al., 2019). Due to this, there have been various attempts of intervention to increase the rates of graduation for this subgroup. Federal accountability to increase graduation rates made graduation reform a necessity (ESSA, 2015). Graduation rates increased more in states that had sanctions in place for those districts whose graduation rates did not improve (Harris et al., 2020). Federal accountability led to state accountability to put in place interventions to increase the graduation rates for all students. Analyses by Harris et al. (2020) provided evidence, based on improved graduation data, that federal and state graduation accountability and sanctions assisted increased graduation rates. Many states and districts have considered multiple ways to increase overall graduation rates so that students will graduate within 4 years of entering high school as freshmen. “While a great number of interventions have sought to increase

graduation and decrease dropout rates in the nation, just a few of these interventions have focused on SWD” (Sublett & Chang, 2019, p.2). Blazer and Gonzalez Hernandez (2018) studied dropout risk factors which were attendance, behavior, and failing grades. The study consisted of a review of the school subgroup populations that experiences the highest level of high school dropout. The results of the study suggested that there is a positive impact of implementing preventative programs and effective intervention strategies that focus on assisting students with disabilities to persist and graduate from high school.

To master academic standards, students with disabilities require multiple forms of accommodations and modifications while needing graduation options and standard alternative means to meet graduation requirements to graduate earning a standard high school diploma (Act 833, 2014). Johnson et al. (2019) completed “a national study on diploma options, graduation requirements, and exit exams for students with disabilities” (p.1). Exit exams are one of the strategy’s states use to determine students’ eligibility for high school graduation (Johnson et al.). These are *high stakes* tests because they singularly determine whether or not a student receives a high school diploma. States have various high school diploma and exit options for students (Johnson et al.). A standard diploma, certificates of completion and attendance, honors degrees, and general educational development (GED) diplomas were among the high school graduation options discussed by the authors. Their research showed that only 18 states offered only a standard diploma option in which IEP teams were give autonomy in the decision of coursework required for graduation. These policy exceptions, while good for individual

students and some states, the graduation results have contributed to confusion and ever-changing achievement expectations.

Students with disabilities in high schools that offer learning options with class settings and graduation options have higher rates of high school graduation (Sublett & Chang, 2019). The researchers suggested that students with disabilities have greater rates of high school dropout than students without special education services. There is a huge disparity observed in the rates of high school graduation between students with and without disabilities. Sublett and Chang's (2019) research showed that students with disabilities had a greater chance to graduate from high school within states that provided flexibility within high school graduation requirements, exclusion from graduation exit exams, and options to obtain a diploma based on individualized education program (IEP) goal mastery. Sublett and Chang (2019) suggested offering students with disabilities online learning courses as an option to increase rates of high school completion without compromising academic standards and achievement. Additionally, to help increase graduation rates for students, Jones (2018) suggested having a graduation coach in high schools as an intervention of support. Many Georgia schools have added graduation coaches to support students. Graduation coaches were used to provide guidance and monitor students' paths to graduation and have shown to increase graduation rates (Jones).

In attempt to provide intervention to students who dropped out of high school in Chicago, Awsumb et al., (2018) reenrolled 116 students into a charter school for dropouts. All participants were students with disabilities who dropped out of school as

juniors and seniors. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 22. The program consisted of student engagement in academic instruction within the inclusion setting, interagency collaboration, vocational training, paid internships, and family engagement activities. The results of this study were positive. One of the main goals of this program was high school completion. Graduation data show that this goal was mastered at a rate of 95% (Awsumb et al.). Additional data show that 11% were hired directly from internships, 13% enrolled in college courses, one enrolled in a military school, and one was incarcerated. Based on data review, this program has been successful for students with disabilities in producing high school graduates and preparing them for post-secondary learning and work experiences.

Schifter (2016) shared that students with disabilities who participate in inclusion have higher rates of graduation within 4 years upon entry into high school. To increase graduation rates for all students, with and without disabilities, Louisiana put a credit recovery program in place to assist struggling students in earning credits for failed courses as a support to the continuum to graduate within 4 years. These credit recovery courses are usually online learning platforms, such as Edmentum's Plato Courseware which is a database which houses a multitude of courses students can enroll in online. Recent evidence suggests that the credit recovery intervention utilizing online courses in high school to makeup courses failed, have helped escalate high school graduation for students, but has had finite leverage on academic achievement (Heinrich et al., 2019).

Robison et al. (2017) researched high school graduation and dropout rates for primary and secondary school students with alternate outcomes. Their research showed

that having interventions in place that will prevent high school drop out for students with disabilities may impact the positive outcomes for high school graduation. The provision of evidence-based interventions is needed to close the achievement gap (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016). Diverse learners have had a history of inequitable educational practices and a lack of quality instruction and supports. The use of Response to Intervention has shown to decrease the number of students with learning disabilities who dropped out and increased the number of students who graduated earning a regular high school diploma. Response to Intervention is a federal implemented reform system of using universal screenings, provided to all students three times per year, using assessment tools to identify students who may be struggling academically (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). It is a three-tiered system which consists of tiers one through three. Tier 1 is the general curriculum, Tier 2 is an intervention tier which provides small group, systematic, and targeted interventions, and Tier 3 is an intervention tier which provides intense, targeted, systematic, and explicit interventions one-on-one with students. Progress monitoring is done during intervention phases. Based on students universal screening data, it is determined if students need intervention. While in intervention tiers, progress monitoring methods are used to determine progress and next steps. Policy efforts to reduce inequity in education have been connected to individualized and data-driven approaches to improve student outcomes (Castro-Villarreal et al.).

One of the largest school districts in Oregon created an Early Warning Indicator Tracking System to identify students who are and are not on track to graduate from high school. Attendance, behavior, and coursework were the indicators used to monitor

students who were on track to graduate and those who needed intervention to meet graduation requirements (Phinney, 2016). In this research, attendance concerns were found to be the major indicator of those who struggled to graduate within 4 years from high school. Students who are not present for class will miss the instruction needed to pass courses leading them not to be able to graduate from high school within a 4-year period. A system of intervention to monitor and track attendance, behavior, and coursework is needed to ensure students with disabilities receive the coaching and support they need to graduate from high school within a 4-year period.

The April Dunn Act (2020) is a state created policy that provides a framework to increase graduation rates for students with disabilities which will be the focus of this study. The April Dunn Act was created to provide qualifying students with disabilities alternate means as an option to meet state graduation requirements to earn a standard high school diploma. However, teachers play a major role in the implementation of the April Dunn Act and students meeting graduation requirements once the Act is applied to a student's IEP. Teachers must strategically plan how to:

1. Identify qualifying students each semester upon entering high school.
2. Monitor students' assessment data to determine when students may be April Dunn Act eligible based on lack of passing state assessments.
3. Implement academic goals on the students' IEP for each course, within 30 days of being enrolled in the course, that has a state assessment component to meet graduation requirements to earn a standard diploma (LDOE, 2016).

According to the most recent guidance, students may meet eligibility requirements by either one of the following two ways.

Students may become eligible for the April Dunn Act performance criteria if:

Students enter high school having not achieved at least a combination of the following within 2 of the 3 most recent years:

- 8th Grade - Combination of Basic/Approaching Basic on Math and ELA.
- 6th and 7th Grades – At least Basic on any two of the four assessments: ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies.

OR

- High School - Not achieved Approaching Basic or above after two attempts of the same high school LEAP 2025 Assessment. (LDOE, 2022)

The complexity of identifying students who qualify is one reason it has been difficult to track and understand the fidelity with which the act has been implemented and managed within individual schools. Teachers play a critical role in the intervention process whether it be implementing behavior or academic interventions (Benedict et al., 2021). Once the need for student interventions are identified, teachers are usually the target people to implement and progress monitor the intervention process for students. For example, if there is a reading specialist providing interventions for reading to an identified student. The teacher is the one to identify the need for intervention, make the referral for targeted interventions for the student to the Response to Intervention Team, provide additional intervention, and monitor progress. However, at times, teachers are providing interventions, small group and one-on-one, independently in the classroom

while still managing a class of students. This intervention process can often lead to teacher burnout (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). With the implementation of any interventions or initiative, there is a need for adequate teacher training related to the interventions or initiative to be implemented in order to increase the effectiveness of the implementation process and to prevent teacher burnout. This applies to the implementation process of the April Dunn Act as well. Sufficient teacher training is a prerequisite to effective implementation. The LDOE did provide training to school district central office leaders in 2014 at the time the Act was implemented. They also posted the professional development on the state's website as a reference. However, the level of training teachers have experienced across the state may vary district by district. The impact of teachers supporting students with the April Dunn Act implementation process to earn a standard high school diploma as a means to meet graduation requirements remains undetermined within the school district of study.

Summary and Conclusions

Making graduation accessible to all students within a 4-year period is the goal of Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). This policy governs education for all students, with and without disabilities, enrolled in public school systems within the United States. However, the review of annual graduation cohort data show many students with disabilities are graduating in lower numbers annually in comparison with students without disabilities earning a standard high school diploma (DePaoli et al., 2018). With this federal accountability requirement goal of all students to graduate within a 4-year period as documented in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), many states have been

creative in the creation of graduation pathways, diploma options, and alternative methods to meet graduation requirements to earn a standard high school diploma for students with and without disabilities (Harris et al., 2020). With policies and procedures in place, special education district leaders, principals, counselors, and teachers play a major role in the education and supporting students with disabilities through high school years to meet course completion and graduation requirements. Having a support system for students in meeting graduation requirements is critical for students with disabilities who struggle to meet graduation academic requirements (Phinney, 2016). Graduation coaches have been used as a critical intervention support to guide, monitor, and provide access to support during high school to meet graduation requirements (Jones, 2018).

Civic Enterprises (2017) suggested establishing a standard diploma that is achievable by all students and alternative criteria for content mastery and state accountability assessment measures for students with disabilities. Having multiple diploma pathways provide students with options to earn diplomas that allow them to graduate and become college and/or career ready by high school graduation. For example, the state of Louisiana offers two standard diplomas: TOPS University and a Career Diploma (LDOE, 2016). The Career Diploma allows the students to choose a career pathway in which they will earn a certification in the area of study which will allow them to directly go into a career, such as a dental assistant, cosmetologist, or carpenter. Louisiana offers a host of graduation pathways that will fall under the achievement of a Career Diploma. Testing requirements are tied to many graduation requirements which cause many students with disabilities to struggle to meet this

component of the graduation requirement to earn a standard diploma (Civic Enterprises, 2017). The April Dunn Act (2020) provides academic intervention with alternate criteria to meet the high school assessment requirement to earn a standard high school diploma. There were not any data found on the April Dunn Act implementation in practice from the perceptions of high school special education teachers. Making every student with disabilities a high school graduate is critical to their future beyond high school (Welch, 2017). The high school diploma will afford students with disabilities an opportunity to further their education and expand their post-secondary learning and work experiences which will reduce the statistical negative life impacts students with disabilities may encounter that leave high school without earning a high school diploma (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

In the next chapter, the research methodology will be explained. The literature review documents evidence of a historic national and local graduation deficit for students with disabilities. Literature, based in policy and the research of student experiences, has alluded to a need to have alternative pathways and diploma options for students with disabilities to have a greater opportunity to earn a standard high school diploma (ESSA, 2015). The need for interventions to support an increase in the graduation rate of students with disabilities has been identified in the literature as well. The research method chosen connects the problem of understanding how April Dunn Act (2020) is implemented as well as identifies trends in the standard-diploma HS graduation rates of students with disabilities and IEPs before and after the Act's implementation. There was a suspected gap in practice between the purpose of the law and the implementation of the law by

teachers to effectively support students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma within 4 years of starting high school. This multi-modal qualitative case study method has been selected to explore how teachers are implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act (2020), as well as identify graduation trends before and after the Act's implementation for this population of students. Low graduation rates of students with disabilities in Louisiana is the reasoning behind the development of the April Dunn Act. With this being so, an exploratory method was also chosen as a means to provide information, reflected in data and from the teachers' implementation process, on how the graduation rates of students with disabilities, earning a standard high school diploma, has changed in one of the largest school districts in the state since the implementation of the April Dunn Act.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act (2020) to support students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma. The exploratory study was also to provide information on how the graduation rates of students with disabilities, earning a standard high school diploma at four high schools, has trended in one of the largest school districts in the state before and since the implementation of the Act. In this chapter, there is an explanation of the research method used in the study. I briefly review the research design and a rationale for the research. The role of the researcher is explained, along with the setting, and how the participants were selected. I also address the data analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

This study began as a prospectus-approved quantitative study to examine the effectiveness of the April Dunn Act for improving the high school graduation rates of students with disabilities who also had an IEP. After my initial dissertation chair retired suddenly, however, my second chair asked me to change the study to a qualitative design because the actual research problem had more to do with understanding how the Act was being implemented at the local level than whether the Act was effective based on graduation statistics. If the Act was being implemented with fidelity, it was reasoned, then it likely would also be found effective. Qualitative studies are suitable when the goal of the research is to explore a phenomenon for the purpose of understanding (Creswell,

2013), and so the qualitative design was selected. When quantitative data are also included to expound on the qualitative data in ways that do not rise to the level of mixed-method designs (i.e., non-inferential), then researchers often add the word multimodal to further describe their research design (Antoniadou, 2017; Collier & Elman, 2009). The four high schools in a single school district provided the case to be explored, so I also describe it as an exploratory case study (Alam, 2020; Rumrill et al., 2011). No other research design description better captures the essence of this study's design than an exploratory qualitative multimodal case study.

This study used two data collection methods. The first was the collection of publicly available archival cohort graduation data of students with disabilities who graduated from the four high schools with a standard high school diploma: those entering high school during school year 2009-10 and school year 2010-11, immediately prior to the Act's implementation, as well as the cohorts that entered high school during the school year 2014-15 and school year 2015-16, immediately following the Act's implementation. The purpose of collecting these data was to establish graduation trends for this population of students before and after the Act's implementation (RQ1). Secondly, for the qualitative portion of the study (RQ2), data were also collected through an interview process with teachers delimited to those who have taught high school students with disabilities for a minimum of 5 years. The years of teaching experience was required to gain teachers' responses that would reflect experience prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher within this research study was to explore the implementation of the April Dunn Act to support students with disabilities in graduating earning a standard high school diploma. According to Cooke et al. (2020), the researcher is the data collection instrument in qualitative research. As such, it was my role to gain access to the perceptions of the participants on the phenomenon of the Act's implementation in the classroom as guided by my interview protocol (see Appendix A). The goal was to gain their personal experiences of the implementation process and the ongoing inclusion of implementing a state initiative to assist students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma. Teachers who volunteered to be participants in this research were not teachers who were under my direct supervision. The principals of the schools were the teachers' supervisors. My bias, in particular my belief that the April Dunn Act had been implemented inconsistently in classrooms and was therefore less effective than it should have been, played an important role in the design and implementation of my study. Rather than trying to mitigate my bias, my interview and follow-up questions were designed to expose inconsistencies and weaknesses in the Act's implementation. As will be shown in Chapter 4, however, this belief that I had developed through observation turned out to be accurate in the beginning research years of implementation of the Act, but based on my data analyses and findings, inaccurate in the subsequent years of implementation of the Act.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participant selection process consisted of multiple steps. 10 special education teachers were asked to participate from four high schools in the study district. There were to be two to three teachers selected from each of the four high schools with the goal of selecting 10 participants: two participants from two schools and three participants from two schools. The opportunity to participate was offered through email communication. The teachers who were interested in participating were to click on a link in the email that would take them to the first of two Google Forms. The first was by an informed consent form that explained the research and participant rights. Teachers who still wanted to participate after reading the informed consent were to click on a link at the bottom of the form to acknowledge and give consent, which took them to the second Google form, the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). The second questionnaire collected information to ensure the potential participants qualified for participation by collecting the teachers' areas of teaching certification, years of experience teaching students with disabilities in the study state, and if their teaching experience has been with students with significant cognitive disabilities or those students with disabilities that do not fall under significant cognitive disabilities category (Louisiana Administrative Code, 2017). After reviewing the teachers' responses to the items to the demographic survey, 10 special education teachers were selected to participate based on having at least 5 years of experience teaching high school students with disabilities in Louisiana who were working towards earning a standard diploma and their areas of certification. The years of

experience must range from the most current school year 21-22 back to at least 5 years. For this selection process, the years of teaching experience was required to gain teachers' responses that would reflect experience prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020). Special education teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience would provide a rich range of perceptions about how the April Dunn Act has actually been implemented in the classroom. There were 24 special education teachers, varying because of high teacher turnover, who match the study criteria over these 4 high schools, so securing 10 of them to participate would be feasible.

The special education teachers selected were those who teach students without significant cognitive disabilities because this is the population of special education students who are assessed using the same state assessments as their nondisabled peers. The teachers that teach this subgroup of special education students are the teachers required to implement the intervention process for students qualifying for the April Dunn Act (2020). These special education teachers were uniquely qualified for investigation into the research problem because they have experience teaching this subgroup of students both before and after the implementation of the April Dunn Act.

Instrumentation

This study took a dual exploratory approach for collecting data (Goldkuhl, 2012). Descriptive data were collected from three sources. One data source was JCampus, which contains all students' demographic, attendance, health, academic, behavioral, and special education records for the school district. The data from JCampus were used to determine and extract the needed information for qualifying pre-Act students with disabilities who

entered high school in school year 2009-10 (Pre-Act Cohort 1) and school year 2010-11 (Pre-Act Cohort 2), as well as the post-Act qualifying students for school year 2014-15 (Post-Act Cohort 3) and school year 2015-16 (Post-Act Cohort 4).

Once the qualifying student cohorts have been established, a second data source was used to collect data on the actual graduation for those cohorts. The second data source was the STS. This system is managed by the LDOE. STS provides a collection of detailed transcript and high school diploma data, for public and nonpublic schools of interest, for students in Grades 8-12 who have taken courses for high school course credit. These data depict how many students earned course credits sufficient to earn a high school diploma (Goldkuhl, 2012). Louisianabelieves.com, a third data source, reports the results of graduation data annually from STS and was used for validity. The LDOE website was used as a data verification source to confirm validity of graduation data found in JCampus and STS. Descriptive statistics were used with these data to address the first research question which seeks to understand how the standard diploma high school graduation rate has changed within the local district since the implementation of Act 833.

An interview plan had to be developed to access the perceptions of the teacher participants. Intervention theory suggests that effective intervention is dependent upon having the appropriate knowledge about the intervention, with the appropriate application of that knowledge, to access a range of clear and defined options to achieve the desired outcome (Argyris, 1970). Therefore, I worked with my research committee to create an interview plan designed to generate information about the teachers' knowledge related to

the statutory requirements of the April Dunn Act, their experiences related to how they learned about and originally implemented the Act, and what they currently did to satisfy its requirements. Semi-structured and open-ended interview questions were asked to pursue the collection of thick rich data (Nowell et al., 2017) that could then be transcribed and analyzed to answer RQ2. Interviews were conducted using the video conference platform using Zoom to meet with the teachers who volunteered and were selected to participate in the study. The video conference was recorded in Zoom and downloaded into a file on a personal laptop. For an additional backup, a hand-held digital recorder was used to record the interviews. The teachers' responses were transcribed from the recordings into written manuscripts for thematic data analysis.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The recruitment process occurred through email to high school special education teachers. A list of special education teachers was obtained from the high school principals of the four schools that were a part of the study. The invitation explained the purpose of the study, the role of the participants, and the selection process for the participants. Inform consent was gained for participants and the confidentiality measures were explained that were taken to protect the data gathered from the participants. Those who wanted to participate completed an application using a Google Form which consisted of questions which provided answers to their teaching certification and their years of experience teaching special education students in the high school setting in Louisiana.

The special education teachers selected participated in interviews using a video conference format utilizing Zoom. Participation occurred in the teachers' home or school

setting. The location decision was left to each participant. The interviews were approximately a 1 hour duration. Interview questions were conducted using the researcher-created interview protocol (see Appendix A) about the implementation process of the April Dunn Act from their experiences. Participants shared their perceptions of the intervention process which included strategies and processes that have assisted this population in earning or moving toward earning a standard high school diploma. They were informed that their perceptions of the Act's implementation and maintenance would be used to provide a better understanding of how teachers have used the April Dunn Act to pace special education students towards completing coursework to earn a standard high school diploma.

There were two forms of data collected. First, to better understand how the Act's implementation has changed the graduation rates for students with disabilities within the local district, archival cohort graduation data of students with disabilities was collected and compared prior to and after the original Act's implementation in 2014. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers who have provided interventions to support students who qualified for the April Dunn Act to meet graduation requirements and who agreed to participate in the study.

The second part of the data collection consisted of 10 teacher interviews. Teachers selected were those with at least 5 years of experience with teaching students with disabilities. Teachers who teach students with disabilities were asked to discuss the intervention process provided to support students who have the April Dunn Act (2020) applied on their IEPs. They were asked to share which interventions were used to meet

course and state assessment criteria. Teachers shared the benefits and challenges of the implementation of interventions for students with disabilities who qualify for the April Dunn Act. The interview questions and procedures are contained in Appendix A (Interview Protocol).

Archival Data

This study explored archival cohort graduation data of students with disabilities who graduated from four high schools earning a standard high school diploma. For the graduation data collection, there were two groups of qualifying students with disabilities from four high schools. One group entered high school during the academic years 2009-2011 (prior to the Act's implementation), and the second group consisted of qualifying students who entered high school during the academic years 2014-16 following the Act's implementation. These archival data provided information related to the number of students with disabilities that graduated earning a standard diploma prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020).

Descriptive archival graduation data were retrieved and reviewed from the STS, which is managed by the LDOE. The data were shared from the four high schools prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020). Data collected were from 4 graduation cohort periods: 2009-10 and 2010-11, expected to graduate within 4 years, which was Spring of 2013 and Spring of 2014. Those data reflected the two graduation cohorts prior to the implementation of the April Dunn Act. The entering cohorts from 2014-15 and 2015-16, the two cohorts immediately following the Act's implementation, would have graduated in Spring of 2018 and Spring of 2019. Those graduation years

2013 and 2014 for the last two graduating cohorts before the Act's implementation, and 2018 and 2019 for the first two cohorts following the Act's implementation, were the graduation years of focus for answering RQ1.

Data Analysis Plan

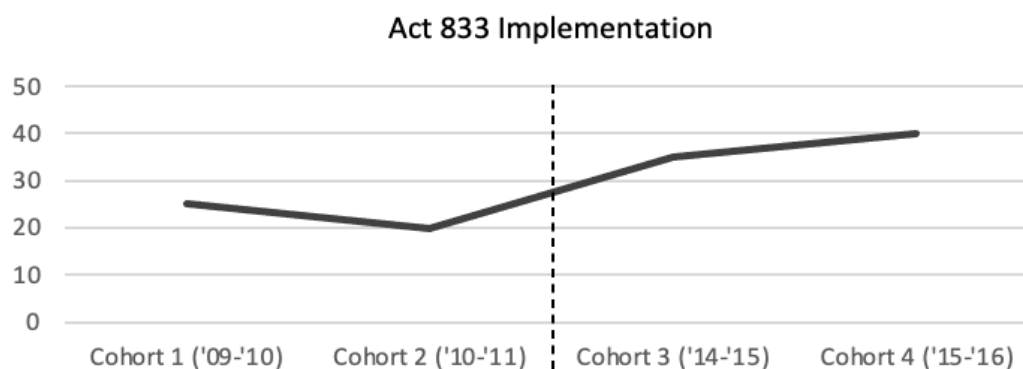
The first research question: How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act? To respond to this research question, descriptive archival graduation data was retrieved and reviewed. This reflects graduation data from two graduation cohorts since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. With these data, I described how the number of students with disabilities that graduated earning a standard diploma prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020) may have changed. The graduation data collected was compiled into a Google Sheet. The compiled data from the Google Sheet is reported in pictorial and narrative format. For transferability purposes, data is also converted to percentages to reflect the manner in which local districts, state, and national graduation data are reported. Any discrepancies are reported in findings and used to explore how teachers are implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act (2020) to support students with disabilities in earning a standard diploma.

Presenting the descriptive statistics for both groups describe initial findings to determine if there has been a change in the graduation rates of students with disabilities since the implementation of the April Dunn Act within the district. Qualifying students are defined as those students whose disabilities do not otherwise disqualify them from

earning a standard high school diploma. The number of high school graduates are combined and determined by graduating cohorts. A graduating cohort is based on the number of students that enter high school in the ninth grade and graduate from high school 4 years later (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). The numbers of students are then ultimately used by districts and states for annual determination of high school graduation and attrition for all high schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). With these data, I described the graduation rates prior to and since the April Dunn Act for the four high schools. Figure 1 shows an example of how these data could demonstrate change over the time of the Act's implementation.

Figure 1

Sample Graduation Trend Line



The second research question sought to understand how classroom teachers perceived the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020) statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma. To respond to this question, special education teachers participated in an interview process. The teachers shared interventions, practices, and their perceptions of the implementation

process of the April Dunn Act. The teachers that have assisted special education students in earning or moving toward earning a standard high school diploma were selected for participation. A content analysis of the participants' responses was completed. Once the participants' perceptions were captured using digital recordings, the recordings were transcribed into written manuscripts for thematic data analysis. The data was reviewed multiple times to look for patterns and transcribe data.

To look for commonalities in the data collected from the interviews, open coding was used to group like responses which is a data-driven approach to data collection and organization in which the data speaks for itself (Parameswaran et al., 2020). This system of coding was used to analyze data in search for patterns, relationships, and connections from the derived perceptions to place them into categories. Teacher interview data was transcribed from the digital recorder and entered into a Google Form for each participant. Patterns, relationships, and connections from data collected, teachers' perceptions, were documented in Google Sheets. Once coding and data analysis were complete, the results of the interviews were compiled to be formulated into a narrative paragraph format. Additionally, meaning from the perceptions of the participants were derived in attempt to accumulate of list of best practices and interventions when implementing the April Dunn Act (2020).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the following measures were taken. Member checking was used to validate the transcription results. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is crucial for establishing credibility. The data results were

shared with the participants once it was gathered and documented into narrative form. The participants reviewed their interview transcripts, along with a summary of the findings with themes. The participants had the opportunity to interpret, engage in, and add to the interview results. No additional information was added by any of the participants.

To aid in transferability, my research results consist of a thick description of the data analysis process and findings related back to the research questions. The participants, special education teachers, provided the contextual description of their perceptions of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). They explained the process, in detail, from identification of qualifying special education students and the process of moving students who qualify for the April Dunn Act throughout high school grade levels towards graduating from high school earning a standard high school diploma. This research provides school district leaders and teachers with relatable experiences connected to the implementation process of the Act in moving students with disabilities towards earning a standard diploma.

For confirmability, I ensured that the findings reported were those interpreted from the analysis of the participants' interviews only. Reflexivity was used to ensure creditability of the results of the research. This helped the researcher to reflect on their thoughts during the research process (Skukauskaite et al., 2020). Journaling was used to document thoughts experienced related the research process (DeMeyer & Howells, 2020). Reflexivity helped the researcher become aware of their emotions and values connected to the research process (Skukauskaite et al., 2020). Being aware of any

personal feelings, ensured that the interpretation of the participants' responses or the archival graduation data collected reflected only the participants' perceptions. For added accountability, each step of data analysis is included in the study to support confirmability and to disengage any possible biases.

For dependability, the triangulation strategy was used. Triangulation allowed the results of the research to be reviewed from the combination of at least two different sources of data. One set of data responded to each research question to determine if there was a connection between the results found when viewing the two sets of data. The historical graduation data was compiled within the research process to respond to Research Question #1: How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma at four high schools, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act? Teacher interviews were completed with high school special education teachers to gather perspective data to respond to Research Question #2: How do classroom teachers perceive the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma? Triangulation of the data added more confidence and validation to the results of the study by using the historical graduation data and the teachers' perceptions to gain additional knowledge of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act and if any changes in the graduation rates have occurred since the implementation of the April Dunn Act.

Ethical Procedures

All participants were provided informed consent. They were knowledgeable of the purpose of the research and their roles in the research study. Written consent was gained from participants. The participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous for confidentiality to gain the true perceptions of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020) from the teachers. The participants' names were not included, nor the schools where they work. Their responses remained confidential. For ethical purposes, the names of the target schools and the target district will not be disclosed. To keep the school district confidential and norm with the number of high schools in other local school districts in the state, only a few of the high schools from this district were chosen for this research study, excluding magnet accelerated schools. Data gathered from participant interviews that document the teacher perceptions of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020) remain confidential.

Once the participants' perceptions were captured using digital recordings, I manually transcribed the recordings into written documents for my thematic data analysis. I implemented measures to ensure the participants' rights were protected. For example, to ensure anonymity, I created an alphanumeric code (i.e., P1, P2, etc.) for each person interviewed and used only those codes in my research reporting. I also used archival high school graduation data of special education students from within the district of study. Hard copy residue data is retained in my home-office in a locked filing cabinet that only I have access to. Soft copy files are retained on my password-protected home computer. All research data will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of my study.

All graduation data collected prior to and post April Dunn Act implementation was used as descriptive data in the research. All data collected is locked in a file cabinet of the researcher's home office. Once research is complete, the data collected during the interview process will be shredded.

Summary

Chapter 3 focuses on the entire methodology and procedural processes of the research. The methodology chosen was a multi-modal qualitative case study. This study explored archival cohort graduation data of students with disabilities who graduated from 4 high schools earning a standard high school diploma and entered high school during school year 2009-10 and school year 2010-11, immediately prior to the Act's implementation, as well as school year 2014-15 and school year 2015-16, immediately following the Act's implementation. It also explored the teachers' perceptions of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). The components of trustworthiness were explained to elaborate on the measures which were taken to assist in ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformity. Chapter 3 explains explicitly the participant processes, research protocol, data analysis plan, and action steps within the research process which occurred to gain the research results for Chapter 4. Chapter 4 consists of the reporting of thick rich data which comprise the results of my data analysis for this action research.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act and to better understand how the graduation rates for students with disabilities and IEPs trended before and after the Act's implementation. The study provides information on how the graduation rate of students with disabilities, earning a standard high school diploma, has changed in one of the largest school districts in the state since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. This study addresses the gap in practice between the intent of the law and the implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities in graduating within 4 years earning a standard diploma as their nondisabled peers.

Research Questions

RQ1: How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma at four high schools, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act?

RQ2: How do classroom teachers perceive the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma?

This chapter documents the research process and research results of this multimodal qualitative case study. The chapter is organized around the research setting; the data collection analysis and results for RQ; the data collection analysis and results for RQ2; evidence of trustworthiness; and a chapter summary.

The Setting

The investigation of RQ1 focused on any trend change in graduation rates for students with disabilities since the implementation of Act 833 (2014; renamed the April Dunn Act in 2020). Three data sources were used to retrieve the graduation rate data for special education students graduating with a standard high school diploma. The database that I retrieved the graduation data from was from the STS available through the LDOE database. The other database was the Student Information System on the school district's JCampus portal: a system that was available to me because of my position in the school district. The reason I consulted two different databases was because I wanted to cross-reference the available data to ensure that the graduation rates I reported were as accurate as possible. As discussed in my data collection section, the result of these data verification efforts led to the utilization of the information from the LDOE website because of reporting inconsistencies by the school district prior to 2018, inconsistencies that were exacerbated by changes in reporting software and hardware. The relevant data files were initially downloaded from both resources for cohorts graduating in years 2012-2019. These were the years initially of interest when my study began. Due to amount of time my study was in progress, however, the data also became available and were downloaded for the years 2020-2021.

The investigation of RQ2 consisted of gathering teachers' perceptions about the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). The settings of the research interviews were either in a school office, classroom, or participant's home. In all cases, the interview room was occupied only by me and the participant being interviewed to

minimize distractions and ensure privacy. I conducted the interviews using video conferencing technology. The video cameras were turned off as per instructions of the Walden University IRB. With high teacher turn over, it was a challenge to find experienced and certified special education teachers to engage in the interview process. Two of the 10 teachers that initially agreed to participate transferred to other school parishes and had to withdraw from the study. One of the teachers retired, and as a result, withdrew participation. Some special education teachers expressed not having time to participate due to workload. Due to the lack of teachers available that met the research requirements, it took 3 months to locate participants and complete the interview process. Due to the large population of special education teachers in the school district, the search for consenting certified participants was not anticipated the difficult task that it proved to be.

The participation criteria for the study was that all teachers had to be experienced and certified special education teachers within the school district in Louisiana where the research study occurred. 10 special education teachers were selected to participate based on having at least 5 years of experience teaching high school students with disabilities in Louisiana who were working towards earning a standard diploma. For this selection process, the years of teaching experience were required to gain teachers' responses that would be reflective of teaching experience prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020). Special education teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience were able to provide a wide range of perceptions regarding how the April Dunn Act has actually been implemented in the classroom and provided insightful

comments on the Act's connection to the graduation rates of special education students graduating with a standard high school diploma (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018).

Data Collection, Analysis, and Results for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 focused on how high school graduation rates for students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma at four high schools has trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020), formerly Act 833 (2014).

Data Collection

The data collection process for RQ1 consisted of retrieving graduation data from multiple data bases. The descriptive archival graduation data were retrieved and reviewed from the STS managed by the LDOE, the JCampus Database, as well as from high school graduation data documented on Louisiana Believes, a Department of Education website. Data were reviewed from the four high schools within the school district prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020). Data collected were from four graduation cohort periods: 2009-10 and 2010-11, expected to graduate within 4 years in Spring of 2013 and Spring of 2014. Entering cohort data from 2014-15 and 2015-16 cohorts were also reviewed for the students who graduated in Spring of 2018 and Spring of 2019. Combined, the data reflect graduation rates for two cohorts before and two cohorts after the implementation of the original Act in 2014. The graduation data collection was documented for each of the four high schools into a spreadsheet. The data were then depicted as an average trend line for the four schools, as well individual trend lines for each school (Figures 2 and 3, respectively). Each chart reflects the percentage of

students with disabilities who graduated with a standard high school diploma for the two cohorts that entered high school immediately prior to that Act's implementation (academic years 2009-10 and 2010-11) and the two cohorts immediately after the Act's implementation (academic years 2014-15 and 2015-16).

There was a variation from the data collection plan documented in Chapter 3. It was discovered, during research and due to the longevity of the research period, additional report worthy graduation data were available beyond the research year range presented in Chapter 3. Additional reporting reflects students with disabilities who entered within cohorts 2016-17 and 2017-18 and graduated in Spring of 2020 and Spring 2021, respectively. Therefore, these two additional cohorts, for all four high schools, were reviewed as well. There are culminating charts, for each of the four high schools, the district, and the state of Louisiana which was created to depict the impact the Act has had on students with disabilities graduating earning a standard high school diploma from entering cohorts 2009-10 through entering cohorts 2017-18 and graduating within 4 years up to graduation completion year of 2021. These additional data will be shared in the appropriate section in Chapter 5 (see Interpretation of Findings).

Data Analysis

In response to RQ1, high school special education graduation data for four high schools were used to show how graduation rates have trended for the two graduation cohorts prior to and the two graduation cohorts after the state-wide implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020), formerly known as Act 833 (2014). In Figure 2, an average trend

line was developed for all four high schools, and in Figure 3, the high schools' trend lines are depicted separately.

Results

Descriptive statistics, specifically the percentages of students with disabilities who graduated with a standard high school diploma, were used to answer RQ1. The graduation data for the population of interest are presented in Figures 2 and 3. The descriptive research question for this study consists of results derived from archival cohort graduation data and descriptive statistics to show how graduation rates have trended prior to and since the implementation of Act 833 (2014) in 2015. Recall that historical data show that in 2015 Louisiana was among the three lowest states that graduated less than 50% of their special education students from high school (Civic Enterprises, 2017). In the district of study, students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma graduated at a historical low of 17.84% in 2008 (LDOE, 2008). Based on these data from DePaoli et al. (2018) and the LDOE (2008), less than 30% of students with disabilities graduated from high school earning a standard diploma for at least a decade. This was a problem that led to the creation of Act 833 (2014), and drove the purpose of this study.

The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act (2020) to support students with disabilities in earning a standard diploma. To provide a baseline for teacher interviews, as well as establish a baseline for future research, it was necessary to establish the trend lines of the graduation rates of students with disabilities

who earned a high school diploma before and after the Act's implementation (Cupchik, 2001). In so doing, this study addressed gaps in knowledge and practice by exploring trends in the standard diploma graduation rates of students with disabilities based on the intent of the new law.

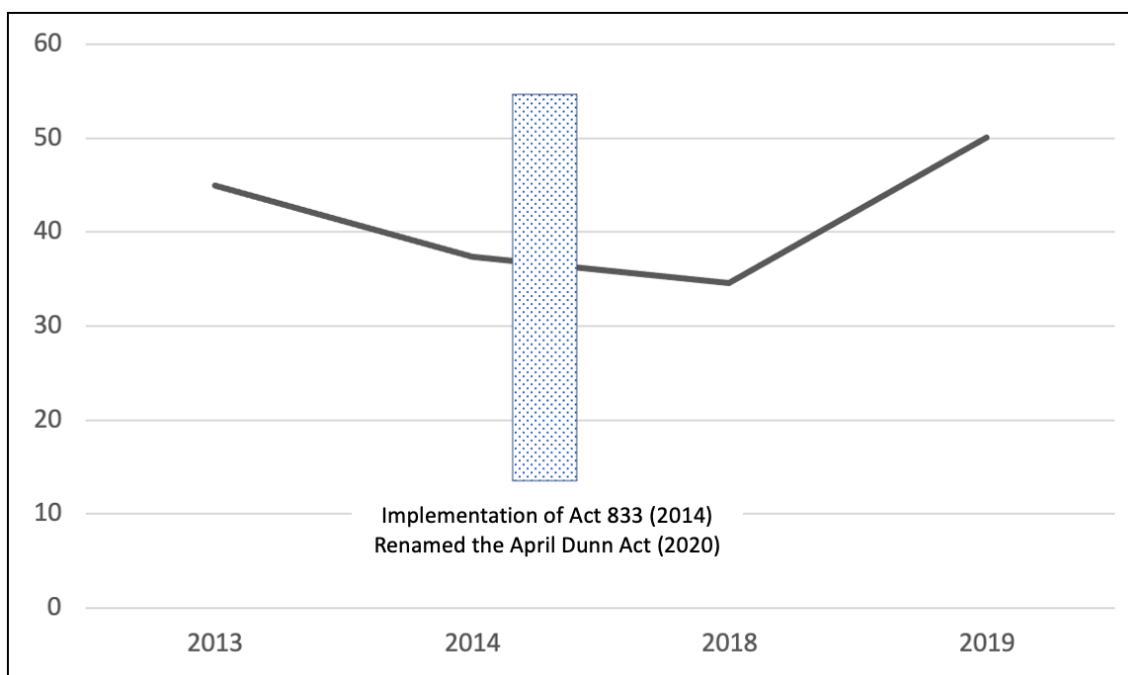
Figure 2 shows the trend line representing the average percentages of students with disabilities who graduated with a standard diploma and entered high school in cohorts 2009-10 and 2010-11; the two graduating cohorts immediately prior to the implementation of the Act, as well as 2014-15 and 2015-16; the two graduating cohorts immediately after the implementation of the Act. The graduation data represent the four high schools within the district that were selected to participate in the study. The average trend data for the four schools show a sharp increase in the graduation rates beginning in 2019, which was the second graduation year for the second cohort following the implementation of the Act. The average graduation trend line for the four high schools was decreasing for the two years prior to implementation as well as for the first cohort year following the Act's implementation. Beginning with the next graduating cohort (2019), however, there was an increase. For the four high schools, an average of 45% of students with disabilities graduating with standard high school diplomas in 2013, fell to 37.32% in 2014, the year before the act was implemented. With an average of 34.63% of these students graduating in 2018, the first graduating cohort following the Act's implementation, the trend line continued to decrease but did so at a slower rate, until it reversed with the second post-Act graduating cohort in 2019. The cohort of students with

disabilities who entered the four high schools in 2015 graduated with a standard high school diploma at an average rate of 50.03%.

Student academic gains beginning in 2019 may have derived from educational initiatives and interventions that were connected with more effective teacher learning and implementation of related pedagogies (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). School year 2014-15 was a year of new learning connected to Act 833 for leaders and administrators state-wide. For students to successfully benefit from Act 833's implementation, leaders and teachers had to learn about the purpose of Act 833 (2014) and how the implementation process should proceed in schools.

Figure 2

Average Percentage of Students With Disabilities Earning a Standard High School Diploma Among Four Louisiana High Schools

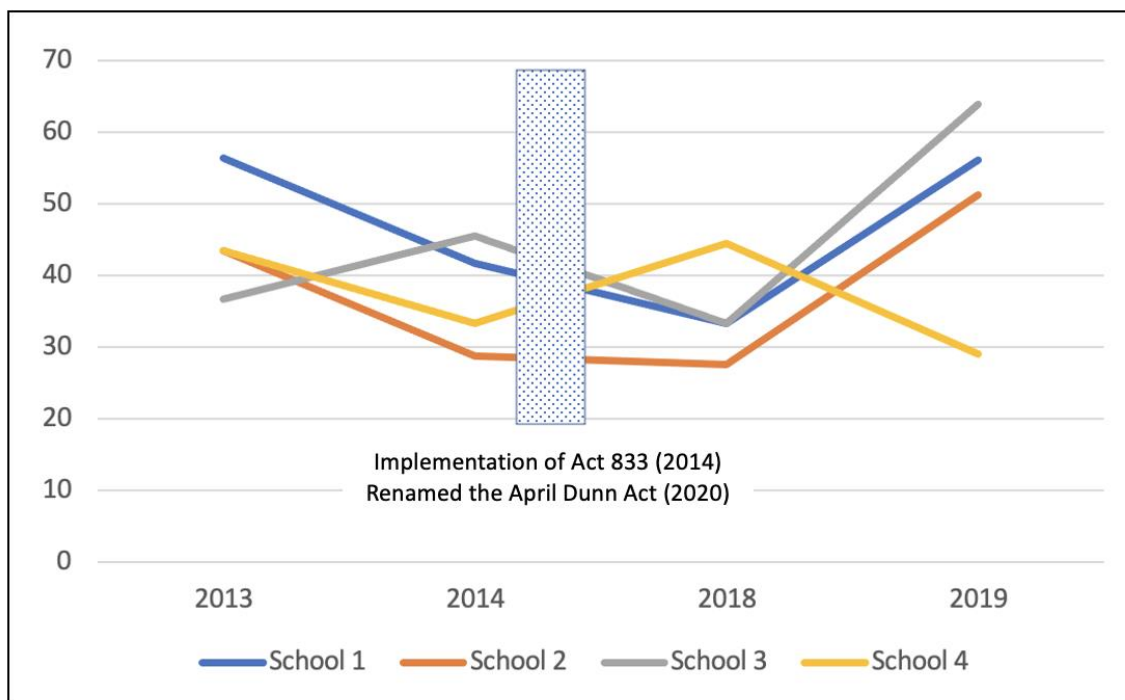


Note: The Y axis is percentage of students with disabilities graduating. The X axis is the year of graduation. The average graduation rates for the two graduating cohorts immediately prior to the Act's implementation (2013 & 2014), and the average graduation rates for the two graduating cohorts that began attending high school immediately following the Act's implementation in 2015 and 2016, graduating in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

Figure 3 represent the trend data for the four high schools individually. The graduation trends for Schools 1, 2, and 3 mirrored the average for all four schools provided in Figure 2. The graduation trend for School 4, however, contradicts the average trend, showing an initial increase until 2018, but then falling sharply in 2019. Then, rather than a sharp increase in graduation rates in 2019, as was demonstrated by the other 3 schools, School 4 experienced a 15% decline in standard diploma graduation of students with disabilities from 2018 to 2019. With the noted exception of School 4's decline in graduation rate in 2019, the graduation trends for the other three schools were impressive for the second graduating cohort following the Act's implementation. The 2018-2019 graduation trend differences for the four schools were +22.7% (School 1), +23.7% (School 2), and an impressive +30.6% (School 3). School 4 experienced a -15.4% drop in students with disabilities graduating with a standard diploma.

Figure 3

Percentage of Students With Disabilities Earning a Standard High School Diploma by School



Note: The Y axis is percentage of students with disabilities graduating. The X axis is the year of graduation. Schools 1-4 are color keys for the trend lines. The 2013 and 2014 graduation rates represent the two graduating cohorts immediately prior to the Act's implementation, while the 2018 and 2019 graduation rates represent the two graduating cohorts that had the benefit of attending high school for 4 years after the implementation of the Act in 2015.

Additional Graduation Data (2020 to 2021) Results

Additional report worthy graduation data were available following the years of initial interest. Especially because there was a disparate downward trend for School four compared to Schools 1-3 (see Figure 3), these additional graduation data were consulted to see how those trends may have changed in more recent years. These new data were the

graduation rates of SPED students earning a standard HS diploma for 2 additional cohorts, those who entered school during the 2016-17 school year, graduating in 2020, and those who entered during the 2017-18 school year, graduating in 2021. The graduation rates are added for the two new cohorts in Table 3 and reproduced in the bar graph in Figure 4, respectively. These data show that, with the exception of 2019, the SPED standard-diploma graduation rates for School 4 stabilized and continued to trend upward in a manner that mirrored the upward trend for the other three schools, correcting the previous disparate trend.

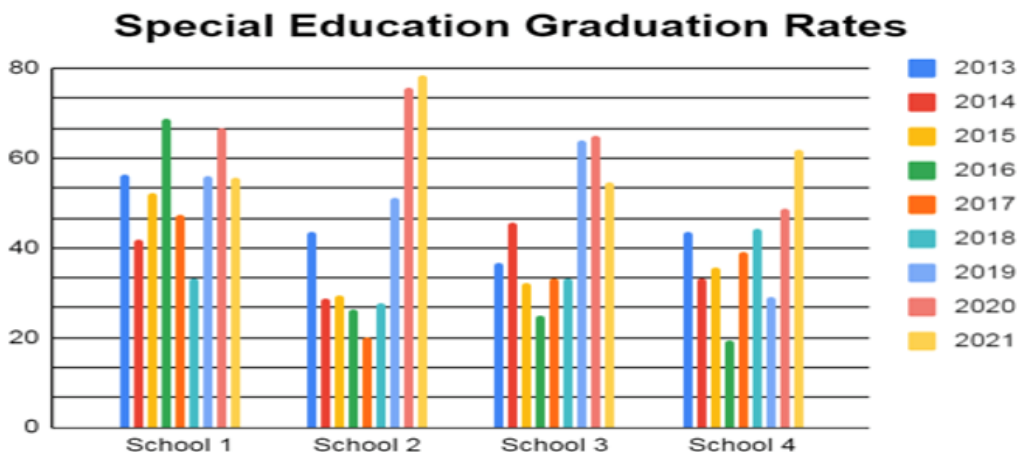
Table 2

Percentage of Students W/Disabilities Graduating 2013 to 2021 (by School)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
School 1	56.3	41.7	52.2	68.8	47.4	33.3	56.0	66.7	55.6
School 2	43.5	28.8	29.3	26.3	20.0	27.5	51.2	75.7	78.4
School 3	36.7	45.5	32.1	25.0	33.3	33.3	63.9	64.9	54.5
School 4	43.5	33.3	35.7	19.5	39.1	44.4	29.0	48.6	61.9

Figure 4

Bar Graph of SPED Graduation Rates for Entering Cohorts 2009 to 2017 (by School)



Note: The Y axis is the percentage of SPED students graduating with a standard HS diploma. The X axis is the four school under study. The color key represents the years, 2013 – 2021).

Data Collection, Analysis, and Results for Research Question Two

The goal for RQ2 was to gain teachers' perceptions about the implementation of April Dunn. The research question sought to discover how special education teachers perceived the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 10 teachers from four high schools who had special education teaching experience since the Act's initial implementation in 2014. Data were collected by conducting individual participant interviews following my approved interview protocol (Appendix A). The data collection process consisted of interviewing participants utilizing the Zoom meeting platform to capture the voices of the

participants as they responded to the open-ended questions. Probing was used to provide clarification and to gain more thorough responses.

Data Analysis

In response to RQ2, data analysis of the teacher perceptions about the implementation process of April Dunn began with transcribing and then analyzing the transcripts to discover categories and themes. There were nine interview questions. The teacher interviews were transcribed from oral audio recordings to written text then to printed text using a Google Form for each individual participant. Once transcribed, the interview responses for each question were transferred onto a Google Sheet containing each participants' response to all of the nine questions.

To search more inductively for themes, the responses for each interview question was transferred to an additional Google Sheet, with one Google Sheet per interview question (Parameswaran et al., 2020). The responses were then broken down, by each question, with the responses to each question documented in the Google Sheet from each participant. The participants' responses were labeled P1 through P10. Based on the responses to each question, themes were derived. Because of the depth of the processes within the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020) and reviewing each participant's responses to each question within the Google Sheets, themes became more evident and thus easier to identify. The categories were derived from the responses to the questions. The themes were derived from within the categories to break down and scaffold the teachers' perspectives.

The Act is multifaceted and has a multitude of components from identification of students to implementation to high school graduation. For this reason, the responses were further broken down to explain the main trend discovered. This process of moving from categories to themes was to assist in explaining the variety of teacher perspectives and experiences as they elaborated on the multi-faceted implementation process of the April Dunn Act. The eight categories and resulting themes are provided as follows:

1. **Category:** Act 833 Training. **Nuanced Interpretation:** Periodicity and type of teacher training for April Dunn Act implementation. **Related Theme:** Adequate Training.
2. **Category:** How students are identified. **Nuanced Interpretation:** Process of identifying students who qualify for the Act's protections. **Related Theme:** Statewide assessment data.
3. **Category:** Ongoing compliance. **Nuanced Interpretation:** Parent notification, IEP team meetings, and teacher collaboration. **Related Theme:** Community Effort.
4. **Category:** Academic progress. **Nuanced interpretation:** Course-grade mastery - How course credits are rewarded. **Related Theme:** Awarding HS credit.
5. **Category:** Assessment tracking. **Nuanced Interpretation:** Ongoing data reviews to identify students who may newly qualify for protection under the Act. **Related Theme:** Continuous Evaluation for Newly Eligible Students.

6. **Category:** Individual student monitoring. **Nuanced interpretation:** Process to ensure students are on track for earning a high school diploma. **Related Theme:** Progress monitoring.
7. **Category:** Overall teacher perception. **Nuanced Interpretation:** Complicated process and intervention opportunity for diploma attainment. **Related Theme:** Intervention complexity.
8. **Category:** Pre-Act graduation for students with disabilities and IEPs. **Nuanced Interpretation:** Carnegie credits awarded toward diplomas resulted in fewer students graduating. **Related Theme:** The Act improves retention and success for students with disabilities and IEPs.

Results

The second question was based on gaining an understanding of the teachers' perceptions about how the Act was being implemented. The purpose of Research Question #2 was to discover how special education teachers perceived the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma. There were ten teachers who participated in the interview process. The teachers who consented to participate in the interview process were teachers that were also teaching at the four schools whose graduation data was presented for RQ1. Based on data analysis, there were multiple categories and themes that were unpacked through my thematic data analysis.

Category 1

The first category focused on the training the teachers had been exposed to during the time of the Act's implementation in 2014. The nuance of training theme, therefore, was the variation in the dates the initial trainings for the participants had taken place. Even though the act was implemented statewide in 2014, many of the participants stated that they received training during years other than 2014. Only one participant (P1) said they had received training during the implementation year of 2014. Participant 1 expressed that in 2014, when the state implemented Act 833, a workshop was attended at the LDOE in Baton Rouge. The participant was the department chairperson for her school. It was a 3-day state training on the implementation of the act. Participant 1 shared,

“The training covered the Act's development and intent, as well as how the state representatives thought it should be implemented”. “The state trainer informed attendees that the Act would help students get a high school diploma while focusing on two graduation pathways that would be aligned to workforce certifications and opportunities”.

The participant who attended the training recalled learning how the intent was to help students with disabilities earn a high school diploma especially if they struggled to pass the state assessments. A few of the participants stated that they did not have any training in 2014 to implement the Act. The training for the teachers seemed to have picked up in 2017, which is the year that six participants said they received their first training. Those six participants stated that they began having school-based and district

trainings in 2017, and those trainings were conducted by district support personnel. Those trainings were in person and conducted at the school sites of those participants.

Participant 5 said, “The district support personnel provided more consistent training beginning in school year 2017-18”. Participant 2 shared more in depth of what those school-based trainings detailed,

The training consisted of the purpose of the act, how to identify qualifying students, and how to support students through the IEP process to earn a standard high school diploma. The training took a deep dive into looking at our students’ assessment data and IEPs to determine if the students qualified, explaining the IEP process for Act 833, how to monitor students’ progress as they moved towards graduation, and how to write goals for state tested subjects and industry-based courses (IBC) for students that were qualified. Professional development was provided by the state in the implementation year and by the district consistently beginning in 2017.

Yet, based on the participants’ responses, all participants were not trained by the state or district at the onset of Act 833 in 2014, now entitled April Dunn (2020).

Category 2

Category 2 reflected the process of identifying students who qualify for protections under the Act. The theme from this category was isolated to the statewide assessment and assessment data. All the participants indicated the same initial step in the identification process for how to qualify students for the Act based on state assessment data, and their initial steps were correct under the Act’s provisions. Each participant

explained the process of using either middle school data and/or high school data to determine if students met the criteria to qualify for protections under the Act. Participant 8 expressed that, “I look at the middle school assessment data when the students enter high school to see if they qualify for April Dunn”. The participants shared the criteria to qualify for the Act using both middle school and high school data.

The information the participants provided aligned with the state qualification criteria. Participant 5 informed, “The criteria to qualify students for April Dunn changed in the summer of 2022, and the criteria to now qualify students when they enter high school using middle school data became easier to understand”. In June of 2022, the state changed the qualifications for 6th and 7th grade qualifying criteria (LDOE, 2022). Participant 7 remarked, “For 6th and 7th grade, if a student now enters high school not scoring at least Basic on any two of the four assessments: ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies, then those years of data could be used to qualify a student for April Dunn”. Previously, to qualify based on middle school data, Participant 10 described, “Students would qualify off middle school data if enter high school without score combination of at least Basic/Approaching Basic in Math and ELA for two of the two most recent years in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades”. Participant 7 articulated that, “The criteria remained the same when using 8th grade data as one of the years to meet qualifying criteria with a change to the qualifying criteria for 6th and 7th grades”. Overall, all the participants were familiar with the 2022 changes for qualification (LDOE, 2022).

Category 3

Category 3 reflected the implementation process taken after students are identified. The participants collectively discussed several needs that must be taken once a student is identified for participation under the Act. Those actions included parent notification, team meetings to manage the student's IEP, and ongoing teacher collaboration. The theme that was unpacked from these categories related to implementation was special education community efforts. For example, Participant 4 recounted that, "Phone calls are made to the parents to notify them when a child qualifies for the April Dunn intervention". Participant 10 said, "When a student is first identified, an IEP meeting is set to amend the IEP to reflect meeting April Dunn qualification criteria". More specifically, Participant 4 stated, "If the parent agrees to the IEP meeting, a JP22 Form (Notice of Parent Notification of Meeting) is sent home with an IEP meeting date and time to have an IEP meeting to document that the student met criteria for April Dunn".

Another participant, Participant 7, revealed that, "The process of holding the IEP meeting consists of including content area teachers who teach courses in which the act will be applied". The majority of the participants explained the involvement the core content area teachers had in supporting the academic success of the implementation of the act using the IEP process. The importance of the IEP process in April Dunn implementation was best captured by Participant 4, who stated,

I have to have an IEP meeting just notifying that parent that the child qualifies for April Dunn, but also part of my job is to work with the particular subject area

teachers. For example, for English I, I have to write English I goals and objectives on the student's IEP, and if that student actually achieves those English I goals on the IEP and pass that class, they're in good shape if they don't pass the state assessment.

The themes of parent contact, IEP meeting, and teacher collaboration was consistent with each participant. Another participant, Participant 7 communicated that,

Once the students are qualified, we go through the process of looking at their classroom data and reaching out to their content area teachers to get their input. We look at all the data to implement a plan together so that the students can have success in the classroom. The participant shared that the IEP meeting allows the regular education teachers and team members to have individualized plans for special education students to see what plan will work for each student.

In short, the participants all seemed to have the requisite knowledge needed to implement the Act for individual students once a student is identified as meeting April Dunn Criteria. The April Dunn Act (2020) over all provides support to students with disabilities who pass the course, but may struggle to pass state assessments required for high school graduation the participant stated. Therefore, to be proactive the participants shared that, once a student is enrolled in a course aligned to a state assessment or IBC, an IEP meeting is held with the content area teachers and the special education teachers, inclusive of the assistant principal and school counselor, to determine the academic goal and objectives related to the course(s) that are needed to be documented on the students' IEP to provide academic support during the course.

Category 4

Category 4 reflected course mastery and how course credits are awarded to participating students. The theme unpacked from this category was awarding high school credit. Participant 1 shared that, “Course credit was awarded when the student attended the class and once they have passed, they obtain that Carnegie Credit for that class”. According to Participant 6,

The next step after they passed the class, we have to go back to have an IEP meeting and discuss the student, with the regular education teacher, to discuss the IEP goals they followed. If they have obtained the knowledge from the IEP goals and objectives, based on their student work, then we agree that yes they passed the class and got a Carnegie Unit.

All the participants expressed accurate knowledge of the IEP process for awarding course credit by the content teacher for the course as long as the student had passed the course and met the goals and objectives aligned to the course on the student’s IEP. In summary, the participants shared that the IEP team meets at the end of the course to determine if the students met the goals and objectives on the IEP and if the student passed the course in order to determine if the students are awarded course credit. The meeting of state graduation requires of alternative measures implemented on the IEP then becomes a form of intervention for those who struggle to pass state assessments. If the student does not pass the course's state assessment aligned to the course, but passes the

course and meet the goals on the IEP aligned to the course, then the student receives course credit for this course towards high school Carnegie Units needed for graduation.

Category 5

Category 5 reflected the need to monitor students with disabilities who do and do not qualify for protections under the Act. The common theme unpacked from this category was continuous monitoring. Without exception, the participants stated they routinely check both the students' grades and the students' state assessment data and course work. Participant 10 expressed that, "The students' transcripts were used to keep up with the students' data". Participant 1 revealed, "Often, I communicate with general education teachers while students are enrolled in the inclusive setting to keep up with the students' grades and progress. This participant also shared that, "Some students enter high school not qualifying for April Dunn. Adding, "Those students then must qualify based on high school criteria". When this occurs, Participant 1 noted, "Identification becomes more challenging for students and teachers".

Participant 4 stated, "Based on high school data, students qualify because they are not being able to pass two of the same state assessments on two different occasions". The participant went on to express, "Once they fail two of the same state assessments, they can qualify for April Dunn". The consensus was that most students enter high school qualifying based on middle school data under the Act's provisions. Participant 6 pointed out by stating that,

Students with disabilities who are working towards earning a standard high school diploma are enrolled in all content courses needed to earn a standard high school

diploma, and each student goes through each semester and course receiving accommodations and modifications as stipulated by the IEP. At the end of the semester, the student then takes the state aligned assessment. If they do not pass the state assessments and are not April Dunn qualified, they must retake the same assessment the next semester when it is given again. However, if the student passed the course, they move on to the next course.

Participant 10 stated that it was observed that, "The process for students to qualify, based on high school criteria, creates more repetitive testing and testing anxiety just to qualify for the Act". "The students", according to Participant 10,

must regress and refocus to retake the same failed state assessment the next semester. If the students fail the same assessment twice at the end of the next semester, the students will now have met the requirements for April Dunn.

Participant 3 noted, "My school maintains a list of students that qualify". However, little was expressed as to how students are monitored that have not qualified upon entering high school and have to go through the process of qualifying by waiting to fail the same state assessment twice to qualify for April Dunn (2020). There appeared, therefore, to be a lack of a specific, consistent system shared by the participants on how students' performance is monitored who may need to qualify for act based the high school criteria. However, all of the participants stated they reviewed the students' assessment data. The frequency of the review and how data are monitored was not emphasized by any of the participants. Seeming to put a stamp on his earlier statement about the difficulties involved with too much testing, Participant 10 stated that, "time is of the essence."

Participant 3 shared a similar sentiment, noting that, “Students who are not identified timely, often retake multiple assessments and are put through the mode of over testing more than is needed to qualify for the Act”. Participant 9 noted that, “Most students do enter high school already meeting the criteria based on their middle school state assessment data”.

Category 6

Category 6 reflected the processes in place to ensure students are on track for earning a high school diploma. The theme unpacked for this category was progress monitoring. The participants shared variations they follow to ensure students that qualify earn a standard high school diploma. The focus of the participants’ responses was centered around collaboration. That collaboration ranged from counselor, teacher, and IEP collaboration. Participant 9 stated that, “Special education case load teachers are in contact with the general education teachers to make sure that the IEPs are being followed, not only for April Dunn, but their accommodations and modifications too”. It was described as a working communication weekly.

Participant 10 suggested that, “An extremely important role is that of the counselor in the planning and scheduling of the students for the required courses the participant shared”. Participant 10 said, “This process involves collaboration, tracking, and monitoring by the special education teachers, counselors, and the special education leader on campuses”. “When working towards graduation”, Participant 9 shared, “Counselors play a major role in the planning processes of the courses that students need to take each semester”. Participant 5 expressed that he meets with the counselor and with

the students to make sure that the graduation track that they have chosen is aligned with the courses the students are enrolled in. Participant 2 stated, “Assurance is made to make sure that the goals are met and annotated, and that the transcripts are accurate”.

Participant 5 further elaborated that, “This process allows the students to graduate within 4 years and within the graduation pathway of their choice earning a standard high school diploma”.

Category 7

Category 7 reflected the overall perceptions about the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). The theme unpacked from this category was intervention complexity. The process was described as being ‘very tedious’ by Participant 4.

Participant 9 revealed that,

The teacher had to pull up assessment data from middle school in JCampus to see if the students qualify each semester. Also, that you have to make sure to check assessment data for high school students not previously qualified to know when the students fail the same assessment twice to qualify for the Act.

This was described as being “a lot of work to qualify students” by Participant 10.

Participant 5 shared, “A solution of having a computerized system in place to qualify students automatically based on assessment data”. However, this is only the beginning of the implementation process. Participant 5 further added, “when the students get qualified, the IEPs have to be initiated or amended, and implementation starts from there”.

All the participants felt the process of implementation was complicated. However, they described the process as beneficial to assisting students with disabilities in

graduating from high school. Overall, the connection all of the participants had regarding the process was that it was tedious, yet good for students. One participant share that it is a good process, and it gives the children an opportunity to still have that pathway to graduation.

Category 8

Category 8 reflected how the participants perceived the process of students earning a high school diploma prior to Act 833 (2014). The theme unpacked from this category was retention. The participants shared that it was very difficult for students to graduate earning a standard high school diploma prior to the implementation of the act. One participant stated before there was Act 833 as an intervention, students would give up and drop out of high school. Participant 3 shared,

That many students are now given the opportunity to graduate high school and then go to college. Now, students have an alternative pathway to graduation and before there was not this alternative pathway to graduate earning a standard high school diploma. Many students test in different ways. Many have test anxiety and struggled to pass state course assessments needed to graduate earning a diploma.

Therefore, we had less students graduating before the implementation of Act 833. During the interview, Participant 9 elaborated saying, “We didn't have that many graduating because they passed the class, but they didn't pass the state test so they could not graduate earning a diploma”. Participant 1 noted,

Several students were taking regular classes and their desire was to graduate. But when it came down to the last semester of high school, in March to take the test

the Louisiana Graduate Exit Exam, and the students did not pass the core test, they could not graduate. With LEAP 2025, which the students take now, without April Dunn, they have to pass the English, Algebra, and have to either pass Biology or American History to graduate.

Participant 2 expressed that it was experienced that, “Prior to April Dunn, one of the students that passed all of her classes, but she did not pass the state test to graduate earning a diploma”. Participant 2 also stated,

“It was 2 weeks before graduation, the leaders had to make a decision because the student had bought a graduation gown robe”. The student still went across the stage and got a certificate of achievement that says, “here you did finish school, and you attended for 12 years, but did not earn a standard high school diploma”,

Participant 5 added, “However, when Act 833 (2014) came out, the state asked us to identify any of those students that possibly might have fell into that category, and there were 3 students at my school”, Participant 1 shared,

“The state allowed a window of time for the school to eliminate the state test if the students passed all their classes and earned the Carnegie Credit. This student came back to receive her high school the diploma crying in tears for joy. This diploma allowed her another chance Participant 1 shared. The student went on to college and is now a licensed practical nurse”.

Participant 2 emphasized, “Positive changes resulted from the Act’s passage”.

One takeaway based on these perceptions could be that Act did not benefit only 9th

graders coming to high school in 2014, but also supporting those who were already in high school struggling to pass state assessments. The law stated that students may become eligible if they entered a high school during or prior to the 2012- 13 school year, and did not achieve state benchmark scores on a combination of one EOC Assessment and either/or another EOC Assessment, High School LAA2 Assessment, and a retest of an end of course assessment (Act 833, 2014). This inclusive opportunity of the act benefited, not only the students entering in cohort 2014-15, but some of the students who entered high school prior to 2014 who could not meet graduation criteria state assessments had an opportunity to graduate earning a high school diploma (Act 833, 2014).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the following measures were taken. For credibility, member checks were used for participant validation. The data results were shared with the participants once it was gathered and transcribed. The participants reviewed their interview transcripts, along with a summary of the findings with themes. The participants had the opportunity to interpret, engage in, and add to the interview results. The participants read the responses collected, we discussed their responses, the participants questioned as to when the study would be completed fully, and no additional information was added to their responses.

To aid in transferability, my research results consisted of a thick description of the data analysis process and findings related back to the research questions. This research consisted of historical graduation data for over a 10-year span that documents the evident

struggle students with disabilities have had to graduate from high school earning a standard diploma. Led by interview questions that sought to answer the research questions from the perceptions of the participants, the participants provided their contextual description of their perceptions of the entire implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). They explained their perceptions of the implementation process, in detail, from the identification of qualifying special education students and the process of moving students who qualify for the April Dunn Act throughout high school grade levels towards graduating from high school earning a standard high school diploma. To the extent that other schools and school districts match the demographic characteristic of the schools I studied, this research will provide school district leaders and teachers with relatable experiences connected to the implementation process of the Act in moving students with disabilities towards earning a standard diploma.

For confirmability, it was ensured that the findings reported were those interpreted from the analysis of the participants' interviews only. Reflexivity was used to ensure creditability of the results of the research. This process helped me, as the researcher, to reflect on the participants' thoughts during the research process (Skukauskaite et al., 2020). Journaling was used to document thoughts experienced related the research process (DeMeyer & Howells, 2020). For added accountability, each step of data analysis was included in the study to support confirmability and to monitor my own biases throughout the process.

For dependability, the triangulation strategy was used. Triangulation allowed for the results of the research to be reviewed from the combination of at least two different

types of data. One set of data responded to each research question to determine if there is a connection between the results found when viewing the two sets of data. The historical graduation data was compiled within the research process to respond to RQ1: How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma at four high schools, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act? Teacher interviews were completed with high school special education teachers to gather perspective data to respond to RQ2: How do classroom teachers perceive the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements in support of students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma? Because the graduation rates for this population of students overall trended up sharply 4 years after the Act's implementation and overall the teachers were very familiar with the Act's requirements and how to operationalize within their schools, triangulation was met. Triangulation of the data adds more confidence and validation to the results of the study by using the historical graduation data and the teachers' perceptions to gain additional knowledge of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020) to determine the fidelity with which the Act has been implemented.

Summary

Chapter 4 focused on the data collection process, data analysis, and the results of the research findings. RQ1, How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma at four high schools, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act? This question supported the need to gather archival data and descriptive statistics to describe how graduation rates may

have changed as a result of the April Dunn Act. The results of the research were connected back to the problem and the purpose of the research. This was done by presenting an archival cohort graduation data of students with disabilities who graduated from 4 high schools earning a standard high school diploma and entered high school during school year 2009-10 and school year 2010-11, immediately prior to the Act's implementation, as well as school year 2014-15 and school year 2015-16, immediately following the Act's implementation.

Due to the date of devising the research problem and purpose, more research worthy data was currently available beyond the initial entering cohorts who enter in school years 2014-15 and 2015-16. This research also includes additional historical data from cohorts entering high school in 2016-17 and 2017-18 who graduated in Spring of 2020 and Spring 2021. The data connects to the original problem of students graduating at a historical low within the state of Louisiana and the district of study which prompt the purpose of the study. This additional state and district data was to show percentages of how high school graduation rates for students with disabilities has trended in the state of Louisiana and the school district of study, inclusive of the four schools of research two cohorts prior and cohorts entering since the implementation of the April Dunn Act and graduating within 4 years by Spring 2021 (2020), formerly Act 833 (2014). This data will be shared in Chapter 5.

The research presented also explored the teachers' perceptions of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). RQ2, How do classroom teachers perceive the implementation of the April Dunn Act statutory requirements in support of

students with disabilities in earning a standard high school diploma? The participants shared a rich and thorough reflection of their experiences they have had, as teachers, with moving students through the implementation process of April Dunn to earn a high school diploma. The interpretation of the research findings will be in Chapter 5. That chapter reflects the spoken word of the perceptions of special education teachers. The findings will be historically documented here to provide an internal voice of the implementation of Act 833 (2014), now April Dunn (2020). These perceptions detail the struggles of implementation, the teacher knowledge gains of how to implement the Act, to the victory tears of students now graduating from high school moving on to post-secondary learning experiences.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study was to explore how teachers were implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act (2020) to support students with disabilities and an IEP in earning a standard diploma. The study explored historical graduation data, the intent of the law, which was to support students with disabilities in earning a standard HS diploma, and the actual implementation of the Act from the perceptions of the teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience in the district. Accessing graduation statistics from four high schools in one of the largest school districts in the state, the study provided HS graduation trend lines for this population of students before and after the Act's original implementation in 2014. In addition, the thematic analysis of interviews with 10 teachers from the four high schools resulted in eight categories that confirmed that the teachers had actually done a good job implementing the Act's requirements, despite receiving training to do so in a variety of different ways and at different times after the Act's implementation. The nature of the study, therefore, was exploratory, multimodal, qualitative, and case specific.

RQ1 required the use of archival data and descriptive statistics with the intent to describe how graduation rates trended before and since the Act was implemented at the 4 high schools in 2014. The key finding for RQ1 demonstrated a declining average graduation trend prior to the Act's implementation with a reversal to increasing average graduation rates 4 years after.

The key finding for RQ2 that sought to explore teachers' perceptions about the implementation of the Act, resulted in eight themes. The categories, my nuanced interpretations, and themes for RQ2 are provided in Table 2.

Table 3

Categories, Nuanced Interpretations, and Themes

Categories	Nuanced interpretations	Themes
ACT 833 Training	Periodicity and type of training received	Adequate Training
How students are identified	Process for Identifying Students	Statewide Assessment Data
Ongoing compliance	Parent notification, IEPs, team meetings, teacher collaboration	Community effort
Academic progress	Course-grade mastery	Awarding HS credit
Assessment tracking	Ongoing data reviews to identify students who may newly qualify for protections under the Act.	Continuous evaluation for newly eligible students
Individual student monitoring.	Ensuring qualified students stay on track to graduate.	Progress monitoring
Overall teacher perceptions	Complicated process and intervention opportunity for diploma attainment	Intervention complexity
Pre-Act graduation for students with disabilities and IEPs	Carnegie credits awarded toward diplomas resulted in fewer students graduating	Improved retention of students with disabilities and IEPs

Interpretation of Findings for Research Question 1

Federal standards were set for state assessments and curriculum guidelines and for students with and without disabilities to graduate within 4 years with their entering ninth grade cohorts (Darrow, 2016). According to ESSA, all students must have equal access to the general education curriculum. Additionally, all students with disabilities must be assessed using the same state assessments as their nondisabled peers, and are expected to master the state content standards with the exception of those students with significant cognitive disabilities. The LDOE, along with state representatives, developed alternative criteria to meet graduation and promotion requirements for students with disabilities, who take state assessments, through a law implemented in Louisiana entitled Act 833 (2014), renamed the April Dunn Act (2020). The April Dunn Act applies to students with disabilities that are working toward a standard diploma just as their nondisabled peers which requires them to pass state assessments to earn a high school diploma.

The first research question sought to establish trend lines related to, How has the high school graduation rate for students with disabilities, earning a standard diploma, trended in the school district since the implementation of the April Dunn Act?

The interpretation of Research Question 1 is as follows. The LDOE (2008) produces School Performance Profiles for each school district annually. The target district of this research study is the largest school district in Louisiana. The target district shows that in school year 2006-07, 10.31% of students with disabilities graduated earning a diploma in comparison to the state average of 12.95% of students with disabilities graduating with a diploma statewide (LDOE, 2008). Yet, students without disabilities

were able to graduate earning a diploma with 85.44% in the target district and at 83.76% statewide. Students with disabilities dropped out in the target district at 20.62% in comparison to the statewide average of 28.97%. Students without disabilities had a dropout rate in the target district of 14.56% and state average of 16.24%.

The graduation data represent the four high schools within the district that were selected to participate in the study. The data extract at four high schools was for those who entered high school in school year 2009-10 (Cohort 1) and school year 2010-11 (Cohort 2), as well as the post-Act qualifying students for school year 2014-15 (Post-Act 833 Cohort 3) and school year 2015-16 (Post-833 Act Cohort 4). The average trend data for the four schools show a sharp increase in the graduation rates beginning in 2019, which was the second graduation year for the second cohort following the implementation of the Act. The average graduation trend line for the four high schools was decreasing for the 2 years prior to implementation as well as for the first cohort year following the Act's implementation. Beginning with the next graduating cohort (2019), however, there was a sharp and historic increase. For the four high schools, an average of 45% of students with disabilities graduating with standard high school diplomas in 2013, fell to 37.32% in 2014, the year before the act was implemented. With an average of 34.63% of these students graduating in 2018, the first graduating cohort following the Act's implementation, the trend line continued to decrease but did so at a slower rate, until it reversed dramatically and historically with the second post-Act graduating cohort in 2019. The cohort of students with disabilities who entered the four high schools in 2015 graduated with a standard high school diploma at an average rate of 50.03%.

It is presumed that School Year 2014-15 was a year of new learning connected to Act 833 (2014) for leaders and administrators state-wide. For students to successfully benefit from Act 833's implementation, leaders and teachers had the responsibility to learn the purpose of Act 833 and how the implementation process should proceed in schools. If new learning that was provided by the LDOE to school leaders was not transferred to practice at the district and school sites, there would be an evident gap in practice in the implementation of the act. This gap in practice is evident in the trend line data, which shows and decline in graduation rates upon implementation of the Act with an increase in cohort graduation in year two of implementation. In the Interpretation of Additional Findings for RQ1 Section below, data depicts a steady incline in the graduation rates of students who qualified for Act 833, April Dunn (2020) as an intervention. An increase in graduation rates identified in 2019, with second entering cohort post Act 833 implementation, may have increased due to educational initiatives and interventions that were connected with more effective teacher learning and implementation of pedagogies (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020).

The data for the four schools showed an overall downward trend in graduation rates for students with disabilities earning a standard HS diploma before the Act's implementation in 2014, with that trend reversing overall after the Act's implementation. To provide additional context for these findings for the four schools, I wanted to review graduation data for students with disabilities earning a standard HS diploma for the district where the four target schools are located, and for the state of Louisiana as a whole.

The district data show that in school year 2006-2007, only 10.31% of students with disabilities graduated earning a standard diploma compared to the state average of 12.95% of students with disabilities graduating with a diploma statewide (LDOE, 2008). Yet, students without disabilities were able to graduate earning a diploma with 85.44% in the target district and at 83.76% statewide. Students with disabilities dropped out in the target district at 20.62% compared to the statewide average of 28.97%. The LDOE (2013) school performance data for the target district revealed that in school year 2011-12, 11.2% of students with disabilities graduated in the state of Louisiana with virtually the same percentage graduating in the target school district that same year (LDOE, 2013).

While the district's rates have lagged notably behind the state's rates, adding the graduation rates for 2020 and 2021 show a jump by the district in closing the gap since the implementation of the Act. The 2013-2021 state and district graduation rates with standard HS diplomas for this population are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

State and District SPED Graduation Percentages of Cohorts Entering 2009 to 2017 and Graduating 2013 to 2021

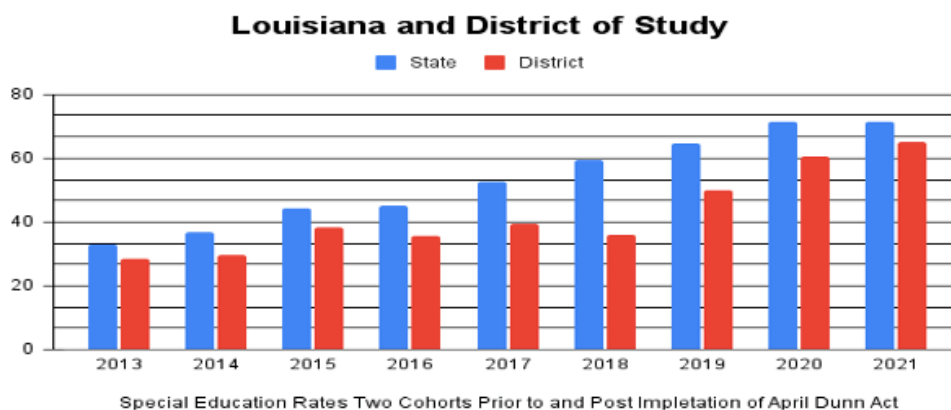
Year	State	District
2013	33.0	28.5
2014	36.7	29.6
2015	44.3	38.4
2016	45.2	35.8
2017	52.6	39.3
2018	59.3	35.9
2019	64.7	39.8
2020	71.3	60.5
2021	71.3	65.2

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Act 833 also applied to students entering high school 4 years prior to the implementation of the Act, although they would not have been identified under the Act's provisions until its implementation. Based on potential early qualifiers, the increases shown in Figure 5 reflect a near continuous increase in graduation rates since 2013 at both the district and state levels. Overall, these data show that within the 9-year span since 2013, the state grew its graduation rates for students with disabilities graduating with a standard high school diploma from 33% to 71.3%. For the same timeframe, the district's rates grew from 28.3% to 65.2%, and from 45% to 62.6% for the four schools in the study. Since the implementation of the Act in 2014, the state's graduation rates for this population grew from 36.7% to 71.3%. Similarly, within

the same timeframe, the district grew from 29.6% to 65.2 % and from 37.32% to 62.6% for the four schools.

Figure 5

State and District SPED Graduation Rates for Cohorts Graduating 2013 to 2021



Note: The Y axis is the percentage of students with disabilities graduating with a standard HS diploma. The X axis it the year.

Interpretation of Findings of Qualitative RQ 2

The conceptual framework for this study included intervention theory combined with the state's rules and requirements for the implementation of the Act designed to improve the standard-diploma graduation rates of students with disabilities who also had IEPs. According to Welch (2017), many factors contribute to poor graduation rates for students with disabilities. Some of those factors have included inadequate special education instruction, persistently low academic achievement, and academic motivation. Intervention theory evolved from social policy theory which is a civil policy and practice in the areas of health wellness, human services, criminal justice, injustice, education, and employment (Presidents & Fellows of Harvard, 2006). Social policy aims to reform

human welfare and to accommodate humanistic needs for education, health wellness, housing, and fiscal preservation (Spicker, 2014). The April Dunn Act (2020) was designed to improve human welfare as it relates to dropout prevention of students with disabilities. Intervention theory consists of analysis of decision-making to address problems and then intervening effectively to achieve the desired outcome. Intervention theory investigates the effectiveness of multiple types of interventions. The intervention theory applies to the Act 833 framework, as this act implemented policy reform created to support students with disabilities academically who struggled to meet graduation requirements. Intervention theory suggests that effective intervention is dependent on knowledge of appropriate intervention that consists of clearly defined options to attain the desired outcomes (Argyris, 1970).

Intervention theory is the premise of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act. Interestingly, during the implementation year of the Act, 2014, only two teacher participants in my study stated that they had formal training to implement the Act. According to participant responses, training for the implementation of the Act picked up in 2017, which was the year that six participants stated they received their first training. Those six participants shared that those trainings were conducted by district support personnel at the district and school level directly with teachers and school leaders. Those trainings were in person and conducted at their school sites. Participant 2, who received training on the Act initially in 2014, stated that the training consisted of the purpose of the act, how to identify qualifying students, and how to support students through the IEP process to earn a standard high school diploma. The training took a deep

dive into looking at our students' assessment data and IEPs to determine if the students qualified, explaining the IEP process for Act 833, how to monitor students' progress as they moved towards graduation, and how to write goals for state tested subjects and industry-based courses (IBC) for students that were qualified. Based on the participants' responses related to their initial training on Act 833, it was discovered that all participants were not trained by the state or district at the onset of the Act in 2014. This lack of teacher training and ongoing teacher support may have a direct correlation to the lower percentages of special education students graduating earning a standard diploma within the first entry cohort, the year the Act was implemented in school year 2014-15, in comparison to those cohorts which entered after the year of implementation. Intervention theory (Argyris, 1970) suggested that effective intervention is dependent upon knowledge of interventions which are appropriate that will provide targeted opportunities to achieve the desired outcome. It seems as though intervention theory, as defined by Argyris (1970), was facilitated through the passage of the Act.

Each participant explained the process of using either middle school data and/or high school data to determine if students met the criteria to qualify for protections under the Act. The participants collectively discussed several needs that must be taken once a student is identified for participation under the Act. Those actions included parent notification, team meetings to manage the student's IEP, and ongoing teacher collaboration. This process involves collaboration, tracking, and monitoring by the special education teachers, counselors, and the special education leader on campus. To be proactive, the participants shared that once a student is enrolled in a course aligned to a

state assessment or IBC, an IEP meeting is held with the content area teachers and the special education teachers, inclusive of the assistant principal and school counselor, to determine the academic goals and objectives related to the course(s) that are needed to be documented on the students' IEP to provide academic support during the course.

Louisiana provides guidance in the Louisiana Special Education Guidance for High School Students (LDOE, 2016) and in *Title 28 Education: Bulletin 1566 - Pupil Progression Policies and Procedures* (Louisiana Administrative Code, 2020). Within these documents contains guidance on how students should progress and earn credits for courses taken within students' educational careers. The IEP team meets at the end of the course to determine if the students met the goals and objectives on the IEP and if the student passed the course in order to determine if the student is awarded course credit. The alternative measures implemented on the IEP becomes a form of intervention for those who struggle to pass state assessments. If the student does not pass the state assessment aligned to the course, but passes the course and meets the goals on the IEP, then the student receives course credit towards high school Carnegie Units needed to meet state graduation requirements.

The theme unpacked from the category of overall perceptions about the Act's implementation was *intervention complexity*. All the participants felt the process of implementation was complicated. However, they described the process as beneficial to assisting students with disabilities in graduating from high school, and therefore worthwhile. Overall, the connection the participants had regarding the process was that it was tedious, yet good for students. The participants felt it gives students with disabilities

an opportunity to still have that pathway to graduation. Argyris (1970) suggested that a premise of intervention theory is that effective intervention is dependent upon appropriate and pertinent knowledge that extends a range of clearly defined options to ascertain the desired outcome. The participants all shared that students with disabilities have an opportunity to graduate and go to college by having an alternative pathway to graduation.

In 2014, the Louisiana Department of Education implemented two diploma options for all students, including alternate criteria to earn a diploma for students with disabilities (LDOE, 2016). The April Dunn Act (2020) was implemented so that students with disabilities who passed general education courses, but could not pass the state assessment, were offered an alternate means to meet testing criteria via the students' IEPs. The diploma options and alternate means of meeting diploma requirements was implemented with the intent to increase graduation in the state of Louisiana.

The participants shared that prior to Act 833 (2014), now April Dunn (2020), it was difficult for students to graduate earning a standard high school diploma due to the students struggling to pass state assessments. Participant 2 stated that before there was Act 833 as an intervention, students would give up and drop out of high school because they struggled to meet graduation requirements of passing high school state assessments. Participant 5 shared that many students with disabilities were graduating less because even though many passed the state-aligned classes, they failed to pass the state-aligned assessment causing them not to graduate earning a standard high school diploma. Therefore, Participant 1 added that we had less students graduating before the implementation of Act 833.

A gap in practice revealed between the intent of the law and the consistent implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities graduating earning a standard diploma was found to be consistent with the graduation data reported annually. The data which show lower graduation rates, within the cohort who entered in 2014-15 and graduated in 2018, aligns with the identified lack of sufficient teacher training at the onset of the Act 833 in 2014. In comparison, DePaoli et al. (2018) noted in a study that there is a lack of evidence associated with interventions that purport to increase the academic success of students with disabilities. This gap in practice was mirrored statewide in public schools (April Dunn Act, 2020). Teacher identification of students who qualify for the April Dunn Act is key at the beginning of the implementation process. A review of students' assessment records, in the study district, showed that students who initially qualified for the April Dunn Act were not identified for the Act's accommodations causing them to unnecessarily retake state assessments they in turn failed to pass pushing them further from graduation (Special Education Coordinator, personal communication, January 21, 2020). Lack of early identification of qualifying students pushed high school graduation further behind for qualifying students causing many not to graduate within 4 years with their non-disabled peers. This inefficiency may account for the difference in the graduation rates of students with disabilities graduating with a standard HS diploma between the school district studied and the state average.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation within this multi-modal qualitative case study may have had an impact related to the qualitative research question due to the sample size of teachers

involved in the interview process. The sample size and the level of professional development the teachers within the sample may have received may impact the transferability and dependability of the research. The sample size of teachers involved in the interview process was 10 special education teachers. The teachers taught students with disabilities for a minimum of 5 years. Teachers with this level of experience were selected to assist in eliminating biases as these teachers would have experience prior to the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020) and post implementation of the April Dunn Act. Therefore, their perceptions of the implementation of the April Dunn Act consisted of providing knowledge and experience prior to the implementation of the Act and present knowledge of the implementation process of utilizing the April Dunn Act to promote the earning of a standard high school diploma for students with disabilities. The population size of teachers providing their perceptions may be a limitation as it will not validate all special education teachers' perceptions who teach high school students with disabilities in Louisiana.

To implement the April Dunn Act (2020), special education teachers were provided varying levels of professional development and at varying times. The training and support the teachers experienced to implement the Act directly affected the teachers' perceptions (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018). Teachers who have had sufficient training verses those who have not could create biases in the culminating results of the research. This fluctuation in training availability, however, did not seem to be reflected in biases in their perceptions. To address biases related to professional development which may have had an impact on the teachers' perceptions, there were questions in the interview asked

related to the level of training and support each teacher was provided. In the results of the study, the teachers' perceptions were categorized to include the teachers' level of training. This helped to address any biases to determine if their perceptions are related to sufficient professional development or the lack of professional development to effectively support teacher implementation of the April Dunn Act.

The teacher interviews only addressed a small population of teachers compared to the actual number of teachers required to implement the April Dunn Act within this large school district. Therefore, data for descriptive RQ1 was extended beyond the targeted years of the study, but within the timeframe of research, to unpack the standard-diploma graduation trends of students with disabilities and link those trends to the increase in professional development of special education teachers (Lin, 1998). Additional reporting reflects students with disabilities who entered within cohorts 2016-17 and 2017-18 and graduated in Spring of 2020 and Spring 2021. The data from these 2 additional cohorts also reflect the impact of the Act on the graduation of students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma. These data reflect the continual increase in graduation cohort rates since the implementation of Act 833 (2014). These descriptive data support the data collected from the qualitative research question, RQ2, which focuses on the teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Act. The participants shared that there was an increase in the professional development provided related to the implementation of the Act beginning in school year 2017-18. This was 3 years after the implementation of the Act. An increase in graduation rates identified, since the implementation of the Act, may have increased due to the increase in professional development connected to

this educational initiative and intervention which provided more effective teacher learning for the implementation of the new education policy (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). Therefore, the limitation of the sample size of the participant interviews may have a limitation on the study. However, qualitative data from teacher responses, related to the time frames of professional development, was in line with the increase of students with disabilities graduating earning a standard high school diploma. To help control for research biases, the results of the research came directly from data gathered from the perceptions of the teachers through the interview process and the graduation data of students who have graduated prior to and since the implementation of the April Dunn Act.

Recommendations

The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), a federal policy, placed an accountability requirement goal for all students to graduate within a 4-year period. With this standard, many states had to be creative in the creation of graduation pathways, diploma options, and alternative methods to meet graduation requirements to earn a standard high school diploma for students with and without disabilities (Harris et al., 2020). With policies and procedures in place, special education district leaders, principals, counselors, and teachers have played a major role in the education and support of students with disabilities through their high school years to meet course completion and graduation requirements. Sublett and Chang's (2019) research showed that students with disabilities had greater opportunities earn a high school diploma in states that offered pliability in meeting graduation requirements, waiver options from high school

graduation exams, and alternative criteria to earning a diploma as established within individualized education program (IEP) goal mastery. Students with disabilities that attend high schools that offer learning options within class settings and graduation options have higher rates of high school graduation (Sublett & Chang, 2019).

Act 833 (2014), renamed April Dunn (2020), is a state created policy that provides a framework to increase graduation rates for students with disabilities which was the focus of this study. The April Dunn Act was created to provide qualifying students with disabilities alternative means, as an option, to meet state graduation requirements to earn a standard high school diploma. However, the accountability for implementation of the Act weighs heavily on school leaders and teachers to support students in meeting graduation requirements once the Act is applied to a student's IEP. Therefore, it is recommended to provide continued professional development and implementation support to leaders and teachers annually on the implementation of April Dunn (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). This professional learning training should be inclusive of both current and new special education teachers and leaders. This professional development would consist of professional learning related to the purpose of April Dunn, the full implementation process, and include any changes to the processes and/or procedures that are in place. It is recommended that during the training, the special education teachers and leaders will have a working application session to identify qualifying students on their caseload rosters, retrieve and analyze students' state assessment data, use a monitoring tool to document assessment data, and document next steps for each student based on the state assessment data retrieved. To continue the

growth in the graduation rates of students with disabilities, special education teachers must be able to continue to:

1. Identify qualifying students each semester upon entering high school.
2. Monitor student assessment data to determine when a student may be April
3. Dunn Act eligible based on lack of passing state assessments.
4. Implement academic goals on the student's IEP for each course, within 30 days of being enrolled in the course, that has a state assessment component to meet graduation requirements to earn a standard diploma (LDOE, 2016).

When students are not identified upon initially meeting April Dunn Criteria, it can delay graduation beyond 4 years of high school for students with disabilities who struggle to pass state assessments to meet state graduation requirements. As a best practice, it is suggested that at the beginning of the school year or as new high school students enroll in high school within a school year, the special education high school case load teachers and leader should review their students' case-load rosters and retrieve students' state assessment data to determine if they qualify for the Act. As new special education students enter a high school, regardless of the high school entry grade:

1. State assessment data must be retrieved from JCampus to determine if the student currently has April Dunn on their IEP;
2. if the students meet criteria for April Dunn currently and not identified; or
3. has failed state assessments, but have not met April Dunn high school criteria yet to qualify for the Act.

With this process in place, students who qualify for April Dunn will be identified in a timely manner that will promote the implementation of the Act as intervention using the IEP to assist in helping students meet graduation requirements who struggle to meet state aligned course assessments to graduate earning a standard high school diploma.

Implications

Using this multi-modal qualitative research approach has provided data and findings that will increase the understanding of how the act has been implemented and the direction of change that has occurred for high school diploma attainment for students with disabilities within one of Louisiana's largest school districts. This study is important as it serves as a sourced used to document the strive of Louisiana and the largest school district in Louisiana to increase the graduation rates of students with disabilities earning a standard high school diploma. The review of students' assessment records and the list of students identified as eligible district-wide had shown that Act 833 (2014) had not been implemented fully since the state rolled out the Act in August of 2014. Interestingly, however, the study also documented that the positive influence of the Act gained momentum as the Act was embedded through training. The results of this study reflect significant information that can be used to show the current and past progress of the target district at producing high school graduates with disabilities who have struggled to earn a standard high school diploma. Both the results derived from the descriptive and qualitative research questions provide results that can be used to create social change by sharing how the Act is implemented within the district of study (Zyphur & Pierides, 2019). These results will impact positive social change by providing two forms of data to

provide a descriptive and qualitative depiction of processes of struggle, intervention, and growth towards high school diploma attainment for students with disabilities. This research provides insight into how the April Dunn Act has been implemented from the teachers' perceptions. Clarifying how the April Dunn Act has been implemented from the teachers' perceptions increases the understanding of the process and assists in the creation of ways to improve the Act's implementation in the future within the state and district.

Positive social change results when more students with disabilities earn a standard high school diploma because high school graduation provides a critical pathway to increased economic success and life satisfaction (Henson, 2017). The results of this research will directly impact social change as it shows the growth, the struggle, and success a school district has engaged in to increase the graduation rates for students with disabilities. The data show that within a 9-year span, the state grew from 33% to 71.3% of students with disabilities graduating earning a standard high school diploma. Since the implementation of the Act, the state went from a 44.3% to 71.3% increase in graduation rates for students with disabilities. Within 9 years, the district grew from 28.5 % to 65.2% of students with disabilities graduating earning a standard high school diploma. Since the implementation of the Act, students with disabilities went from 38.4% to 62.5% graduating earning a standard high school diploma.

Based on data collected from the teachers' perceptions, there is a need to provide professional development to school leaders and special education teachers annually on the purpose and implementation process of the April Dunn Act (2020). This ongoing

professional development need is important to the continual increase of the graduation rates of students with disabilities. Intervention theory (Argyris, 1970) suggests that effective intervention is dependent on appropriate and useful knowledge that provides a range of clear and explicit options to achieve the desired outcome. I concluded that based on graduation data and the implementation of the Act from the teachers' perceptions, that an increase in graduation rates since the Act's implementation were aligned with an increase in professional development that occurred in 2017, a conclusion supported by other research (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). Steps suggested in the Recommendations Section of this research can be used as general teacher steps, based on actual practice, which can be used to identify, qualify, and support the implementation of the April Dunn Act (2020), as an intervention, to impact social change by helping students with disabilities graduate from high school within 4 years earning a standard high school diploma.

Conclusion

With Louisiana graduating less than 30% of students with disabilities, the state passed a public law to provide alternative pathways to high school graduation for students with exceptionalities (Act 833, 2014). The state of Louisiana created a law as an intervention to provide alternative means to earn a standard high school diploma for students with disabilities. The target district of study is the largest district in Louisiana, and their school performance weighs heavily on the total graduation rates and the state performance letter grade. With the implementation of the Act in 2014, the target district of study, target schools of study, as well as the state of Louisiana had a continual increase

in the graduation rates of students with disabilities graduating earning a standard high school diploma.

On June 4, 2020 the state's Governor, the Honorable John Bel Edwards, signed Act 1 which renamed Act 833 the April Dunn Act to recognize her tireless devotion to the state's individuals who have disabilities (Office of the Governor, 2020). As with April Dunn, the state leaders, district leaders, school leaders, and special education teachers with the IEP Teams have worked to positively impact the graduation rates of students with disabilities. The work of school leaders, special education teachers, and IEP Teams to implement April Dunn as an intervention for students with disabilities to graduate earning a standard high school diploma has created positive social change. Students that graduate earning a standard high school diploma have gone on to post-secondary learning experiences to promote them in becoming self-sufficient and income producers to become productive citizens of society while promoting student self-efficacy and societal value regardless of their disabilities. The intent in the use of the results of this research and the drive of the researcher is to be used to create positive social change, and know that one should never let obstacles stop you.

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Appendix A: Interview Plan

The interviews will occur using Zoom for video conferencing. The interviews will be recorded. To increase validity, the interviews will be scripted for each participant. The researcher will read the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the research gained from the participants.

Researcher Reads: The purpose of this multi-modal qualitative case study is to explore how teachers are implementing the various components of the April Dunn Act to support students with disabilities in earning a standard diploma. The study will provide information on how the graduation rate of students with disabilities, earning a standard high school diploma, has changed in one of the largest school districts in the state since the implementation of the April Dunn Act. This study will address the gap in practice between the intent of the law and the implementation of the Act to support students with disabilities in graduating within 4 years earning a standard diploma as their nondisabled peers. To gain the true perceptions of the implementation process of the April Dunn Act, your interview responses will be anonymous and not linked to the participants. Your responses will be recorded and scripted for validity and reliability of your responses. Your names will not be included, nor the schools where you work. Every effort will be made to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. To ensure anonymity, the following measurements will be taken:

1. Creation of alphanumeric codes (i.e., P1, P2, etc.) for each person interviewed and use only those codes in my research reporting.
2. Hard copy residue data will be retained in my home-office in a locked filing

cabinet.

3. Soft copy files will be retained on my password protected personal computer.
4. Once research is complete, the data collected during the interview process will be shredded.

Your participation in the study is optional. It is up to you if you decide to participate. You have now signed the consent form participate. However, withdrawing from the study will not negatively impact any relationship, if any, with the researcher. Do you have any questions? Would you like to proceed with the interview? Thank you for your participation. Let us now begin with the interview questions.

1. What training did you receive at the onset of the Act 833 Initiative, now the April Dunn Act?
2. What school year did you begin identifying and qualifying students for Act 833, now the April Dunn Act?
3. How do you perceive the implementation process of the April Dunn Act?
4. How do you identify students who might qualify for the Act?
5. Once students are identified that qualify for the April Dunn Act, what immediate next steps are taken?
6. How do you keep track of assessments students need to take and not pass in order to qualify for the April Dunn Act?
7. How is course credit awarded for students who have the April Dunn Act applied on their IEPs?
8. What process do you follow to ensure that students who qualify for the April Dunn

Act earn a standard high school diploma?

9. Prior to the implementation of the April Dunn Act, how do you perceive the process of students with disabilities working towards earning course credits to earn a standard high school diploma?

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Are you a certified special education teacher?
2. How many years have you taught students with disabilities on the high school level?
3. Which years did you teach students with disabilities on the high school level?
4. Were those teaching experiences in Louisiana?
5. Do you teach special education students who are working towards earning a standard high school diploma as their peers without disabilities?
6. How many years have you taught this population of students with disabilities?
7. Are you familiar with Act 833; now titled the April Dunn Act?
8. Have you had experience with the implementation of these Act?
9. What year did you begin the implementation of Act 833?