Purpose

- Students with Learning Disabilities (LD) and Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD) are at the greatest risk of not completing school (Pyle & Wexler, 2012).
- Many districts and teachers struggle to find ways to support students with disabilities (SWDs; Harvey, 2001).
- Districts faced with the challenge to increase graduation rates and ensure that all students are college and career ready (National Governor’s Association & State Education Chiefs, 2010).
- The literature continues to support a need to develop and validate dropout prevention programs aimed at meeting the needs of SWDs (Wolman, Bruininks, & Thurlow 1989).

Research Question

- What are school districts currently doing to address the dropout rate of students with disabilities (SWDs)?

Method

- Individual interviews and a district wide focus group were conducted with administrators from two school districts in the Midwest (approximately 30-60 minutes each; 9 directed questions).
- Within an ecological/developmental theoretical framework, thematic analysis was conducted on data from transcribed interviews and focus groups. Individual member checking will be implemented.

### Results (Preliminary Findings)

| Cross-Building Conversations (knowledge of supports in other buildings) | «I... I don’t know that anything drastic has changed, it’s kind of the same old same old.”»
| Complacency (just the way things are) | «I... I don’t know how hard they go in or the things they try to do. I know there’s... some credit recovery, I know we have an alternative school program.”
| Building/District Level Supports & Dropout Prevention (actions taken in the past or actions currently being taken) | «Well we had started a dropout committee, but last year we didn’t meet at all, so.”
| Perspectives (school or building-wide beliefs) | «I... I’d be interested to see a dropout policy that would... allow us to do anything different than we are already... doing.”
| Ecology of Schools (factors outside the control of schools but which impact schools) | «The school’s job is to educate the child, we can’t be their doctor, and their pharmacy, and their nutritionist.”
| «I... the failures that we come into are really outside our area of influence. [...] there’s just... too much undermining what the school tries to do for the student.”

### Discussion

- Findings suggest the need for honest conversations regarding dropout across buildings and across districts.
- Schools do not have dropout prevention procedures or programs specific to SWDs; this finding is consistent with the literature which suggests that most dropout prevention programs have focused solely on students without disabilities (Kemp, 2006).
- Many schools are doing what they can with the resources that they have, but whether schools are doing a really good job working with high-risk SWDs is unclear when (1) administrators cannot name a time when they prevented a SWD from dropping out of school, (2) schools may not feel culpable given competing ecological factors, and (3) administrators are complacent with current school policy and procedures and feel that there are no other options.

### Implications for Practice and Future Research

- Administrators did not report any differences in the level of supports provided for SWDs and other struggling students. It may be prudent for researchers and administrators to collect data on the effectiveness of the supports that are currently being employed.
- Future research might explore students’ perceptions of the supports provided to them as well as their reasons for dropping out of school. Moreover, parents’ perceptions of how schools supported them when faced with the struggle of helping their child finish school would also provide valuable information.

### References