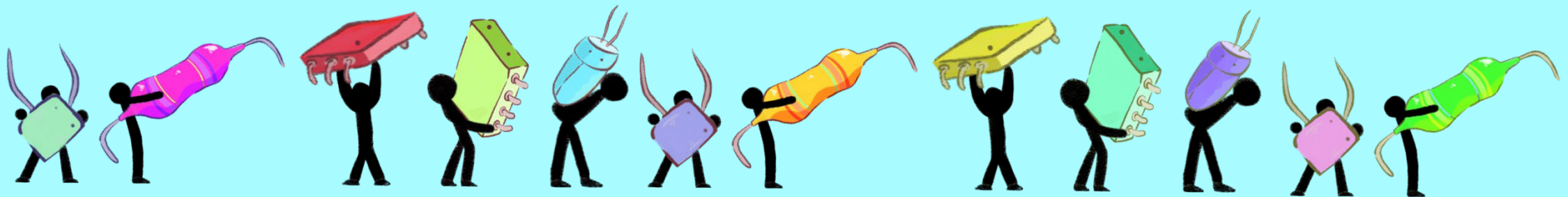




# Learning from the Stories Behind the Data: Why Students with Disabilities are Dropping Out of High School in Washington State

Dr. Cynthia Gale and Dr. Cinda Johnson



Artwork by Nessa Ankney



# Post-School Outcomes: A Little History

- 1990's
  - Washington state researchers collected PSO data on a statewide level
  - Legislators interested in longitudinal studies
- 2000-2008
  - OSPI built data collection into district data review in 2000
  - More districts participated in data collection
  - Data collection mandated for all districts in 2004



# Post-School Survey: Early Design

- CCTS developed a standardized data collection process.
- District staff responsible for collecting and reporting the data.



# What's Changed: Demographic Data

Now	Then
CCTS uploads demographics for <b>leavers</b> to the online data collection platform one year after their exit year.	Data were gathered by districts from IEPs for <b>all graduates</b> in the spring prior to graduation.



# Timeline was Different

Now	Then
Telephone interviews with the former student (or family member) are completed <b>June-November one year after the student exits.</b>	Telephone interviews with the former student (or family member) were completed in <b>December after the student graduated.</b>



# Data Submission was Different

Now	Then
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Districts enter their data in an <b>online data collection platform</b>.</li><li><b>CCTS reviews data</b> and develops statewide reports.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Districts <b>mailed their data</b> to CCTS.</li><li><b>CCTS entered the data</b> and developed statewide reports.</li></ul>



# Engagement Outcomes Were Different

Now	Then
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Higher Education</li><li>• Other Education/Training</li><li>• Competitive Employment</li><li>• Other Employment</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Postsecondary Education</li><li>• Employment</li></ul>

[View Current Engagement Outcome Definitions on the CCTS website](#)



# Post-School Status of Special Education Graduates: Nine Years of State Follow-Up Data (Johnson, et al.)

*Percentage of District Participation and Contact Rates for Special Education Graduates*

Cohort Year	Districts Participating	No. SE Graduates	No. Graduates Contacted	Response Rate
2000	30%	2,100	1,422	68%
2001	50%	2,718	1,949	72%
2002	54%	2,910	2,047	70%
2003	72%	3,423	2,414	71%
2004	88%	3,818	2,750	72%
2005	96%	4,070	3,023	74%
2006	99%	4,223	3,179	75%
2007	99%	4,315	3,236	75%
2008	100%	4,289	3,399	79%
<b>Total</b>		<b>31,866</b>	<b>23,419</b>	<b>75%</b>





# Focus Groups and Feedback

- Data should be personalized in order for practitioners to connect the numbers to their students and programs.
- “We need to hear the stories.”
- “We need the heart part.”
- “What about our students who dropped out?” (5 focus groups, 75 individuals, 2008)



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# Dr. Cynthia Gale

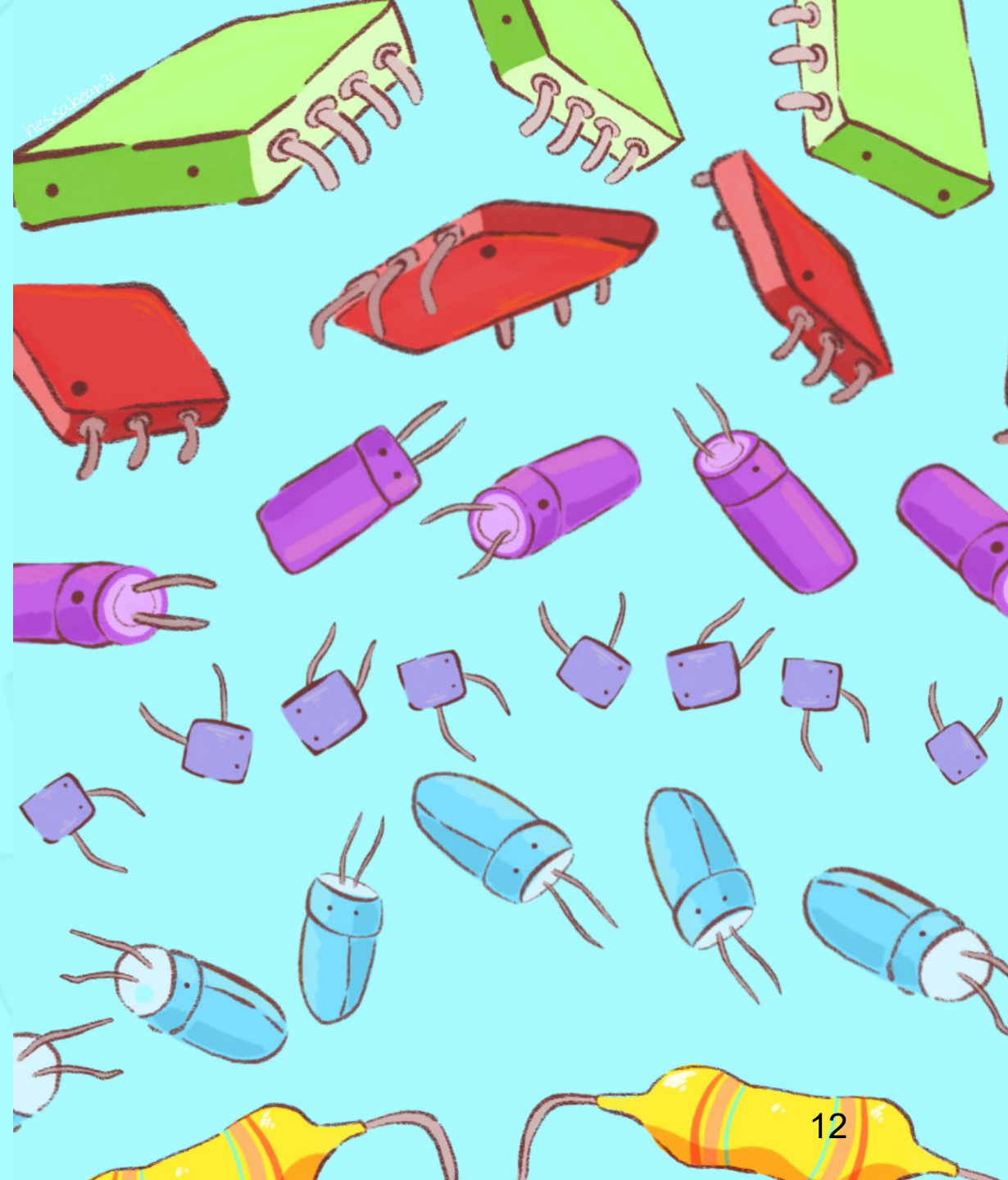
*A Mess by Nessa Ankney*



# Overview

1. Introduction and Background
2. Student and Parent Voices in Research
3. Research Methods
4. Research Findings and Recommendations
5. Future Research Opportunities

# Introduction and Background



# Research Focus

- This research project addresses the problem of students with disabilities in Washington state, who drop out of high school at significantly higher rates than their peers.
- There is a knowledge gap in understanding the causes of high school dropout among students with disabilities.
- This research uses the Post-School Survey responses or data to capture student and family voices to help understand this problem and provide solutions for educational leaders to consider.



# Background: Why Graduation Rates Matter

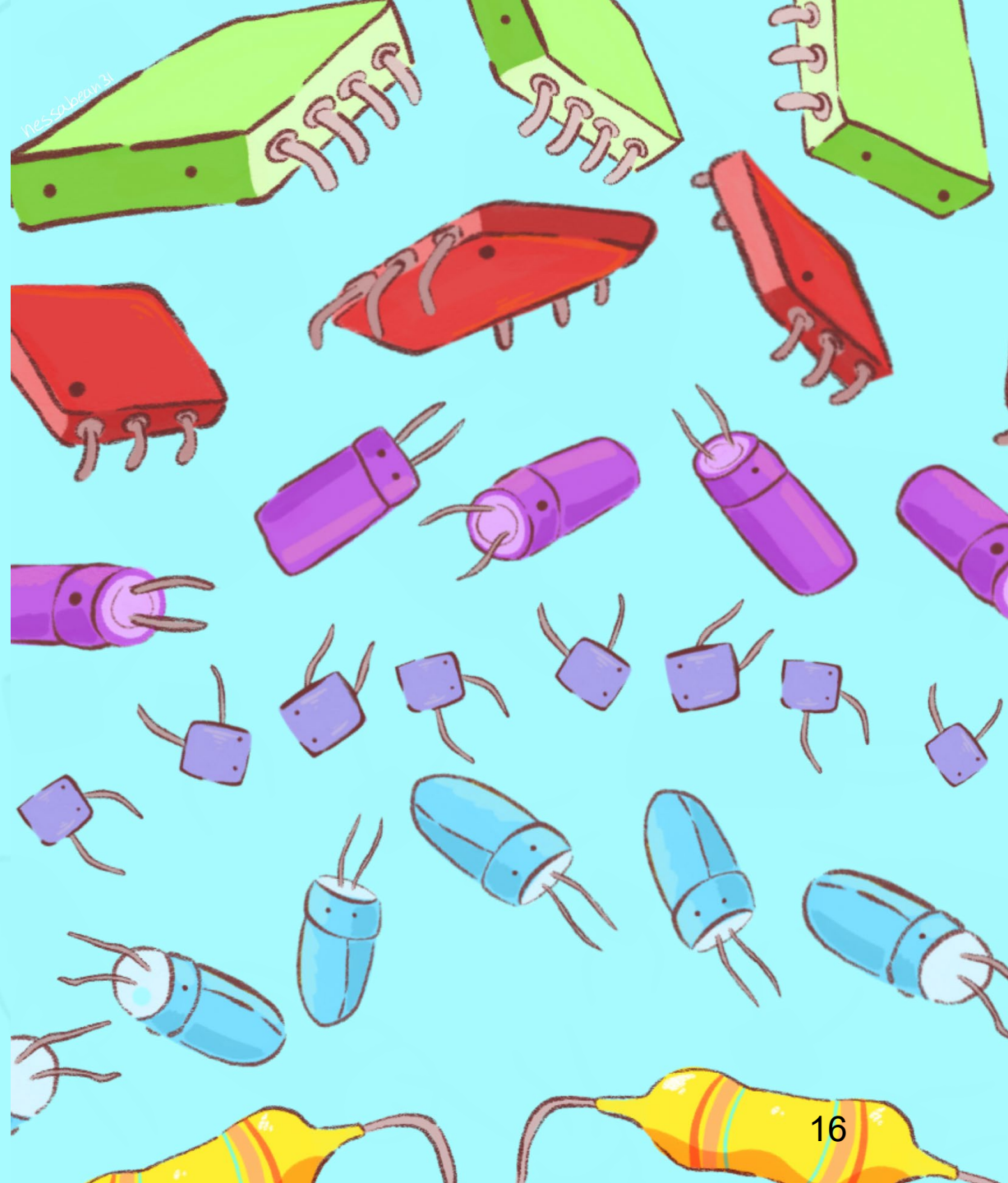
- Extensive research on student outcomes demonstrates the economic benefits of high school education.
- Review of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) on individuals with a disability
  - 19.1% of individuals are employed
  - 8% of those that dropped out of high school are employed

# Research Question

*From the student or parent's perspective, what factors may lead a student with disabilities to drop out of high school?*

# Student and Parent Voices in Research

*Rainbow by Nessa Ankney*





# Importance of Capturing Voice

- The goal of this research was to capture the true reasons that students with disabilities drop out of high school.
- To achieve this, we used existing data from a questionnaire that captures first person “voice” of students and parents.
- This approach captures firsthand experiences and perspectives, allowing us to link with outcomes.

# What is Qualitative Research?

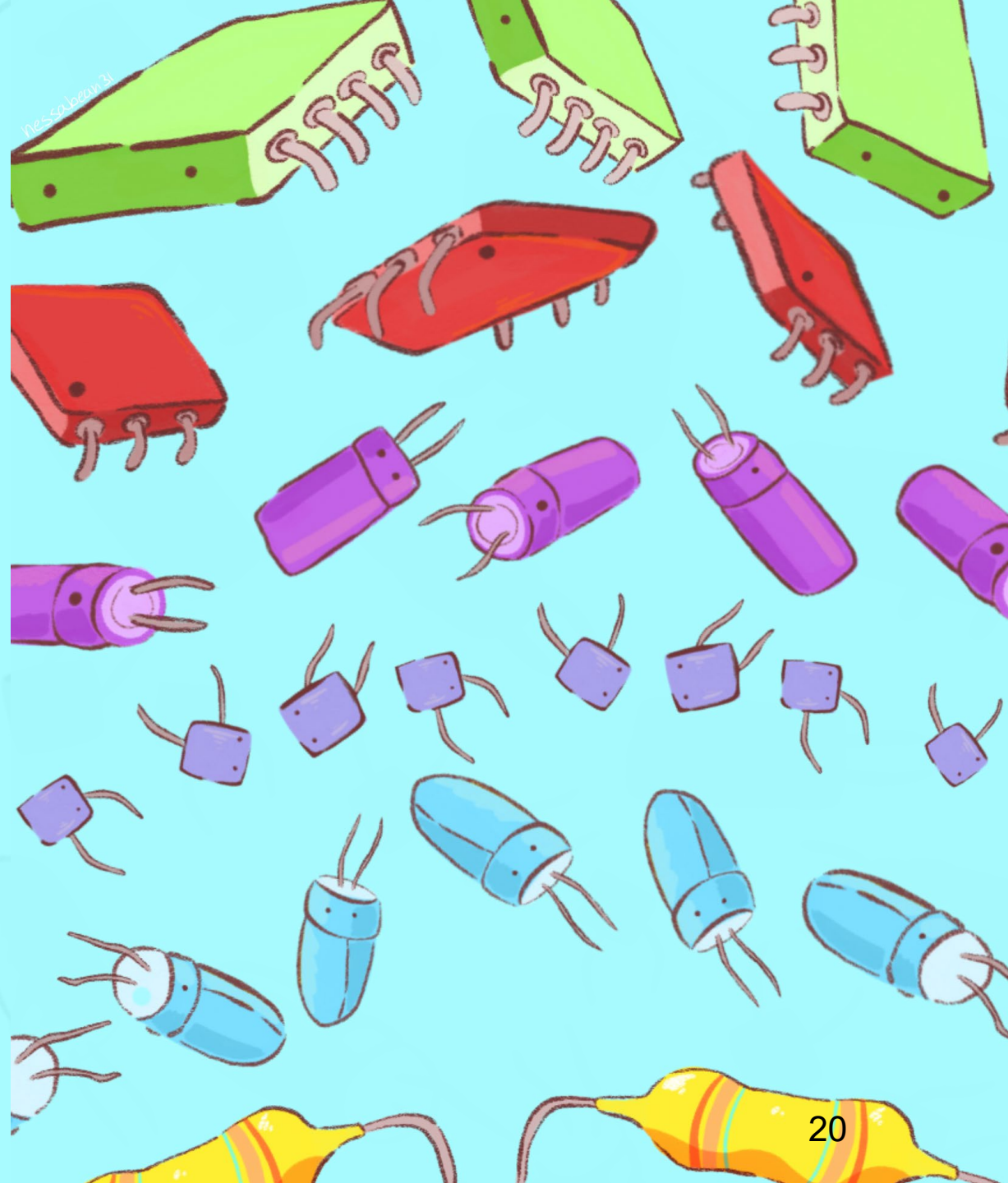
- Method to understand social phenomena using participant voices
- Research focused on questions of “why”
- Helps create meaning beyond traditional reported attributes (e.g., race, gender, category of disability)
- **Thematic Research:** used to identify, analyze, and interpret participant responses for meaning

# Post-School Survey Qualitative Data

- In 2018 CCTS added questions to gather from participants, including why students dropped out of high school.
- Responses are voluntary and can be answered by the student or family member and provide additional meaning to the data.
- The three years of available data were analyzed to search for themes to help understand the research question.

# Research Methods

*Rainbow by Nessa Ankney*



# Post-School Survey Participants

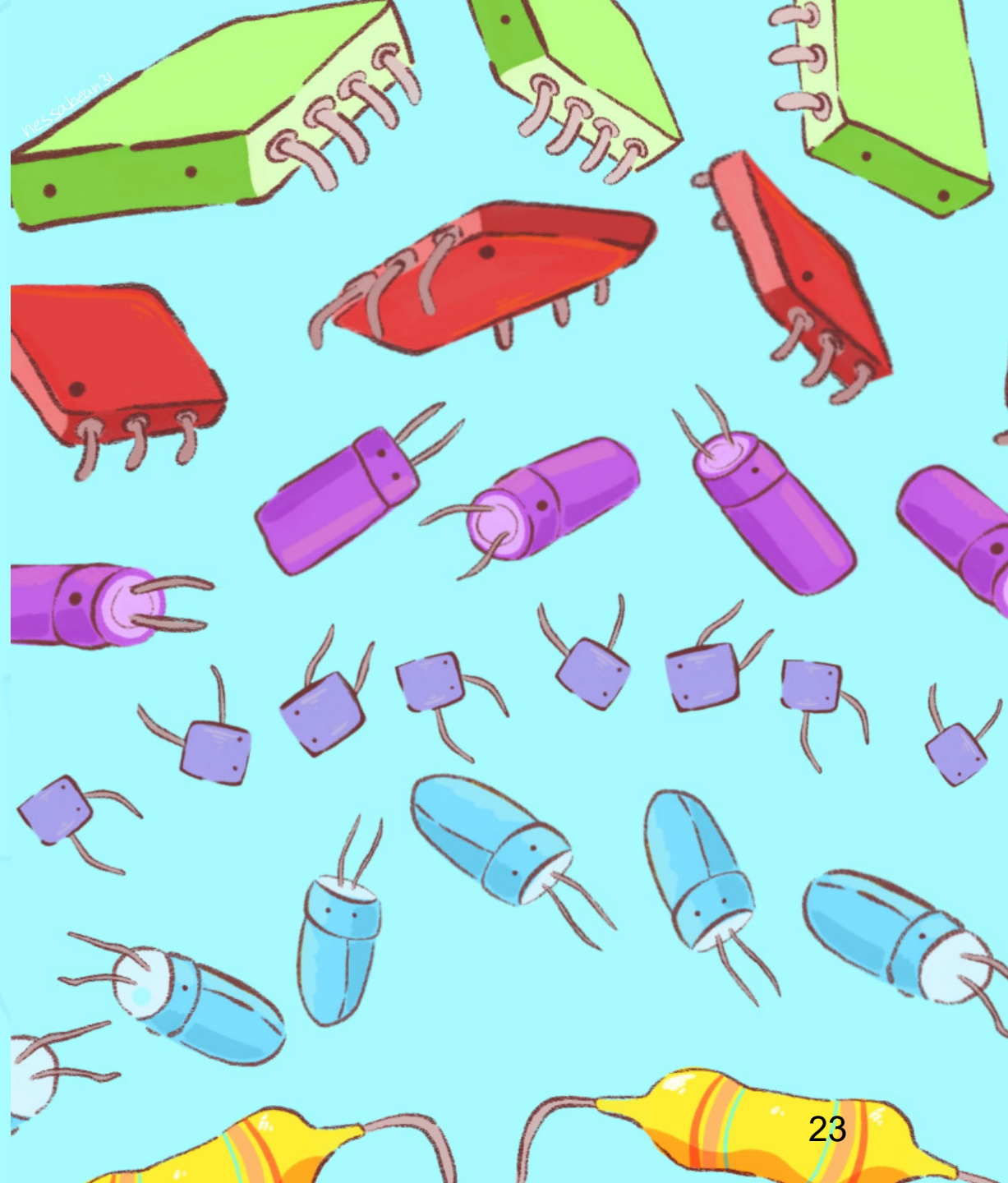
- Review of three years of available data (*2018, 2019, and 2020*)
- Total of 26,982 students in the study
- 2,882 dropped out of high school
- 1,674 (58.1%) survey respondents voluntarily answered the qualitative follow-up question

# Qualitative Data for Dropout Status

## ***Survey Question 17+:***

*Next, I'm going to ask you about your educational experience since leaving high school. But before I do, I see you left high school before graduating. Are you willing to tell me why?*

# Research Findings and Recommendations





# Sample Participant Responses (1 of 2)

- *“She mentioned that when she had a baby it became very difficult to finish school. She is thankful for people trying to help her, but she felt being with her baby was more important than being at school.”*
- *“he left with his father and may be currently homeless”*



## Sample Participant Responses (2 of 2)

- *“I was experiencing a lot of anxiety, which made it difficult for me to function at school. Staff tried to help me get through my challenges”*
- *“Didn’t feel the connection. The teacher he had connected with got cancer and wasn’t available. Others stepped up for him but it wasn’t the same. He also felt less than because of being special ed. He felt like he was the only one who needed special help”*

# Research Findings: Themes

Theme	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Theme 1	Personal and Family	205	12.2
Theme 2	Moving and Housing Instability	108	6.5
Theme 3	Health Challenges	147	8.8
Theme 4	Work and Financial	147	8.8
Theme 5	Disengagement	317	18.9
Theme 6	Disability and Environment	51	3.0
Theme 7	Academic Environment	542	32.4
Theme 8	Environmental Exclusion	157	9.4
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,674</b>	<b>100.0</b>

# Theme 5: Disengagement

- This research shows that there are significant challenges with student disengaging from the school environment or lacking motivation to continue their education.
- 18.9% of students left to due being either uninterested or lacking the motivation to continue their studies.
- The largest number of responses fell under the category of “uninterested” - participants most commonly stated “did not like school” or even “hated it.”

# Recommendations for Addressing Disengagement

- Create an inclusive school culture where students feel welcome.
- Increase the diversity of administrators, teaching, and support staff.
- Support training and additional resources for staff to increase the diversity of their curriculums and teaching materials to reflect cultural responsiveness.

# Theme 6: Disability and the Environment

- 1.7% of respondents specifically mentioned their disability diagnosis as a reason for dropping out of high school.
- 1.3% of respondents specifically stated special education services in the school environment were the reason they left.

# Recommendations for Addressing Disability & Environment

- Evaluate inclusion models within the constraints of existing resources and look for opportunities to expand funding, staffing, and training for these initiatives in schools.
- Expand educational interventions including Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for curriculum and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
- Inclusive teaching practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that are accessible to a wider variety of learners.

# Theme 7: Academic Environment

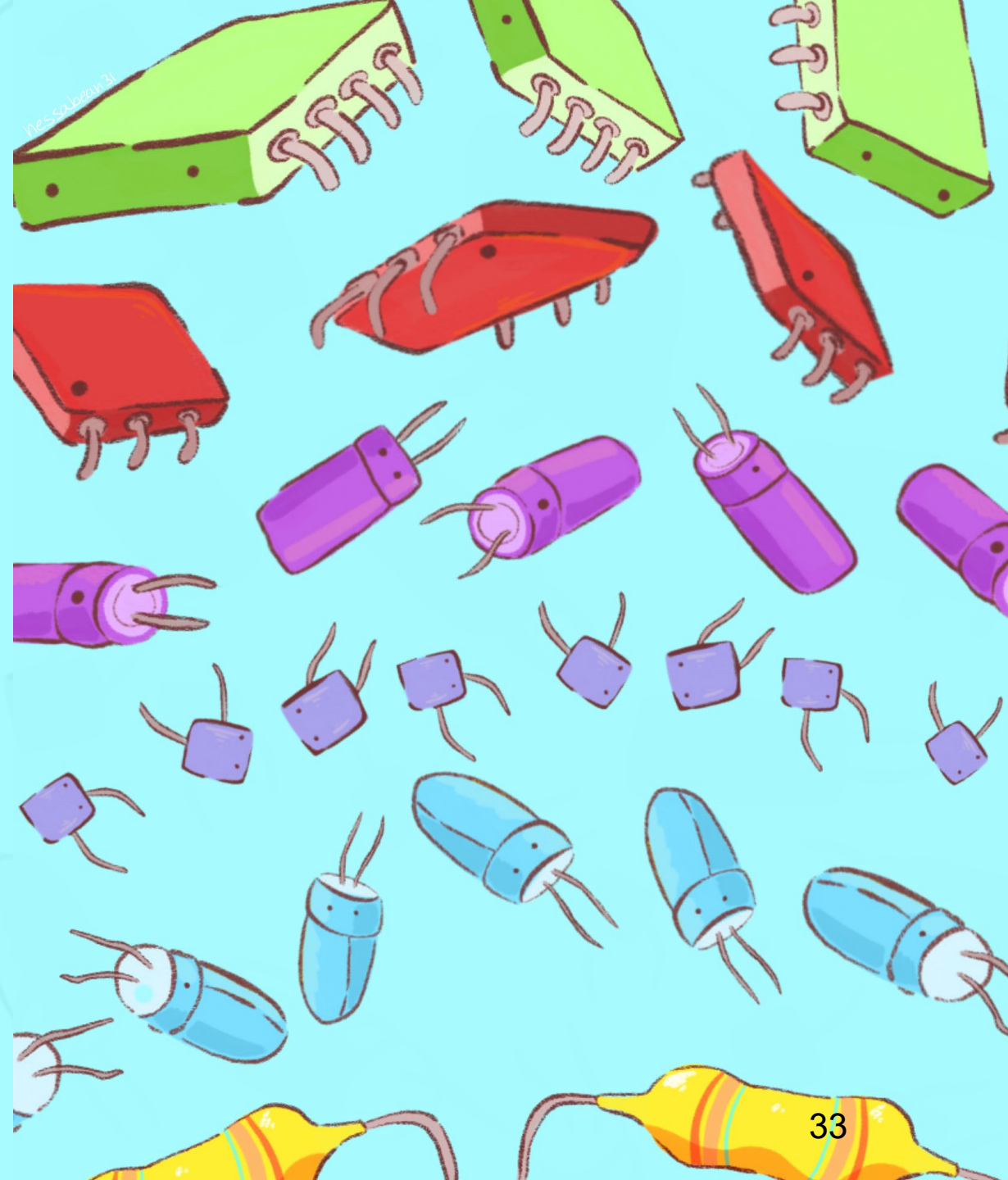
- A major finding from this theme was that the largest number of students who dropped out left to pursue alternate programs (17.0%).
- Students also struggled to be successful in the traditional school environment, many left due to academic challenges (6.1%) or the general school environment (3.9%).

# Recommendations for Improving Academic Environment

- Promote more diverse curriculum and opportunities within high schools including vocational and job skills training.
- Examine partnerships to alternate programs to determine if there are alternate vocational and job training opportunities that are available and accessible to students.
- Consideration that some students may be inadvertently “pushed” from the educational environment into alternate programs due to behavioral challenges or factors related to their disability: a significant number of students drop out of these programs as well.



# Future Research Opportunities



# CCTS: Using Post-School Outcome Data

This research study demonstrates the importance of capturing student and family voices to understand the challenges faced by students with disabilities in our K-12 educational institutions.

# Questions and Future Research

- What can we learn about former students who attempted engagement but were unable to meet the criteria as defined by (OSEP)
- What can we learn from the qualitative data to improve transition planning and services so that former students stay engaged?



# Accessing Post-School Outcome Data

- State, ESD, and county-level post-school outcome reports are available on the [CCTS website](#).
- District-level data belongs to the school district and are stored in the [TSF2](#), CCTS's secure online data collection platform.
- If you are a representative from a school district and would like to access your district's post-school outcome data, please contact your special education department, or email [ccts@seattleu.edu](mailto:ccts@seattleu.edu).

# Questions?

*A Mess by Nessa Ankney*





# References

- Gale, C. M. (2022). *Factors affecting on-time graduation for students with disabilities in Washington state (16)* [Educational and Organizational Learning and Leadership Dissertations, Seattle University]. ScholarWorks. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/eoll-dissertations/16/>
- Johnson, C., Iwaszuk W., Ostergren, M., Smith, M., Edgar, E. (2010). *Post-School Status of Special Education Graduates: Nine Years of State Follow-Up Data*. [Unpublished Report]