AN EVALUATION OF AN INSTRUCTIONAL TEAMING PROGRAM WITH FIRST-TIME AT-RISK NINTH GRADERS

by

ELEANOR KYLE SIKES

(Under the Direction of C. Thomas Holmes)

ABSTRACT

To reduce the dropout rates in a high school in Bibb County, Georgia, a program was implemented for first-time at-risk ninth graders. Participants had to meet at least one of four criteria that included scoring below the 25th percentile on their eighth grade norm-referenced test, being at least one year behind grade level, being administratively placed in high school, and having poor attendance records. Those students who were finally included in the LEAP program had to have parental permission. Those students who were not included in the program served as the control group. Five research hypotheses were tested. Data were gathered for the 1997-98 school year from student records at the school site and from stored electronic records. Analysis of the data showed a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants who passed their ninth grade English course. However, no statistically significant difference was found in the proportion of LEAP and non-LEAP students who passed ninth grade math, were promoted to the tenth grade, returned to school the following year, or graduated.

INDEX WORDS: At-risk ninth graders, dropout prevention, transitional programs for ninth graders at risk

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

If you ask any high school teacher which grade is most important to the successful completion of high school, he/she will most likely respond ninth grade. This first year of high school, which is a year of transition for adolescents, may be the stumbling block leading to failure or the stairway leading to success. Experience indicates that any period of transition in one's life brings with it an increase in stress that may prevent successful adjustment for a long time (de Mesquita, Courtney, & Woods, 1992). Students transitioning from middle school to high school may experience an achievement loss at ninth grade (Alspaugh, 1998). If these students are also at risk, they may need even more help to make the transitional year successful. Therefore, transitional programs and alternative approaches to instruction are being tried in many areas.

One transitional program implemented in 1995 at a high school in Bibb County, Georgia, focused on first-time ninth graders identified as at risk, the students most likely to find this transitional year a stumbling block. The program used a teaming approach, and the instructional team consisted of a teacher from each of the four major academic areas and a vocational teacher. Whenever possible, their teaching schedules were adjusted so that the five teachers had a common planning period. This team of teachers and their students were referred to as a cluster, and the program was called LEAP, an acronym for Learners, Educators, and Parents, and a title predictive of the surge of success anticipated for participants.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if the proportion of students in the LEAP cluster were more successful academically than LEAP eligible non-participants. Success was measured by the proportion of students who passed English, passed math, were promoted to the tenth grade, returned to school the year after the initial freshman year, and eventually graduated from high school. Two secondary purposes were to examine related literature to find the best practices of programs designed to promote achievement of at-risk students and from this examination to provide information for educators working with at-risk high school freshmen.

Definition of Terms

At-risk ninth grade students were those students who met at least one of the following criteria:

- Scored below the 25th percentile on the eighth grade norm-referenced test (the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in 1997) in reading and/or math;
- Were at least one year behind grade level;
- Were administratively placed in ninth grade; or
- Had poor attendance records.

The *cluster* in this study of the LEAP program consisted of student participants, the four academic teachers, and one specialized vocational teacher of Coordinated Vocational Academic Education (CVAE).

Justification for the Study

In elementary and middle school, students are part of relatively small instructional groups. In middle school, students have a homeroom of 20 - 30 but become part of a larger cluster of students who share core teachers. Even though the middle school student may have several teachers during the day, these teachers are given a common planning

time so that they may confer about students and plan together for student achievement. As the students leave middle school, they find themselves part of a larger freshman class. In addition to the change from the student-centered instructional approach used in elementary and middle school, educators tend to see parental involvement decline as students move to higher grades (Anderson & Keith, 1997).

Traditionally, high schools are subject-centered, not student-centered, so the impersonality of school is increased. Students move from teacher to teacher at each class change. The time allowed for interaction decreases. According to Ascher (1987), older students frequently intimidate and tease the younger ninth graders. The difficult ninth grade presents new dangers and new temptation to the freshmen.

Whatever measures educators can take to provide a more stable and supportive environment for ninth graders should increase the likelihood of their completing high school. LEAP was established in order to provide opportunities for the at-risk students to experience a more supportive environment (Mays, 1996).

Ability grouping is one of the measures employed in education to bring about success (Foster, 1989). However, studies on the effectiveness of ability grouping indicate that the anticipated success rate is not always reached. Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, and LePore (1995) stated the differences in the nature and effect of classroom instruction, the amount of off-task behavior, and differences in the quality of instructional discourse all had an impact on the success of ability grouping. Research has found that often the ability of the teacher was reflected in the level of students assigned to him/her - that the less effective teachers were given the lower-achieving students, and the most effective teachers were given the higher-achieving students (Gamoran et al., 1995). Furthermore,

gifted students might have benefited from this arrangement, but the lower ability students suffered. A study of the grouping practices at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, (Galloway & Schwartz, 1994) confirmed many of the findings from the Gamoran et al. (1995) study. "The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the most disadvantaged high school students were 50% to 100% more likely to be taught core academic subjects by a teacher without certification or proper training in the subject" (Stover, 1999, p. 40).

In 1987, the program STRIVE was implemented at the Barbara Jordan High School for Careers in Houston, Texas. A counselor and a team of four teachers worked together to provide a program that was both nurturing and academically intensive for over-age, low-performing ninth grade students. Although the program operated in isolation from the regular program, students were given opportunities for involvement in regular school activities such as sports, computer lab classes, art, and music. An evaluation of the STRIVE program in 1991 resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Participants improved their performance on a standardized test during the year of participation.
2. Participants outperformed a comparison group on a math component only.
3. Attendance rates declined significantly.
4. Statistics on dropout rates were not conclusive.
5. Examination of withdrawal rates indicated that the program did help to keep participants in school (Stevens, Tullis, Sanchez, & Gonzalez, 1991, p. 23).

Other findings included participants' expressing a greater appreciation for their teachers and a desire to attend school regularly although attendance rates declined. Fifty-

seven percent indicated the program had helped improve self-esteem. Seventy percent indicated more confidence in their ability to improve their grades, and 90% indicated they would encourage other at-risk ninth graders to participate (Opuni, 1990).

The evaluation of the STRIVE program and the research on ability grouping offered both positive and negative reasons for clustering at-risk students at the ninth grade. Because it is reminiscent of the cluster in middle school, this grouping approach may make at-risk ninth graders more comfortable in the high school setting. The purpose of this study was to determine if LEAP, which grouped at-risk freshmen in a high school setting, did impact success rates for its participants.

Research Hypotheses

1. There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed English.
2. There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed math.
3. There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who were promoted to the tenth grade.
4. There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who returned to school after their first year in the ninth grade.
5. There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP and LEAP eligible non-participants who graduated from high school.

Procedures

Population of the Study. The students who participated in the program in 1997-98 were compared with a group of students who were eligible for the program but did not participate. Data collected were analyzed in relation to the five stated research hypotheses.

Research Design. The study was a post-test only control group design.

Organization of the Study

This was a study designed to determine the effectiveness of LEAP, a program for first-time at-risk ninth grade students at a high school in Bibb County, Georgia. Chapter I introduced the topic, stated the problem, defined the terms, presented the research hypotheses, and stated the research design. Chapter II presents a review of literature related to at-risk students and programs designed to support those students. A history of the movement to address at-risk students precedes a section on causes leading to the situation. A section on characteristics of at-risk students, or descriptive data used to identify at-risk students, follows next. Sections on studies examining strategies for preventing "at-riskness" (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989) and programs for working with at-risk students are included next. A brief description of LEAP and a summary conclude the chapter.

Chapter III presents the methods used to collect, interpret, and analyze the data. The purpose of the study is restated. Also presented are the null hypotheses, a description of the population, an explanation of the data collection process, an explanation of the variables, and an explanation of the research design. Finally, the chapter explains the statistical analyses used and concludes with a summary.

Chapter IV reports the findings of the study based on the testing of each hypothesis. Tables and figures presenting the data are also included in this chapter. Chapter V contains a summary of the results of the study and a statement of the conclusions reached as a result of the research. The final chapter also includes recommendations for implementation of the program in this study and for future studies. Following the reference list is an appendix containing a fuller description of the LEAP program as it was designed and as it evolved.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Just what is meant when a student is labeled "at risk"? Where did this term originate? What can we do to prevent a student's being at risk? Can we significantly affect a student's present as well as his/her future? These and other related questions have been topics of study for some years. A review of related literature will assist in understanding programs like the subject of this study, LEAP, and others that have been established to provide help to at-risk students.

This chapter provides a history of the at-risk movement, a review of causes of being at risk, and strategies for working with at-risk students. Also presented are characteristics of at-risk students that may be used to define the term and descriptions of programs developed to aid identified students. A brief introduction of LEAP, the subject of this study, will be presented. A summary concludes the chapter.

History

On August 26, 1981, Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education, directing it to examine the quality of education in the United States and to report to him and the nation its findings. The Commission was created as a result of the Secretary's concern about negative public perception of the United States educational system. The resulting report, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, startled the nation, especially educators and legislators, into taking action to provide aid to students deemed at risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The focus of the report was the problems of our United States school system and possible solutions to those problems. Some indicators of the risk being faced in 1983 were:

1. Some 23 million American adults were functionally illiterate.
2. About 13% of all 17-year olds in the United Sates in 1983 could be considered functionally illiterate.
3. Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests was lower than 26 years earlier (1957) when Sputnik was launched.
4. Business and military leaders reported spending millions of dollars for remedial education of beginning employees (National Commission, 1983, p. 4 - 5).

Other factors listed in the 1983 report described standardized test data and employment data. Surprisingly, the Commission did not list dropout rates. However, in reporting 1993 dropout statistics, Schwartz (1995) said that the rate was declining. A 1997 report concurred (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Other consistencies in these two reports were: the dropout rates were higher for Hispanic students than for any other group; rates were highest in the largest urban areas; students in the lowest 20% of the family income group were more likely to drop out than others; and lifetime income for dropouts was about one-third that of high school graduates. In general, the dropout rate had declined from about 6% to 5% since the 1970s. However, there were still 11% of young adults ages 15-24 who had not completed high school or its equivalent.

The indicators that the Commission listed identify what motivated it to address at-risk students so that the goal of United States schooling in 1983 was to

> develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should

> expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of our educational system. (National Commission, 1983, p. 9)

The findings of the Commission underscored the very reasons that programs to address the children most at risk were developed and continue to be developed throughout the United States. Schools and colleges began to take action to meet the challenges of this report and to implement as many of the recommendations as possible. Some recommendations were higher expectations, tougher curriculum programs, increased graduation requirements, and more time on task. The beginnings of the reform movement addressing at-risk students began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), and the evolution of the movement continues.

In response to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), educators and advocates pointed to the problems of children and their families. They pointed to inept social and economic systems as contributors to the decline in educational achievement. The authors of the report did not exclusively blame educators and schools for the failure of students; however, they said little about the poverty and degradation that affect those at risk (Brandt, 1992).

> Many families live in poverty. Even though parents try hard to make ends meet, the corrosive effects of long-term poverty splinter families. Children in these families often lack care; to survive, they lie, steal, and fight. They lead stunted lives. Without help, these children will continue their destructive behavior as adults. Thus, if some families cannot rear their children properly, the public schools must intervene to avert substantial future costs to society and to help each child become a productive citizen. (Cuban, 1989a, p. 780)

In 1961, former Harvard University President James Conant studied affluent suburban schools and city schools in which most of the students were poor and black. He concluded that the educational disparity in the two areas was a menace for the social and

political health of the large cities (Cuban 1989a). Payne (2001) stated, "regardless of race or ethnicity, poor children are much more likely than non-poor children to suffer developmental delay and damage, to drop out of high school, and to give birth during teen years" (p. 11). A 1999 census report indicated the greatest number of poor children are white, but the largest percentage of poor are children of minorities (Payne, 2001).

The publication of *A Nation At Risk* (1983) renewed the need to address the plight of those students likely to fail in school. Dropout rates, unemployment statistics, and lifetime earning data drove the renewal effort. Cuban (1989a) stated that for over 200 years poor children from a variety of cultures have threatened society at large because neither parents nor the larger community could control their behaviors. Compulsory education was seen as a solution to the fear of having to spend more on welfare and prisons, and it continues to be seen this way. Over the decades, some of these poor children achieved in school, but too many did not (Cuban, 1989a).

Causes of Being At Risk

Those students who were first considered at risk were the children of the poor. These students were from varied ethnic and racial backgrounds, and although some of them achieved well in school, many were placed in special classes for failing to meet academic standards or for behavior problems, and many of them dropped out of school. What created this situation? Cuban (1989a) pointed to compulsory schooling as a major contributor to the increase in dropouts. Although originally it was seen as a solution to social problems of poor children, compulsory schooling forced poorly performing children to remain in classrooms even when they continued to fail, thus creating more problems.

In the last 100 years, the low achievement of at-risk students has been categorized in two ways -- poorly performing students lack ability, character, and motivation, or families are to blame because they are poor, have poor education, and do not properly rear their children. Now different reasons for poor performance of at-risk students are proposed which do not blame the student himself or his family. Rather, these views blame the schools. One view stated that the problems exist because the teachers reflect the culture of the school, and because most teachers are middle class, they impose middle class values on these students. Another view blamed the school's inflexible nature that is not designed to accommodate individual differences of children but is designed to mold all children into similar beings (Cuban, 1989a). Examining these three entities--the child himself, the family/society, and the school--yields information about causes of a student's being at risk and leads from there to strategies to prevent failure and to work with these students.

The first assumption was that the student was to blame for his status; it was the student's fault that he was failing. Slavin and Madden (1989) cited dropout rates as being closely associated with being at risk and included eligibility for Chapter I, special education, and/or remediation as risk factors. Eligibility for any one of these three special programs had student ability and academic achievement as criteria for inclusion.

Likewise, El-Hassan (1998) referred to studies that cited cognitive ability, gender, and minority status as intrinsic factors that may lead to a student's being at risk. Another factor El-Hassan included in his eligibility criteria was behavior. In some cases, this also is controlled by physical, emotional, or mental traits that the student cannot control or which must first be diagnosed before control is possible.

A third trait that Cuban (1989a) listed as student inherent was motivation. Alderman (1990) reported that students who considered themselves "helpless" in preventing their success or failure believed that whatever caused their plight was always with them and came from within. Changing the motivational outlook of these students was very difficult; just experiencing success was not enough since they believed they did not control the outcome.

Wehlage, Rutter, and Thurnbaugh (1987) also cited lack of motivation as a characteristic of at-risk students. "Low expectations of receiving good schooling or good grades often account for their dropping out. Truancy is common. Before dropping out, at-risk students demonstrate low self-esteem and a sense of having lost control of their futures" (p. 70).

The second factor believed to influence a student's being at risk was the family. Here research pointed to many factors that were linked to family demographics as contributors to student success and/or failure. Most of these were also listed as factors influencing dropout rates. "Children whose home environments and social backgrounds result in development different from the mainstream enter school at a distinct educational disadvantage" (Duttweiler, 1995, p. 8).

In the Phi Delta Kappa study of at-risk students, Frymier and Gansneder (1989) stated that these students had usually been enrolled in more than one school in a five-year period, a statement of family mobility. Also, for 20% of the students included in the study, English was a second language. El-Hassan (1998) reported higher retention rates among students whose parents had less than 12 years of education. A large number of factors associated with family background and structure have been identified in the

literature as influencing student success in school. Rumberger (1987) not only listed those factors already mentioned, but he also cited socioeconomic status, educational and occupational attainment of parents, single-parent families, and the absences of learning materials and learning opportunities in the home. Payne (2001) stated that conducting school is getting harder because of a demographic switch; the culture of the middle class is being replaced by the culture of poverty as middle class enrollment decreases and enrollment of students of poverty increases. Slavin and Madden (1989) added that attending a school with a large number of poor is a factor leading to a student's being at risk.

Because dropping out of school is too often the last act of the at-risk student, events and traits leading to dropping out are also events and traits that identify at-risk students. Frymier and Gansneder (1989) listed the following:

- One out of seven students had been retained in grade at least once and the same percentage had failed a course the previous year.
- One out of six was at least one year older than the typical student in that grade.
- One out of 15 students missed 21 or more days of the previous school year.
- One out of 18 was suspended from school at least once the previous year.
- Four out of five did not participate in extracurricular activities.
- Involvement with drugs ranged from using drugs (3%) to living with drug users (3% - 7%) to selling drugs (2% at the high school level).
- Three percent of high school students had attempted suicide.
- Three percent of high school students and 2% of others had been physically or sexually abused.
- One to two percent, depending on grade level, had been involved in a pregnancy (p. 144).

Rumberger (1987) added the influence of peers to the list. Also, some students reported they dropped out because they had to work to help out their families. Sometimes they left to get married and to support a family. Rumberger concluded with a mention of

lower levels of self-esteem and less sense of control over their lives than other students as factors leading to students' leaving school before completion.

In some ways all of the preceding causes of a student being at-risk are related to inherent characteristics of the student or to demographics of the student's family, or to a combination of the two. Cuban (1989a) cited the school, or the school structure, as a third factor leading to a student's being at risk. Duttweiler (1995) believed that lasting educational reform would occur only by systemically restructuring the system. Although they are school-related, such factors as absenteeism, truancy, poor academic performance, behavioral problems, retention, and low test scores might have their roots in student ability, character, motivation, or family demographics. The school organization, leadership, and instructional staff also have an influence on a student's decision to drop out (Rumberger, 1987).

'School failure for at -risk students is greater because all students are expected to learn the same battery of skills in so many years" (Englemann, 1999, p. 77). The existing school structure perpetuates a system over 150 years old which looks at birth dates and determines which grade a child should be in and then expects each child to master the same material in one school year. Grant (1997) stated that research estimates indicate incorrect diagnoses or lack of diagnoses of attention disorders, learning disabilities, and similar limitations has led to 20% of students being placed in the wrong grade. Many students with disabilities are younger than their grade-level peers. In addition, it is frequently the youngest child in the class who ends up being retained in grade, dropping out, or being referred to special education.

An examination of the reform movement studies from the 1960s indicated that family background and socioeconomic factors had a greater influence on student achievement than did school influences. This was confirmed with studies in the 1990s. However, checklists for determining student achievement developed in the 1970s emphasized the school factors that would most influence student achievement. One factor that appeared on every checklist was educational climate (Jansen, 1995).

In her qualitative study of a seventh grade social studies teacher, Pierce (1994) defined classroom environment as the physical, emotional, and aesthetic characteristics of the classroom that enhance attitudes toward learning. She concluded that constructive educational climates lead to student achievement; however, a classroom climate that most often focused on production and outcomes was most likely to lead to more failure for at-risk students.

Pierce suggested that the teacher exhibit caring, respect, and physical closeness and fill roles of the "teacher as a person, a counselor, a safety net, and an encourager" (p. 40). Such effective behaviors by the teacher facilitate student/teacher interactions, leading to the development of a classroom atmosphere conducive to success for at-risk students.

Reiterating that schools may be to blame for the plight of the at-risk student, Pigford (1992) agreed that healthy schools might be a solution. She defined a healthy school as one that provides students "supportive, nurturing, intellectually challen ging experiences" (p. 156). In a healthy classroom, the teacher provides opportunities for the students to connect, to find meaning, and to be important. More than seatwork occurs.

Pigford (1992) also reminded us that too often children from poor families are likely to be in unhealthy schools, thus perpetuating the myth that students are to blame

for their poor achievement. Unhealthy schools have limited resources, teachers who are perceived to be less capable or who are less experienced, fewer extracurricular activities, and fewer rewards. Healthy school environments provide "opportunities for ongoing teacher/student interactions" (p. 157). Smaller classes can help promote such interactions, but educators are cautioned that at-risk students need true interaction with teachers, not just interaction with teaching tools. Healthy schools also are places where "students are held accountable for their behavior and their learning" (p. 157). In healthy schools, teachers and administrators have high expectations for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, level of education of parents, or any other identifying characteristic.

Finally, Pigford (1992) stated that healthy schools are places where "each student is recognized" (p. 157). These schools provide opportunities for at-risk students to have individual, personal experiences and interactions with caring adults; trusting relationships exist between students and faculty alike. Students are "visible" in healthy schools.

If Pierce and Pigford were correct, the teacher is the key to a supportive environment that might decrease the failure rate of at-risk students. Concurring, Stover (1999) stated that too often poor students attended schools with poor resources and faculty of poor ability. Also, at-risk teachers too often were put in charge of at-risk students. The chances of the student's being successful were very negatively impacted with this combination. But too often, either the poorest or the least experienced teacher, who may be the same person, was assigned to teach the at-risk students.

Means and Knapp (1991) reported that failure of at-risk students was as much a result of what schools do as of what kids bring with them to school. In the past, the

education of at-risk students has focused in part on what the students lacked; therefore, the direction was to 'teach basics through curricula organized around discrete skills" (Means & Knapp, p. 282). Unfortunately, this instruction was in a linear sequence just like regular education instruction. Instructional practices were repetitive and not challenging; they stressed basic skills and lower order thinking. Teaching was directive and uncomplicated and presented in small pieces.

Compensatory education tended to widen the gap between the capable and the at-risk student. Pullout programs tended to teach word decoding, phonics, and vocabulary in isolation with no congruence to the regular education classroom. When the students returned to the regular classroom, they had missed as much as they had received. There was some indication of positive results in the early years in basic skills taught this way, but there was nothing positive about this structure with more advanced skills (Means & Knapp, 1991).

The literature of the effective schools movement provided characteristics of instruction that benefited at-risk students in all schools, and most particularly in urban schools (Cuban, 1989b). By examining these studies, one can also identify the problems in the structure and instructional practices of ineffective schools. These problems were: large, impersonal classrooms; staff not committed to all students' achieving; very traditional programs; and very little community within the school and on the outside supporting the schools. Likewise in ineffective schools, instruction was not focused and not linked to life; ability groups separated students so that there was no cross-cultural or cross-ability interaction.

Cuban (1989a) suggested that one of the primary tools used in blaming the young for their problems was testing, both intelligence testing and achievement testing. Test results were used to group students under specific labels – mentally defective, average, gifted, and so forth. Too often the children from immigrant families, poor families, and families with less education than that reflected by the culture of the school were channeled into classes for "dull" students. Scores on standardized tests continue to be used as criteria for placement in special programs.

Those who blame the schools for the problems of at-risk learners hold up for scrutiny the structure of the school, its lack of flexibility, and its failure to address individual differences of learners.

> The major difference between at-risk children and those not at-risk is their levels of dependency on the school experience. At-risk children, who are typically from lower social-class backgrounds, have limited resources on which they can rely and must therefore depend on the school to provide for and promote their academic, social, and psychological development… The challenge for schools is first to identify children lacking support structures outside the school and then to provide the necessary support. (Pigford, 1992, p. 156)

Cuban (1989a) stated that when school reformers first began redesigning schools in the early 1900s to meet the needs of the students and to broaden the educational experiences, they did so by adding lunchrooms and gymnasiums, by offering vocational courses and extra-curricular activities, by making the classroom cozy and comfortable and easily rearranged, and by making the relationships between students and faculty less formal. Educators and policy makers began to alter their practices to accommodate individual differences of learners. However, this may have backfired; it made testing for differences more prevalent, thus continuing the practices of labeling, sorting, and ability grouping that led to the need for reform (Cuban, 1989a).

Reports on American secondary education in the early 1980s had school districts scurrying to make changes. A switch from the comprehensive high school curricula to a "one program fits all" approach resulted in the majority of students being subjected to a college preparatory curriculum. This change disregarded the variance in academic intelligence and the fact that less than 20% of the population was earning college degrees. The overwhelming need for the high school diploma became even more critical but harder to earn for students considered at risk (Downing & Harrison, 1990).

This college preparatory curriculum for all was only one hurdle Downing and Harrison (1990) believed impeded high school students from earning the diploma. The instructional strategies that focused on college preparation were another hurdle. The societal attitude that only a college diploma would bring about a successful life added another. Mandatory competency tests, rules, and the high school student's sense of isolation presented other hurdles that were especially difficult for the at-risk student.

Manning and Baruth (1996) stated that schools "can be stressful, boring, dangerous, and in general, harmful to at-risk students' cognitive, social, and overall growth" (p. 241) because of such practices as ability grouping, sitting still for long periods of time, and providing work that is not appropriate to the learner's ability. Other factors which can be cited to blame schools for at-risk students' poor achievement include: the "national emphasis on testing and assessment; violence in schools; tracking that segregates learners according to ability, gender, or race; and the emphasis on competition which separates learners into winners and losers" (p. 241).

The effective schools movement embraced school-based change, restructuring, and school-site management as solutions to the redesigning of schools and thus the

improvement of environments for all learners. Too often, however, the at-risk student has not benefited greatly from these innovations. Cuban (1989a) believed this was because of the continuation of the graded school structure. Redesigning this structure was difficult for several reasons. This structure has made it possible to move more students through school by standardizing expectations. The relationship between schooling and the economic success of the United States was embedded in our thinking. Additionally, not until the civil rights movement in the 1960s had the schools been seen as not serving the students well. That movement made educators and citizens begin to question who was teaching what to whom and for what purposes. This led to alternative teaching methods, special education classes, Head Start, dropout-prevention programs, and similar developments.

Regardless of whether one decides that the student is to blame, the family is to blame, or the school is to blame, there have been and will continue to be students who are at-risk. Understanding the contributions of those three sources to the at-risk condition may help educators to recognize these students early on and begin to give them the help needed.

Characteristics of At-Risk Students

Literature supports the hypotheses that at-risk students are a product of their lack of ability and motivation, of families without ability to properly rear children, or of the school. So just what does an at-risk student look like? The literature provides several descriptive items that may be used to identify students who are at risk.

At-risk students are often thought to be the same as disadvantaged students. In his article for the 1989 *Kappan*, Ralph stated that

> youth at-risk are usually identified by the outward signs of distress and failure, such as alcohol and drug abuse, unwed pregnancy, attempted suicide, street crime and delinquency, truancy from school, and dropping out; disadvantaged students are defined in terms of demographic or sociological indicators, such as family background and socioeconomic status. (p. 396)

In their analysis of effective schools research, Druian and Butler (1987) provided the following list of conditions linked to youth considered at-risk:

- Living in high growth areas
- Living in unstable school districts
- Being a member of a low income family
- Having low academic skills (though not necessarily low intelligence)
- Having parents who are not high school graduates
- Speaking English as a second language
- Being single-parent children
- Having negative self-perceptions; being bored or alienated, having low self-esteem
- Pursuing alternatives: Males tend to seek paid work as an alternative; females may leave to have children or get married (p. 3).

Frymier and Gansneder (1989) cited examples of events from school and life to characterize students at risk. School events included failing a single course, being retained in grade, or dropping out of school. Life events cited were drug use, physical or sexual abuse, and contemplation of or attempted suicide (p. 142).

Pierce (1994) considered the use of the term "at risk" in the current literature to be

> a euphemism for students who exhibit a wide range of educational problems, including the failure to respond positively to the instruction offered in basic academic skills, the inability to keep up with their classmates in academic subjects, and a limited repertoire of experiences that provide background for formal education. (p. 37)

Pierce also cited conditions of these students that fall outside the control of the school. Such conditions include poverty, dysfunctional homes, an absence of positive role models, poor medical care, poor diet, and poor coping skills.

The degree of "at-riskness" is another factor to consider (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989). For example, if a student is poor but has positive role models, he has a better chance of coping with his social and school environment than does a student who is poor and has no positive role model. If one thinks of life as following a "continuum ranging from healthy or good to unhealthy or bad, then at-riskness begins somewhere at the mid-point and continues to death-oriented behavior. Being at risk may range from frustration over a homework assignment to drug addiction" (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989, p. 142).

Educators are urged to use with caution the term at risk in referring to students. Dickinson (1991) argued that the term described behaviors and circumstances rather than people. Behaviors are within the control of the person; examples of at-risk behaviors are skipping school, abusing drugs, or engaging in sexual behavior. Circumstances may not be within one's control; these include poverty, lack of supervision, and inadequate schools.

In truth, all of today's youth may be at risk at some point in their lives. And although each child at risk has individual needs, there are commonalties in all the definitions or lists of traits of at-risk students. The term designates youth who lack success in life due to social, economic, or demographic conditions. It also describes student performance in school – frustration, failure, retention, absenteeism, and ultimately dropping out. The challenge for educators is to find and/or develop programs that will effectively reach at-risk youth so that their future is changed.

Strategies for Working with At-Risk Students

Before implementing a program to work with at-risk students, educators must determine which students to target. Mueller (1990) developed a quick, easy, and reliable

method that educators can use to select their target students for intervention. The factors assessed in this method are race, gender, reading achievement, promotion to next grade, and type of high school. When Frazer and Wilkinson (1990) studied the effectiveness of Mueller's scale in the Austin Independent School District, they found a 40% accuracy rate in predicting dropouts. They also found that the three statistically significant factors were overage, failing courses, and being below grade level.

Once the at-risk population is identified from the general school population, educators can then determine which strategies to use to promote achievement of at-risk students. Working with students considered at risk begins very early in their school experience. Educators agree that children progress academically, socially, and emotionally at different rates, and they are constantly looking for methods to help bring students slower in development up to par with those considered at the appropriate stage of maturity for their age. In the United States, strategies for working with these students have included retaining children, a practice used heavily in the 19th century, tracking, and ability grouping (Foster, 1993).

Being on grade level is one indicator of successful academic achievement. However, promotion to the age appropriate grade level is determined by both objective and subjective academic assessment. Subjective assessment occurs if the teacher decides that regardless of objective measures the student is not ready to move on to the next grade; the student may be retained. If being behind grade level is a trait of the at-risk learner, why are schools still retaining students?

Retention is used because of the belief that competency based education relies on grade-level standards (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Saturday, 2000). In his analysis of

research studies on retention, Holmes focused on five dependent variables: academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, attitude toward school, and attendance. The groups of retained students scored .15 standard deviation unit below the promoted comparison groups.

Specific findings of Holmes's (1989) meta-analysis indicated that regardless of when they were tested -- immediately after retention or at the end of the year -- retained students scored lower on academic achievement than did the comparison group. Additionally, the retained students scored lower than the promoted students on measures of personal adjustment and self-concept, had more absences, and had poorer attitudes toward school.

The impact of retention on academic achievement is less negative in early grades than in higher grades. "Primary students' self-concepts appeared stable over a two-year period following retention, but intermediate and secondary students showed significant decreases in self-esteem" (Foster, 1989, p. 39). And although a student may do better during the year of retention, three years later he is not keeping up with younger classmates (Holmes, 1989). Any increase in standardized test scores of the retained student may be due to the fact that the student is older and thus has had more experience with the material; retention will have negative long-term effects (Slavin & Madden, 1989). "Other studies confirm the notion that children recommended for retention but promoted anyway, do at least as well or better than similar children who are retained in order to improve their academic skills" (Foster, 1998, p. 39).

At the conclusion of his report, Holmes cited evidence of retention being used successfully in nine out of 63 studies. These positive uses more frequently took place in

predominately white suburban schools and for students with average IQs who were more able academically than the traditionally retained student. The programs focused on academic achievement and had several traits that were also found in other programs to help at-risk students. These traits were:

- Potential failures are identified early and given help.
- Parents are involved in the decision from the moment of identification.
- An individualized and detailed education plan is prepared.
- Students are placed in smaller classes with a different curriculum.
- Students spend part of the day with their age peers.
- Students receive regular counseling.
- Students are evaluated continuously and rejoin their age cohort as soon as possible (p. 25-26).

Grant (1997) also believed that an additional year of learning time in grade is sometimes appropriate. He stated this can be accomplished by looping, a practice that promotes the first-grade teacher with her students so that they are all in second-grade together. The teacher then has an extra year to bring students up to grade level.

According to Grant (1997), retention did not work for slow learners or emotionally disturbed children. It was not a good motivator, did not boost IQ, and did not promote attendance. It was effective for students of average to above average ability who were the youngest of their classmates. It also helped students who started school "socially, biologically, emotionally, and physically" (p. 35) behind their classmates or those who were put in the wrong grade. However, Grant concluded that retention would not work without the cooperation of parents.

Retention is related to school dropout rates. One of the goals of retention was to keep children in school longer and provide more chances for success. Foster (1989) cited studies that proved just the opposite happens. In fact, being retained one year "almost doubled a student's likelihood of dropping out, while failing twice almost guaranteed it.

Retention is the second greatest predictor of school drop-out" (p. 40). Holmes (1989) reported the chances of a student's dropping out of school increase by 40% with one retention and by 90% with two retentions.

Tracking and ability grouping are also strategies used to provide success experiences for at-risk students (Foster, 1989). The differences in the nature and effect of classroom instruction, the amount of off-task behavior, and differences in the quality of instructional discourse all have an impact on the success of ability grouping (Gamoran et al., 1995). Although students who are gifted might profit from ability grouping, lower ability students are too often deprived of student resources necessary for success. Teachers assigned to lower ability students prepare less and are less enthusiastic in their teaching (Galloway & Schwartz, 1994; Gamoran et al., 1995; Stover, 1999). Students with less ability would be more successful if placed in a challenging classroom setting where there is more classroom discourse. Ability grouping patterns contradict the organizational rationale for this practice (Gamoran et al., 1995).

Building on the assertions from the study cited above, one could conclude that ability grouping might be more successful if more thought were given to how instruction is delivered. Foster (1989) stated that using retention to achieve homogenous ability grouping which results in older and younger students being grouped together is especially harmful at middle school where social and emotional progress are most influenced by experience. The results of Gamoran's 1993 study supported ability grouping for lower ability students when more experienced teachers were assigned to those classes, when the curriculum was parallel to the regular curriculum and not a caricature of it, when the classes were smaller, and when the overall school climate stressed effort and caring.

In preparing for their 1994 study of grouping practices in an Illinois school, Galloway and Swartz considered the following points:

- Is the curriculum challenging, complex, related to real life and rich with meaning;
- Are groups heterogeneous, based on skill levels across grade levels, limited to basic subjects such as reading and math, and used within classes as often as possible; and
- Is there small group instruction within the heterogeneous classroom?

Tracking "not only damages children who are doing poorly, but it also damages the children who are doing very well" (Scherer, 1993, p. 8). The separation of children of differing abilities deprives them of learning something about "decency and unselfishness." Students cannot participate in peer tutoring programs if grouped homogeneously. Tracking is predictive; once a child is placed in a low group it is predicted that he will be in the low group the next year (Scherer, 1993).

Another strategy widely used, especially in Chapter I (now Title I) schools, is the pullout program. Research suggested it is best used in early grades math. Pullout programs help keep kids from getting further behind their agemates but do not give them the edge to stay with their peers in later years. Because little is done to integrate the curriculum of the pullout program with the regular program, regular classroom instruction is disrupted, and students left in the regular classroom setting tend to label those pulled out for remediation (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

Hamby (1989) stated that the first step in dropout prevention is dispelling three myths. The first myth, there is no dropout problem, arises from a debate over just how many students do not finish high school and whether that number is significant enough to be considered a problem. Matthews (1997) stated that although it would seem easy to define the term, in actuality the definition of a dropout seems to be developed by each

school system in accordance with its needs. This practice of locally defining the term could lead some systems to appear to have higher or lower dropout rates than others and may account for the debate over the number of dropouts.

Hamby's (1989) second myth, some children do not belong in school, erodes the entire concept of public school for all. The third myth, schools do not abuse dropouts and can do nothing to keep them from leaving, is erroneous since dropouts themselves report that they left school too often because of school related reasons.

> We must recognize that there is indeed a problem, reaffirm our commitment to education for all youth, and, most of all, recognize that schools can make a difference. (Hamby, 1989, p. 22)

By focusing on the following "A" list, Hamby (1989) stated schools could dispel these myths and make a difference.

1. Awareness – Communicate the problem through every means possible; hire a public-relations person; take meetings to parents; involve business and industry.
2. Attendance – Notify parents early of absenteeism and use incentives to get students to school.
3. Achievement – Help students learn; provide tutors; recognize successes.
4. Attitude – Confirm value systems, the bases of attitude; make school pleasant and relevant; involve everyone.
5. Atmosphere - Provide a safe and orderly school.
6. Adaptation – Use counseling, career education, and community resources to engage all students.

7. Alternatives – Provide alternatives to the regular school program (before/after-school programs, Saturday classes, summer school, mini-courses); help students set goals and determine the means to those goals.
8. Advocacy – Aggressively pursue financial resources; network in the community; establish inter-agency councils; keep policymakers informed.

> Students don't drop out of school because they do not want to learn. They drop out because they are failing to learn. Everyone wants to learn if the outcome serves a purpose and the process is more positive than negative. (Hamby, 1989, p. 23)

Strategies to help at-risk students that sound much like Hamby's "A" list appeared in a publication of the U.S. Department of Education (1987b). This report added that the school staff should help parents in educating their students, should make frequent contacts with parents, and provide in-service opportunities on parenting. A few suggestions for tailoring instructional strategies to meet the needs of the disadvantaged students included setting and practicing classroom rules and routines, linking new learning to previous learning, questioning frequently, using independent work among students, and providing frequent in-service to staff in instructional strategies.

At-risk students are in this predicament due to more than demographics; attitude and motivation contribute. "Poor attitudes about school are associated with poor academic achievement and behavior problems" (Weir, 1996, p. 48). In order to make an impact on poor attitudes, we must change curriculum and instructional methods. Weir continued by stating that organizational, instructional, and interpersonal components must be present in every middle level program if it is to be successful. At the organizational level the program must have a low pupil/teacher ratio, be set in an environment unlike the traditional school, have a fair discipline policy that includes

alternatives to the usual punishment of suspension, have a flexible attendance policy, and have students participate in the decision-making process. Wehlage et al. (1987) agreed with having the non-traditional environment and the links to other agencies.

The instructional category changes Weir (1966) suggested included attendance improvement projects, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, computer-based instruction, career development and vocational exploration, and curriculum materials other than traditional textbooks and commercial educational materials. School staff employed in these programs must be well versed in making adjustments in materials, instructional methods, assessments, and academic demands (Weir, 1996).

The interpersonal category changes stressed having a sensitive and caring staff who had chosen to work with at-risk students. Students in the program must be given opportunities to interact with adults in informal settings. Parents and community should be interested participants, and counseling must be a component.

One successful middle school program had 20 participants, and a goal of the program was that the students would be promoted to the ninth grade. Five were promoted at the end of the first year. Additionally, available attendance records showed an improvement in that area, mean scores on a self-concept scale indicated students held an average or better view of themselves, and the reading program created students eager to read who made steady achievement gains. Thematic units provided students with relevant and new learning experiences (Weir, 1996).

Mathews (1997) reported that students in Henry County, Georgia, who participated in middle school and high school in an intervention program that included the aforementioned criteria did better than expected on dropout rate. Although 62% of the

participants did drop out of school, this was a better rate than non-participants with a drop out rate of 77%.

Middle school students need a wide variety of authentic learning experiences and at-risk students need direct instruction in learning procedures that are connected to information processing. Middle grades teachers should team to plan lessons and instruction around integrated units. Some time should be spent enhancing the knowledge base, listening skills, note taking skills, and test taking skills, as well as self-concept and academic independence. Middle grades teachers should use strategies such as verbal cues, advance organizers, SQ3R reading skills, webs, and study guides (Knight & Wadsworth, 1994).

Based on her fourteen years in New York ghetto schools, Hodges (1987) asserted that at-risk middle level students learn if they are exposed to "global, tactual -kinesthetic experiences" (p. 3). They need high interest activities that seem real, require movement, and involve working with others, activities that reflect their learning styles.

Payne (2001), contending that many of the tests used in education are about an acquired knowledge base (p. 118), stated that in order for an individual to learn, he/she "must have a structure inside his/her head to accept learning" (p. 119). To develop necessary cognitive strategies, educators should use input strategies, elaboration strategies, and output strategies. These are defined as the quantity and quality of data gathered, the use of data, and the communication of data (p. 124-125).

Downing and Harrison (1990) suggested that practical strategies be developed within each school to help all high school students earn a diploma. Educators must accept that hurdles exist and want to help at-risk students overcome these hurdles. Counselors

should help students set attainable goals, put students in contact with community leaders, target the at-risk students the first day of their freshman year, and provide the students with reasons for compliance with school policy. Making changes in graduation requirements, in mandatory testing, and in school management rules could also be beneficial.

Botwinik (1997) added tips for the classroom teacher who is working with at-risk high school students. First, arrange the classroom so that it appears warm and orderly; use plants, mirrors, and space to do so. Next, teach the students routines that provide structure for each day. Organize materials and resources so that students have ready access to them and so that their identity is safe. Plan lessons that are creative, relevant, of student interest, and of different ability levels. Finally, involve coworkers, parents, and community members in the education of all students.

One large urban high school established a committee to respond specifically to referrals from staff of students considered at risk. The committee met weekly to review the status of referrals and to determine interventions for each student. The committee used interventions available within the school, the district, and the community. Special accommodations were made for those students who needed them. The study of this referral committee strategy suggests that the input from multiple sources and the wide variety of interventions can promote positive results for students at risk (Baker & Sansone, 1990).

The cures for the problem of at-risk children have been correlated to the view held of the source of the problem. When the problem was seen as inherent in the child, the child got larger doses of school – more homework, more courses, a longer school day and

school year, and so on. When the problem was seen as originating in the family structure, then parents were given help in rearing their children (Cuban, 1989a). Blaming the student/victim for his lack of achievement ultimately justified beliefs that lower ability students cannot learn, excused poor quality programs and outdated and irrelevant curricular materials, and failed to make an adequate commitment to the solution of at-risk conditions (Manning & Baruth, 1996). The effective schools movement recognized the problems within school structure that contribute to failure of students who might be at risk when they start school and those who are made so by the school environment. Strategies to work with at-risk students grew out of the focus of the problem; from the development of these strategies grew various programs.

Programs for At-Risk Students

Educators want all students to be successful in school, and they are frustrated when they encounter the problems of at-risk students. However, they have acknowledged that trying to overcome some of the factors these students bring to school with them is impossible. Educators cannot mend broken families, employ all parents, insure all parents graduate from high school, or change population shifts. Educators must concentrate on what they can do with the at-risk students while they are in school. Throughout the last two centuries, educators in the United States have tried different strategies including retention, tracking, ability grouping, remediation, and early intervention. In this section, some of the programs employing these and other strategies and their success are reviewed.

Those persons directly or indirectly involved in the education of at-risk students agree that early intervention is a priority. "When students fail in early grades they begin a

cycle of failure, poor self-esteem, poor expectations, poor motivation, and poor performance that leads to dropping out" (Slavin, 1996, p. 6). It is better to prevent failure than to allow students to fail and then try to remediate. Studies on "readiness for school" have predicted first-grade scores in reading and math. Pre-kindergarten attendance has been related to success in kindergarten but has shown no direct effect on success in first or second grade. Variables that do impact success are parental involvement, which increased with pre-kindergarten attendance, and mobility (Bracey, 1992).

Bracey (1992) also stated pre-kindergarten attendance led to more success in early grades unless the student had attended Head Start. However, Schweinhart (2002) proposed that Head Start is an acceptable program for all children as evidenced by its continued financial support and by the fact that the majority of states now fund a pre-kindergarten program. Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, urged school systems to increase pre-kindergarten programs like Head Start to reduce the achievement disparity between students without access to such programs and those with access to them (Scherer, 1992).

Foulks and Morrow (1989) stated that increasing academic survival skills would enhance the at-risk student's ability to be successful. They cited two necessary academic survival skills commonly agreed upon by early childhood teachers: "Child listens carefully to teacher instructions and directions for assignments" and "Child complies with teacher demands" (p. 161). They added that teachers should recognize these skills when present in children and teach them to students who do not have them. Behaviors considered unacceptable challenged the teacher's authority and control (Foulks & Morrow, 1989).

"Between 1950 and 1985, the percentage of mothers in the labor force with children under 18 increased from 14% to 62%, with similar rates for mothers of three-and four-year-olds" (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986, p. 5). In 1986, there were approximately 43 million pre-school children who needed supplemental childcare arrangements. About one third were served in nursery schools and kindergarten, thus beginning an increase in early childhood programs. These became especially important for young children living in poverty. Statistics from the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1984 revealed that one of every four children under six was poor. The rate increased among minorities to 50% of all blacks and 20% of Hispanics being poor. This increase may have been due to the growth in single-parent families resulting from the high rate of divorce and never-married mothers (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986). In 1996 in the United States, 25% of individuals under 18 were living in poverty. Children under 6 living in households with only female providers experienced a poverty rate of 50.3% (Payne, 2001).

The High/Scope program, developed by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, was an early childhood program that helped children later in school, reduced rates of delinquency and pregnancy, and increased employment and decreased participation in welfare (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986). The program had a curriculum based on children learning by being active. The teacher arranged situations that allowed the student to create and then conduct his own learning. During the activity, the teacher asked questions that stimulated learning and promoted critical thinking skills. There were no special materials involved, and the activities promoted problem solving and independent thinking.

Classes had fewer than 16 students per teacher. The High/Scope curriculum focused on the whole child and not just the academic development of the student. Therefore, the parent was involved in the planning and implementation of the child's curriculum (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986). A follow-up study on students at age 27 who had participated in the 1970 High/Scope program revealed lower rates of criminal involvement, lower levels of welfare assistance, more stable marriages, an economic status four times better than non-participants, and 71% graduating from high school or its equivalent (Schweinhart, 2002).

Englemann (1999) stated that a well designed pre-school and kindergarten program would improve academic success. Furthermore, because at-risk students learn more slowly than do average students, their learning must be accelerated. All day programs with direct, careful instruction focusing on language, reading, and math skills is important. Skills must be presented and practiced orally. Students should engage in self-initiated projects.

The ability to read well, to understand what has been read, and to then be able to call upon this knowledge when it is needed, is fundamental to academic success. In the early 1990s, Bergman and Schuder (1993) developed a reading program for the Montgomery County, Maryland, Public School System. Students Achieving Independent Learning (SAIL) became an implementation strategy for the system's meaning-based language arts curriculum. The intent of the program was to build reading skills necessary for lifetime learning.

Teachers modeled strategies that taught reading as a decision-making process. The first step in the process, "Getting Ready to Read," asked each student to determine

why he wanted to read. Next, the student read for meaning and related the reading to his personal goals to improve his understanding of the reading process. The second step in the process was "Before Reading." The student established a purpose for reading (fun, research, etc.) then selected an appropriate text. Next the student decided how to process the text.

The third step involved what the student did "While Reading." The developers of the program formulated four monitoring strategies and related problem-solving strategies that they taught the students. Finally, the student chose and used an appropriate evaluation strategy that focused on how well he achieved his purpose for reading and what he would do if he had not met his goal.

In 1980, Pogrow and colleagues developed the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) program in Norwalk, California, for students in the upper elementary grades who had a history of enrollment in Chapter I classrooms. The HOTS program focused on teaching these children general thinking skills.

From data collected over a five-year period, Pogrow (1990) concluded that the fundamental learning problem of at-risk students was they did not seem to understand "understanding." He also concluded that educators in general did not recognize that the problem of understanding "understanding" existed. Furthermore, the collected da ta led him to conclude that this misunderstanding of understanding could be eliminated if enough time and enough resources were made available.

Pogrow and colleagues developed the "35 minute principle" of school improvement. This principle advocated 35 minutes a day of "intensive, consistent exposure to sophisticated conversation that engages students in key techniques to develop

thinking, conducted in groups of fewer than 15 students, for four days a week for two years" (Pogrow, 1990, p. 35). Data collected supported the use of the 35-minute principle with at-risk students.

Payne (2001) stated that there is a direct link between achievement and language. From her research of language registers, language discourse, and story structure, Payne concluded that schools should teach formal register language to students, especially to those who are at risk because they have as their primary discourse casual register language. Formal register reflects the standard structure and syntax of textbooks, standardized tests, and the workplace. Knowledge of and use of formal register impacts one's ability to get a higher-paying job (p. 50).

Earlier in this chapter, the role of motivation was listed as a factor in a student's being at risk. Cuban (1989a) and Alderman (1990) were cited for supporting the belief that at-risk students are not motivated to learn in classrooms. Based on the research literature, Hootstein (1996) developed a model of strategies to motivate at-risk students involving curiosity and interest, personal meaning of instruction, extrinsic and intrinsic reinforcement, and expectancy of success. The RISE model grouped strategies based on teacher behaviors: ***R****elating* content to the students' needs, concerns, goals, interests, and experiences; presenting ***I****nteresting instruction* that made anything abstract more concrete or familiar; optimizing the student's sense of ***S****atisfaction* through the first two strategies; and ***E****xpecting* students to succeed.

Levin (1987) stated that the reform movement neglected the educationally disadvantaged. He cited higher birth rates, immigration, and increased poverty in families as reasons for the increase in the number of disadvantaged. Furthermore, current reforms

had increased standards and requirements of the high school student thus increasing the gap between the average and the disadvantaged student. Many of the existing intervention models failed because they assumed the disadvantaged student was not able to maintain a normal instructional pace, remedial services alone did not narrow the gap, and a timetable for moving students out of the programs was not required. Levin's Stanford model did not assume the above. It was an accelerated elementary school design that brought the disadvantaged student up to grade level by the end of sixth grade.

The Stanford model assessed each child upon entry and set individual objectives for achievement. The student was evaluated periodically on standardized tests. Staff created assessments tailored for each student. Language was emphasized in all disciplines. The program applied learning to everyday problems, and it made available peer tutoring and cooperative learning for everyone. Parents signed agreements that clarified their obligations, their student's obligations, and the school's obligations. Parents were expected to come to the school to interact and set high standards for their students. The Stanford model included an extended day, which allowed college students and senior citizens to provide tutoring.

Any school wishing to use the Stanford model had help from the Stanford group, but each school had flexibility in deciding upon curriculum and instructional strategies. Participating schools also received help in initiating school-based governance.

Levin and Hopfenberg (1991) reported on three schools that implemented the Stanford model. The student population in each school was at risk either because of minority enrollment or socioeconomic level. All three schools had been at the bottom in their respective districts in student progress but made significant gains. Levin and

Hopfenberg attributed these gains to the schools' commitment to the Stanford model of acceleration.

From a study of over 50 schools that were using the Accelerated Schools Project (the Stanford model), Levin and Hopfenberg (1991) reported that remediation actually slowed down progress for the at-risk student. Accelerated schools had higher expectations for achievement and provided inspiring experiences. They pushed students to learn at a faster rate so that they could catch-up with their peers and perform from then on at levels appropriate to their age group. These schools emphasized the school as a whole, employed a language-based approach across all subjects, promoted independent projects and problem solving, reserved the role of the principal to be the "keeper of the dream," and drew upon the strengths of all stakeholders. The authors believed that unity of purpose, school-site empowerment, and building on the strengths of the staff, students, parents, and communities were the principles that provided the foundation for success of the Stanford model of accelerated schools.

The foregoing elementary school programs supported early intervention, or prevention, as more likely to promote success than intervention programs for older students. However, there are successful programs for older students. According to Manning (1993), programs for adolescents that have proven to be successful share seven essentials. These components are:

- Comprehensive programs that address more than one at-risk factor at a time;
- Recognition of the relationship between self-concept and achievement and emphasis on improving the relationship;
- High expectations regardless of the cause of a student's being at-risk;
- Lessons that address the skills necessary in social interaction;
- Teachers and learners agree on expectations, methods, and materials;
- Parents and families are involved in determining program goals and strategies for reaching them;

- A focus on the relationship of motivation and achievement and emphasis on the student's responsibility (p. 135 -138).

The staff of Flamson Middle School in Paso Robles, California, in an effort to curtail high school dropouts, established mandatory eighth grade graduation requirements. These included a minimum grade point average of 1.61, no more than 20 absences, and no ongoing discipline problems. Parents of eighth grade students who had displayed at-risk traits in the seventh grade were notified of these requirements in September and were provided information on how to help their students be successful. Regular notification to parents of student achievement and documentation of such notification were important program components. Students could work their way off the non-graduating list by following the guidelines provided.

Students who did not graduate attended the summer program. Parents met with the staff and signed a contract for the program that was taught by a team of middle and high school teachers. A counseling component on self-esteem helped students cope with their plight. Teachers and staff emphasized positive attitudes and provided encouragement. Students who successfully completed the program earned 10 units toward high school graduation. A review board determined whether a student who did not complete the program should be placed in a middle school or a high school remediation program. This program blended the middle school focus on self-esteem with the high school focus on completion of work. Bedell (1993) indicated that the students passing the program were better prepared to face high school and that those who did not pass the summer program were given an opportunity in an alternative program that would help them find success.

VENTURE, a program for high-risk students established at Glenn Middle School in Bedford, Massachusetts, also focused on failing eighth graders (Aronstein & Desilets, 1988). The principal, counselor, math and English teachers, industrial arts teacher, and special education teacher designed a program for students they considered potential dropouts or substance abusers. Students gained skills by establishing a business and producing a saleable product. Students were required to work cooperatively, and their behavior was tied to monetary rewards.

The 12-15 students enrolled in the program participated in regular academic classes for half the day and in VENTURE for the other half. English and math were taught in the VENTURE setting and focused on business skills. The special education teacher ran the business training center and the industrial arts teacher designed the product and acted as foreman of production.

Like other programs, this one involved students, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. The necessary funds to begin the program were obtained from a local teachers' organization , a grant, and some school funds. The local Chamber of Commerce provided technical assistance and consultants. To acquire more revenue, students made presentations to potential investors.

Participants focused on reporting to work on time, working productively throughout the period, cooperating, and not disturbing others' work. The primary goals of the program were: to improve self image; to provide success experiences; to provide students an opportunity to be part of a team; to work in a physically and emotionally safe environment; to give insight into vocational choices; to demonstrate the relationship between good will and a payoff; and to improve student attendance. Aronstein and

Desilets (1987) assessed the program's achievement in late 1987. Students reported personal improvements in all goal areas except feeling safer in the workplace.

Kallmann (1991) reported on a middle school program that focused on improving self-esteem of a group of 28 students from grades 7-9 with poor social and academic skills. The program set these goals: to significantly increase self-confidence of participants; to sensitize faculty and administration to problems of at-risk students; to increase academic performance of targeted students; and to improve attitudes of students toward school. The results indicated that individualization and a concentrated effort in learning strategies, coupled with parent and faculty involvement, aided in raising self-esteem and keeping at-risk students in school.

PROJECT ENABLE, in Chesapeake, Virginia, incorporated all of the elements Manning (1993) cited as essential for an effective program for at-risk youth while it trained military personnel transitioning into becoming teachers of at-risk students (MacDonald, Manning, & Leary, 1999). The program included curricular materials that addressed both academic and behavioral needs, classroom and field experiences that offered new career and educational opportunities, and counseling and other activities that promoted self-esteem, self-control, interpersonal skills, and conflict management. Parents were included on advisory boards for planning and implementing the program and as often as possible in helping in classrooms and on trips.

The Chesapeake Bay PROJECT ENABLE yielded suggestions for working with teacher candidates and at-risk adolescents. These included addressing more than one at-risk behavior at a time, collaborative planning from all stakeholders, making learners responsible for academic achievement, providing activities that address academic and

nonacademic needs, preparing students for higher teacher expectations, including experiences that had real-world connections, and supplementing academic needs with positive role-model tutors (MacDonald et al., 1999).

> A student's decision to drop out of high school is often the end result of a long series of negative school experiences – academic failure, grade retention, or frequent suspensions – that begin before the ninth grade. Dropout prevention strategies, therefore, must be targeted at the middle school grades, when stresses of schooling related to a more complex curriculum, a less personal environment, and the growing need for peer acceptance pose grave danger to already disadvantaged students. (Wells, 1989, p. 1)

Marchak (1999) stated that a middle school program should address the physical and emotional variability of the students. Making middle schools smaller and more personal (Wells, 1989), and recognizing the powerful influence of informal structures (Marchak, 1999) should be included in the design. Systems were encouraged to reform the local retention and tracking policies. Cooperative learning, a curriculum that includes a strong health education focus and career education, and improved relationships between students and teachers were other components Wells (1989) included in her middle school redesign criteria. Marchak (1999) stated that any middle school design should include a flexible, easily communicated plan with reasonable demands of classroom teachers and students. It should include all stakeholders in the decision making process, consider societal as well as institutional norms, and have on-going evaluation (Marchak, 1999).

Although identification of at-risk students before they enter ninth grade is more likely to lead them to graduation (Frazer & Wilkinson, 1990), programs are in place in high schools. Mueller's (1990) findings of critical at-risk factors for ninth graders were being a minority, being male, reading in the bottom third distribution on a reliable test,

repeating the ninth grade, and being enrolled in a comprehensive high school rather than a non-alternative high school.

Transitional programs for ninth graders include strategies to address high-risk students. Stennet and Isaacs (1979) followed up on a group of students in Ontario who made the transition to high school. They found the group contained many more males than females, the students were only slightly less capable than students not considered high risk, and many of the academic problems were related to school placement and/or course selection. Pantleo (1992) examined transitional programs for students moving from eighth grade to ninth grade in Pueblo, Colorado. Data gathered indicated an increase in failing grades, so staff at both middle and high schools coordinated efforts to provide transitional activities.

A similar program developed by Marshall, Scott, and Sikes (1990) in Macon, Georgia, included a summer institute with teachers from both levels who planned yearlong activities to prepare students to handle the transition both before and after the move. One yearlong activity focused on frequent meetings of eighth grade and ninth grade core subject teachers. This allowed for the beginning of articulation of curriculum, a transitional program component advocated by Ascher (1987) and Lindsay (1998).

Lindsay (1998) stated that transitional activities should focus on making the freshman welcome at the high school. Meetings held early in the eighth grade year should inform the parents and students of high school courses, schedules, personnel, expectations for academic achievement, and conduct. Parents should complete information sheets outlining their expectations for their student. These would provide information for advisement and guidance, class placement, and health care. In May,

eighth graders should visit the high school for a day, half of which should be spent shadowing a junior.

At-risk students are less likely to become involved in the activities offered by the school. Ascher (1987) recommended reducing the feeling of alienation in ninth graders and conducting special programs to orient students and parents to high school. Orientation activities should include events such as an extracurricular fair (Pantleo, 1992) to expose students early on to those opportunities.

The Marshall et al. (1990) program included an eighth grade shadow day and an extracurricular fair. The program included an emphasis on courses available in high school and the impact of course selection (Pantleo, 1992; Lindsay 1998). Because early academic success is so important to holding at-risk students in school, Ascher (1987) recommended that required courses be deferred to allow room for more electives and courses of higher interest at the ninth grade.

De Mesquita et al. (1992) concurred that transition to the next grade is often characterized by declining academic performance and added that attendance also declines. They reported a freshman failure rate reduction from 26% to 14% for participants in a program that established networks of technological support, student-centered support, instructional support, community-focused outreach, school governance, and frequent teacher professional staff development. Testerman (1996) reported that establishing a positive advisor/advisee relationship for a group of high-risk students with grade point averages of 1.5 or below improved attendance and grade point average after 21 weeks.

Another transitional program, BRIDGE, was a "multi-faceted program in Hartford, Connecticut, that focused on the disengagement of at-risk students transitioning to high school" (Words + Numbers Research, 1991, p. 1). The program included opportunities for students to be promoted from grade 7 to grade 9 and to participate in a subsidized internship while finishing high school. Results of the BRIDGE program indicated a 65% participant promotion, a 33% promotion of students who had been retained, and more participant engagement with the school.

While all programs designed to help at-risk students focus on academic achievement, they do so in a variety of ways. Manning (1993) recommended middle school programs include developing self-esteem; it is not unusual to find a similar focus in programs designed for high school students, especially ninth graders who are transitioning into the stricter, more competitive academic setting.

Secondary III was designed for a group of 20 underachieving ninth graders of average ability. They were grouped together for English, geography, and supplemental instruction. Study results indicated participants had improved self-confidence and a lower dropout rate than non-participants, and twelve had better grades (Fitzpatrick, 1984).

High school programs focus on preventing students from dropping out of school. A school-within-a-school structure in one study resulted in declining dropout rates, increased attendance, and progress toward graduation (Gordon, 1993). The locally funded program was designed for students in grades 7-10 and included basic skills, counseling, and career guidance.

"Stay a Winner" was a high school program developed for at-risk students that emphasized multicultural diversity. It included a focused, more meaningful curriculum

and combined improved instructional processes with the use of multimedia technology (Burden, 1992). Participant criteria included:

- Scoring in the 25th percentile or lower on a norm referenced test
- Failing two or more core subjects
- Having two or more retentions in core subjects
- Having at least a 10% absentee rate
- Having multiple discipline referrals.

One characteristic of at-risk students, socioeconomic status, is equated with qualification for free and reduced lunch; another is eligibility for special programs. When "Stay a Winner" was established in Bethel, N.C., North Pitt High School had a 57% free and reduced meal rate. Twelve percent of the students qualified for exceptional education; only 3% were gifted; and only 2% qualified for National Honor Society. Sixty-three percent of the students were labeled at risk.

The creators of the program set six goals. The first of these was to increase the level of student motivation and sense of identification with the school as a community. Strategies included reducing class sizes to 5-15, using cooperative learning and multimedia instruction, and providing a course to help students build self-esteem. Morris (2000) stated that curriculum reform must involve a change of attitude and understanding that addresses the negative factors affecting students' school attendance and achievement. In "Stay a Winner," a restructured curriculum was more personalized and meaningful and focused on skills required for job success, critical thinking, and problem solving.

"Stay a Winner" included an advisor system that assigned only eight students to each teacher. The advisor was responsible for all academic counseling. Payne (2001) advised schools to include developing positive relationships between at-risk students and

school staff who served as role models; the "Stay a Winner" advisor served as a source of support and encouragement.

The second goal of "Stay a Winner" was to develop skills and attitudes of leadership. A course for building self-esteem was required for all ninth graders and included the development of leadership skills. Other courses also fostered skills and attitudes critical to leadership development.

Developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for career preparation, decision-making, and success was goal three. The revised curriculum, technology instruction, and career development seminars were strategies developed to support this goal.

Goal four, to develop cognitive skills with special emphasis on key concepts, essential processes, and problem solving abilities, echoed previous goals and strategies. In addition to the revised curriculum and instructional strategies, staff developed new assessment measures emphasizing demonstration of competencies. Student demonstration of skills or the degree of their improvement rather than a score on a written test often determined progress. Portfolios and group projects were common assessments.

The fifth goal focused on community involvement in the program. Meetings, dinners, luncheons, parent workshops, and newsletters got stakeholders involved, kept them involved, and communicated goals to the entire community, thus building lasting support.

The final goal focused more on the school structure and staff than on students. This goal--to develop improved teaching methods, curriculum learning materials, and

structural changes that could be used in other professional settings--was supported with video communications, training in multimedia technology, and staff development in multicultural learning styles. Components of the program and its results were disseminated to interested parties.

The goals set in "Stay a Winner" were desig ned for total school implementation since 63% of the students were considered at risk. Results of implementation reflected a 50% decrease in dropout rates over a two-year period. Attitudes and student successes also improved with implementation. Burden (1992) attributed successful implementation to a dedicated faculty who were not satisfied with status quo.

Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh (1987) reviewed research and formulated "a model program" for dropout prevention. A study of nine schools that implement ed the model yielded encouraging results. Data indicated that the more closely the model was followed the greater the effect on students. The four components of the program were:

1. Administration and organization – school-within-a-school or alternative school setting; no more than 100 students with two to six faculty allowing for personal interactions and individualized instruction; teacher collaboration on mutual concerns; and teacher authority over admissions and dismissals from program;
2. Teacher culture – deal with "whole child" including home, community, and peer group; and joint decision-making and cooperation to lessen feeling of alienation from other faculty;
3. Student culture – voluntary application for participation; student openness about reasons for applying and the need to change attitude and behavior for success;

commitment to rules, work expectations, and standards of behavior; acceptance of a "family" atmosphere within the program; and

4. Curriculum – different from the regular high school program; individualization, clear objectives, prompt feedback, concrete evidence of progress, and active role of students; sex education and parenting instruction; health care and nutrition education; and community social services.

Planned experiential learning activities were an integral part of the Wehlage et al. model. Volunteers worked in groups at a day care center, a nursing home, elementary schools, or similar settings. Attitudes and social skills were thus developed. Later, students were introduced to vocational possibilities and toward the end of the program participated in internships.

Anderson and Keith (1997) drew from researched models that stressed time-needed versus time-allowed to learn because at-risk students learn more slowly than those not at risk. This model for academic success for at-risk high school students had five components: student ability, student motivation, quality of instruction, quantity of instruction, and home environment.

Anderson and Keith (1997) also stated that student ability influenced academic achievement regardless of the chosen definition of ability and regardless of ethnicity of students. Ability in turn influenced other variables (motivation, time spent on homework, and parental involvement) that influenced learning.

Quality of instruction included expectations and interest of teachers, resource allocation and school facilities, consistently enforced rules, and general emphasis on learning. This variable influenced motivation, time spent on homework, and achievement.

Home environment, or parental involvement, contributed to ethnic differences in achievement, enhanced educational equality, and was a component in compensatory education. Parental influence may lessen as students get older and may be very slight with high school students (Anderson & Keith, 1997).

Motivation was described as time spent on learning, beliefs, expectations, interest in school, and enjoyment of learning. Anderson and Keith (1997) stated this component might make the difference in achievement of middle class and poor. Quantity of instruction referred to the number of academic courses taken. The latter directly impacted standardized test scores.

Anderson and Keith (1997) collected data on the above variables from 8,000+ students during their tenth grade year and again at their twelfth grade year. Results of the longitudinal study indicated that student ability and academic coursework had the most direct influence on academic achievement. Quality of instruction and home environment impacted student motivation, causing it to have a powerful total effect on achievement. In conclusion, the authors indicated that all variables except home environment/parental involvement influenced achievement whether or not the student was considered at risk.

In reviewing the literature on programs designed to benefit at-risk adolescents, one common thread noted is the inclusion of vocational or career education. The Pennsylvania State Council on Vocational Education recommended the integration of academic and vocational education and the clustering of courses (Pennsylvania State Council, 1989). In his overview of the affects of vocational and career courses on dropout rates, Nayolr (1987) reported that quality of vocational instruction was important to the impact. A casual exploration of career and vocational courses did little to prevent

dropouts. However, tenth and twelfth graders who took more courses that concentrated on a specific vocational program were more likely to stay in school. Individualized plans, small programs with low pupil/teacher ratios, and cooperative rather than competitive programs also increased likelihood of the student remaining in school.

Sprabery and King (1992) evaluated a program in rural Mississippi for at-risk ninth graders that was designed to reduce dropout rate and promote career awareness. The program included career education, personal improvement skills to enhance employment, basic social skills, and emotional counseling. In Virginia, a restructured ninth grade curriculum clustered core courses and integrated the program with a regional Wildlife Refuge (McFaden, Nelson, & Randall, 1996). Programs cited earlier also listed career awareness, vocational education, integration of academic and vocational courses, and clustering of students as factors which affect dropout rates positively.

Not all research supported the inclusion of vocational courses in dropout prevention programs. A study by Pittman and Chalker (1994) compared dropouts and graduates in rural areas based on gender, reading comprehension, socioeconomic status (SES), attendance, and exposure to vocational courses. Results suggested that the two groups had about the same amount of exposure to career courses and that their participation in such programs did not influence them either to stay in or to drop out of school.

Programs for at-risk students also included creating a climate that was safe and orderly, nurturing and nourishing. Valdivieso (1987) called this a "culture of concern." He also stressed the need for vocational and community involvement components. Manning (1993) emphasized that community agencies should be integral parts of any

program so that more than one at-risk condition can be addressed. Involving social agencies, medical and judicial agencies, and community schools would broaden the scope of support. Like Manning, others also supported parents and educators working cooperatively to determine the goals and the strategies for reaching those goals for any program.

> Students who are at-risk bring multiple problems that cut across traditional social, health, and educational systems… Traditional (service) is fragmented. Schools often have the most enduring contact with families and are convenient centers for integrating services. (Lowenthal, 1996, p. 54)

Integrated services focus on prevention of problems and provide assistance for academic readiness and success.

Prevention and intervention programs cited were integrated into an existing school program, creating school-within-a-school structures. Another solution for working with at-risk students is the alternative school. Leone and Drakeford (1999) stated that these must be proactive establishments rather than last chance institutions. Enrollment might be an option rather than a mandate due to disruptive behavior. Five elements cited as necessary for successful alternative schools were:

1. A clear focus on academic learning with a challenging curriculum that focused on problem-solving skills;
2. An ambitious professional development plan focused on teaching strategies and instructional methods;
3. A strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making that built trust and loyalty among staff and promoted creativity and instructional excellence;
4. A sense of community in which students and staff shared expectations for learning, and students were encouraged to take a variety of courses that enabled

them to pursue interests and goals; and

5. Essential elements of the curriculum were identified and linked with programs from other agencies and services for youth.

The Transitional Support Resource Center at Fairfax County, Virginia, was an alternative school for students in grades 9-12 who had been suspended, expelled, incarcerated, truant, or retained twice or who had dropped out (Giles, 1998). An individual contract with a timeline for completion was drawn for each student. A major focus of enrollment was the individualization of a program to meet the needs of each student. Teachers developed positive, on-going relationships as facilitators of learning. Credit was awarded by completion of the objectives for each course so that students could earn two credits each nine weeks. Additionally, students worked at home or were jointly enrolled at the high school. Counseling was an integral part of the program.

The Transition Center had a challenging, relevant program with an accelerated school concept. Independent and cooperative learning, study models and peer tutoring, and technology were integral components of the program. The small size, responsive faculty, flexibility in instructional methods, and options for students' academic experiences developed the sense of belonging. The curriculum also included strategies for social skill development. Collaboration between school, parents/family, and community (colleges, social and medical services, volunteers) was a vital part of the school (Giles, 1998).

The Berkshire Union Free School District in Canaan, New York, was created in 1965 for at-risk students from the courts (Richman, 1994). Students with emotional disorders were prevalent. Each student took a 10 weeks computer course that began with

basic word processing and extended to multi-media presentations. Presentation projects were the end products of learning and demonstrated how the student got the information, organized it, referenced it, and structured the knowledge gleaned. The alternative school was a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1993.

Although the term alternative school indicates enrollment in a separate facility, one program was organized as a school-within-a-school in a conventional high school in northern Louisiana. Students identified as having low self-esteem and lacking social skills were given the option of attending. Counseling and an academic program allowing students to experience success met motivational needs of students. Block scheduling allowed them to increase the number of courses taken each year and to accelerate catching up with peers. Vocational opportunities were stressed. Because the program was located within the conventional school, students were able to participate in the elective courses offered (Watts, 2000).

The literature on alternative schools indicated their success when organized to meet the needs of the students rather than to provide a last chance for disruptive students. Studies cited indicated that a successful alternative school, even if primarily established for disruptive students, should provide opportunities for success so that completion of high school, rather than dropping out, is the student's focus.

In addition to within school programs, separate facility programs, transitional programs, and individual education plans previously described, other philosophies are shaping educational programs centered on helping at-risk students. Two other philosophies that merit some attention are accelerated learning concepts and the role of resilience in success.

Placement of any student who is retained in an alternative program to the school's regular curriculum has already been discussed in relation to several programs. One point in those programs was that the instruction must accelerate learning so that students learned what they were lacking that led to retention and that they learned what was necessary to place them on an equal level with their agemates. The use of accelerated learning groups that supplemented regular instruction was an alternative to retention proposed by Stansbury (2001).

Students who previously had earned a high grade in a high-risk course attended the class regularly and then facilitated interactive study groups. These peer tutors received some training in instructional strategies that enabled them to help the at-risk learners better understand the curriculum. Although the groups met frequently, participants were required to attend the accelerated learning group at least once a week. In the test with college students, the at-risk students did not attend as frequently as the non-at-risk.

Another study focused on developing the accelerated learning groups for students with weak prerequisite skills. Individual education plans were developed based on placement tests. Then the students with similar test results were placed in a group with a tutor (Stansbury, 2001). In accelerated learning groups in a secondary school setting, upper classmen who had mastered a high-risk course and had flexibility in their schedules could audit those courses and serve as the leaders or facilitators. District policies could address enrollment and attendance.

In spite of the odds against at-risk students becoming successful, some of them do. Resilient students overcome their social and personal disadvantages. They generally

have factors in their lives that help them to compensate for their disadvantages. These factors may come from within, from family, from relationships, from community, or even from school (Johnson, 1997). If schools act as caring communities, being pro-active rather than reactive, they use the knowledge of the characteristics of resilience and the protective factors to meet the needs of at-risk students more effectively (Christiansen, Christiansen, & Howard, 1997).

Christiansen et al. (1997) stated that resilient children approach problems proactively. They have problem-solving skills that help them maintain self-esteem and bring about positive changes in their lives. Resilient children are generally good-natured and gain positive attention from others. Often there is a bond with a caregiver or close adult. These children have a sense of humor and coping skills. Resilient children approach an event that produces negative results as a challenge and work with the challenges. Christiansen et al. (1997) added that resilient children have a sense of control over their lives that allows them to maintain personal order and structure. Most became resilient as a result of their environmental conditions or life's experiences.

Proactive schools create protective factors that allow students to develop resiliency (Christiansen et al., 1997). Factors listed were:

- A classroom and school climate that embraces the child, ensures a sense of safety and security, and allows each child to participate and learn effectively;
- Access to arts, sports, and leisure activities that develop special interests and bring about positive recognition even though the student does not excel in the activity;
- A mentoring program that provides the at-risk student an opportunity to bond with an adult;
- Family members model adult skills and give support to the students;
- A home-school counselor coordinates workshops for parents and conducts home visits; and
- The school uses the other components to plan turning point events for at-risk students. (Christiansen et al., 1997)

An Introduction to LEAP

The Learners, Educators, and Parents (LEAP) program was started at a large urban comprehensive high school in Bibb County, Georgia, to "create a variety of teaching and learning opportunities that would not normally exist in a traditional setting" (Mays, 1996, p. 2). First-time ninth grade students selected for participation met at least one of several criteria. These included having scores at the 25th percentile or lower on a norm referenced test, the eighth grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), in English and/or math, having poor attendance records, being one or more years below grade level, and administrative placement in ninth grade. Chronic discipline status, youthful offender status, and teacher recommendation were considered with the four basic criteria. The teaching team consisted of selected teachers from each of the four major academic areas--English, math, science, and social studies--and a vocational teacher. The vocational teacher provided instruction in job acquisition skills in a Coordinated Vocational Academic Education (CVAE) class. The CVAE teacher often used class time to reinforce skills already presented in the core academic courses and to introduce work place skills, thus coordinating the academic and vocational areas.

To further the team concept, the academic teachers were clustered in one building, much like a middle school cluster, hence the use of the term cluster to refer to this program and its participants. When scheduling permitted, the academic teachers and the CVAE teacher were given a common planning time so that they could meet regularly to discuss student progress. An identified counselor also met with the team of teachers. The counselor was instrumental in communicating with parents and social services to include them in discussions benefiting the students. Thus, the team concept embraced not only

the school environment, but the home and community as well. Whenever possible, staff working with the program were drawn from teachers who desired to work with at-risk students. They were encouraged to seek professional development to enhance their instructional skills and to provide them with skills that helped them better understand and aid their students. Continuity of staff was desirable. See the Appendix for more about the LEAP program as it was designed and as it was implemented.

The LEAP program design included characteristics of other successful programs. Like those cited earlier in this chapter, the purpose of LEAP was to provide opportunities for success to at-risk students in the hope that such successes would prevent their dropping out. This study examined the data from student records to determine the extent of success experienced by LEAP participants.

Summary

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1981spurred educators and legislators to consider the problems in education associated with students at risk. Statistics on the dropout rates and related earnings added to the urgency of finding methods to improve the situation. A tendency to blame the parent, the student, or the school for the problems was supported by research. Reformers began to develop strategies to overcome these problems, and the focus turned to the characteristics of effective schools. Whether the causes of being at risk came from identified demographic sources, from student characteristics such as lack of ability or motivation, or from systemic problems within the school structure, reformers began to develop programs to improve chances of success for at-risk students. All agreed that whatever the source, any student in danger of failing in school or in life was at risk.

Research and a plethora of opinion are available to educators to use to determine how to help at-risk students. Some common characteristics from the literature were significant. Foremost in these traits was a focus on high expectations. Also included was a belief that each educator of at-risk students should focus on clarifying a personal expectation for each student to master the basics (Russell, Lickteig, & Grandgenett, 1995). Schwartz (1987) stated this would mean that some teachers with racial and cultural biases who believe that certain students cannot excel in some areas, especially in math and science, would need to change their attitudes. He added that all students should be encouraged to take challenging academic courses.

High expectations and challenging courses were two significant traits of at-risk student programs. Inclusion of training for teachers, administrators, and other staff who will work with the programs participants was another characteristic of successful programs. Additionally, a diverse staff of high quality was recommended.

Early intervention and strategies aimed particularly at those times when students are in transition from one grade, school, or program to another were included in many programs. Schools should focus on providing relevant and positive experiences for students. Positive relationships with teachers and pro-school peers were cited as important to academic success. Inclusion of parents and community persons was also a common characteristic of successful programs. Larrivee and Bourque (1991) stated that the reason for the failure of some programs was that they "focus on one cause, what is at-risk, what is a dropout" and did not go beyond seeking causes. Those programs that integrated all social services with the education community had experienced success (Grannis, 1991; Russell, Lickteig, & Grandgenett, 1995; Schwartz, 1987).

Accelerating learning of the at-risk learner rather than remediating him was another common trait. Because at-risk students are already behind, their instruction should focus on catching them up to their agemates. Successful programs for at-risk students stressed curriculum that was relevant to the lives of the learners. Finally, many successful programs for at-risk students included some instruction in career awareness or enrollment in vocational/workplace courses with hands-on experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter focuses on the research design of the study. A section describing the population used in this study follows a statement of purpose and the null hypotheses. A description of dependent and independent variables includes data collection procedures. A description of the research design, the procedures for data analysis, and the level of probability follow. There was no standardized test or instrument used in this study. A summary concludes the chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if at-risk ninth graders who participated in the LEAP program cluster had a greater success rate than those LEAP eligible non-participants. The cluster in this study refers to a team of teachers from the four core academic areas (English, math, science, and social studies), one vocational area, and the identified at-risk students they taught. The vocational teacher was the instructor for Coordinated Vocational Academic Education (CVAE), a workplace readiness class that focused on job and life skills and included time for extra help in the academic areas.

The core academic teachers each taught four classes of LEAP students; their fifth class was of students considered not at-risk. The CVAE teacher taught the same students but in five sections; the smaller classes allowed her an opportunity to reinforce the academic skills along with the career skills. If scheduling limitations permitted, all five teachers had a common planning period that permitted them to plan together. At the minimum, the four academic teachers had a common planning period, and the team met

regularly with the cluster counselor to confer about participants. An administrator from the building that housed the academic teachers met with the team whenever possible. Other administrators, teachers, or counselors attended when necessary.

Null Hypotheses

In order to determine whether or not the at-risk students who participated in this cluster had a greater success rate than eligible non-participants, specific measurements of achievement were established. Success was measured by the pass/fail rate in English, pass/fail rate in math, promotion rate to tenth grade, return to school rate the next year, and graduation rate.

The null hypotheses tested were:

1. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed English.
2. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed math.
3. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who were promoted to tenth grade.
4. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who returned to school the year after their first year in the ninth grade.
5. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who graduated.

Population of the Study

The public high school in the study was located in Bibb County, Georgia, in a city of approximately 150,000. The school had an approximate enrollment of 1300, was 70% African American, and was located in a middle-income residential neighborhood that was surrounded by commercial property. The school served three major housing projects, several smaller housing complexes, numerous city neighborhoods, and a growing suburban/rural community. Because several major highways bisected the area, the majority of the students were transported by bus.

The LEAP cluster students were first-time ninth graders who had been selected from a larger population of at-risk ninth graders. Program developers listed four criteria that could identify an at-risk student. These were: having scores below the 25th percentile on the eighth grade norm referenced test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in English and/or mathematics; being at least one year below grade level; being administratively placed in the ninth grade; or having poor attendance records. Total enrollment was to be limited so that the CVAE class size did not exceed 20, or approximately 100 total students.

The eligibility roster for the ITBS identified 172 students scoring below the 25th percentile. Of this number, 33 were receiving support through special education classes and were not considered for LEAP, leaving 139 potential participants. Thirty-nine students were on a list for placement in the ninth grade. Of this number seven were eliminated because they received special education services, and seventeen were also on the ITBS roster, leaving an additional 15 possible participants. The total number of possible participants at that point was 154, about 41% of the entire grade. Ninth grade

enrollment at the end of 1997-98 was 380, including students who were repeating the ninth grade. Sixteen students did not start ninth grade at the host school for LEAP.

Parental permission was required for participation in the program. Parents were asked to provide a place at home for students to use as a study center. The center should contain tools that teachers might require, such as a dictionary, and should be in an area that would not be disturbed by radio, television, telephone, or household traffic. Parents were asked to monitor the area and to insist on a regular study time for students. Parents were also asked to attend three out of five scheduled workshops that were designed by the counselor to provide information on graduation requirements and information on how as parents they might help their students.

The final group of participants was selected from the ITBS roster, the roster of students administratively placed, and the roster of students who were given parental permission to participate. For this study, all students from the LEAP cluster served as the experimental group. Students eligible for LEAP but not in the program served as the control group. Since it was the student about whom information and scores were gathered, the student was the unit of analysis. The number of students observed in the study was 81 LEAP participants and 57 LEAP eligible non-participants.

Variables

The independent variable in this study was inclusion in the LEAP program. The study determined if participation in this program had a statistically significant effect on student achievement. Pass/fail rate in English, pass/fail rate in math, rate of promotion to tenth grade, rate of return to school the next year, and rate of graduation measured achievement. These five measures of achievement were the dependent variables.

The data on the dependent variables were gathered from examination of student folders at the school site and computer records in the system research department. All data on the variables were nominal, requiring only a yes or no answer. The questions were:

1. Did the student pass ninth grade English?
2. Did the student pass ninth grade math?
3. Did the student promote to the tenth grade?
4. Did the student return to school the year after his/her first year in the ninth grade?
5. Did the student graduate?

Promotion to the tenth grade was based on the student's earning five Carnegie units during the ninth grade year, including summer school. Since the school involved was operating on the semester system, credit was awarded at the end of each semester. This meant that it was possible for a student to earn the necessary five units for graduation in a combination that might exclude one or both semesters of English and/or math. This was acceptable in this study for the variable promotion to tenth grade. However, credit for the variables on passing English and math were given only if both semesters of the course were passed.

Although students could be promoted by passing any 10 out of 12 semesters in the regular school year and had an opportunity to earn two semesters of credit in summer school, some did not do so. If LEAP students returned to school the next year, participation in LEAP was considered a factor. For this study, if the student did not officially withdraw before the first day of school year 1999, he/she was considered returned to school.

Research Design

The research design for this study was a post-test only control group design XO where X represented the treatment – participation in LEAP. Observations were made on the five dependent variables. The final design was:

$$\begin{array}{c} XO_1 \\ \text{----------} \\ O_2 \end{array}$$

Analysis of the Data

The information obtained for each of the participants in both experimental and control groups was subjected to calculations of proportion. Descriptive statistics, a comparison of means, ranges, and standard deviations for each variable, were derived from the data.

A *z*-test was conducted to compare the proportion of the control and experimental groups on the five dependent variables. Tables and figures present demographic data and the findings from the tests of analysis.

Level of Probability

A .10 level of probability indicated a statistically significant effect of the treatment and resulted in the null hypothesis being tested. Any higher level of probability decreases the likelihood that it is the treatment, participation in LEAP, which made a difference in the success rate of at-risk ninth graders. If a Type I error is made, it would mean that the LEAP program will continue even though it is not making a difference for at-risk ninth graders. Since there are many programs similar in design to this program across the state of Georgia and since many of them receive monies through special

funding, the findings of this study could impact that funding and continuation of those programs.

Summary

Five null hypotheses were tested to determine if participation in LEAP significantly affected student achievement. The proportion of LEAP participants was compared to the proportion of LEAP eligible non-participants on these five hypotheses. Comparisons were made on the proportion of LEAP and non-LEAP students who passed English, who passed math, who were promoted to tenth grade, who returned to school after one year in ninth grade, and who graduated. Chapter IV presents the findings from the analysis of the data related to these comparisons.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter IV contains the statistical analysis of the data related to the five research hypotheses. These data were obtained by examining student information contained in original permanent folders and in computer records. The first section presents demographic information about the students involved in the study. The following sections present the results of the statistical analyses of the research hypotheses. Data are presented comparatively for both LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants.

Demographic Data

Although the final roster of eligible students contained 154 possible participants for LEAP, 16 students never reported to the ninth grade at the high school in this study. Three of the No Shows would have been in LEAP; 13 were non-LEAP students. The final number of participants in this study was 138 - 81 LEAP participants and 57 LEAP eligible non-participants. Of the students in the study, 76 were male and 62 were female. LEAP participants included 42 (51.9%) males and 39 (48.1%) females. Non-participants included 34 (59.6%) males and 23 (40.4%) females. Although one student was 13 and one was 17 on the first day of school in 1997, they generally ranged in age from 14 - 16 years old. The average age of LEAP participants was 14.72 years of age and the average age of LEAP eligible non-participants was 14.53 years of age. See Table 1.

Seventy-six LEAP students were identified as black and five were identified as white. Of the non- LEAP students in the study, 48 were identified as black and nine as white. Socioeconomic data were based on participation in the Free/Reduced lunch

program. Research department eligibility records, which are updated electronically each year, indicated 50 students in LEAP received free lunch and two received reduced lunch. The other 29 were not coded, indicating they paid for their lunch. Similarly, records indicated 32 non- LEAP participants received free lunch, three received reduced lunch, and 22 were not coded. Table 1 presents the information on sex, race, and socioeconomic status (SES).

Table 1

Demographic Data

Group	Sex		Race		SES		
	Male	Female	Black	White	Free	Reduced	Paid
LEAP	42 (51.9%)	39 (48.1%)	76 (93.8%)	5 (6.2%)	50 (61.7%)	2 (2.5%)	29 (35.8%)
Non-LEAP	34 (59.6%)	23 (40.4%)	48 (84.2%)	9 (15.8%)	32 (56.1%)	3 (5.3%)	22 (38.6%)

Research Question 1

The first research question compared the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed their ninth grade English class. In order to receive credit for passing this course, the student had to receive a grade above 70 in each semester of English. If a student did not pass, he/she had an opportunity to take either semester or both semesters in summer school. Therefore, if the student did make up failed semesters of the course in summer school, he/she was included in the total number of students passing the course for the year.

Of the 81 students enrolled in LEAP, 46 passed English and 35 failed the course. Of the control group, 57 LEAP eligible non-participants, 23 passed and 34 failed English.

After statistical analysis of the data, a *z* score of 1.90 favored LEAP participants and indicated a statistically significant difference at the .10 level in the proportion of LEAP and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed English. The null hypothesis was rejected. Table 2 contains the data analysis results for this question.

Research Question 2

The second research question compared the proportion of LEAP participants and non-LEAP participants on the pass/fail rate of their ninth grade math course. As with the English course, students had to pass both semesters of math to get credit for the course. Again, the student who needed to make up one or both semesters had the opportunity to do so in summer school.

There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed math in the ninth grade. Thirty-seven students in LEAP passed math and 44 failed. Of the non-LEAP participants, 25 passed and 32 failed. In both groups the number of students failing was greater than the number of students passing the course, and the analysis of the proportions indicated a *z* score of 0.21. The null hypothesis was accepted. Data analysis results for research questions one and two are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Pass/Fail Rate in English and Math

Group	English				Math			
	Enrollment	Pass	Fail	*z* score	Enrollment	Pass	Fail	*z* score
LEAP	81	56.8%	43.2%	1.90	81	45.7%	54.3%	0.21
Non-LEAP	57	40.4%	59.6%		57	43.9%	56.1%	

Research Question 3

This question asked if there was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP and LEAP eligible non-participants who were promoted to the tenth grade. Analysis of the data indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in these proportions; the null hypothesis was accepted.

Only 29 LEAP participants were promoted to the tenth grade and 24 non-participants were also promoted. Fifty-two LEAP participants and 33 non-participants were not promoted. The *z* score in this analysis was –0.75, indicating no statistically significant difference in promotion rate was achieved by participating in the LEAP program. Table 3 presents the data for this question.

Table 3

Promoted and Not Promoted

Group	Enrollment	Promoted	Not Promoted	*z* score
LEAP	81	35.8%	64.2%	-.75
Non-LEAP	57	42.1%	57.9%	

Research Question 4

The fourth research question asked if the was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP and non-LEAP students who returned to school after their first year in ninth grade. The total for each group included promoted and retained students. A *z* score of -0.93 indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP students who returned to school the year after participating in LEAP.

Sixty-five LEAP students were still enrolled in school on the first day of the school year 1998-99. Since 29 of these were promoted, the remaining 36 had been retained and returned to a second year in ninth grade. Forty-nine of the non-LEAP participants were still enrolled at that time. Twenty-four of these had been promoted and 25 had been retained. The null hypothesis was accepted. See Table 4 for data.

Table 4

Returned to School After First Year in Ninth Grade

Group	Enrollment	Returned	*z* score
LEAP	81	80.0%	-0.93
Non-LEAP	57	86.0%	

Research Question 5

The final question compared the proportion of LEAP and LEAP eligible non-participants on rate of graduation. At the time participants were eligible to graduate, they were expected to pass all portions of the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) in order to receive a diploma. Students who completed all requirements except passing all portions of the GHSGT received a certificate of completion. Those students were eligible to continue taking the portions of the GHSGT they had failed until they passed, at which time they would be given a diploma.

Of the 26 LEAP participants who finished the twelfth grade, four had not passed the GHSGT at the time the data were collected. Of the 22 graduates, five participants remained in school an extra year and received their diplomas in 2002. Twenty-six non-participants completed the twelfth grade. Of these, four had not yet passed the GHSGT

when these data were collected. Of the 22 receiving diplomas, two graduated in 2002. Analysis of these data resulted in a *z* score of -1.61. The null hypothesis was accepted. The table below presents this data analysis.

Table 5

Graduation

Group	Enrollment	Graduated	*z* score
LEAP	81	32.0%	-1.61
Non-LEAP	57	45.6%	

Other Data Collected

1. At the time these data were gathered, three LEAP students and one non-LEAP participant were still enrolled and scheduled to return for school year 2002-03.
2. As this study progressed, data indicating enrollment by group for the four years of high school were gathered. The difference in the proportion of LEAP and non-LEAP students enrolled in any given year was not large. Figure 1 illustrates the enrollment for each group in each of the four years of high school. Figure 2 presents a comparison of the enrollment of the two groups in each of those years.

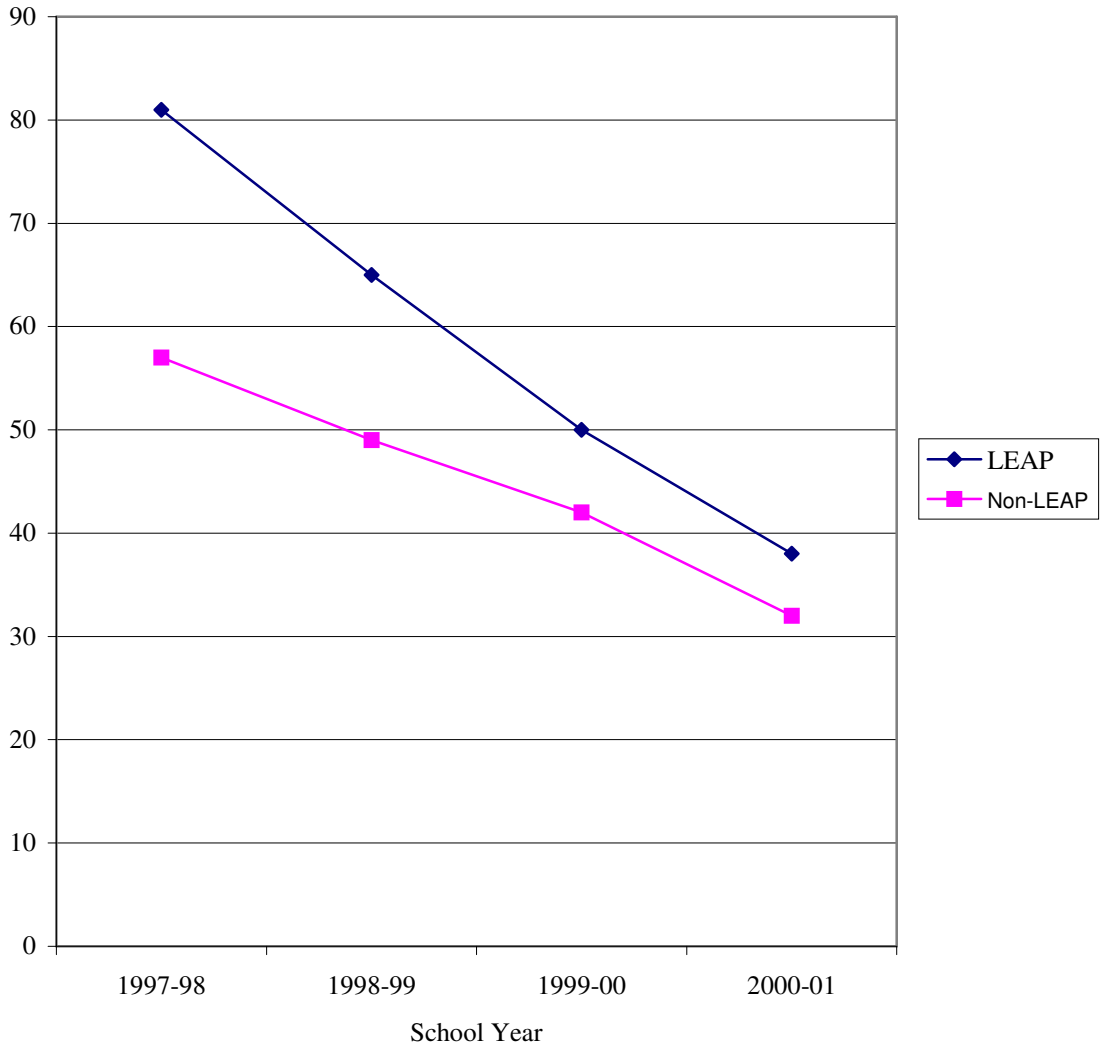

Figure 1. Enrollment by Group

Figure 1. This line graph shows the number of LEAP and non-LEAP students enrolled at the beginning of each year of the four years in the study.

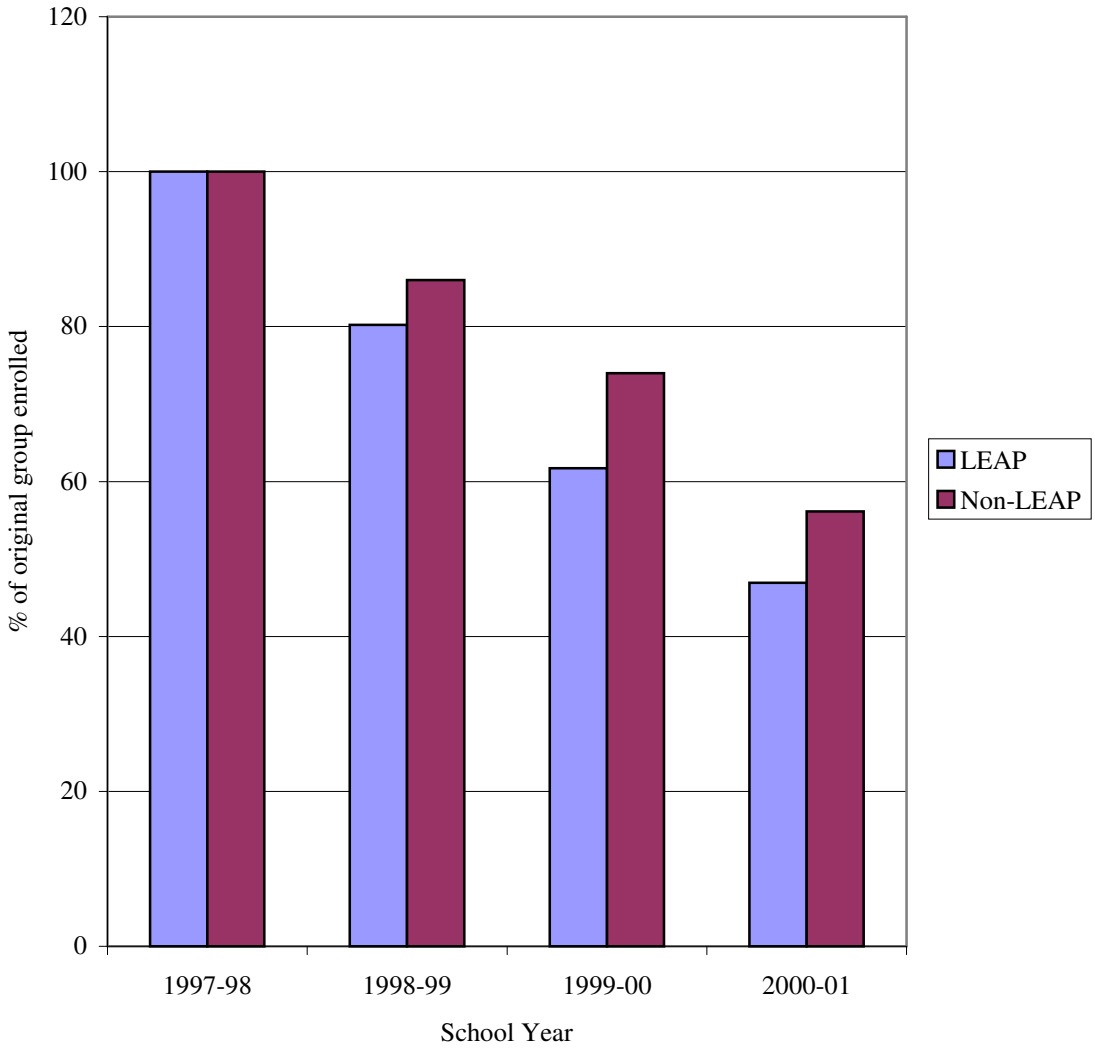

Figure 2. Enrollment by Group

Figure 2. This bar graph compares the enrollment of LEAP and non-LEAP students at the beginning of each year of the four years in the study.

Summary

For four of the five research hypotheses, the null hypothesis was accepted. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP participants and LEAP eligible non-participants who passed math, were promoted to tenth grade, returned to school after their first year in ninth grade, and who graduated. As stated earlier, the null hypotheses for these four hypotheses were accepted.

In the case of research hypothesis one the null hypothesis was rejected. There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP and non-LEAP participants who passed their ninth grade English course.

What do the data analyses mean to educators? Will they be useful in determining the merits of programs like LEAP? Chapter V of this study includes a summary of this research, discussion and conclusions. Recommendations are also included in the chapter.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a restatement of the problem and a summary of the findings resulting from analyzing the data gathered. Conclusions drawn from the findings are also discussed. Recommendations based on the study are presented. The chapter is organized into the following sections: restatement of the problem, summary of the procedures, and findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Restatement of the Problem

This study was undertaken to determine if a program designed for first-time at-risk ninth graders in a Bibb County, Georgia, high school was effective in preventing participating students from dropping out of high school. The investigation focused on continued enrollment of the identified students and tested five null hypotheses. Students participating in the program in 1997-98 were the experimental group. A group of identified at-risk students who were eligible for the program but did not participate was the control group. The individual student was the unit of analysis.

1. A statistically significant difference occurred favoring LEAP participants in the pass rate of ninth grade English. This difference was significant at the .10 level. Participation in the program resulted in a greater proportion of LEAP students than non-LEAP participants passing this course. The null hypothesis was rejected.
2. No statistically significant difference occurred in the proportion of LEAP and LEAP eligible non-participants in the pass rate of ninth grade math. Thirty-seven

(45.7%) LEAP students passed math, and 25(43.9%) non-LEAP students passed their math course. The null hypothesis was accepted.

3. No statistically significant difference was found in the promotion rate of LEAP and non-LEAP students to the tenth grade. Of the original 81 LEAP participants, 29 students (35.8%) were promoted. Of the control group of 57 non-LEAP participants, 24 students (42.1%) were promoted. The null hypothesis was accepted.
4. No statistically significant difference was found between LEAP and non-LEAP participants in the rate of return to school following the first year in ninth grade. Twenty-nine LEAP students, 35.8%, were promoted, and 24 non-LEAP students, 42.1%, were promoted. The null hypothesis was accepted.
5. No statistically significant difference occurred in the graduation rate of LEAP and non-LEAP participants. Thirty-two percent of the LEAP students graduated, and 45.6% of the non-LEAP students graduated. The null hypothesis was accepted.

Summary of Procedures and Findings

The intent of this study was to determine if participation in LEAP, a program designed for working with first-time at-risk ninth graders, would reduce dropout rates among those students. Five hypotheses were tested. The first three hypotheses to determine success of the program focused on pass/fail rates in ninth grade English and math and promotion to the tenth grade. Two other hypotheses were also tested. Because the program included only first-time ninth graders at risk, data also included whether or not those students came back to school the year after ninth grade. Finally, graduation rate was considered. The data that were analyzed were gathered from student permanent

folders still housed at the school site and from computer records available at the system's research department.

The data were entered into a spreadsheet and were statistically analyzed to determine whether the variables showed a statistically significant difference in the achievement of the students in the LEAP program. The null hypothesis for one of the questions was rejected; four null hypotheses were accepted. The null hypothesis that was rejected showed a higher proportion of LEAP students than non-LEAP students passed their ninth grade English course. The null hypotheses that were accepted showed no statistically significant difference in the proportion of LEAP and non-LEAP students who passed their ninth grade math course, who were promoted to the tenth grade, who returned to school after their first year in ninth grade, and who graduated or completed high school.

Conclusions

Researchers and educators are concerned about the number of students who do not graduate from high school. Much effort has centered on how to prevent students from dropping out before earning a diploma, and the ninth grade has been a focus because this transitional year brings challenges that are difficult and have long lasting impact (Alspaugh, 1998; Austin Independent School District, 1987; de Mesquita, Courtney & Woods, 1992). The LEAP program in Bibb County, Georgia, was implemented to provide successful opportunities for first-time at-risk ninth graders that would keep them in school and thus reduce dropout rates. However, this program was not successful for students in the program in 1997-98. Therefore, it should not be continued with the same design or structure.

Since a greater proportion of students in LEAP than those eligible but not in LEAP passed English, it can be concluded that there was some component of the instruction in English that did work.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the review of literature, the data analysis, and the resulting conclusions.

1. Intervene before ninth grade. Norm-referenced test scores for these students in the lower 25% indicated performance well below grade level in the eighth grade. These scores did not happen just in that year; these students began falling behind much earlier. Therefore, intervention should take place as soon as problems are noticed. Programs in elementary school are more successful in preventing dropouts than those instituted later (Hootstein, 1996; Levin & Hopfenberg, 1991; Schweinhart, 2002).
2. Another indicator of the need to intervene earlier is the fact that 16 students eligible for the program dropped out after eighth grade. Perhaps selection for a ninth grade intervention program should take place during the eighth grade. Contact over the summer should follow-up on the selection and provide additional transitional activities for program participants.
3. If an intervention program for ninth graders is implemented, all students should spend at least one class period a day in a course that develops reading skills. This would be in place of or in addition to their ninth grade English class. The CVAE teacher in 1997-98 was a certified teacher of English. It is quite possible that one

reason for a higher pass rate in this subject was because of her ability to provide extra help in reading.

4. Provide regular professional development opportunities for the LEAP teachers. Instructional strategies for working with at-risk students should be the focus. Also make instructional techniques the focus of each team meeting.
5. Strengthen the staff component. Use experienced staff who are willing to work with at-risk students. The teachers in the LEAP program in 1997-98 each had fewer than five years experience. Choose staff that will develop positive advisor relationships with the students and the parents. Staff should plan integrated units of study that have a variety of teaching and learning strategies.
6. Strengthen the parental involvement component. Besides monitoring a study area, parents were asked to attend workshops. One of these focused on parenting skills and the other focused on promotion and graduation requirements. Offering topics of greater interest might pull more parents to the school. Involve community agencies such as the Health Department, Law Enforcement, financial institutions, and charitable organizations. Provide incentives for the parents to come to the workshops. Hold parent meetings in the community rather than at the school.
7. Any other study of similar programs might include a survey of participants in their second year of high school and after graduation to determine their attitudes toward the impact of the program on their decision to remain in school.

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APPENDIX

A DESCRIPTION OF THE LEARNERS, EDUCATORS, AND PARENTS (LEAP) PROGRAM

This program was implemented after reviewing ninth grade data on attendance, dropout rates, discipline referrals, and academic status. The data indicated that many students were reporting to this high school ill-equipped academically as they were below grade level in reading and/or math. Discipline referrals on tardiness to class and skipping class were numerous. Follow-up on referrals was compounded by the fact that students attended classes in more than one building. Communication between teachers, students, and parents was not always open or consistent (Mays, 1996).

This program was developed around a team concept that would improve the plight of the at-risk ninth grade student. It was proposed to improve communication between faculties in the three buildings, provide support networks for students and parents and their teachers, and provide some consistency in routines for the at-risk students.

Several goals of LEAP that are consistent with components of programs cited in the literature were proposed (Mays, 1996):

1. To ease the transition to high school for identified at-risk students (Lindsay, 1998, Marshall, et al., 1990);
2. To improve student attendance and achievement by improving communication between teachers and parents and involving parents in their students' education (MacDonald et al., 1999; Manning, 1993);

3. To make learning more interesting and relevant (Ascher, 1987; Hootstein, 1996) by integrating disciplines (Burden, 1992; Gordon, 1993);
4. To improve attendance (Morris, 2000) of LEAP participants to 95%;
5. To graduate at least 90% of the participants;
6. To assist in the development of academic skills needed for success in school and in life (Aronstein & Desilets, 1988; Sprabery & King, 1992);
7. To provide models of appropriate behavior; and
8. To build advocate relationships for students in all school related activities (Ascher, 1987; Burden, 1992; Wells, 1989).

The program created a "learning team," or cluster, of 90 -100 identified students who were served by four core teachers and 1 vocational teacher. This cluster was to provide a variety of teaching and learning opportunities that would not be found in a traditional high school setting (Mays, 1996). The high school was contained in three buildings that were organized by subject area. One building housed vocational programs; math and science shared one building, and social studies and language arts were in the other. Since this program focused on integrating disciplines, the four academic teachers agreed to be housed in one building. All five teachers were to have the same planning period so that they could meet regularly to discuss proactive strategies for dealing with disruptive students, academic problems, teaching strategies, thematic units, and parent contacts. This teaming of teachers was a recommended component of several programs for at-risk students (Ascher, 1987; Aronstein & Desilets, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1984; McFadden et al., 1996; Pantleo, 1992; Stevens et al., 1991). The four academic teachers

were able to communicate with each other daily if necessary, but a weekly meeting of all five teachers was scheduled. The main topic of these meetings was behavior intervention.

Parents were asked to provide a regular study schedule and place at home for studying that would not be disrupted by television, telephone, or family. Five workshops were anticipated, and parents were asked to attend at least three (Mays, 1996). These workshops were to focus on information that would help the parents help their students (U.S. Department of Education, 1987b) and would provide opportunities for parents to confer with teachers. It was also the intention of program developers to identify role models from the community that would give motivational talks to the students at least once a month (Mays, 1996). Several speakers did meet with students and teachers. Parent and community involvement with at-risk students was advocated in several programs (Ascher, 1987; Burden, 1992; Frymier & Gansneder, 1989; Manning, 1993; Stevens, 1991).

Ascher (1987), Burden (1992), and Stevens et al., (1991), as well as others, included a counseling or advisor/advisee component in their recommendations for at-risk programs. One of the counselors at the high school was assigned to the cluster and met weekly with the teachers during their common planning period. The teachers provided her with a list of students whose grades were failing or who had excessive absences. The counselor was to meet with the students and contact parents about these problems. The counselor was also to help plan the parent workshops, field trips for students, and recognition opportunities for the students (Hamby, 1989). At least two parent workshops were held; one focused on parenting skills and the other presented information on promotion and graduation requirements. At least three filed trips were taken.

When the LEAP program was proposed, criteria for the selection of the teaching staff included persons with creative teaching strategies, positive and supportive attitudes, an interest in teaching at-risk students (volunteers), and successful past performance (Mays, 1996). Pigford (1992) and Stover (1999) recommended a nurturing and supportive staff. Stover (1999) and Gamoran et al. (1995) recommended experienced teachers. Only the counselor for the LEAP program in 1997-98 had more than five years experience in education, and this was her first year as a counselor. The vocational teacher was a third year teacher who had taught English at this school for two years before changing to vocational education in 1997-98. The social studies teacher and the science teacher were first year teachers. The English and math teachers were third year teachers and had been part of the program since it began.

Program developers cited the need for staff development activities in cooperative learning, interdisciplinary planning, instructional use of computers, selection and evaluation of software, and critical thinking skills (Mays, 1996). Weir (1996) supported extensive staff development for staff working with at-risk students. All new teachers in Bibb County went through a series of Effective Teaching Strategies workshops as part of the county mentoring program. LEAP teachers also received two workshops on discipline.

Some components of the proposed program were met. The cluster was made up of four core academic teachers, one vocational teacher, and a counselor. The staff did try to establish advocate relationships with each other and with their students. The team did meet to share information about their students. Attempts were made to involve parents in workshops and in participating in their students' education. Staff did attempt to contact

parents about attendance, grades, and behavior. Extra field trips and speakers were part of the program.

Some intended components were not included. Although past performance was a criterion for selection, the staff was not experienced. Staff development needs focused on instructional strategies, but this was provided only to first year teachers through the county system and was not always directed at working with at-risk students. Team meetings focused more on discipline than on instructional strategies. Although integration of disciplines was desired, teachers did not plan instruction together. Modifications in instruction were left to the individual.