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# The Journal

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OF AT-RISK ISSUES

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Clemson University, 209 Martin Street, Clemson, SC 29631-1555

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# The Journal OF AT-RISK ISSUES

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# Student Risk Assessment for Identifying Needs and Evaluating Impacts

Raymond E. Morley and James R. Veale

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to present a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of programs and services for at-risk children and youth. An instrument designed to identify most at risk to least at risk students is presented along with examples of how to assess and evaluate program effectiveness utilizing the instrument. The primary intent of applying the process described is to assist personnel to leverage resources for maximum benefit.*

The term “at risk” was originally defined in Iowa (Office of Educational Services for Children, Families and Communities, 1996) with the following results-oriented criteria: Children and youth (a) not meeting goals within ongoing education programs, (b) not completing high school, and (c) not becoming a productive worker upon leaving high school. Multiple criteria were identified in each of these three categories to assist in identification. A given student could be at risk by one or more of the three categories. The specific criteria used to identify students as at risk were drawn from a wide array of state and national information regarding factors that contribute to student failure and lack of success in school. Multiple criteria for identification are indicated and suggested for use in each of the categories. These criteria are still being used in Iowa schools to identify students who need additional assistance to succeed and to leverage resources to help students maximize success. These same criteria plus more are used in the enclosed risk assessment instrument intended to assist educators to identify at-risk children and youth, leverage resources, and assess the effectiveness of services provided. Multiple examples are provided to illustrate its utilization in the management and delivery of services and in assessing and evaluating their effectiveness.

## Student Risk Assessment Instrument

An instrument is presented in this paper for identifying students who are least at risk to those who are most at risk. This instrument was developed from team processing of program effectiveness by school and community-based support services personnel in the School-Based Youth Services Program in Iowa (Veale, Morley, & Erickson, 2002). In order to plan how to work together and make a difference for children and youth, team members needed to determine whether services were effective with the most at-risk children. Broad-based group data was not enough to demonstrate

whether, in fact, the services were impacting those students most at risk. This previously hidden information was needed to develop the necessary knowledge to change services to help the most at-risk children and youth. The Student Risk Assessment Instrument moved the teams to more profound levels of knowledge for planning and leveraging resources.

The development and implementation of the instrument occurred from 1990 to 2000, a 10-year period of model program development between schools and multiple community-based support service agencies and organizations. Partial support for development came through the FINE (First in the Nation in Education) Foundation (Veale, 1995). The Student Risk Assessment Instrument serves as a tool to assist schools and school districts to determine the effectiveness of programs. Moreover, it allows observations of student performance on outcomes across risk levels, which can help with planning and modifying services, as well as resource management.

Thirty factors were identified by local community teams as significant reasons for students being at risk of not succeeding in school, dropping out of school, or not becoming a productive member of society. Seven factors were identified as “critical” for determining degree of risk, while the other 23 were considered important but “noncritical.” A critical factor is one that may *by itself* force a student into a school failure, dropping out, or lack of productivity upon leaving school. The critical factors are (1) dropped out or expelled; (2) victim of physical, psychological, sexual abuse, rape or other violent crime; (3) pregnancy/teen parent; (4) homeless; (5) language/cultural barriers; (6) out-of-home placement; and (7) committed criminal acts. A noncritical factor is one which combined with other such factors (altogether, four or more) may force a student into school failure, dropping out, or lack of productivity. Noncritical factors include repeated school failure, no extracurricular activities, chronic health condition, gang member-

ship, and no identified career interests, *inter alia*. The Student Risk Assessment Instrument is presented in the Appendix.

The factors we came up with agreed closely with those established in the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) "Study of Students At Risk" (Frymier, 1992a, 1992b). Although published a year before we developed our instrument, we were not aware of that study at the time. Since that study was based on data from more than 20,000 students, and all of the factors included in the resulting PDK template were associated with factors included in our instrument, we felt that this provided a degree of validity for the factors included in our instrument and their generalizability outside of Iowa.

Empirical data have provided further validation. For example, students classified as high risk were found to have higher dropout rates than those of medium or low risk. Since having previously dropped out of school is one of the factors contributing to risk, this result provides further evidence regarding the validity of risk assessment using this instrument. Reliability was assessed in a study where separate observers assessed the same students in a collaborative services program site in Iowa.

This instrument has been found to be useful in describing populations served, evaluating the impact of services in those populations, identifying student needs, establishing policy guidelines, and as a tool for leveraging resources for school improvement initiatives. The instrument has the following advantages:

- simple checklist format;
- three levels of risk assessment (low, medium, and high), allowing easy entry into the database and use in surveys via color-coding (e.g., for evaluating impact of services);
- validity based on comparisons with an instrument of established validity and empirical data;
- reliability based on indices of interobserver agreement and correlation;
- specifically targeted to students and families in collaborative services programs.

### Classification by Level of Student Risk

The classification by level of student risk is based on the number and types of factors identified for a student. A student is classified as having

- *low risk* if no factors were indicated;
- *medium risk* if one to three noncritical factors were indicated (no critical factors);
- *high risk* if (a) one or more of the critical factors were indicated or (b) four or more of the noncritical factors were indicated.

It is intended that staff members identify these risk factors for each student upon intake and update these assessments whenever risk increases significantly and new information becomes available on students. (If no information is available on a student, he or she is classified as having *unknown risk*. This may occur, for example, when a student has just entered the school or program.) The rationale for the above rule was (a) to provide greater weight to the critical factors, (b) incorporate a cumulative effect for the noncritical factors, and (c) insure practicality by keeping it simple to use.

For purposes of evaluating the impact of services, we suggest that *new information can increase—but should not decrease—the risk level of a student*. This does not mean that the student cannot overcome these risk factors. The only situation where a student's risk could decrease would be when the original assessment was in error. For example, suppose that a student's attendance for the year was incorrectly recorded as 85 days missed, whereas the actual number of days was 8.5 days—a transcription error involving a misplaced decimal point. This should not be confused with the situation where a student no longer indicates the risk factor(s), e.g., a student whose attendance had been very poor but who is now attending regularly. The risk factor (poor attendance) is still there; it is just not presently being manifested. In contrast, changing a student's risk classification from high to low (or medium) would reduce one's ability to demonstrate program impact using standardized measures or informal assessments. Since the focus of a demonstration is often those who are most at risk, there would be fewer records on which to make such an evaluation. In effect, this would be throwing away data.

We consider the level of student risk to be a background characteristic, not an outcome. As such, the assessment of student risk can yield a specification, restriction, or qualification of program effectiveness. Risk is not *itself* a measure of program effectiveness (outcome) in this system.

Professional judgment must be utilized and trusted in the application of this instrument. Local school personnel are given the flexibility to make the decisions on risk classifications of children based on available data outside the instrument itself. Information from multiple resources will be necessary in order to apply the classification of students most effectively. For example, information from human services personnel may be necessary to verify homelessness. [Note: A spreadsheet template is available to monitor and calculate the level of student risk, as well as summary statistics on the risk factors for the student population. This template may be obtained by request, free of charge, from the authors.]

### Assessment of Student Risk: What Do We Get From It?

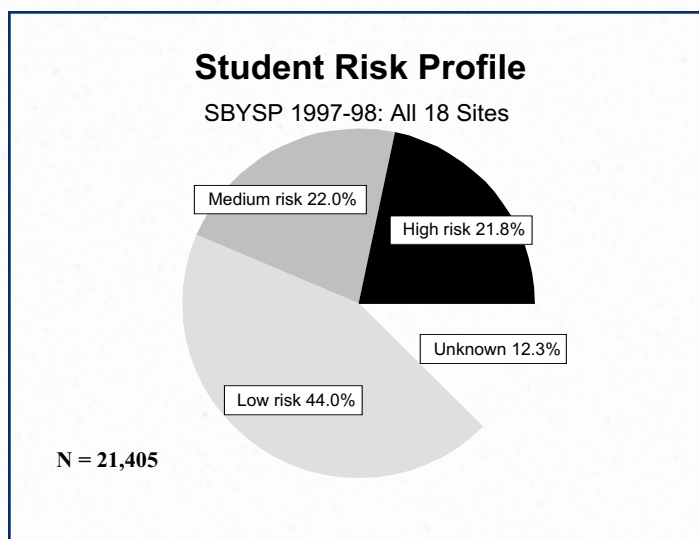
The assessment of student risk yields the following benefits for students, schools, and programs:

- *describing population served*—gives information on how many in a program are at high, medium, and low levels of risk;
- *identifying student needs*—provides a holistic, diagnostic picture of each individual student's needs (to personalize and fine-tune service delivery);
- *evaluating impacts of services*—determines the effectiveness of services for students at different levels of risk;
- *establishing policy guidelines*—determines the minimum number and type(s) of contacts for a student in a school year to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (e.g., keeping the highest-risk students in school);
- *improving schools*—incorporates provisions for at-risk students, as identified by factors in the risk assessment instrument, into the comprehensive school improvement plan.

The first of these benefits provides an answer to the first part of the question that gave rise to the risk assessment instrument: “How do we know we are *serv*ing and *imp*acting the most seriously at-risk students (in the community)?” We can determine the number of students participating in a program or initiative who are high, medium, and low risk. There may also be others in the community who are high risk and not participating in the support services program. If the instrument could be applied more generally to students, students not involved in services could also be assessed.

For example, a student’s risk classification is included as a demographic variable (“risk factor”) in the database *EASY/2EASY* used in the School-Based Youth Services Program (SBYSP) in Iowa (Veale, Morley, & Erickson, 2002). In the SBYSP in 1997-98, based on a total of 21,405 K-12 students served, we found that 21.8% were high risk, 22.0% medium risk, and 44.0% were low risk (12.3% were of unknown risk). This may be presented in a pie chart, as in Figure 1. In this example, slightly more than one student in five is high risk, and about half of those of known risk are either high or medium risk. Since the SBYSP is open to all students, these figures for high and medium risk may be considered fairly high. These figures will vary over program sites and over time.

**Figure 1. Student Risk Profile for the SBYSP in 1997-98**



The second benefit of student risk assessment is that it provides a holistic, diagnostic picture of the student’s needs. This can be used in customizing or personalizing services and fine-tuning delivery of services. The value of using the risk assessment instrument as a diagnostic tool to drive service delivery is demonstrated by the following set of circumstances (Veale, Morley, & Erickson, 2002):

A student is frequently absent, citing health problems as the reason. He is sent to the school nurse, and she learns that he has had frequent colds and other respiratory infections. The health symptoms are treated, but he continues to have health

problems that cause him to be absent. The nurse becomes more concerned because she suspects that there may be other factors contributing to the student’s health issues. She notes that the student does not appear to have warm clothing or a heavy winter coat. The nurse sets up a visit for the student with the school-based case manager who completes a more thorough assessment of needs with the student. As the case manager is assessing the various risk factors, he or she learns that the student is homeless and that he and his family are often forced to sleep in their car. Both parents dropped out of school before graduating and work part-time at minimum wage. They have no benefits such as insurance, sick leave, or vacation time. They cannot leave work to take their child to a doctor or clinic where they may have to wait several hours to be served.

The risk associated with being homeless is far greater than that of poor attendance and/or “colds” and alerts the case manager that a different type and intensity of services will be required.

Student risk assessment provides an opportunity to look for plausible relationships among many different variables and to gauge the type and level of intervention that may be necessary. Investigating many different factors also makes it more likely that the cause of the barriers to success can be discovered and addressed rather than focusing on an array of symptoms. In this case a cold would be a symptom of the student’s more serious issue of homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

The third benefit—determining program impact for students at varying levels of risk—addresses the second aspect of the question that led to the development of the risk assessment tool. In outcomes evaluation, it is of interest to determine the degree to which performance on some outcome, for example absenteeism, is different for students at different risk levels. Such differences point to the importance of considering the social or cultural conditions (contexts) on which the impact of the initiative may be contingent (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). For example, if absenteeism is significantly reduced among the high-risk male student participants, this indicates that the initiative is contributing to improved attendance for male students most at risk. This result can lead one to question why the program isn’t also successful with high-risk female students. Reflection and dialogue can result in changes in program focus or implementation that may yield significant improvement in attendance for all high-risk students.

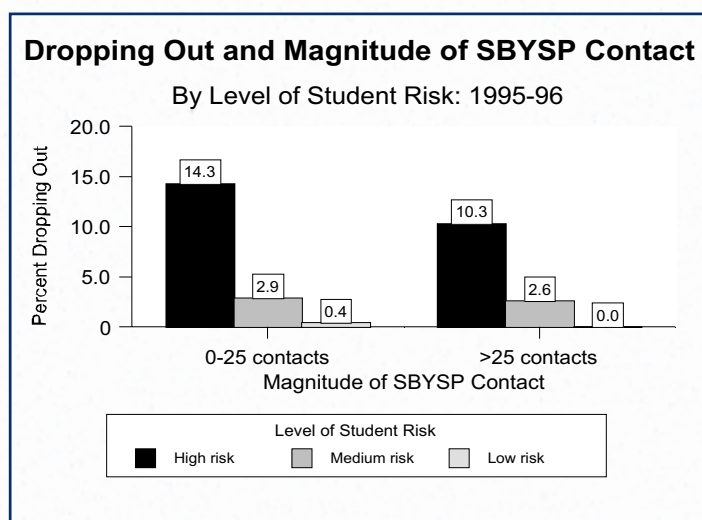
Longitudinal analysis can add an important dimension to an evaluation. In the Caring Connection, a school-based collaborative services program in Marshalltown, Iowa, outcome data are added each year to the previous year’s database. The premise here is that it is unrealistic to expect students to turn their academic lives around in one year. Multiyear data provide the opportunity to assess progress on outcomes over longer time intervals. For example, improvement in attendance is defined as missing no more than 10 days in the current school year after missing more than 10 days in the previous year. This definition may be applied to succeeding years to assess improvement over a longer time interval. In the Marshalltown program among high-risk students missing more than 10 school days in 1997-98, 17.9% improved in the following year and 26.3% (a 47% increase) improved in the third year—over their attendance in the first year. Among students missing more than 10 days in 1997-



98 who were medium risk, 23.3% improved in the following year and 37.7% (a 62% increase) improved in the third year, while among those who were low risk, 40% improved in the following year and 53.8% (a 35% increase) improved in the third year. This shows longer-term improvement among *all* risk categories, with somewhat greater percentage increases in improvements the third year (over those of the second year) among the medium-and high-risk students.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, among those of medium or high risk missing more than 10 days in 1997-98, the proportion improving their attendance from more than 10 days missed in 1998-99 to 10 days or fewer missed in 1999-2000 exceeded the proportion whose attendance worsened during this period ( $P < .05$ , McNemar test). This result implies that the longer-term improvement (over the three-year period 1997-98 to 1999-2000) was significantly greater than the short-term improvement (over the two-year period 1997-98 to 1998-99), for these higher risk students.

The fourth benefit is related to the third—establishing policy guidelines to increase the likelihood of success among students. For example, in the School-Based Youth Services Program in Iowa, it was found that high-risk students with more than 25 contacts with the program had significantly lower dropout rates than those with fewer contacts—10.3% compared with 14.3% ( $P < .05$ ). This was not true for those at medium or low risk (see Figure 2). Thus, in terms of lowering dropout rates, the program appears to be impacting high-risk students more than those at lower-risk levels. Since high-risk students have the highest dropout rates, one of the program sites established a policy of encouraging high-risk participants to secure at least 25 service contacts with the program staff. Of course, the services must be appropriate to the specific needs of the student. The Student Risk Assessment Instrument provides the ability to fine-tune and personalize service delivery. Similar policy guidelines may be developed around other outcome areas or other types of programs.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2. Dropping Out and Magnitude of SBYSP Contact by Level of Student Risk**



All of the above discussions of benefits apply to school improvement initiatives. Local school districts are required under existing standards, largely driven by the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001, to evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs and services for at-risk children and youth. The expectation is that this will occur at all levels of education (elementary through high school). Effectiveness of programs can be measured by identifying whether the most at-risk children and youth are improving and succeeding in school. It is important to consider the totality of risk factors and how these are distributed over the various groups mandated in the No Child Left Behind legislation to identify specific needs and achieve success (Foster, 2004).

Effectiveness can also be demonstrated longitudinally by a reduction in the percentage of children and youth who are at high risk (or an increase in the percentage who are at low risk). As stated earlier, this strategy has not been utilized in past research using the Student Risk Assessment Instrument, but the possibilities remain open for application in local school districts. In order to accomplish this type of measurement, some attempt would have to be made to reclassify students at given time periods such as (a) the grade levels for standardized testing, (b) September (the beginning of the school year) and May (the end of the school year), or (c) upon entry into school and upon exit or graduation.

Comprehensive school improvement plans identify evaluation strategies to assess student progress. Yearly progress reports are used to monitor the progress of students based on chosen procedures. The plans and progress reports can incorporate the above ideas to address at-risk children and youth including services provided and evaluation of effectiveness of those services. This data utilization would provide more precise assessment of progress with high-, medium-, and low-risk children and youth from a comprehensive point of view. Assessments could be conducted at the elementary, middle, and high school levels to evaluate effectiveness of services at each level, and resources could be leveraged accordingly. This system could also be applied at each grade level, if necessary, to identify program effectiveness and to leverage resources. In particular, federal and state funding sources identified in comprehensive school plans could be directed accordingly.

The case study on page 5 illustrates why we do *not* recommend erasing a risk factor, even though a student may no longer manifest the particular behavioral tendencies that define it. The fact that the student had those tendencies at one time means that he or she could return to them at some time in the future. We know, for example, that students who drop out are at increased risk of dropping out again. Moreover, although it may have receded, having the risk factor (e.g., poor attendance) at a previous time could make it more difficult to achieve outcomes during school or when the student gets out of school and into a work activity (e.g., showing up for work). The fact that, in some cases, students may overcome these risks and achieve success makes their story all the more impressive.

### Validity of Risk Assessment

The validity of an assessment is the quality of accurately assessing the desired construct, trait, or behavior. In this case, the construct is a student's risk—of dropping out of school, not success-

## Case Study

The following case study submitted by a local collaborative services program coordinator provides an example of how the Student Risk Assessment Instrument can help in organizing the various risk factors that are impacting the lives of students. It illustrates how the use of the tool is really a *process* that evolves as knowledge of the student's risk factors increases.

### ***Example: Case Study Illustrating the Use of Risk Assessment to Diagnose Student Needs and Fine-Tune Service Delivery***

The risk assessment tool was initially used to determine if this particular student (we'll call him Bill) needed to be in a tutoring program. Four factors became apparent as we filled out the form:

- Experienced repeated school failure (Bill had failed several classes in the middle school);
- Poor attendance (his attendance had been sporadic for some time);
- No extracurricular school activities (he had not participated in any such activity);
- Economically disadvantaged (he was from a low-income family).

Four noncritical factors made him a high-risk student, and one for whom the tutoring program was appropriate. After being in the program for several weeks, it became apparent why he had been struggling in school. Bill opened up to me one day and told me about the physical abuse that he and his mother had been suffering at the hands of his father. Going back to the assessment tool helped us get a clearer picture of how at risk this young man was. We now had to add the following to his list of risk factors:

- Recent crisis or life transition (his father moved back into the home after having been gone for a couple of years);
- Extreme mobility (the family had moved several times to get away from the father);
- Victim of physical . . . abuse (the boy was a victim of physical child abuse by his father);
- Experienced mental health problems (we referred him to mental health counseling).

After the Department of Human Services became involved, things began to change. Some of the other risk factors faded as Dad moved away. However, new ones cropped up. Bill became the father in the family, taking care of a very mentally ill and depressed mother and two little sisters. We would have to add family dysfunction to the list of factors as he took on the parental role,<sup>4</sup> as well as substance abuse by a family member, as Mom was using (drugs). A new crisis appeared as Mom was placed into the Mental Health Institute. Sisters were removed and for a while Bill was basically homeless, with a neighbor taking care of him informally. This situation was eventually resolved.

As time has gone on, new factors have arisen. Bill has become sexually active; he has had relationship problems over a girl; and he committed a delinquent act (driving without a license). While some factors may be corrected or fade over time, their effects never seem to entirely disappear. For example, Dad may leave but the effects of the abuse continue to influence how Bill reacts to his environment. Attendance may no longer be a problem, but the effects of past poor attendance could influence his learning ability and future work attendance. Therefore, it is vital to never erase a risk factor but to look instead at their cumulative effect.

### ***Strengths Indicated by Risk Factors Not Present***

Of particular interest are the factors that Bill has *not* experienced, which can be seen as strengths:

- He has stayed in school (no small accomplishment) and so has not become a dropout.
- His grades blossomed once he was no longer the caretaker of the family.
- He is healthy and does not appear to be using drugs or alcohol.
- He has personal goals and motivation to improve.
- He has not been involved with the juvenile court system (a delinquent act only gave him a ticket).
- He has the ability and desire to work.
- He has solid career plans.

With the support he now has, coupled with these strengths, we have a lot of hope for this young man.

fully completing a course of study, or not becoming a productive worker and citizen. Validity is often considered to be a characteristic of the instrument. Others consider validity to be a quality of the inferences or assessments based on a specific application of the instrument (McMillan, 2001). The latter is probably more accurate, but the language “validity of the instrument” is more common than that of “validity of the assessment.” Moreover, validity is always a matter of degree. When quantifiable, this quality is often measured by indices or coefficients on a scale of zero to one (or zero to 100 %).

1. *Content Validity: The Instrument Development Process*—Content validity refers to the extent to which the assessment items represent a larger domain of interest. Although theoretically quantifiable, this type of validity is usually in the form of a qualitative judgment. The process used to develop the instrument can contribute to this type of validity. In this case, the instrument was developed through a brainstorming process, with input from local program coordinators who were thought to be most knowledgeable about the types of problems students have in their families, school, or personal lives. A review process was used to further develop, fine-tune, and validate the instrument. These processes resulted in the factors identified in the risk assessment instrument. The emphasis was on the practical utility of the instrument—both in terms of the checklist format and the simple rule for classification. The authors and teams involved believe that this process resulted in a practical instrument that can be used to create a *context* within which to evaluate the effectiveness of local programs and services in reaching all children and youth, in particular the most at risk (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).
2. *Construct Validity: Agreement With Template Developed in Phi Delta Kappa Study*—Another approach to assessment validation is construct validity—how an assessment is related to an underlying construct, trait, or behavior, in this case, student risk. Often, construct validity is established by studying how an assessment is related to other assessments of the underlying trait. One such assessment is the “risk template” developed in a multiyear Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) study (Frymier, 1992b). A committee came up with 45 factors that previous research indicated contributed to putting children at risk. A protocol instrument was developed and experienced professionals in 276 schools in 85 communities collected data on more than 21,000 students in grades 4, 7, and 10 across the United States and Canada. Teachers or counselors who knew the students best and had immediate access to their records provided the information. These data were subjected to a variety of statistical and item analyses and the number of factors was eventually reduced to 24. These items were grouped into three categories: family, personal pain, and academic failure factors.

There is considerable agreement between the 24-factor risk template developed in the PDK study and the 30-factor risk assessment instrument. For example, all seven of the critical factors in the risk assessment instrument are associated with those in-

cluded in the PDK risk template. In some cases, there is a near perfect match (e.g., “pregnancy/teen parent” compares with “student involved in a pregnancy . . .”); in others, the critical factor in our instrument relates to factors in the PDK template (e.g., “homeless” relates to “mother or father . . . unemployed” and “student does not live with real mother and real father . . .”). Their classification criteria are also similar to ours—evidence of a single factor in the personal pain component (PDK) or critical factors (risk assessment instrument) was considered sufficient to assess the student to be seriously at risk. Evidence of two or more family factors and one or more academic factors was also considered sufficient to assess the student as seriously at risk using the PDK instrument. This criterion is comparable to that of four or more noncritical factors for identifying a student as high risk in the risk assessment instrument.

A cross-correlation of factors indicates that all factors included in the PDK template are included or associated with those in the Student Risk Assessment Instrument, which includes other factors considered critical by Iowa educators. The Student Risk Assessment Instrument includes 12 factors not identified in the PDK final template, which bring it into close conformance with existing school standards. One may interpret this to mean that the factors included in our instrument are slightly more comprehensive, in order to align with existing standards for evaluation. The additional components relate to career development/education, which is identified as part of the education program of all students nationally (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), 1991, 1992). In addition, social factors were included to address the importance of human growth and development, also identified in current research as intrinsic to total student development (Adelman & Taylor, 2001; Goleman, 1995). Moreover, factors related to or leading to criminality were also included in the enclosed instrument (Catalano, 1999). The PDK factors included criminal acts, but not other factors leading to criminal acts such as gang membership and committing delinquent acts.

3. *Construct Validity: Correlations With GPA, Absenteeism, and Staying in School*—Another way to establish validity is by studying relationships between the assessments and other variables that are thought to be related (either positively or negatively) to the underlying construct, trait, or behavior. Three such variables are GPA, absenteeism, and (not) staying in school. Research indicates that at-risk students will tend to have lower GPAs, greater absenteeism, and reduced likelihood of staying in school (more likely to drop out). The first two are highly correlated with all other risk factors in the PDK study (Frymier, 1992a); the third includes being suspended or expelled from school, which is highly correlated with all other risk factors in the PDK study.

In Iowa’s School-Based Youth Services Program in 1997-98, using the Student Risk Assessment Instrument and classification procedure presented earlier, the data on the three above-mentioned outcomes are presented in Table 1. Each relationship was in the

anticipated direction—decreasing GPA, increasing absenteeism, and increasing dropout rate for increased level of risk.<sup>5</sup> This provided additional evidence of the (construct) validity of the student risk assessment instrument.

### Interobserver Reliability: Agreement and Correlation Indices

The reliability of an assessment is the quality of consistently assessing the desired construct, trait, or behavior (student risk). Consistency can be defined internally or in terms of stability over time, forms, or observers. In this case, the most appropriate definition of reliability is consistency over observers. This is called interobserver (interrater, interscorer) reliability. Like validity, reliability is often measured by indices or coefficients on a scale of zero to one (zero to 100%).

In 2001, coordinators of the SUCCESS Program, a collaborative services school-based program in Des Moines, Iowa, agreed to participate in a study to assess the reliability of the assessments using the risk assessment instrument and classification procedure presented herein. The program case manager was asked to assess the risk levels of student participants in the program and, independently, have an individual from the school staff (counselor, teacher, etc.) assess the same students. Individuals who had knowledge of the students in question—their academic records, extracurricular involvement, and family situations—conducted the assessments.

Perhaps the simplest measure of reliability is the average proportion of matches, found by counting the number of factors on which the two observers agreed for each student, dividing by 30 (the total number of factors in the instrument), and averaging over the 108 students assessed. This yielded .835 or 83.5% matches on the factors indicated or not indicated. This may be broken down into separate proportions of matches for critical factors (.937 or 93.7%) and noncritical factors (.804 or 80.4%). These proportions may be the most appropriate measures of reliability for the diagnostic use of the instrument to customize and fine-tune service delivery.

The above results do not utilize the method of classifying students as high, medium, and low risk. The results incorporating this

classification system are summarized in Table 2. Although this was not a random sample, the marginal totals are fairly typical of the risk distribution for this site. Note that these row and column totals reflect a higher level of risk than in the overall program for an earlier time period (cf. Figure 1).

The cells representing agreements between the case manager's assessment of the student's risk level and that of the school staff are shaded. The raw proportion of agreements is found by taking the total in these cells (81) and dividing by the total number of students assessed by both observers (108)—yielding 0.75 or 75%. This value indicated a fairly high level of interobserver agreement (McMillan, 2001).

Some of the 81 agreements could be due to chance. To correct for this, Cohen's kappa is sometimes used as an agreement index (Cohen, 1960). Expected values (based on the assumption of statistical independence between the two observers) were computed and subtracted from the numerator and denominator of the raw percentage of agreements, yielding a kappa of 0.309. Although not large, this value is statistically significant ( $P = .0004$ ).

The value of kappa is much smaller than the raw proportion of agreements. Given the marginal totals in Table 1, a high level of agreement between the two observers can be expected by chance alone. With the marginal totals given in this table, the *maximum* raw proportion of agreements is found by first pairing the marginal totals (in Table 2, (2, 7), (22, 17), and (84, 84)), taking the smaller of each pair (2, 17, and 84), summing (103), and dividing by the total sample size (108). This yields a maximum raw proportion of agreements of .954. Then correct for chance agreements as before, yielding a maximum kappa of .872. Another possible index is the ratio of kappa to its maximum value or "adjusted kappa"— $0.309/0.872$ , or 0.354 (Traub, 1994). This doubly corrected agreement index has the advantage that it has a maximum value of one, which simplifies the interpretation.

Cohen's kappa counts only *perfect* agreements, that is, both observers assess the student at exactly the same level (low, medium, or high). This is a rather stringent criterion. For example, the 20 (= 9 + 11) who were assessed as medium by one rater and high by the other rater were counted as disagreements in computing kappa.

**Table 1**

**Outcomes GPA, absenteeism (more than 10 days missed), and dropout rate by level of risk among student participating in the SBYSP in 1997-98.**

Level of Risk	Outcome		
	GPA	More than 10 Days Missed Per Year	Dropout Rate
Low	2.67 (N = 3,794)	27.0% (N = 8,428)	0.4% (N = 5,156)
Medium	2.23 (N = 2,403)	38.4% (N = 3,644)	2.8% (N = 1,934)
High	1.89 (N = 2,155)	52.9% (N = 3,061)	13.2% (N = 2,374)

**Table 2**

**Table of agreements between the case manager and school staff assessments of risk of students in the SUCCESS Program in 2001.**

Level of Risk: Case Manager Assessment (#1)	Level of Risk: School Staff Assessment (#2)			Total
	Low	Medium	High	
Low	1	1	0	2
Medium	4	7	11	22
High	2	9	73	84
Total	7	17	84	108

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One might argue that some “partial credit” or weight should be given to such ratings. Weighted kappa using the “quadratic difference” weighting method, accomplishes this by assigning a weight of one to the diagonal cells (perfect agreement), to those that are just off the diagonal (near agreement: low on one, medium on the other or medium on one, high on the other), and zero to the two remaining cells (clear disagreement: low on one and high on the other) (Agresti, 1990). The weighted kappa is 0.451—a somewhat larger value reflecting the more liberal concept of agreement applied. It is also statistically significant ( $P = .0000$ ). These indices of agreement utilizing the classification system may be the most appropriate for use of the instrument in evaluation.<sup>6</sup>

The various indices of interobserver reliability provide evidence of the consistency of assessments across different observers or raters using the risk assessment instrument. This is considered the most critical type of reliability for such assessments.<sup>7</sup>

Cohen’s kappa counts only *perfect* agreements, that is, both observers assess the student at exactly the same level (low, medium, or high). This is a rather stringent criterion. For example, the 20 (= 9 + 11) who were assessed as medium by one rater and high by the other rater were counted as disagreements in computing kappa. One might argue that some “partial credit” or weight should be given to such ratings. Weighted kappa using the “quadratic difference” weighting method, accomplishes this by assigning a weight of one to the diagonal cells (perfect agreement), to those that are just off the diagonal (near agreement: low on one, medium on the other or medium on one, high on the other), and zero to the two remaining cells (clear disagreement: low on one and high on the other) (Agresti, 1990). The weighted kappa is 0.451—a somewhat larger value reflecting the more liberal concept of agreement applied. It is also statistically significant ( $P = .0000$ ). These indices of agreement utilizing the classification

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### Summary

The student risk assessment instrument presented in the Appendix has been found to be practical, valid, and reliable. It can help educators to (a) describe the risk levels in student populations, (b) diagnose student risk issues and fine-tune service delivery, (c) evaluate impacts of programs and services, (d) establish policy guidelines for programs and services, and (e) assist with school improvement and accountability initiatives. We offer this discussion not for the purpose of justifying a means to classify at-risk children and youth, but rather to support its use in managing and delivering services and in determining the effectiveness of such services. We recommend it to all who are concerned with assisting at-risk youth in their education and development.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Homeless” is one of the demographic characteristics tracked in *EASY/2EASY*, a system for monitoring services and tracking student outcomes in collaborative services programs (see Veale, Morley, & Erickson, 2002). Homelessness is a factor that indicates high risk (in particular, high correlation with dropping out of school) in our instrument and is associated with at least two factors in the PDK template (Frymier, 1992a, 1992b).

<sup>2</sup> The numbers of students on which these percentages were based were as follows: high risk, 156 for 1998-99 and 133 for 1999-2000; medium risk, 86 for 1998-99 and 77 for 1999-2000; low risk, 15 for 1998-99 and 13 for 1999-2000. The slightly lower numbers for the 1999-2000 year reflects attrition due to dropouts, positive terminations (students successfully leaving the program), and/or missing data. Also, note the low numbers for the low risk students. This was due to the fact that we are focusing on those needing improvement based on attendance (missing more than 10 days in 1997-98), which is less likely for low risk students. Thus, the percentages for the low risk group are less precise than those for medium or high risk. Finally, the percentage increases in improvement were computed by dividing the percentage improvement for the third year by the percentage improvement for the second year, subtracting 1, and multiplying by 100.

<sup>3</sup> In 1997-98, data like those of Figure 2 were collected for the Caring Connection—the SBYSP site that established the aforementioned policy. The results were similar, with an even larger difference in dropout rates between the contact groups for high risk students in this site. To the extent that keeping students in school (their not dropping out) and improved attendance are related, this policy may have contributed to the positive result regarding long-term improvement in attendance among high- (and medium-) risk students in this program. (The Caring Connection was one of the four original SBYSP sites and was cited by researcher Joy Dryfoos as an outstanding “safe passage” program for youth (Dryfoos, 1998).)

<sup>4</sup> The family was dysfunctional before, but even more so now.

<sup>5</sup> The risk assessments using the Student Risk Assessment Instrument were made as part of the intake process (when the student entered the program) and, as more information was made available, adjusted (upward) as needed. The outcomes data cited in the table were collected at the end of the school year. Thus, the data in Table 1 may be considered evidence of *predictive validity*—the ability of the assessment to predict behavior or performance. However, since these outcomes have associated factors in the risk assessment instrument and some program sites may have reclassified students based on evidence of these outcomes (as well as other information) during the school year, there is probably some degree of functional dependence between level of risk and the outcomes cited.

<sup>6</sup> It may be argued that a risk factor *score* (equal to the number of risk factors indicated for the student) would have been a better indicator of the level of risk of the student. With this measure a correlation coefficient between the scores for the two observers would be an appropriate interobserver reliability index. In the reliability study, this correlation coefficient was found to be 0.601, which is statistically significant ( $P = .0000$ ). Other possibilities include breaking this into a critical score (interobserver correlation of 0.740) and noncritical score (interobserver correlation of 0.587), as well as more sophisticated weighted scores (e.g., giving more weight to the critical factors). These were considered and rejected in favor of the simpler rule, which we felt had greater usability and practicality.

<sup>7</sup> For example, test-retest reliability is considered inappropriate here, since a student’s level of risk can change over time. Inconsistent measures over time may occur due to actual changes in a student’s risk profile—not measurement error.

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## Appendix

### Student Risk Assessment Instrument

<b>CRITICAL FACTORS</b>	<b>CHECK (✓) IF PRESENT</b>
1. Dropout or expelled	
2. Victim of physical, psychological, sexual abuse, rape or other violent crime	
3. Pregnancy/teen parent	
4. Homeless (on the street, shelter, transitional housing, living with friends, or other temporary arrangement)	
5. Language/cultural barriers	
6. Out-of-home placement (foster care, detention, independent living, residential treatment, etc.)	
7. Committed criminal acts	
<b>NONCRITICAL FACTORS</b>	
1. Experienced repeated school failure (low achievement, low grades)	
2. Poor attendance, repeated suspensions, repeated tardiness	
3. Special education student or student with mental, learning, behavioral, or physical disabilities whose needs are not met through special education	
4. No extracurricular school activities	
5. Experienced mental health problems (including suicidal ideation or attempts or sudden personality changes)	
6. Recent crisis (death, divorce, illness) or life transition	
7. Social isolation/relationship problems/negative peer influence	
8. Eating disorders	
9. Chronic health condition	
10. Sexually active	
11. Substance abuse by self or family member	



**Student Risk Assessment Instrument (Continued)**

NONCRITICAL FACTORS (Cont'd.)	CHECK (✓) IF PRESENT
12. Economically disadvantaged	
13. Lack of personal educational goals	
14. Lack of motivation to improve	
15. Family dysfunction/youth's needs are not being met by the family	
16. Committed delinquent acts	
17. Gang membership	
18. Extreme mobility (moving two or more times in one year)	
19. Inability to keep employment/unacceptable work behavior	
20. Lack of skills for competitive employment	
21. No identified career interests	
22. Lack of work ethic (not wanting to work)	
23. No postsecondary work or training plan or goals	

# Grade Retention and School Completion: Through Students' Eyes

Albert A. Penna and Marilyn Tallerico

**Abstract:** *There are numerous factors associated with not finishing high school. The purpose of this study was to shed new light on one of them, grade retention, as seen through the eyes of retained dropouts themselves. Respondents describe three interrelated phenomena that characterized their trajectory from being retained-in-grade to subsequent premature exit. The article concludes with suggestions for concerned educational professionals to help redirect this trajectory toward more positive outcomes.*

The consequences of dropping out of school are dire. They include diminished lifetime earnings, increased likelihood of criminal incarceration, restricted access to further education, greater chance of dysfunction in family life, and curtailed opportunities for employment (Heubert, 2003; National Research Council, 1999; Office of Educational Research & Improvement, 1988). Clearly, educators do not wish such long-term costs and wasted potential for students. Yet U.S. Department of Education (1999) data suggest trends of increased numbers of dropouts during the past decade.

Moreover, recent statistical studies find that retention-in-grade is the single most powerful predictor of dropping out of school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). It is even more powerful than parents' income or mother's educational level, two family-related factors long associated with student achievement and school completion (Heubert, 2003; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1990). U.S. Department of Commerce data indicate that "the number of young adults who had ever been retained increased from 11.1% in 1992 to 13.3% in 1995" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). Anderson, Whipple, and Jimerson (2002) estimate that between 5% and 10% of students are retained every year in the United States.

Previous efforts to quantify the relationship between grade retention and school completion indicate that dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Students who repeat once have a 35% chance of dropping out, while students who repeat two or more grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100% (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

But numbers alone rarely tell the whole story. For that reason, our study sought to get underneath the statistics. We went directly to students, listened

carefully, and probed for deeper understanding of the human side of the grade retention-school completion correlations. What is it about being retained that contributes to dropping out? What insights might the perspectives of early school leavers provide? What can be learned from examining the personal experiences of students who were retained and eventually dropped out of school?

It is uncommon for researchers to locate, pursue, and follow up on school dropouts (Fine, 1992). Similarly, though many educators' daily work involves frequent interactions with students, opportunities for extended conversations with those who have exited early (rather than graduated) are rare. This study synthesizes and analyzes 24 such conversations, to provide a student-centered look at issues and possible interventions associated with youth at risk of failure.

## Theoretical Rationale

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) served as the theoretical framework for this research. This perspective views individuals as social products whose actions are influenced primarily by their own interpretations and meaning-making of the world around them. This framework assumes that all reality is subjective, and that a principal goal of research should be to draw out and study "what goes on in the heads of humans" (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975, p. 55). Thus, instead of aspiring to (unattainable) universal or "objective" truths, symbolic interactionist studies seek to explore the multiple subjectivities and meanings that research participants voice for themselves. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, one of our study's strongest contributions to the extant knowledge base is that it surfaces and examines the personal side of early school leaving, including dropouts' feelings and emotions relevant to grade retention.

## About The Study's Methods

After meeting personally with the superintendents of 15 different upstate New York school districts, three agreed to allow data collection for this research. Letters of introduction were mailed to former students of those districts who met three selection criteria: (a) had dropped out of school during grades 9-12; (b) had done so in the recent past (that is, no earlier than five years prior to the start of the study); and (c) had been retained at any grade level K-12. A total of 24 students agreed to participate, and each was interviewed in-depth and in person, for a minimum of an hour and a half. The sample included 16 males and 8 females; 10 from an urban district with a multiracial, multiethnic population of 4,716 students; 10 from a rural-suburban district of 2,635 students; and 4 from a G.E.D. program of a multi-county rural district (termed a Board of Cooperative Educational Services). Approximately 9% of students in the urban district and 16% in the rural-suburban district were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch, a proxy for low-income status. It is important to note that, though this information about districts contextualizes the study in general terms, participants' attendance histories typically involved multiple changes of school district.

Interviews centered on open-ended questions about school experiences and memorable events in students' lives. Participants had been informed that the study's intent was to improve future school practices, so most were eager to share. They knew they had been identified by their dropout status. Interviews explored related experiences, feelings, and reasons for the early departures. We did not reveal that invitations to participate also depended on grade retention. Nonetheless, in every case, interviewees brought the topic up themselves, allowing additional follow-up questions to elicit details. Of the 24 participants, virtually every grade level was mentioned at least once as the retention year, with most retentions occurring (in declining order of frequency) in grades 9, K, and 10. In this sample, five students had been retained once, 16 students twice, and three students three times.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. All field notes and interview transcriptions were coded conceptually, consistent with Miles and Huberman's (1994) definition of codes as "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information in a study" (p. 56). Coded data were reread several times, including in-between interviews, to allow for improved focusing and continuous shaping of the research as it proceeded (Bogdan & Taylor, 1984; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These constant comparative means of data collection and analysis enabled preliminary synthesizing and sense making of findings. A more comprehensive analysis was conducted after all data collection was complete, to focus on patterns of both recurring and "outlier" perspectives, experiences, interpretations, and feelings of participants.

To increase the trustworthiness and credibility of analyses, "member checks" and "peer examination" were used to triangulate emerging patterns (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1998). We exchanged opinions and points of view in interpreting students' responses with colleague teachers and administrators experienced in working with school dropouts and potential dropouts. Whenever

possible, second meetings with respondents occurred, during which time students read their interview transcripts, elaborated initial responses, and evaluated preliminary interpretations of data.

In what follows, we synthesize the most common patterns in participants' responses. Both participants' and school districts' anonymity are preserved throughout.

## Findings

Interviewees were forthright in taking personal responsibility for their problems in school and life. (The retrospective and volunteer nature of the study is likely related to such hindsight.) Respondents acknowledged and detailed the paths they took that fostered educational difficulties, including drug use, alcohol abuse, truancy, limited effort, "bad attitude," violence, gang membership, laziness, lack of cooperation, resistance to authority, and myriad other unproductive choices all too familiar to secondary principals. Clearly, major threats to adolescents' school success and health are the risk behaviors they choose (Resnick, Bearman, & Blum, 1997).

Our findings also confirm prior quantitative research showing strong correlations between retention-in-grade and early school leaving (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). Twenty of 24 students (83% of the sample) identified grade retention and its effects as the major factors in their eventual exit. But why? What was it about being retained that contributed to dropping out?

Student accounts of their experiences underscore three interrelated phenomena: (a) the unhelpful nature of the repeat year, academically; (b) social stigmatization by peers, primarily for being overage for grade level; and (c) their own immediate and longer-term emotional reactions to these academic setbacks and peer pressures.

### *The Grade-Retained Year*

According to students, not much changed the second (or third) time around. Retainees usually experienced the same assignments, instruction, textbooks, and tests they had failed the previous year. Often, students' teachers didn't change. As one respondent put it, "It was the same teacher, the same curriculum, the same seat, the same stuff over and over again." Several participants had the same subject teacher in high school for three or four consecutive years.

The redundancy of the classroom routine during the repeat year was alternately boring and frustrating. It didn't help retainees see or understand the content in ways different from the failed year. Often, teachers assumed students understood the schoolwork, because of the second or third exposure to lessons. Accordingly, some teachers provided fewer, rather than additional, explanations of subject matter or skills. At other times, teachers embarrassed students with remarks calling public attention to their retention; for example, "Surely you remember this from last year." Such comments were interpreted as demeaning, contributing to the retained year as being not only unproductive, but in some cases, counterproductive to students' engagement in school.

Overall, grade repeating failed to improve students' academic achievement. Participants reported continued lack of understanding and poor performance. Only one respondent recalled being helped individually and, thus, prepared to do better the next time around. This pattern of findings is consistent with Roderick's (1995)

research on grade retention. Her review of previous studies concluded that “repeating a grade provides few remedial benefits” (p. 1). Students got further and further behind their peers academically, due to both the obstacles they created for themselves (mentioned earlier) and the unrealized potential of repeating one or more grades.

### **Peer Response to Being Overage for Grade**

Compounding cumulative academic failure and more frequent than teachers’ occasional careless remarks, were schoolmates’ hurtful and demeaning behaviors. Retainees were targeted negatively by peers on two interrelated counts. On the one hand, for “being dumb,” and hence, repeating the grade; on the other hand, for being older than classmates, a direct consequence of having been “held back” one or more years.

What did this targeting sound and feel like? Respondents described it as ranging from name-calling and teasing to verbal “put downs” and, in one interviewee’s words, “being tormented” repeatedly. Participants in this study were mocked, picked on, bullied, ridiculed, and berated because of their age and retained status. Peers referred to them as “worthless,” “loser,” “the failure,” “the big dummy,” and, in the most pejorative of tones, “the oldest one” in class. As one interviewee summarized, “the other kids were always rubbing it in your face.” For another respondent:

I got a lot of negative pressure from other students on my repeating. They would tease me, pick on me, all kinds of negative things. I can remember this one boy who just picked on me daily and it was like I would try to dodge him in the halls. He made me feel so ashamed to be held over, and he would pick on me. It was terrible.

A recurring theme was that being retained and overage in grade drew unwanted negative attention from other students—attention that followed retainees through their subsequent school years.

### **Cumulative Loss of Hope**

Participants vividly recalled their initial reactions to being required to repeat a grade. They spanned the emotional spectrum from anger, denial, and disbelief, to shame, upset, humiliation, and frustration with both themselves and their schools. Often the retention decision was viewed as unjust or illogical. As one retained drop-out put it: “It made no sense to me that they’d made me repeat a whole year just because I failed two subjects in middle school.” Another student recalled, “I don’t know how I messed up kindergarten. I guess I didn’t color in the lines.” Another characterized it as “ridiculous” for his teachers to place him in eighth grade when he was 16 years old. A second-time retainee became “mad and furious” because he believed, from past experience, that repeating the year wouldn’t benefit him and “the teachers would be too busy to help me.”

Whether or not these assessments were warranted, participants’ feelings of being treated unfairly or unhelpfully contributed to growing resentment, disillusionment, and exasperation with school. Sometimes their longer-term responses included increased “acting out” behaviors, exacerbating their difficulties in school. Other times it led to feelings of worthlessness, resignation, and withdrawal, internalizing the lowest expectations of teachers and schoolmates:

“When you say you failed seventh grade, you feel like a failure. You failed, therefore you are a failure.”

Respondents repeatedly spoke of being “worn down,” “stressed out,” “in a ditch,” and of eventually coming to believe they could never “get out of that hole” to “get on track” at school. For the majority, this sense of futility led to loss of motivation, demoralization, and disengagement from both classes and peers who were experiencing some success in school.

### **Patterns as a Whole**

Taken together, the perceived unhelpfulness of the grade-retained year academically; the ensuing social stigmatization by other students for being “dumb” and overage; and interviewees’ own sense-making of their cumulative academic failures and peer responses combined to eliminate any hope or desire for “fitting in” at school. Of course, as mentioned earlier, myriad other personal, family, and environmental factors also affected these students’ trajectories. Yet these were the three school-centered phenomena that rose to the fore in this study.

For each respondent, there seemed to exist an internal commencement clock that began ticking upon entering ninth grade. Interviewees frequently mentioned the original date they should have graduated with their class, had they been on schedule age- and grade-wise. They became painfully aware how the retention years distanced them from their commencement mark, often in high school cultures in which identity was closely tied to projected year of graduation (e.g., membership in “the class of 2003,” etc.). This awareness created additional pressures to leave, especially for multiple-year repeaters. As one participant explained:

By the time I failed two grades, I mean, I didn’t want to be in that situation. I’ll be graduating with my little brother. He’s two years younger than me, and that would be, like, total humiliation. I totally gave up and wanted to get out of there.

Another multiple-year retainee said she looked around at her high school classmates; they were 17 and 18 years old and ready to graduate. She was 20 and in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. It occurred to her that she “would never be able to step out on that stage and grab a diploma,” so she left.

In sum, participants in this study affirmed that being overage for grade predisposed them to drop out of school. In simplest terms, they didn’t fit in. They came to believe they never would. They lost hope. Ultimately, they exited.

### **Practical Considerations for Concerned Educators**

So, what might help? In this section, we first recap suggestions made directly by our informants; then we follow with recommendations commonly referenced in professional literatures.

Interviewees emphasized both alternatives to grade retention and suggestions for enhancing the quality of schooling more generally. Of most immediate value to educational professionals were students’ reminders about ways to provide additional “time to catch up.”

- Expand summer school opportunities, as an option in lieu of repeating the grade or course the following academic year. Re-

spondents suggested that success in summer classes was more likely, because students would typically be enrolled in fewer courses than during a regular school semester. In their observations, interruptions were less frequent and class size smaller in summer school, so that teachers could focus attention on individuals. Interviewees also noted that “students seemed more equal in summer school,” because everyone in class had experienced failure.

- Extend the day so that blocks of time after school could be used for extra help, remediation, and tutorials, in lieu of grade retention. Again, the benefit cited most frequently here was increased one-on-one attention, often including the development of better personal relationships with teachers and other adults.
- Allow students to “double up” on courses failed at the secondary level, so that struggling students could either schedule a course with two different teachers during the same day or, for example, “take 9<sup>th</sup> grade English one period and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English the next.” Clearly, these alternatives to grade retention are not typical in secondary school scheduling.
- Make Saturday school available, for the same reasons cited above for expanding summer school opportunities and extending the school day.
- Change unstructured study halls to devise better ways to use time. The retained dropouts in this study said they typically had one or two study hall periods per day. They also reported that most students didn’t study during these times but, instead, “goofed around” or visited with friends.

## Additional Considerations

Certainly, support systems for students at risk of failure continually need updating, rethinking, and strengthening (Grant, 1997; Smink, 2001). While always challenging to find the financial resources and skilled staff necessary to expand prevention and remediation initiatives, this study suggests that existing efforts aren’t reaching everyone. More one-on-one attention from caring adults in schools may promote connections that can interrupt the spiral of increasing alienation that accompanies course or grade failure and leads to hopelessness and withdrawal (Fine, 1992).

In concert with central office and other support personnel, school leaders can facilitate the professional development needed for teachers to continuously expand their repertoire of instructional strategies. Differentiating instruction, designing lessons that address different learning styles and multiple intelligences, and optimizing teachers’ working relationships with classroom aides and school tutors, all hold promise for making teaching more helpful and less repetitive—even in those cases where it is students’ second or third time in grade (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

Moreover, educational leaders need to insist and ensure that teachers’ professional development is provided in ways that *model* varied instructional techniques (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). The latter include self-guided formats for learning, small study groups of colleagues, action research in classrooms, and other active learning strategies appropriate for adults (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989). If leadership delivers primarily sit-and-get lectures for their staff development programming, they unwittingly foster the overreliance on direct instruction and learner passivity that has characterized

classrooms all too frequently (Nevills, 2003; Sarason, 1990).

One study group or action research strategy might involve adapting this study’s methods. That is, perhaps existing staff development time could be used to have teachers conduct focus group interviews of former students retained in grade. Such direct exposure may deepen understanding of some of the onerous personal impacts this study and others’ research have underscored. Yamamoto (1980) found, for example, that elementary students rated repeating a grade as more stressful than wetting in class or being caught stealing. The only two life events his interviewees said would be more stressful than being held back were losing a parent or going blind. Who knows what additional firsthand interviews by teachers might reveal and how powerful students’ words might be in altering longstanding support for extant instructional and retention practices?

At a more systemic level, district policies on grade retention, dropout prevention, and alternative programming may need to be reshaped. Coupled with teacher and community service agency input, school boards and other educational leaders may be able to make the voices of retained-dropout students part of their institutional responses to system-wide problems of underachievement and disengagement (Fine, 1992). As this study demonstrates, high school dropout is not exclusively a secondary school issue.

We know that local leadership has considerable influence on the culture and feeling tone of schools (Deal & Peterson, 1991; Firestone & Louis, 1999). Nurturing environments of respect and “no put-downs” can help ameliorate the peer harassment and bullying brought to life in our respondents’ stories. Districtwide expectations, adult modeling, policies, and practices related to character development towards acceptance of differences and appreciation of others can help build such environments.

## Summary

There are numerous correlates of dropping out of school. Some are family and social background factors, like low income and limited English proficiency. Some are personal, like individual student’s health problems and dysfunction due to death of a loved one. Others are institutional factors, like grade retention, curricula, and school size (Wehlage et al., 1990). As Mann (1986) summarizes, “not finishing high school is a nest of problems” (p. 311), not easily understood, and complicated to resolve.

Many of these family, social background, and personal factors are beyond the purview of schools. Others are not. This study focused on a significant correlate, grade retention, that *is* within the school domains of policy and practice. We hope that this up-close-and-personal view of the relationship between grade retention and school completion lends additional perspective for educators grappling with the complexities of sustaining high standards while simultaneously “leaving no child behind.”

The experience and viewpoints of teachers and administrators are readily accessible in schools. It may be valuable to consider these difficult issues through the eyes of retained dropouts as well. Neither statistics alone, nor any one group’s perspectives, tells the whole story. Together, however, lies the potential for creative problem solving.

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# Cost Discrepancy, Signaling, and Risk Taking

Jim Lemon

**Abstract:** *If risk taking is in some measure a signal to others by the person taking risks, the model of “costly signaling” predicts that the more the apparent cost of the risk to others exceeds the perceived cost of the risk to the risk taker, the more attractive that risk will be as a signal. One hundred and twelve visitors to youth “drop-in” centers estimated the costs (“dangers”) of four behaviors as presented to them and the costs that they perceived for themselves. The four behaviors were chosen to plausibly signal different characteristics about the risk taker and also to have different magnitudes and probabilities of cost. Cost discrepancy, the excess of presented over perceived risk, was associated with intention to smoke in females. It is concluded that costly signaling seems to operate in behaviors with low magnitudes but high probabilities of cost. Other behaviors with this risk profile may also be associated with costly signaling.*

The propensity to take risks in adolescence is widely recognized as a major factor contributing to health liabilities, some of which may have lifelong consequences. Additionally, risk-taking behavior is a frequent source of conflict between adolescents and those responsible for their development and well being (Crockett & Peterson, 1993). A variety of health promotion programs aimed at reducing adolescent risk-taking behavior have been conducted, often with little effect (Fromme & Brown, 2000). The emphasis in many of these programs has been upon dramatic consequences (e.g., serious injury or death) of such risks. Although these consequences may occur and are of serious concern to the guardians of adolescents, they may be less significant to the adolescents themselves. Limited experience (Halpern-Felsher et al., 2001; Weinstein, 1989), a tendency to underestimate the probability of occurrence of negative events (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and perhaps even failing to consider the costs (Halpern-Felsher & Cauffman, 2001), may result in different perceptions of risk behaviors by adolescents.

Definitions of the word “risk” emphasize the costs of risk taking. For some risks, such as Russian roulette with a six chamber revolver, the magnitude and probability of cost are easily quantified (Luce & Raiffa, 1989). For more commonly attempted risks, both the magnitude and probability of cost are far less certain. However, the supposed costs of risk taking are routinely presented in the media and by concerned individuals. Without attempting to determine the accuracy of these presentations, what might be the effect of discrepancies between the presented costs and the costs estimated by the adolescent risk taker upon their risk taking?

One aspect of the analysis of risk taking has been strongly influenced by recent developments in animal behavior. Zahavi and Zahavi (1997) pro-

posed the Handicap Principle as an explanation for what appeared to be gratuitously risky behavior in animals, such as “stotting” (jumping in place) by gazelles in the presence of a predator. It is generally accepted that such behaviors act as signals of quality, in this case informing the predator that the gazelle is likely to escape. Such displays, while exacting a cost from the actor, do appear to divert predation onto other, presumably less fit, prey (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997). “Costly signaling” has become accepted as a model of many risky behaviors, advertising individual quality to conspecifics as well as predators (Grafen, 1990; Leal, 1999).

The application of this model to human behavior is straightforward, with the major difference that humans have a wide variety of costly signals that they may choose to display in different combinations. Involvement in mountaineering, skateboard stunting, or skydiving places individuals at some risk which they accept as a demonstration of their superiority. It has often been observed that risky rituals in primitive societies (National Geographic, 1976) bear a striking similarity to the risky behavior of adolescents in more advanced societies. Risky behaviors thus fit into the general class of costly signals, their performance imposing direct costs as well as the possibility of reduced survival.

To the extent that behavioral displays are unrelated to underlying fitness, individuals may be able to advertise a level of fitness that they do not possess. The simulation of costly signals can survive at equilibrium in populations (Johnstone & Grafen, 1993). Indeed, as long as the simulated signal increases the overall reproductive success of the individual, it will remain a viable strategy (Candolin, 1999).

Grafen’s (1990) analysis of costly signaling included a “strategic choice” option which has become important in the analysis of this type of be-



havior and is particularly appropriate for costly signaling in humans. In this option, the signaler evaluates the costs associated with particular behaviors, estimates his/her own level of fitness, and tries to optimize the return from costly signaling by choosing behaviors and levels of risk within these behaviors that will produce the most effective signals with the least cost to the individual.

In other words, if one wishes to send a deceptive signal of fitness by engaging in risk taking, it is wise to choose a risk-taking behavior with the largest excess of apparent cost over the perceived actual cost. One factor affecting this is that humans tend to rate the probability of negative events occurring to themselves as lower than occurring to others (Weinstein & Klein, 1995) even in high-risk situations (Middleton, Harris & Surman, 1996). This provides a ready-made difference even if the receiver (R - who rates the probability slightly higher for the other person) has the same overall appreciation of the risk as the signaler (S - who rates it lower for himself/herself).

Additionally, participation in risk-taking behaviors is associated with lower estimates of the costs of those behaviors (Benthin, Slovic & Severson, 1993). To the extent that S has a lower estimate of the cost than a nonparticipant R, the behavior will be attractive as a deceptive signal. Beyond this, the well-known tendency of authorities to exaggerate the costs of socially disapproved behaviors provides an additional excess of apparent cost when signaling to Rs who accept the inflated cost estimates presented to them. It is clear that a number of factors can produce cost discrepancy.

Personal characteristics such as courage, strength, hardiness, skill, and luck are valued universally. As mentioned above, the first four appear to be closely related to costly signaling in animals, while the last is certainly important to humans (Smith, Wiseman, Harris, & Joiner, 1996). Engaging successfully in a risky activity such as skateboard stunting would signal strength and skill, while purchasing a winning lottery ticket would be accepted as a signal of luck by many.

Consider cigarette smoking as a risk behavior. If the smoker is using smoking as a signal of quality, it is almost certainly signaling hardiness. In contrast, speeding while driving would appear to signal skill, and perhaps luck. Engaging in unsafe sex might signal a reliance on the presumed luck of avoiding pregnancy or disease. Finally, defying risks in general might signal courage. If cost discrepancy interacts with what quality is signaled, it should differentially affect risk taking on that basis.

Another way of analyzing risk behaviors is to examine the magnitude of cost and the probability. Smoking and getting drunk have a low cost per occurrence, but a high probability of cost. That is to say, they represent an incremental risk. Speeding while driving or engaging in unsafe sex exposes one to high costs, but at a much lower probability per occurrence. It is also possible that the magnitude and probability of cost interact with cost discrepancy in risk-taking decisions.

The present study sought estimates of presented and perceived risks, intention to perform and recent performance of smoking, getting drunk, engaging in unsafe sex, and speeding while driving. The intended subjects were from 16 to 20 years of age, sampled from populations likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

One hundred and twelve (112) visitors to youth “drop-in” centers in the Sydney metropolitan area participated in the study. These centers are intended to provide an alternative to “hanging out” in public places, especially for students in the hours after school and unemployed youth. They typically offer amusements, instruction in various subjects, counseling, and support for young people in difficulty.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire was anonymous. It first requested the age, sex, and educational attainment (as years of school completed) of the respondent. The survey then asked for information about four behaviors—tobacco smoking, getting drunk, having unsafe sex, and speeding while driving. These behaviors were selected to provide both contrasting signals of fitness as discussed above and differing probabilities and magnitudes of cost. For each behavior, the respondent was asked to record, on five point semantic differential scales, how dangerous that behavior was as presented to them by their acquaintances and by the media, their own estimate of how dangerous it was to themselves, and how likely they were to perform that behavior in the near future. They were also asked whether they had performed that behavior in the past month in a Yes/No format.

### **Procedure**

Coordinators of youth “drop in” centers in the Sydney metropolitan area were contacted by telephone and asked if they would be willing to participate in a study about adolescent risk taking. All centers contacted expressed interest and an interview with each coordinator was arranged. The purpose and procedure of the study was explained to the coordinator. If the coordinator decided to be involved in the study, either the coordinator or a superior signed a form expressing their agreement. A box of questionnaires including instructions and a sheet to record decliners and exclusions was left with the coordinator. The coordinator and other youth workers involved were asked to mention to visitors between the ages of 16 and 20 that the survey was being conducted, and invite them to participate if they wished. Exclusion criteria were: inability to read/write English, known psychiatric diagnosis, or intoxication. Coordinators were requested to note exclusions and decliners in order to determine if either might be biasing the sample. The centers were contacted periodically by telephone and when the coordinator felt that they were unlikely to collect more surveys, the box containing completed and unused surveys was retrieved by the investigator.

## **Results**

Sixteen out of 17 centers contacted agreed to participate. One center was dropped when an interview with the coordinator could not be arranged. Centers recruited from 0 to 24 participants each, with a mean of 7.5 respondents per center, over periods ranging from three weeks to six months.

Although it was requested that participation be restricted to persons between the ages of 16 and 20, reported ages ranged from 13 to 45 with a mean of 18.4 years. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of re-

spondents were within the requested age range. The analyses summarized in Tables 1-4 were conducted on the data from the subjects who were 20 years or younger, as this was the group relevant to the study. The results for all subjects were essentially the same, except for two associations of danger ratings with unsafe sex. Forty-three females, 57 males, and six of unspecified sex completed the questionnaire satisfactorily. The mean age of females (18.9) was slightly higher than that of males (18.1) as was their educational attainment (11 vs. 10.7 years). Exclusions and decliners were poorly recorded, but the sex ratio of respondents was within coordinators' estimates of the sex ratio of visitors.

### **Analysis of Rating, Intention, and Performance**

A cost discrepancy score was calculated by subtracting the perceived danger from the presented danger rating. The higher this score, the more the respondent estimated the presented danger as inflated with regard to him- or herself. Linear modeling was used to test the relationship of the ratings to intention to perform the behavior. Logistic regression was used to test the relationship of ratings to actual performance. For each behavioral intention and performance, three relationships were to be tested: presented danger, perceived danger, and cost discrepancy. Therefore, a Bonferroni adjusted critical  $p < 0.017$  was used for each test. If more than one rating was a significant predictor when tested separately, these were entered into a stepwise selection based on the Akaike Information Criterion (Sakamoto, Ishiguro, & Kitagawa, 1986) to determine the best fitting model. As cost discrepancy was a linear combination of presented and perceived danger, if all three were significant separately, only cost discrepancy and the best predictor of the other two were tested together.

In the following analyses, age and years of schooling were tested for association with intention and performance on all variables. No significant associations were found. No significant differences were found between males and females for the ratings of presented danger, perceived danger, cost discrepancy, or frequencies of performing the risk behaviors.

### **Tobacco Smoking**

The presented dangers of tobacco smoking were reported as quite high, although 75% of respondents reported smoking in the past month. On a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with endpoints of "Not at all" and "Extremely" the mean score was 4.1. Despite the high ratings of presented danger of tobacco smoking, there was no significant relationship of presented danger to intention to smoke, either overall or by males and females separately. However, the respondents estimated the danger to themselves as somewhat lower with a mean of 3.7. The best predictor of intention to smoke for all respondents was lower perceived danger rating (Table 1). There were no significant predictors of intention to smoke among males, but cost discrepancy was the best predictor among females (Table 1). Interestingly, none of the ratings were significantly associated with reported smoking in the past month, overall, or for each sex separately.

### **Getting Drunk**

The presented dangers of getting drunk were rated as considerably less than tobacco smoking at a mean of 3.3. Sixty percent of respondents reported having been drunk in the past month. Again, estimates of the dangers of getting drunk for the respondent were lower, at a mean of 2.8. The best predictors of intention to get drunk were lower presented and perceived danger ratings for all respondents (Table 2). However, the best predictor for males was presented danger rating, while for females it was perceived danger rating (Table 2). Similarly, while perceived danger rating was the best predictor of having gotten drunk in the past month for all respondents, the best predictor for males was again presented danger rating, and for females, perceived danger rating (Table 2).

### **Unsafe Sex**

The presented dangers of having unsafe sex were reported as even higher than those for smoking at 4.2. Only 27% of respondents reported having unsafe sex during the past month. Perceived dangers were lower at 3.8, leading to the smallest mean cost discrepancy for any behavior. There were no significant differences between males and females. There were no associations of danger ratings with intention to have unsafe sex (Table 3). Turning to performance, only a significant association of lower presented danger rating with reported unsafe sex in the past month for males was found (Table 3).

### **Speeding While Driving**

The presented dangers of speeding while driving achieved a rating of 4.2, while the perceived dangers were rated at 3.6, producing the highest mean discrepancy score. As before, there were no significant differences in ratings between males and females. Twenty nine percent of the respondents reported speeding in the past month. The presented dangers of speeding were related to intention to speed overall and intention to speed for females, but not for males (Table 4). No associations were found between perceived dangers of speeding and intention. While there was a significant relationship between cost discrepancy scores and intention to speed for females when tested separately, it was in the direction of lower intention to speed when the perceived danger ratings were less than the presented danger ratings, and did not achieve significance when tested with presented danger rating (Table 4). No significant associations of ratings with reported speeding in the past month were found.

### **Discussion**

For every behavior, a positive mean discrepancy score indicated that respondents estimated the dangers of that behavior to themselves as less than those presented to them. This is not unexpected, as previous studies have demonstrated that people generally estimate the probability of occurrence of undesired events for themselves as less than actuarial estimates (Weinstein, 1984) and as lower than the probability for others (Weinstein & Klein, 1995). However, the intention and performance of a risky behavior are generally expected to be related to the dangers of that behavior, whether those presented to the person, or the person's own estimates.

**Table 1****Intention and performance of tobacco smoking by sex.**

	Predictor(s)	Significance
Intention to smoke—overall	Perceived danger	F[1,80] = 7.43, p = 0.0079
Intention to smoke—males	-	-
Intention to smoke—females	Cost discrepancy	F[1,33] = 10.3, p = 0.003
Smoked in past month—overall	-	-
Smoked in past month—males	-	-
Smoked in past month—females	-	-

Note: Statistics in this and succeeding tables are those associated with the coefficient(s) of interest in the linear model (F) or logistic regression model (z).

**Table 2****Intention and performance of getting drunk by sex.**

	Predictor(s)	Significance
Intention to get drunk—overall	Presented danger	F[1,79] = 39.7, p < 0.0001
	Perceived danger	F[1,79] = 12.0, p = 0.0008
Intention to get drunk—males	Presented danger	F[1,44] = 31.2, p < 0.0001
Intention to get drunk—females	Perceived danger	F[1,33] = 21.7, p < 0.0001
Drunk in past month—overall	Perceived danger	z = -4.3, p < 0.0001
Drunk in past month—males	Presented danger	z = -3.24, p = 0.001
Drunk in past month—females	Perceived danger	z = -2.74, p = 0.006

**Table 3****Intention and performance of unsafe sex by sex.**

	Predictor(s)	Significance
Intention to have unsafe sex—overall	-	-
Intention to have unsafe sex—males	-	-
Intention to have unsafe sex—females	-	-
Had unsafe sex in past month—overall	-	-
Had unsafe sex in past month—males	Presented danger	z = -2.56, p = 0.01
Had unsafe sex in past month—females	-	-

**Table 4****Intention and performance of speeding by sex.**

	Predictor(s)	Significance
Intention to speed—overall	Presented danger	F[1,78] = -3.17, p = 0.002
Intention to speed—males	-	-
Intention to speed—females	Presented danger	F[1,33] = -3.1, p = 0.004
Sped in past month—overall	-	-
Sped in past month—males	-	-
Sped in past month—females	-	-

With regard to tobacco smoking, there was no evidence that intention to smoke was related to presented dangers, and the best predictor of intention for females was the cost discrepancy score. Actual performance was unrelated to both presented and perceived dangers. In contrast, presented and perceived dangers were strongly related to both intention and performance in getting drunk. In both intention and performance, males appeared to rely more on presented danger, while females looked to perceived danger. The difference between these two behaviors, here characterized as having costs of low magnitude but high probability, is striking. It is probable that getting drunk is not assessed solely on the basis of its direct physical costs, but includes the possibility of collateral costs associated with the drunken state, such as violence or accidents.

In behaviors characterized as having high costs, but low probability of cost, a different picture emerges. For speeding while driving, presented dangers were inversely related to intention to perform these behaviors for all respondents and females. McKenna, Stanier and Lewis (1991) found that females' estimates of their driving skill were generally less overoptimistic than those of males. In contrast, there was no significant predictor of intention to have unsafe sex or speed among males, and only a single inverse relationship of presented danger ratings to performance of unsafe sex.

Smoking seems to be a good model of the incremental cost risk behavior. While males did not apparently utilize cost discrepancy in their risk assessment of smoking, females did so. As females may derive additional perceived benefits from the calming and appetite suppressing effects of nicotine, these factors may differentially affect their risk assessment of smoking.

It appears that getting drunk was not perceived primarily as an incremental cost behavior. The context of heavy drinking may be an important factor in assessing the dangers of such behavior. It is well recognized that in such contexts, violence and accidents are more common. It is likely that the direct physiological effects of heavy drinking are outweighed by the associated dangers, making it unsuitable to test the relationship of magnitude and probability of cost on risk assessment in the adolescent. One relationship that was initially expected, that of cost discrepancy scores to getting drunk in males, was not observed. While males were expected to assess getting drunk in terms of their estimates of how well they could withstand the effects of alcohol compared to the general perception of these effects, it was not observed in this sample.

The conclusion drawn from the present study is that adolescents may well incorporate costly signaling in their risk taking, and in the case of intention to smoke, females may use estimates of presented and perceived dangers of these behaviors in ways that are consistent with "strategic choice" in the costly signaling model (Grafen, 1990). Turning to whether the quality signaled or the magnitude/probability of cost interacts more strongly with cost discrepancy, there is some evidence that magnitude/probability may be more important, as the only strong relationship of cost discrepancy was with intention to smoke. If hardness as a quality had been more important, getting drunk would be expected to exhibit a relationship with cost discrepancy, despite the presence of lower probability costs such as violence or accident. Other incremental cost behaviors such as voluntary poor diet might also be influenced by costly signaling. In contrast, costly signaling does not appear to

explain either intention or performance in high cost/low probability risk taking in adolescents.

The effect of cost discrepancy on smoking may have some bearing on anti-smoking campaigns. To the extent that these widen the gap between the presented and perceived costs, such campaigns may actually make smoking more attractive as a costly signal. Particularly important might be the extent to which anti-smoking campaigns emphasize dramatic but relatively uncommon health dangers, as it would be predicted that the less adolescents had actually encountered such outcomes, the more likely they would be to discount the probability of their occurrence (Weinstein, 1989).

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# Expansion of an Alternative School Typology

Randy S. Henrich

**Abstract:** *The alternative education program remains a viable response for engaging students who would otherwise be dropouts. Raywid (1994) synthesized and advanced an alternative school typology describing organizational characteristics with related effectiveness that appeared useful for considering and improving program practices. A unique opportunity arose involving the chance to scrutinize the transformation of a school-within-a-school alternative program in consideration of Raywid's (1994) typology using a mixed-methods case study relying upon questionnaire, documentary, observational, interview data, and propositions. The findings yielded significant contributions through expansion of the typology.*

Policymakers, administrators, and educators appear to value and organize alternative schools as experiences, and expectations vary across circumstance. Raywid (1994) largely captured this variety in practice through a typology advancing alternative school organizational types by effectiveness (i.e., fully effective type I – transformative; ineffective type II – punitive; and marginally effective type III – therapeutic). Interested policymakers, administrators, and educators should find interest in distinguishing effective ways to organize alternative schools as these programs offer potentially robust approaches toward intervening in and preventing dropout activity.

## Overview

This article (a) briefly reviews Raywid's (1994) typology; (b) addresses recent alternative school literature; (c) summarizes a mixed-methods case study addressing Raywid's (1994) typology; and (d) provides recommendations for interested policymakers, administrators, and educators. With significant findings expanding Raywid's (1994) typology, the author advances that the student at risk would benefit from alternative school practices that incorporate traditional school activity and integrates progressive curricular and service delivery models.

## Raywid's Alternative School Typology

Raywid (1994) produced a typology that some scholar-practitioners commonly used while exploring alternative schools. Type I programs were usually proactive, successful, focused, innovative, and transformative; type II programs were usually reactive, last chance, and punitive; and type III programs were rehabilitative, successful with distinct disadvantages, and remedial, and returned students to mainstream schools after successful intervention. Typically, an alternative education program manifested one dominant tendency while possibly exhibiting aspects from one or both additional types.

## Alternative Schools

Recent literature about dropout prevention and alternative education pointed toward conceptual difficulties and commonalities in practices. The alternative school has emerged as one response toward addressing dropout activity, as there may be as many as 20,000 alternative organizations in the United States (Barr & Parrett, 2001) serving nearly four million students (Lehr & Lange, 2000).

## Effective Alternative Education Programs?

Dynarski and Gleason (1998) proposed that intensive middle school alternative programs held promise for effectively intervening in dropout activity while high school alternative programs showed little effect except for students who were academically motivated. Relying upon literacy scores and absentee and dropout rates over two- and three-year periods for 21 federally sponsored projects across the United States, with six organizations specifically identified as alternative programs, Dynarski and Gleason (1998) found that alternative schools imparted minimal effects modulating student dropout activity relative to regular school activity. The study appeared to have contained small sample sizes, short timeframes, and a lack of specificity as to what comprised an alternative education program, demonstrating some of the problems of determining alternative education program effectiveness.

Scholars and practitioners were confronted with differing types, sizes, methodologies, student needs, and locations while trying to distinguish successful alternative schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Alternative schools were usually highly adaptive to circumstance (Cox, 1999; Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Leiding, 2002; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). There was a recent paucity of research showing that curricular content and skill acquisition were comparable between demographically congruent groups of alternative and mainstream youth (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). What

little available research there was usually contained methodological errors (May & Copeland, 1998; Worrell, 2000). While early evaluations of alternative schools lacked control or comparison groups, sample randomization, and pre- and posttesting (Kellmayer, 1995), recent literature appeared largely populated with qualitative case studies focused on examining respective program attributes.

Recent literature describing alternative education programs typically indicated that improved student attendance, grades, and graduation rates—and decreased behavior problems *while attending* alternative schools—were markers for program effectiveness. Well-designed alternative schools were effective in helping youth who were failing in traditional settings (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Nichols & Utesch, 1998). Matching specific student needs against corresponding alternative school characteristics boded well for student outcomes (Rayle, 1998). Organizationally, effective alternative schools used democratic principles and processes as staffs sought to influence and not control students, and the students were involved in the design of their educational process (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Kellmayer, 1995; Lambert, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Leiding, 2002). Typically, youth in effective alternative schools reported high levels of engagement and *esprit de corps* (Barr & Parrett, 1997, 2001; Kellmayer, 1995; Ruebel, Ruebel, & O’Laughlin, 2001).

### **Common Alternative Education Program Characteristics**

Derived largely through empirical and qualitative studies, alternative school attributes generally ranged in terms of adopting the characteristics as listed in Figure 1.

The literature focus here and elsewhere seemingly assumed student or school deficits required redress through alternative education activity. Hence, alternative school processes appeared to typically fall along social and curricular approaches.

### **Social Deficits Approach**

Along with other youth-oriented social programs that were geared for and usually failed to adequately address social deficits (Brendtro, Ness, & Mitchell, 2001), alternative education organizational activity typically fell short of *fixing* student behavior. Some alternative schools seemingly offered student *repair* and *return* services. In a study focused on detecting if participation in an alternative middle school would decrease delinquent behaviors, youth who were temporarily placed in an alternative school and then returned to a traditional school demonstrated recurrently poor behaviors (Cox, 1999). Similarly, another alternative school that had demonstrated positive attributes of a learning environment (i.e., small class size and

**Figure 1. Typical Alternative Education Program Characteristics**

Staffing	Instruction	Focus	Nontraditional
Small school, class size, staff	Standards-based	Supportive environment	Flexible scheduling, evening hours, multiple shifts
Low student-to-teacher ratio	Innovative and varied curricula	Informal or high structure	Student and staff entry choice
Adult mentors	Functional behavior assessments	Student-orientation	Reduced school days
Leadership from either a principal or director/teacher-director	Self-paced instruction	Proactive or problem focus (i.e., last chance)	Linkages between schools and workplaces
Lack of specialized services (e.g., library, career counseling)	Vocational training involving work in the community	Character, theme, or emphasis from interests of founding teachers	Intensive counseling and monitoring
Dynamic leadership	Social skills instruction	Teacher-student and student-student relationships	Collaboration across school systems and other human service agencies
Fewer rules and less bureaucracy	Individualized and personalized learning		Collegiality with faculty and students

(Composite characteristics derived from Barr & Parrett, 1997, 2001; Chalker & Brown, 1999; Cox, 1999; Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Knutson, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Leiding, 2002; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Raywid, 1994, 2001; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Ruebel et al., 2001; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Schutz & Harris, 2001; Tobin & Sprague, 2000.)

individualized instruction) returned youth to *home* schools with similar results: The academic advantages did not carry over (Kallio & Sanders, 1999). For a yearlong transition alternative high school, youth were stigmatized and academically unprepared for returning to the traditional high school (Sakayi, 2001). In relation to a reentry alternative education school where students returned to the regular school after catching up on credits and demonstrating proper attendance, communication patterns did not reflect the desirable effect of socializing at-risk youth for traditional schools and justified rather than clarified the role of the alternative school (Souza, 1999). For some, the image of an alternative school seemingly was oriented on placing difficult youth into highly structured settings with appropriate prosocial behavioral training. In relation to Raywid's (1994) typology, this type II alternative education approach appeared to be ineffective.

In a statewide study, as grades improved while youth were enrolled in alternative schools, consideration was given to segregating the disruptive youth from the *true* alternative youth (e.g., academically challenged, disaffected) (Turpin & Hinton, 2000). Many youth enrolled in alternative schools wished to remain in those settings instead of returning to traditional schools (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Sakayi, 2001). For some at-risk youth, traditional school settings may have appeared to have been hostile and criminogenic (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Typically, youth who have prospered in alternative settings should have remained until graduation (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Kellmayer, 1995). In a cross-state study, alternative school students perceived a high degree of one-on-one relationships in alternative school settings and a sense of closeness with each other and alternative school staffs (Castleberry & Enger, 1998). In a separate study presenting similar findings by contrasting student perceptions of past (traditional) and present (alternative) school environments, students "reported significantly more positive experiences in their interactions with administrators, teachers, and counselors/case workers at [the alternative school]" and "students rated the overall environment of the alternative school significantly higher than their prior school" (Saunders & Saunders, 2001, p. 22). According to Castleberry and Enger (1998), alternative school attendance led toward increasing student positive attitudes about school and life (student perceptions about their outlooks occurred during their enrollment in alternative schools). The social implications of alternative education activity indicated that distinguishing organizational effectiveness should account for student interest, aptitude, and willingness to learn (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). From the social deficits approach, distinguishing the successful transformation of disaffected, nonconformist at-risk students elicited a set of detectable emergent properties.

Indicators of behavioral achievement for alternative education programs include: (a) low rate of serious code of conduct violations, (b) high rate of daily attendance, (c) increased percentage of students who felt good about attending school, (d) improved rate of attendance from previous to present school programs, (e) low number of suspensions/expulsions, (f) acquisition and use of social skills (e.g., anger and peer mediation), and (g) internalized locus of control/responsibility (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; May & Copeland, 1998). Standing in contrast to the social aspects of alternative education organizational activity were academic issues.

## **Curricular Deficits Approach**

With a focus on increasing student academic achievement, the alternative school staff usually seeks indicators for determining organizational effectiveness. The emergent properties of academic achievement in alternative schools included percentages and rates of students who: (a) graduate with a diploma, (b) earn a GED, (c) improve their grade point average, (d) earn credits toward graduation, (e) return to the regular high and earned passing grades, (f) improve scores on standardized tests, and (g) reduce failing grades (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Yet, the qualities of these indicators appeared to remain subject to contending values. For example, although the GED is usually held in lighter regard than the high school diploma, GED recipients on average have higher school capability (Wayman, 2001).

## **Curricular and Social Deficit Models, Reconsidered**

As alternative school practitioners focused on academic and social deficits, students and organizations appeared to emerge as rational objects subject to appropriate managerial manipulation. Leaders of alternative schools "should conduct the most broad-based evaluation possible, including an analysis of all pertinent affective and cognitive data that are available . . . Academic achievement . . . should be considered one component of a comprehensive program evaluation" (Kellmayer, 1995, p. 128). As Raywid (1994) and Kellmayer (1995) posited, effective alternative schools appeared to focus on providing highly relevant and experiential learning opportunities through staff and student transformation. The institutional distinction and integration between social and curricular approaches of the education process apparently persisted separate from and as part of the alternative school. Effective education is *transformative* (i.e., problem posing and generative) (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Danielson, 2002; Eisner, 1994; Lambert, 2003; Leiding, 2002; Ramos, 1993). Other alternative school considerations included locations and relationships with traditional schools.

## **Site Considerations**

Configured in a variety of settings, alternative schools were constituted as (a) schools-within-schools (located on related, traditional campuses), (b) districtwide separate programs, (c) regional programs serving multiple districts, and (d) co-located with vocational-technical centers (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Site consideration was critical; placing an alternative school in an enriched socioeconomic environment has potentially powerful academic and social consequences for students (Kellmayer, 1995). Other site factors regarded unwanted cultural assimilation or conflicts at host locations, transportation, competing rule sets, and ready access to social, career, technological, and medical services (Kellmayer, 1995). Physical environmental considerations should include using facilities that evoke professional regard (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

## **Relational Considerations**

As modifying school system factors to a lesser restrictive extent should accommodate at-risk youth and returning dropouts (Wayman, 2001), nurturing a *caring community* approach in alternative schools may prove to be efficacious. Factors for fostering a caring community in a school setting included: (a) establishing trust



and support, (b) developing a sense of common good (c) defining responsibility in terms of personal and group accountability, (d) maximizing involvement, (e) building *esprit de corps*, (f) establishing honesty through open communications, and (g) connecting with extended neighborhood and community (Splittgerber & Allen, 1996). While cultivating family-like relationships within alternative schools appeared conducive toward effective organizational activity (Kellmayer, 1995), promoting prosocial relationships between traditional and alternative schools likewise advanced effective school activity (Knutson, 1996).

## **Case Study Summary**

Acting as the director-teacher seeking to transform a school-within-a-school alternative education program under scrutiny to bolster student performance, the researcher followed mixed-methods case study procedures, and corroborated and extended Raywid's (1994) typology describing alternative schools and related effectiveness. In addition to sampling student and parental, guardian, and volunteer characterizations of program activity through questionnaires at the beginning and end of the research period, the researcher collected, annotated, coded, and recoded case study data informational bits from documents, observation logs, and interviews using NVivo software to detect themes. The thematic characterizations included coding program activities reflecting propositions, Raywid's (1994) typology, Danielson's (2002) school improvement rubrics, and types of participatory activity. The research focus was on detecting typological indications while transitioning an organization toward improving student performance. Through this process, the researcher corroborated and extended Raywid's (1994) typology with a new type of alternative school offering significant implications for interested policymakers, administrators, and educators.

## **Propositions**

The transition of the alternative education program from a type III to type I that corroborated Raywid's (1994) typology should evince an incremental change of characterization of the program's primary focus from meeting students' social, emotional, and basic academic needs toward a thematic emphasis on achievement and enrichment, and changing curricular activity from having a remedial focus toward a participatory, problem-posing learning approach. Some alternative propositions that disputed or extended Raywid's (1994) typology should show continuing or evolving characterization of the focus of program activity as behavioral modification or the focus of the program's instruction as lacking personal or social relevance.

## **Problem Statement**

The alternative school offers an option for disaffected and disenfranchised students who would otherwise drop out of school. For the past 30 years, a growing number of alternative schools across the United States have helped at-risk students achieve academic success (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Meyers, 2001; Reimer & Cash, 2003). There has been extensive inquiry into a variety of alternative schools describing effective practices by approach,

such as Raywid's (1994) typology advancing alternative school effectiveness by type I, transformative; type II, punitive; and, type III, therapeutic (Kellmayer, 1995; Lehr & Lange, 2000, 2003; Raywid, 1994). However, there has been little formal inquiry into corroborating, disputing, or extending Raywid's (1994) typology as means to describe and promote effective alternative school practices. A case study was conducted in order to confirm, challenge, or expand this typology in a natural and unique setting while leadership and managerial practices were introduced to transform an alternative education program from a marginally effective type III to a more effective type I approach as presented by Raywid's (1994) typology.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the mixed-methods case study was to explore Raywid's (1994) alternative school typology through inquiry of leadership and managerial practices used during a transition from a type III therapeutic to type I transformative program for an inclusive dropout prevention alternative middle and high school program that serves 65 students in northeastern Arizona. The researcher of this study used a single-case design to provide a holistic perspective of transformational activities of an alternative education program. Through inquiry methods involving direct and participant observation, documentation, questionnaires, and interviews, the study corroborated and expanded Raywid's (1994) typology.

## **Significance**

As contemporary alternative education programs are highly adaptive to circumstances (Cox, 1999; Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Tobin & Sprague, 2000), the boundaries between these programs and respective context appeared to be less than clear. Thus, empirical inquiry through the case study methodology appeared appropriate as this study determined whether Raywid's (1994) typology was sufficient or whether some alternative set of explanations was more appropriate (Yin, 1994). As the leadership of the alternative education program attempted to transform an inclusive alternative education program, a unique opportunity emerged for contrasting program effectiveness along Raywid's (1994) typology. School leaders, practitioners, and participants benefited from the emerging explanations surrounding alternative education activity.

## **Case Study Findings**

The case study's findings include typological and propositional characterizations. In addition, the researcher found an emergent fourth type of alternative school titled *student-focused*.

## **Raywid's Typology and Effective School Practice**

As the case study data projected, Raywid's (1994) typology largely described alternative education program practices. The case study data advanced a participatory image of the alternative education program with a staff that appeared to have departed from traditional practices using negotiated and consequential means and goals while focusing on meeting and challenging students' basic and, in some cases, advanced social, emotional, and academic needs.

During and at the end of the research period, within Raywid's (1994) typology, the program seemingly emerged predominantly as a type III rehabilitative school with participatory regard including aspects of type I and type II features. The staff departed from traditional instructional approaches and began to ease in challenging activities. Participatory characterizations suggested that the staff established and refined behavioral management approaches to foster student self-management. In addition, the program staff sought to meet student needs through adaptive practices and individualized placement at the alternative program, at the regular school, or both. From a student-focused type IV perspective, behavior management prominently appeared as a driving characteristic along with attendant organizational patterns including *behavior management*, *relational*, *adaptive*, and *another chance* (Table 1).

**Table 1**

Research period typological coding.

	References
Type I - Transformative	
Fulfilling	5
Challenging	15
Popular	3
Choice	6
Innovative	3
Departure	16
Total	48
Type II - Punitive	
Skills and drill	1
Behavior modification	8
Last chance	5
Total	14
Type III - Therapeutic	
Rehabilitation	42
Remediation	15
High maintenance	11
Total	68
Type IV - Student-Focused	
Behavior management	60
Relational	7
Adaptive	36
Another chance	8
Total	111

As characterized by participatory sampling through questionnaires, the program appeared to have remained well regarded with relevant instruction and continuing challenges in program areas

involving opportunities for learning and climate. Questionnaire data collected at the beginning and end of the research period included participatory characterizations through *School Effectiveness Questionnaires* (Baldwin, Coney, Fardig, & Thomas, 1993; Baldwin, Coney, & Thomas, 1993) of program activity as noted in Tables 2-11. Respondents were instructed to score questions along the following Likert scale: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral (parent edition)/no opinion (high school student edition), 4 – agree, and 5 – strongly agree. T-tests were completed by characterization to determine significant mean differences of interpreted program activity between pre-transitional (September 2003) and transitional (December 2003) periods.

### **Behavior Management**

As determined through case study evidence relating to classroom management practices and individual contracts negotiated between staff and high school students, *behavior management* emerged as a consideration not listed in Raywid's (1994) typology. *Behavior management* appeared to have projected staff intentionality toward promoting student self-management and self-discipline. Further, *behavior management* seemingly emerged as a program focus toward managing participatory relationships and activities with emphasis towards negotiating, promoting, and educating appropriate behaviors on individual and group bases.

### **Relational**

As shown through case study evidence relating to participatory relations, particularly between staff and students and their families, *relational* activity seemingly manifested as a characteristic not made explicit in Raywid's (1994) typology. Relational activity seemingly advanced staff intentionality towards fostering and bolstering participatory trust and dialogue as precursors for sustained academic activity.

### **Adaptive**

As illustrated through case study evidence relating to program flexibility and individualization, *adaptive* surfaced as an organizational trait not addressed in Raywid's (1994) typology. *Adaptive* appeared as the staff's response to a variety of student dispositions, needs, and goals.

### **Another Chance.**

As noted through case study evidence relating to programmatic efforts to attract and support school dropouts seeking school opportunities, *another chance* seemingly manifested as an organizational feature not made clear in Raywid's (1994) typology. The program's staff apparently sought to serve students who had not previously experienced success in academic settings in congruity with the organizational emphasis for offering academic opportunities to prevent dropout activity and return dropouts to school.

### **Extension of Raywid's Typology**

Raywid (1994) synthesized and described three types of alternative schools through metaphors, intentions, foci, and assumptions, as summarized in Figure 2.

**Table 2**

Student characterization of program's positive school climate.

	December 2003 N = 26		September 2003 N = 31	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Teachers and students at my school trust and respect each other.	3.69	0.97	3.93	0.81
2. Teachers are approachable, so I feel comfortable asking for help.	4.42	0.76	4.61	0.80
3. Absenteeism is not a problem at my school.*	3.72	0.98	3.64	0.64
4. The school rewards student and teachers for their achievements.**	3.77	0.76	3.93	0.81
5. Students and teachers at school take good care of the school building and grounds.	4.19	0.85	4.32	0.65
6. Students feel safe at school.	4.35	0.80	4.10	0.98
7. Students are proud of the appearance of the school building/grounds.	4.27	0.72	4.19	0.83
8. Teachers care about their students as individuals.	4.23	0.91	4.55	0.57
9. Teachers like the subjects they teach.	4.11	0.77	4.10	0.79
10. Students are proud to be at this school.	4.65	0.56	4.23	0.84

\*December 2003 N = 25.

\*\*September 2003 N = 30.

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(10) = -0.27$ ,  $p < .05$ .**Table 3**

Parent/guardian/volunteer characterization of program's positive school climate.

	December 2003 N = 15		September 2003 N = 10	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. An atmosphere of respect and trust exists in the school.	4.47	0.52	4.20	1.23
2. Social and cultural differences are respected in the school.	4.60	0.51	4.30	0.95
3. Students and teachers have a positive attitude toward school.	4.60	0.63	4.00	1.05
4. Students are recognized for their accomplishment.	4.77	0.43	4.30	0.95
5. School staff members and students work together to keep the school clean and attractive.	4.47	0.64	4.60	0.70
6. Students feel that the school is a good place to be.	4.35	0.70	4.50	1.08
7. The teachers and staff consider the interests and needs of each student.	4.87	0.35	4.30	0.95

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(7) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ .**Table 4**

Student characterization of program's frequent assessment/monitoring of student achievement.

	December 2003 N = 26		September 2003 N = 31	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Teachers keep track of how students are doing in their school work.	4.54	0.58	4.48	0.51
2. Grades are a good indication of ability and effort.	4.31	0.88	4.23	0.88
3. Teachers tell students how students are doing on tests/assigned school work.	4.04	0.82	4.26	0.73
4. Teachers keep parents informed about student progress in class.	4.46	0.65	3.93	0.93

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(4) = 0.72$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 5**

Parent/guardian/volunteer characterization of program's frequent assessment/monitoring of student achievement.

	December 2003 N = 15		September 2003 N = 10	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. The school keeps track of each student's performance.	4.53	0.52	4.60	0.52
2. Student performance is evaluated in a variety of ways.	4.47	0.64	4.20	0.63
3. Parents are kept informed on how well their children are doing in school.	4.73	0.46	4.80	0.42
4. The school quickly informs parents when their children are not doing well.	4.67	0.47	4.70	0.48
5. Students are kept informed of how well they are doing in school.	4.73	0.46	4.70	0.48

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(5) = -0.41$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 6**

Student characterization of program's emphasis on basic skills.

	December 2003 N = 26		September 2003 N = 31	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. The things learned in English class are important.	4.11	0.71	4.19	0.75
2. The things learned in social studies class are important.	3.96	0.96	4.22	0.76
3. The things learned in mathematics class are important.	4.23	0.76	4.29	0.86
4. The things learned in science class are important.	4.08	0.89	4.10	0.79
5. Students will be able to make good use of what they learn in English class.	4.35	0.63	4.26	0.73
6. Students will be able to make good use of what they learn in social studies class.	4.23	0.82	4.03	0.87
7. Students will be able to make good use of what they learn in mathematics class.	4.15	0.97	4.23	0.88
8. Students will be able to make good use of what they learn in science.	4.08	0.93	4.19	0.75

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(8) = -0.82$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 7**

Parent/guardian/volunteer characterization of program's emphasis on basic skills.

	December 2003 N = 15		September 2003 N = 10	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Students are taught to apply basic skills and problem-solving skills in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies.	4.33	0.62	4.30	0.67
2. The school provides learning activities to help students with special needs or interests.	4.60	0.51	4.50	0.71

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(2) = 1.86$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 8**

Student characterization of program's maximum opportunities for learning.

	December 2003 N = 26		September 2003 N = 31	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. School offers a variety of elective classes.	3.88	1.23	3.90	0.87
2. Homework assignments are challenging.	3.58	1.03	3.13	1.06
3. Classes are seldom interrupted by activities, announcements, or other people.	3.46	1.44	3.42	0.93
4. Students have the opportunity to work on lessons with other students.	3.88	0.86	3.97	0.80
5. The material presented in class is often interesting.	3.96	0.77	3.74	0.68
6. The way the teachers present the material makes the subjects interesting.	3.61	0.90	3.77	0.67
7. The way my textbooks/workbooks present information helps students learn.	3.88	0.82	4.13	0.76
8. The school provides many extracurricular activities.	3.69	0.97	3.77	0.84
9. Students get what they need from this school.	4.11	0.82	4.39	0.62
10. Teachers know their subject areas well.	4.50	0.58	4.39	0.72
11. Teachers can explain material in a way that I can understand.	4.42	0.70	4.39	0.80
12. Teachers are well prepared.	4.31	0.84	4.19	0.83

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(12) = -0.13$ ,  $p < .05$ .**Table 9**

Parent/guardian/volunteer characterization of program's maximum opportunities for learning.

	December 2003 N = 15		September 2003 N = 10	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Teachers spend as much time as needed on instruction.	4.33	0.72	4.40	0.70
2. There are few disruptions to instruction in the school.	3.73	1.03	3.40	0.97
3. Field trips and other activities are used appropriately to support instruction.	4.20	0.77	3.80	0.63
4. School courses are varied to meet the different needs, interests, and abilities of students.	4.73	0.46	4.40	0.70
5. Students have enough opportunities to learn with and from each other.*	4.60	0.51	4.33	0.71
6. Teachers are adequately prepared for their teaching fields.	4.80	0.41	4.40	0.52

\*September 2003 N = 9.

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(6) = 3.83$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 10**

Student characterization of program's high expectations.

	December 2003 N = 26		September 2003 N = 31	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Teachers encourage students to do their best on assigned work and tests.*	4.50	0.65	4.47	0.63
2. Teachers expect all students to do well in school.	4.38	0.80	4.52	0.51
3. Teachers challenge students to learn as much as they can.	4.42	0.64	4.29	0.82

\*September 2003 N = 30.

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(3) = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ .**Table 11**

Parent/guardian/volunteer characterization of program's high expectations.

	December 2003 N = 15		September 2003 N = 10	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. School staff members set high, but appropriate and achievable, goals for students.	4.73	0.46	4.40	0.70
2. Students and parents know what the school expects of them.	4.53	0.52	4.40	0.52
3. All students are expected to work toward high standards.	4.53	0.64	4.40	0.52

Note: There was no significant effect for means difference,  $t(3) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .05$ .**Figure 2. Raywid's Typological Characteristics**

Type	Metaphors	Intentions	Foci	Assumptions
I	Transformative Popular Choice	Thematic Innovative Departure	Long lasting improvement in student performance Shared, experiential, and relevant instruction	School-student match Normal staff-student ratio
II	Last chance Sentenced Assignment Soft jail	Behavioral modification Punitive	Extension of traditional programs	Student deficits
III	Community Referral Therapy	Remedial Rehabilitative Return students to traditional settings	Social-emotional needs Student success while in alternative programs	Student deficits Low staff-student ratios Costly to operate

As description *is* prescription (Edie, 1964; Jacques, 1996; Krell, 1992), Raywid (1994) proposed that type I alternative schools were more effective to operate than types II and III. Considering Heidegger's ontic (Krell, 1992) and Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphorical means toward understanding the limitations and obscurities of seeing past advanced scientific, self-contained forms of truth, Raywid's (1994) typology seemingly offered a comprehensive image of alternative school activity. Yet, there emerged a set of organizational characteristics indicating the presence of a fourth type as summarized in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Student-Focused Type Characteristics**

Type	Metaphors	Intentions	Foci	Assumptions
IV	Cybernetic Another chance Option	Adaptive Challenging Individualized Cross-boundary student placement	Student-centered Self-management Sensitive to circumstance Performance-based	School-student match Integrated relationship with traditional school

To see past the ontic forms presupposing comprehensive consideration, the scholar and practitioner can rely upon separate scales and images to gain insight into the respective types and related characteristics. Scholar and practitioner regard for the aims and purposes of education hint at the complexities for each advanced alternative school type as tentatively summarized in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Alternative School Types—Educational Aims and Purposes**

Type	Aims	Purposes
I	Ideological, Progressive	Transformation
II	Behavioral, Orthodoxy	Compliance
III	Humanistic	Participation
IV	Emancipatory, Progressive	Empowerment

### Implications

Even as these aims and purposes are not mutually exclusive, the scholar and practitioner may become concerned with the type I ideological approach residing in a particular theme that may transform *and limit or skew* participatory perspective. In and across context, as participatory interpretations of compliant behaviors may vary from being prosocial to punitive, the scholar and practitioner may be apprehensive about using type II orthodox measures construable as punitive to help guide an immature student toward behaving appropriately. To gain student type III participation-as-therapy, -remediation, or -rehabilitation engenders scholarly and practitioner images about lowered expectations and student defects. What the scholar and practitioner may gain from type IV student-focused

activity involves bolstering participatory investment and voice into and positive control over respective educational expectations and experiences. While the rudimentary nature of this revised typology appears to leave the scholar and practitioner with questions about applicability and efficacy across organizations, a leadership and managerial approach that may significantly bolster student achievement involves establishing and/or incorporating type IV programs and characteristics into alternative education practices. Such practices include promoting student self-management, using performance-based and challenging curricula, nurturing relationships,

developing and providing options, being adaptive to circumstance, and retaining, establishing, or enriching integrative relationships with traditional schools so students may choose to access educational opportunities across boundaries.

### Recommendations for Policymakers, Administrators, and Educators

Interested practitioners should consider integrating alternative education program and traditional school activity. In addition, practitioners should promote, establish, and/or transform curricular and service delivery models toward incorporating self-management, performance-based, challenging, and individualized characteristics.

### Integrating Alternative and Traditional Schools

While the literature readily promotes integrating schools within communities for purposes of improving school and student performance (Danielson, 2002; Lambert, 2003; Leiding, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002), what appears to be missing is the school within the community. As alternative schools tend to operate as stand-alone organizations separate from traditional schools for a variety of reasons, the advantages of shared economies-of-scale, educational opportunities, and social participation and dialogue across school boundaries diminish or disappear. The at-risk student who takes advantage of the opportunity to and succeeds in alternative *and* traditional school settings will come away with different and improved academic and social experiences and expectations. For traditional school participants not trapped into negative perceptions about alternative schools and students, working along with reform-minded alternative school staffs and serving successful alternative students should spark opportunities demonstrating the

value of adaptive and nontraditional administrative and educational approaches benefiting a variety of students in and out of the alternative school system. There are, of course, challenges toward this integrative relationship as alternative and traditional school activities do emerge ontologically as different and potentially oppositional.

Without a shared vision and clear communication between leaders and key staff of traditional and alternative schools, there appears to be little chance that an effective, integrative relationship between schools will develop. As alternative and traditional schools typically vary approaches for promoting student activity, establishing and refining cross-building expectations becomes important. As demonstrated by the findings in the case study, there are complex and contentious images of the alternative school and student that are role-, relational-, and context-bound. For the traditional schoolteacher who faults the student for not succeeding without introspection, there may be concerns about how that same student is finding success in an alternative school, to include questions about the alternative school's quality. For the frustrated-turned-elated parent who now finds his or her youth engaged in school, and attributes this change in behavior to an alternative school, an entirely different image emerges. In an integrative relationship, paradoxical and postmodernistic demands emerge as traditional and alternative school leaders and staff work toward common ends using uncommon means.

### ***Student-Focused Curricular and Service Delivery Model***

As well substantiated in literature promoting Deweyan educational practices embracing progressive curricular and service delivery approaches, students who find relevance and are involved in the design of their educational processes typically achieve success in school (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Goodman, 1999; Lambert, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Leiding, 2002). As identified through the case study, characteristics of a student-focused curricular and service delivery model for alternative schools include *behavior management*, *relational*, *adaptive*, and *another chance*. Each metaphor beckons images that have advantages and disadvantages.

### ***Behavior Management***

Dewey (1916) framed instilling discipline in the student not as a matter of imposing consequences but as means to help the student manage self. As amply presented in the findings of the case study, a prominent feature of the cultural system of action under scrutiny included behavioral management characteristics. The student and parent/guardian who invest in the school process by participating in the creation of performance goals and identifying appropriate behaviors probably differ in disposition than the student and parent/guardian who are the recipients of what others value as appropriate. Using individualized contracts and credit maps are powerful means for shifting locus of control toward self-management by cueing performance and helping instill student discipline. Unfortunately, the notion of behavior management carries with it, for some, negative connotations.

Scholarly indignation with type II behavioral modification programs appears based upon the assumption that such programs

use correctional assumptions and processes with little or no regard for adapting educational activity to meet the student's learning needs. The distinction between modification and management may not be clear, even as the former appears as a top-down student repair service while the latter emerges as an approach eliciting the student's participation. Using individualized contracts as basis for addressing problem behaviors stands at odds with traditional classroom management approaches advancing singular rule sets and requires an adroit handling of student and stakeholder regard about discipline matters. Ideally, as the student gains voice, confidence, and control over his or her educational process, problem behaviors diminish and desist.

### ***Relational***

As suggested by literature describing many alternative school cultures, numerous programs exude a warmth and friendliness where students feel welcome (Bailey & Stegelin, 2003; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Kellmayer, 1995; Leiding, 2002; McGee, 2001). The case study data suggest that developing trust between the student and staff through dialogue usually precedes sustained student productivity. As each student is valued through staff regard over matters academic and personal, the student finds a connectedness and anchor within the alternative school and one or more caring, adult mentors. Staff-student ratios facilitating ready access are an important variable for type IV alternative schools.

### ***Adaptive***

As organizations evolve in today's postmodern world, there emerges a compelling need for personalized and contextually sensitive approaches that dignify the participants (Handy, 1996). As such, the effective alternative school is the postmodern response to the traditional school that relies upon bureaucratic models of yes-teryear, as efficiency, consistency, and standardization are prized curricular and service delivery activities. Student performance is linked with how well the alternative school staff is able to engage respective dispositions and needs (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Toward this end, the use of relevant, experiential, challenging, and performance-based curricula bodes well for improving student performance in type IV alternative schools. Such an approach is incongruent with Carnegie units, scripted course materials outlining activities by time allocations, and grade-level specified activities. For an integrative relationship between traditional and alternative schools, arranging dissimilar curricular and service delivery models constitutes leadership and managerial challenges that are still nonetheless doable and, importantly, beneficial for the student at risk.

### ***Another Chance***

Lange and Sletten (1995, 2002) advanced a fourth type of alternative school titled *second chance*. As Lange and Sletten (1995) emphasized the remedial and social-emotional focus of such programs, Raywid's (1994) model appeared to remain unchanged. The type IV student-focused type, by contrast, focuses toward empowering and emancipating the student who has not previously had success in academic settings. Still, Lange and Sletten (1995, 2002) presented an important alternative school dimension not explicitly



addressed in Raywid's (1994) typology, and that concerns how many alternative schools offer students additional chances to achieve academic goals. Except for the rarest of circumstance as a student may present a significant threat to the safety of others or self, limiting student opportunities through denying entry into school to engage in and grow from prosocial, educational activity appears counter-productive for the student and society at large. While the term *second chance* suggests egalitarian regard for the student at risk, it may limit the number of opportunities a student at risk may need to succeed. *Another chance*, on the other hand, signifies an alternative school approach that seeks to truly leave no child behind.

## Summary

As the policymaker, administrator, and educator organize alternative schools based on respective experiences and expectations, consideration should include regard for an expanded typology characterizing and advancing effective practices. As alternative education has emerged as one potentially robust approach for intervening in and preventing dropout activity, questions relating to school organization and curricular and service deliveries remain important.

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