

**Alternative Education
and
The At-Risk Student**

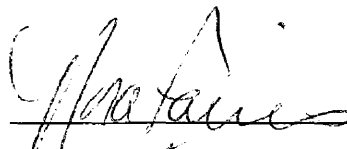
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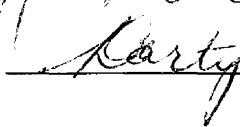
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First Reader



Second Reader



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Introduction

“These darn kids today...”

Consider the following four students:¹

Lonnie is a noticeably good-looking, well-dressed African-American young man with an excellent physique and a pleasant, sincere manner. Average size at birth, he is the third son in a family of four boys and triplet girls. School records show that excessive absences and tardies began in kindergarten. By the end of his elementary school career, his file begins to take on the appearance of a juvenile delinquent’s rap sheet. Repeated physical assaults on other students and slashing a teacher’s tires at age ten are a few of the brushstrokes in a dismal picture of the school scene for Lonnie. At home? His mother has severe mental problems and is often hospitalized. His parents divorce. Lonnie is placed in the Children’s Shelter and takes refuge at the DARES Center (for battered women) with his mother several times. He lives a short time in another city with his father, and is made a temporary ward of the court before his twelfth birthday.

Evaluation by a school psychologist during the fall of his fourth grade year tells of a sensitive boy who makes little eye contact and is slow to respond. Appearing quiet, moody, and withdrawn when the evaluation begins, the psychologist notes that Lonnie has attended five different schools, repeated first grade, and that absences and tardies are a major problem. Although standardized tests show he has low average intellectual potential and is not qualified for Special Education, he has adequate attention and persistence.

Vision and hearing tests show no deficit. Lonnie has academic problems in all areas especially reading and writing but “shows real strength in art.” the psychologist notes that by the end of the session, Lonnie was very happy, “singing to himself,” and asked if he could come back again. A final note indicates that he could benefit from one-on-one help and positive reinforcement.

Alarm clocks are purchased by the school district to help the mother get Lonnie to school on time. A fifth grade teacher notes “A serious problem exists here!” and Lonnie is moved on to middle school.

With his mother on Aid for Dependent Children, Lonnie qualifies for the free lunch program. Within the first five weeks at middle school, he has assaulted a teacher and several students resulting in suspensions. By December of the same year, he has already missed twenty-one days of school. Referred to the school district’s attendance officer, a hearing is set. The parent fails to appear. Discipline problems escalate second semester with eight physical assaults on students (usually female) and a threat to a staff member. There is a letter to Lonnie’s parent on file, signed by four teachers, expressing their concern and asking for a conference. A handwritten note indicates “no response.” With the home phone disconnected, communication is conducted by letter. In May, the court rules that reasonable efforts have been made and that the child should be removed from the home. The next day, Lonnie threatens a staff member and is suspended for five days. The recommendation is made that he attend the district’s alternative school in the fall.

In the fall, he returns to his same school and by the end of September, he has been suspended three times for repeated acts of threats and assaults against female students. In mid-October there is a meeting to transfer Lonnie to the alternative school. Mother does not attend. Lonnie is suspended pending enrollment at the alternative school. Early December, Lonnie enrolls but is a

no-show until early January. In the first two-month period at the alternative school, he receives disciplinary action for “throwing gang signs,” having a pocket pager, and using profanity. During this time, he also faces an expulsion hearing for being on the grounds of his old elementary school with a BB gun and threatening students. In April, he transfers out of the district to again live with his father. Two weeks later, he returns to the alternative school. He receives no passing grades during this semester due to his excessive absences.

Returning in the fall, Lonnie is an eighth grade student. The alternative school uses the same attendance policy as their district and students may not miss more than two days per three-week marking period or they receive no credit. Grades are A, B, C, or No Credit. Due to the structure of the alternative setting, Lonnie has the same teachers he’d had the previous year. This time he passes all his classes for the entire semester. Subscribing to research results that say retention is detrimental to children, Lonnie is moved up to his age-appropriate high school classes in January of that year with the understanding that this is a choice and if he wants to return to the middle school wing, he may do so. If he chooses to stay, he can earn a semester’s worth of high school credits during what would have been his eighth grade year. Lonnie chooses to stay and passes all his classes, earning six credits toward graduation. The following year he earns eleven more credits and report cards show “cooperative, pleasant attitude” in every class. To date, he is passing all classes this year and continues to excel in art and physical education. Lonnie is on schedule to graduate in the spring of 2000.

Mandy is an eighteen-year-old senior who will graduate in June. Her school records show yearly photos of a beautiful, smiling, blonde child. Records indicate that she qualifies for the free lunch program and that she has one younger sister. A self-evaluation essay says she is “responsible, musical,

imaginative, and enjoys helping people.” She likes to “check out guys, hang out with friends and sing in the choir.” Standardized tests place her in the low- to mid-range in intelligence, scoring low consistently in science. In middle school, a letter to her parent informs the mother that Mandy “did not achieve a moderate score on the state MEAP test.” Born to a single, nineteen-year-old mother who completed high school, Mandy has excellent attendance throughout her school career.

In elementary school, reports show several D’s as early as second grade. However, she receives all C’s in fourth grade and mostly A’s and B’s in sixth grade. In middle school, her grades decline and in eighth grade, she has only two passing grades - Health and Chorus.

Moving to a neighboring district, she begins her high school career there and receives exemplary grades in swimming and chorale while her academic classes show low and failing grades. Transferring back to her prior district at the beginning of her third year of high school, she has passed only eleven of the seventeen credits she has taken. Failing everything except Math, she is referred to the alternative high school for the next fall.

Receiving awards consistently for perfect attendance and *high* grades, Mandy excels in her Drama class at the alternative high school. Her Strong Interest Inventory results show that she is Artistic and Social. Thriving in the small classroom setting, she is a role model for younger students in the broadly-graded classes at the school and participates in Leadership Conferences with other alternative high schools throughout the state. She has passed every class and has made up some of her missing credits by doing independent studies and receiving credit for working at White Castle where her boss writes a glowing report noting that she “excels at her job!”

Looking forward to graduation, teachers are helping Mandy complete forms for the ACT tests, financial aid, and college applications as she plans to attend the local community college and perhaps pursue a career in the area of computer programming.

Jake is the fourth child in a family of five sons born to twenty-five-year-old parents who are still married to each other. School records indicate that he is an eighteen-year-old Caucasian who has lived in the same house for most of his life. His parents did not graduate from high school. Jake tests high on standardized tests, his vision and hearing were normal, all shots completed on schedule, and he qualifies for the free lunch program.

His grades were average in elementary school and teacher notes indicate that he is intelligent and nice but forgetful about turning in homework. In fourth grade, a teacher notes "Jake is smart.....sensitive about small stature." This is the first note of several throughout the following years that mentions his small size. In June of that year, a notation says "Nice boy with a huge chip on his shoulder....very short fuse and been in many fights." He is evaluated by the school psychologist (fourth grade) who comments about Jake's "episodes of explosive and disrespectful behavior....he is a small boy and the object of teasing." The following year, the elementary school psychologist again makes an entry in Jake's school records, "explosive temper outbursts which are quite dramatic and disruptive. He is very small for his age, and he has taken a lot of teasing from his peers. Despite his small size, he is very athletic."

The only entries in his records during his three middle school years show that his grades begin declining with numerous D's and an occasional E but teachers' comments show he is "a pleasure to have in class." Beginning in second semester of seventh grade, his attendance declines and a note indicates that his parents do not attend a conference as requested.

By October of his freshman year in high school, Jake has reached the limit on absences and is placed on academic probation for failing grades. His home phone has been disconnected and contact with parents is made through the mail. His second year in high school shows low grades and poor attendance patterns and he is referred to the district's alternative high school. Behind in credits when he enters the new school, the school's choice theory (Glasser) is shared with Jake. He is encouraged to set goals and evaluate his progress periodically. Since graduation is his one long-term goal, he is reminded that he must have forty credits to graduate by his target date of June. He is several credits behind schedule when he enters the alternative school. Absences, and especially tardies, continue to be a problem for Jake. He earns only half of his credits (three) the first semester. There is some improvement the second semester as he passes all four of his academic classes but does not receive his two credits from the TEC program. Due to his attendance, he must forfeit his place in this highly selective program.

A gifted artist, Jake's quick wit and wide base of knowledge make him a favorite among staff. Seldom seen without a book in his hand, Jake is doing independent study to gain two additional credits he needs to make his June graduation a possibility. Currently in the fifth of six marking periods for this semester, Jake had one marking period of "No Credits" due to excessive absences. His advisory teacher notes "Don't order the graduation announcements yet."

Angel, a seventeen-year-old Hispanic young lady, has consistently tested in the mid- to high-range on standardized tests. Her father is a high school graduate and her mother completed ninth grade. Her family is comprised of eight children born over a span of twelve years. Angel is the seventh child and qualifies for the free lunch program. Records indicate that her vision and

hearing were normal and that she received all necessary shots for kindergarten.

Throughout elementary school, her report cards show all A's and B's. Attendance records in Kindergarten show forty days being missed that year. In middle school, her grades were usually above average and there are repeated comments that she was "a pleasure to have in class" and was a "good citizen." Attendance shows a decline in each of the three years in middle school, with an average absence of twenty-two days per school year. In May of her eighth grade year, there is a copy of a letter of warning to her parents regarding a "physical altercation" Angel had with another student.

Her first semester in high school shows a marked decline in grades. She receives a B in physical education and two D's and three E's in her academic subjects. She is referred to the district's alternative high school. (Her younger brother is already a student at that school.)

Angel's records indicate that she passes all six classes her first semester at the new school and receives eleven credits the following year. During her second year of high school, her mother leaves the family and moves to Chicago. Conversations with Angel imply there was an abusive relationship that her mother could no longer endure. The older children have already moved out of the home leaving Angel and her younger brother and her father in the home. In the fall of 1998, the father leaves and moves to Texas and later to Mexico. For a number of months, Angel and Jose are on their own. Both siblings work in fast food restaurants after school to pay their living expenses. Records indicate that an older sibling moved back into the home recently. Tardies continue to be a problem for Angel as she is dependent on others for a ride to school. Working above grade level in Language Arts and Drama, Angel is mature, well-liked, and well on her way to graduating from high school in June, 2000.

Chapter One

The term “At Risk”

Slim and None: The Poor’s Choices²

Four students. What common ground do they share? Race? Gender? Family composition? History of discipline problems? Intellectual ability? Attendance problems? No. Yet all four are students at an alternative high school for at-risk students. The term at-risk has been around for decades but replaced *disadvantaged* only during the past fifteen or twenty years. How and why is a child labeled “at risk”? Is at-risk education just a trendy term that is being used to once again segregate poor and minority students from mainstream classrooms?

In the 1700’s, Benjamin Rush argued:

The children of poor people form a great proportion of all communities. Their ignorance and vices when neglected are not confined to themselves; they associate with and contaminate the children of persons in the higher ranks of society (qtd. in Takaki, 22).

Disguised as a positive force for our nation’s youth, is at-risk education perpetuating past injustices of segregation with federal dollars or is it truly

making a difference in students' lives? Has the term at-risk become a negative, self-fulfilling label and a means of "writing off" a segment of our population?

The definition of at-risk is very ambiguous and evasive and ever-changing. This ambiguity seems to be by intentional design. When defined, does "at risk" really interpret as "poor"? How is the at-risk population distributed racially? Students are being labeled *at-risk* in alarming numbers across the United States. As one looks at the available data of high rates of at-risk children from minority and low-income backgrounds, it is necessary to question if this label is one of educational concerns or another way of classifying people according to race and class.

In the initial presentation of four separate students, all four students receive free or reduced school lunches under the federally subsidized program for low income families³ Poverty appears to be the only common factor among the four cited cases. Indeed, poverty is the unifying and predominant identifying criterion for children being labeled at-risk in our society although it is supposedly only one of a rather lengthy list of variables used for this labeling.

Throughout the available research, the criteria for labeling a student at-risk varies widely. What *does* appear consistent is what the student is at risk *for*. Researchers all seem to share the view of Donmoyer and Kos that the student is considered at risk of either not completing high school and/or completing high school without the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function in adult life. Each year 700,000 students drop out of school and every year nearly 500,000 teens give birth and half of them never complete high school. (Donmoyer, 1993,7) The poor, female adolescent is three times more likely to become a parent than an adolescent who is not poor and black teens are five times as likely to become teen parents. (Donmoyer, 1993, 199) It would

appear that these students, most of whom would have been labeled at-risk in their school careers, have not been served well by this society and its schools.

Labeling, in and of itself, presents concerns to many. Call me a jock and I'll probably try to be one. Tell me I'm pretty enough times and I'll probably internalize that. Labeling a student as *at-risk* can be dangerous and prophetic. However, the medical field attempts to identify people prone to certain diseases and then find ways to lessen the likelihood of the disease occurring.(Donmoyer and Kos, 1993,10) It appears that it is this latter approach that leads to the term *at-risk* in the school setting. But just because the intent is good doesn't mean the practice of labeling leads to a positive result. Labeling a student at-risk implies that the success or failure of that student is dependent on the student and ignores the significant part school and society has in his success or his failure.

Based on the above assumptions that clearly help determine who's at risk, we ask: what conditions or characteristics place a student at-risk? Some that are commonly cited include: membership in a racial or ethnic minority; low income; single parent in the home; low birth weight; bilingual; low educational attainment by one or both parents; and drug or alcohol use in the home. Many children are labeled at-risk soon after birth and are placed in special programs before they even begin kindergarten.

How many children are we talking about? Surely, it's just a few and we can just afford to let someone else worry about those unfortunate students who need a little extra help. Right? Wrong! In 1946, Public Law 79-396 was passed and became known as the *National School Lunch Act*. It authorized assistance to states for "the establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs." In the 1993-94 school year, thirty-three percent of public school students received free or reduced

lunches.(Digest of Educ., 1997, 2) Family income is the basis for qualification and all students receiving free or reduced lunches are considered at-risk because of low income. This figure is probably actually low since records indicate that thirty nine percent of elementary age children receive free or reduced lunches. That figure drops to twenty two percent in the secondary grades. Family incomes have not suddenly increased as students reach middle school and high school but peer pressure does increase and self-esteem is not enhanced by most schools' methods of assisting children in need. Older students would rather be hungry than be embarrassed.

The United States Department of Education estimates that 220,000 school-aged children are homeless and as many as one million children under age 18 lack a permanent home or live on the streets.(Pianta, 1996, 13) While we pride ourselves in being a world leader in many areas, the U. S. ranks twenty-second in the world in preventing infant deaths. "An inner city child in Boston has less chance of surviving its first year than a child born in Panama, North Korea, or Uruguay" and twice as many teens in the U. S. as in other industrialized countries have babies (Pianta & Walsh, 1996, 10-14)

Some argue that while in 1900, only 3% - 4% of fifth graders graduated from high school, our current graduation rate of 75% is something to view with pride. (Dropout Studies: Design & Content, 1965). However, viewing the glass as three-quarters full doesn't eradicate the following findings of Sheffield and Frankel:

Every day 1868 teens drop out of school
Poor children are three to four times more likely to dropout than
whites
Every day 1099 teens have abortions
Every day 1287 teens have babies
Four out of five who become mothers will drop out

Almost half of all black children live in poverty
60% of all dropouts are functionally illiterate
(1988, 3)

In *Framing Drop-outs*, Fine states that 25% of our nation's fifth graders will not make it through to high school graduation. (1961, 21) According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the dropout rate for persons sixteen to twenty-four years old in the United States for 1997 was eleven percent. That rate has not improved in ten years. Even more startling are the dropout rates when statistics are sorted by race. The dropout rate for whites in 1997 was 7.6% while it was 13.4% for blacks and 25.3% for Hispanics.(NCES, 1997, 1) One must question rates that double and triple between races. What is inherent in our current school system that causes such high numbers of children to drop out of school?

In 1993-94, there were 41,621,660 students in public schools in the United States.(Digest of Ed. Stats, 1997, 1) (This figure does not include pre-kindergarten students or the five million students attending private schools.) Sixty five percent of the children were elementary students with the remaining thirty five percent in secondary schools. The school population shows even distribution of students at central city schools (29.2%), urban fringe schools (32.6%) and rural/small town schools (38.2%). William O'Hare writes in *A New Look at Poverty in America*,

"Both the number of poor and the poverty rate are higher in the 1990s than they were in the 1970s. 14.5 percent of Americans were poor, compared with 11.1 percent in 1973. The U. S. poverty population includes nearly 40 million people in the mid-1990s, about 15 million above the 1973 number. The increase in poverty has been driven by a 50 percent rise in the child poverty rate." (1)

Pianta and Walsh give three major reasons for the increase in children's poverty: changes in the family structure, changes in the labor market (low wages and unemployment), and the reduction in government assistance to poor families. (1996,18)

In 1996, the American school population was 64.2% white and 35.8% minority. This was a significant change from 1976 when the figures reflected 76% white and 24% minority. (Digest of Ed. Stats., 1) According to some projections, children of color will comprise more than half of the students in our nation's schools by the year 2020.(Ed. Reforms, Chpt. 7, 1)

It is obvious that students traditionally labeled as "at risk" - poor children and minority children - are increasing in vast numbers. In today's culture that is too often characterized by violence, many would argue that all of our children are at risk and that risk no longer includes only dropping out of school. They are at risk of developing poor skills, joining gangs, using drugs, etc. Unfortunately, "in the context of formal schooling, being different has too often meant being deficient, and being deficient has meant 'being at risk of academic failure.'"(Ed. Reforms, Chpt. 7, 1)

Another factor which impacts students and schools significantly is the frequency with which many students move and change schools. Estimates suggest that 20-25% of students change schools each year.(Addressing Barriers, 1997, 1) Fifty percent of all school-age children move at least twice before they are eighteen years old and ten percent of them move at least six times. (Vinovskis, 1999, 187-209) Poor children are more apt to move. Many of these students have a difficult time fitting into their new surroundings and some come with a chip on their shoulder.

In the 1960s, President Johnson's War on Poverty addressed the inequity that impoverished and minority children were experiencing within the educational

system and various compensatory education programs were enacted. The Title 1 Program of 1965 was later renamed Chapter 1 and it remains the most extensive and highly funded of those programs. In 1991-92, it provided more than \$6 billion to programs in 90% of the public schools, serving five million students. (Montgomery & Rossi as qtd. in Educ. Reforms) The language of the law includes "children who are not yet at grade level, economically disadvantaged, children with disabilities, migrant children or limited English proficient children, any child who participated in Head Start, children who received services under programs for neglected or delinquent children including community care programs for those children, homeless, etc."⁴

The program received an overhaul in 1994 and received a pledge of continued support from the government although results were not as inspiring as initially forecast. In the 1996-97 school year, education expenditures were \$564 billion with sixty percent of those monies going to the K-12 schools. (Digest of Ed. Stats., Chpt. 1, pg. 3) With 7.4 percent of our gross national product being spent on education, it seems to be a priority and therefore, everyone wants to see tangible results in the form of higher standardized test scores.

Huge national research centers such as the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At-Risk (CRESPAR) and the National Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) have been formed and have received significant grants to transform schooling for students placed at risk of educational failure.⁵

In A Nation Still at Risk, we read

We seem to be the only country in the world whose children fall farther behind the longer they stay in school..... In the midst of our flourishing economy, we are re-creating a dual school system, separate and unequal, almost half a century after it was declared unconstitutional. We face a

widening and unacceptable chasm between good schools and bad,... Poor and minority children, by and large, go to worse schools, have less expected of them, are taught by less knowledgeable teachers, and have the least power to alter bad situations. Yet it's poor children who most need great schools. (1998,2)

Identification of at-risk children seems to be the only step that has received a great deal of attention. Huge sums of money have been allocated for their educational needs and yet we have not seen a significant change in the dropout rates. Our young people are still growing up in poverty and the problems of their rage and despair are more often the problems of society than the individual.(Addressing Barriers, 1997, 1)

Equal educational opportunity is the next great civil-rights issue. We refer to the true equality of opportunity that results from providing every child with a first-rate primary and secondary education, and to the development of human potential that comes from meeting intellectual, social, and spiritual challenges. The educational gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students are huge, handicapping poor children in their pursuit of higher education, good jobs and a better life. (Nation Still at Risk, 1998, 4)

We've all heard the adage --- *Get an education and you can become anything you want to be!* Although the value of an education is immense, it certainly does not eliminate the barriers of race, color, and gender erected by society and supported by the institutions within our society. Hodgson wrote in 1973 that "you cannot have equality of opportunity without a good deal of equality of condition." (38) In *Children of the Poor*, Mollie Orshansky writes:

It would be one thing if poverty hit at random, and no one group were singled out. It is another thing to realize that some seem destined to poverty almost from birth -- by their color or by their economic status or occupation of their parents. It has become a truism that, in good times and in bad, certain groups lag behind in the long-term upswing of our economy. Prominent among these are the aged, the families headed by a woman, and minority groups. (1967, 61)

If Donmoyer and Kos were accurate in their analogy that identifying students as being at-risk aids in providing them with opportunities to succeed just as the medical doctor identifies high risk patients and maps out their care, what is being done after all these children are identified and labeled to ensure that they do not become a dropout statistic?

Chapter Two

Early Intervention

“Johnny, You’ll be in the Red Reading Group”

Ninety percent of first grade bottom reader groups are still poor readers in upper grades. (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993, 197) This grim statistic is not the vision former schoolteacher, Lyndon Johnson, had when Head Start and Title 1 programs were initiated over three decades ago. Johnson was committed to using education to help the disadvantaged children of America. The Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965 was the first major federal aid to education program targeted specifically at disadvantaged children. Unfortunately, “Title 1 was more a funding mechanism than a specific program or policy for helping at-risk students.(Vinovskis, 1999, 189)

Some believe that the biggest mistake has been “making young people the focus of intervention rather than pursuing system deficiencies that are causing the problem in the first place.”(Addressing Barriers, Vol.1, 1996, 1) The Title 1/Chapter 1 program has been the nation’s single largest investment in

schooling. It currently provides almost \$7 billion annually and reaches over six million children each year.(NCES) One in every five children in first grade participate in a Title 1/Chapter 1 sponsored program. It was initiated to give individualized help to at-risk students in the area of math and reading. In the Title 1 instruction, students are usually pulled out of the regular classroom and meet one-on-one or in very small groups with a trained teacher who will help them improve their skills. However, when the program was evaluated in the mid-1980s, the efforts were modest and not effective in closing the gap for the most disadvantaged children in our society. (Montgomery and Rossi as qtd. in Educ. Reforms) In addition, pulling these children out of their regular classroom setting on a daily basis seems to result in children feeling at home nowhere within the school setting. In addition to the stigma of leaving the regular classroom, it would seem to have a negative affect on a child's self-concept as he is regularly reminded that he needs this extra instruction. One must ask if the school is helping or hindering a child's success at this point.

The Clinton Administration and the 103rd Congress restructured the program and renamed it Title I of the Improving America's School Act of 1994. This new legislation stressed standards-based education.(Vinovskis, 1999, 192)

Head-Start was intended to help at-risk children prepare for entrance into elementary school. Advocates thought it would dramatically improve the IQ of young at-risk children. (Vinovskis, 1999, 194) Even though Head Start and Title I started at the same time, the programs were not coordinated.

In 1989, the Even Start Program began as an effective approach for helping at-risk students and it worked simultaneously with schools and parents rather than trying to help the young at-risk children in isolation. The link between home and school is a vital one and much too often, the weakest link. "It

is a fact that great schools can work miracles with children from miserable homes and awful neighborhoods. But it is also a fact that attentive parents are an irreplaceable asset.” (Nation Still at Risk, 1998, 7) The goal of Even Start is to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by expanding the educational opportunities available to low-income families with limited educational experiences. The program provides services in three main areas: adult education; parenting education’ and early childhood education. Federal law mandates an annual evaluation of all Even Start Projects. In 1994-95, approximately 31,000 families in 513 local projects were served by Even Start. (Elem. & Sec. Ed. Eval., 3) In 1989, Even Start received \$14 million. That budget increased to \$102 million by 1995. (Vinovskis, 1999, 196)

On January 24, 1994, another federal mandate was issued. Called *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, the focus of this paperwork was that every child could learn. One of the goals of this legislation was to increase the high school graduation rate to at least 90 percent. by the year 2000. (Goals 2000, 1996, 1) One of the “lessons learned” published within the National Goals Panel’s document is that students stay in schools that offer personal connections with caring adults, connections made possible in school-within-a-school programs, and with adults involved in community activities.

And yet, Vinovskis writes that:

More than \$150 billion have been spent and we still do not know which practices and programs are particularly effective in helping at-risk children - especially those living in the high poverty areas of inner cities.(1999,199)

If the major risk factor for a child is poverty, what can the schools do to heighten the possibility that the identified child will succeed in spite of that risk factor? Many children live in unsafe, disorderly, and decaying environments. Their family situations are unstable and insecure and many are emotionally

neglected children. In our case studies, Lonnie would appear to fit this description quite readily. The birth of triplets to an established middle income family would require enormous financial, physical and emotional adjustments. Now picture those triplets being born to a young mother who has severe mental problems and who is already the single mother of four young sons. It has to seem overwhelming to the mother and by sheer virtue of time and energy, the older children “lose” their mother to the babies. In 1989, Uri Bronfenbrenner said that every child needs to have an adult who is *crazy* about them in order to develop intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally. “[Crazy] means that the adult in questions regards this particular child as somehow special” (7-9) It would be unwise and unfair to speculate on significant adults in Lonnie’s life, but one quickly remembers that school psychologist’s entry regarding Lonnie leaving the session “singing to himself and asking to return” and the almost prophetic entry that Lonnie “could benefit from one-on one help and positive reinforcement.” That seems to be what he has found in the alternative setting. Every teacher knows his name. He sees male and female teachers of different races. His report card is celebrated by the entire staff with him and his name appears regularly on the highest levels of achievement. He has people who are *crazy* about him within the school setting. His mother still isn’t emotionally stable and his family income is still precariously low. He is still at-risk but he is valued within the school community and he knows that.

Juxtaposed next to the pull-out programs of Title 1/Chapter 1, why aren’t the results better in that highly funded program? Aren’t there good, caring teachers in those programs? Of course, there are. But instead of working in isolation (i.e. one teacher knowing that child well and building a relationship), the entire alternative school system is built around the student’s needs. Perhaps the greatest “mistake” of the Chapter 1 programs is that it does nothing to

change teaching within the traditional classroom and ***that is where the changes need to occur to benefit all students.***

Chapter Three

Alternative Programs

“Maybe there’s a better way...”

Trying to place blame is common, though not helpful, as we see the numbers of children labeled *at-risk* increasing. There has been some positive results from the government’s attempts to make education more equitable. However, many would cry “Too little, too late!” Individuals, corporations, educators, and parents have joined ranks to provide some unique programs across this country while continuing to push for change on the broader scale.

In March, 1999 the U. S. House of Representatives Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families heard testimony that “an investment in early childhood alternative school programs will result in safe schools.” (MEA Voice, 1999, 10) Congress was called on to support alternative programs for elementary age children who are unable to cope with school or the classroom. It was argued that these early intervention programs are effective and cost-efficient for addressing school discipline and violence.

In 1984, Grand Rapids created Later Elementary Alternative Program (LEAP) for students in grades four through six with identifiable and documented behavioral problems. (MEA, 1999, 10) There is a low student-to-teacher ratio

which “allows teachers to focus on each student and utilize individualized teaching techniques.” (MEA, 1999, 10) LEAP attempts to return students to a regular school environment within three months to a year. A key to their success is targeting young children before they reach their teen years when teachers “are able to recognize warning signs - including lack of remorse for wrongdoing, cruel behavior, inattention, restlessness, erratic behavior, academic problems, absenteeism, threats against others, and threats of suicide - and intervene before aggression is ingrained.”(MEA Voice, 1999, 10) Most alternative programs are for the high school level student.

In 1995, The Edison Project opened its first four schools after three years of research and development to design “innovative schools that could operate at public school spending levels.” (Edison, 1999, 1) Edison Schools are charter schools that are accountable to local authority, open to all students, and funded with tax dollars. There are currently approximately 24,000 students attending Edison’s 51 schools that are located across the United States. Sixty percent of all Edison students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. (Edison, 1999, 2) As a system, Edison schools serve a student population that is 45 percent African-American, 32 percent Caucasian, 18 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian, and 2 percent Other. (Edison, 1999, 3) With only a few years of existence, it is still early to measure results, but it appears that student achievement is up substantially with test scores improving and reading achievement improving. Parental involvement is strong. There is a 95 percent student attendance rate, and a student mobility rate below 10 percent annually. (Edison, 1999, 4) Edison schools have long waiting lists.

Another elementary level program which was developed in 1988, is Families and Schools Together (FAST). This highly structured activity-based approach began in Madison, Wisconsin and was designed to enhance

parent-child interactions, empower parents and build parent support groups. (CIS, 1998, 1) The FAST program was developed to address many of the problems faced by elementary schools with significant numbers of students with low achievement. FAST's four goals are "to enhance family functioning, prevent the target child from experiencing school failure, prevent substance abuse by the child and family, and reduce the stress that parents and children experience from daily life situations." To join the FAST program, a school must identify and partner with two community-based partner agencies who agree to work with the school over a period of two years. Once the school identifies the partner agencies, leadership is identified and trained. Children and parents gather once a week for eight sessions, at the school, and the sessions usually take place around the dinner meal. Following graduation from the 8-week course, monthly family support meetings are designed to maintain the network formed between the participating families. Up to twenty children and their parents can be served during each eight-week FAST cycle and a school can sponsor up to four cycles per school year. The cost for the initial training for the school and its FAST team is \$3,900.(Tools for Schools, 1998, 2) The cost of supplies per cycle is \$1,500 with additional costs of approximately \$2,300 per cycle to cover personnel for for the community partners and each participating parent-partner. There are also child care costs involved. Schools usually fund the program with funds from Title 1 or other Federal or local sources that target schools with significant populations of poor and low performing students.

Communities in Schools (CIS) is the nation's largest stay-in-school network, serving over 300,000 young people in 30 states. The mission of CIS is to champion the connection of needed community resources with schools to help young people successfully learn, stay in school, and prepare for life. Founded

in 1977, the organization wants to provide a safety net of community support for children. Their basic beliefs are: (CIS, 1999)

*Every child **needs and deserves:***

- a **one-on-one relationship** with a caring adult;
- a **safe place** to learn and grow;
- a **marketable skill** to use upon graduation;
- a **chance to give back** to peers and community

Communities in Schools, Inc. was been funded by a five-year cooperative agreement (1994-99) with the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control Prevention to develop Teen Health Corps at thirteen sites throughout the United States. (CIS, 1999, 2) Teen Health Corps members receive health instruction and training in peer education, leadership, and community service.

Other programs which have been found to be successful in reducing dropout rates and increasing school completion are:⁶

- ⇒ **The Adopt-A-Student Program**, operating in Atlanta, Georgia. It pairs business volunteers as mentors with low-achieving high school juniors and seniors in a career-oriented support system.
- ⇒ **Project Coffee** in Oxford, Massachusetts targets potential dropouts from 16 regional school districts and provides job training, work experience, and a school-business and industry partnership.
- ⇒ **Rich's Academy**, located in a major downtown Atlanta, Georgia department store, is an alternative high school serving former dropouts and near dropouts. Students are placed at random in "family groups" of 20-30 members that meet daily for counseling and support. Parents are encouraged to participate, and the staff visits each student's home at least

once to share the program objectives. The completion rate is 85 percent, with all graduates going on to jobs or postsecondary school.

- ⇒ **The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program** features cross-age tutoring designed to reduce the dropout rates among middle school children who are limited-English-proficient and at risk of leaving school. The support strategy includes coordination and family involvement. The program was recognized in 1992 by the Secretary of Education as a model dropout prevention program, meeting the National Education Goal of increasing the high school graduation rate to at least 90 percent as mentioned earlier in this paper.
- ⇒ **At George Washington Preparatory High School** in south-central Los Angeles, both parents and students are required to sign a contract. Parents must attend workshops on how to help their children and must visit the schools at designated times. Teachers must make daily calls to the homes of absentees. Absenteeism was less than 10 percent in the 1985-86 school year and 70 percent of the students now go on to college.
- ⇒ **The New York City Dropout Prevention Program** focuses on the transition from junior high to senior high school, a stress point in the lives of adolescents that contributes to dropping out. Using a team approach, the resources of public and private agencies provide adolescents with support. Parents are an integral part of the program and are considered central to success. Overall, the philosophy is to provide adolescents with caring adults who understand their needs and who will support them. Two years after the program was put into place the dropout rate went from 42 percent in 1985 to 30 percent in 1987.

There are many other programs that are being initiated, revised, and reviewed throughout the nation as schools, communities, and parents struggle to help children stay in school and be successful there.

The Kansas City area has been plagued with problems beginning with the early refusal to desegregate their schools. Forced to comply, they were the recipients of federal dollars to make the program work. With a high concentration of inner city children, many impoverished, and low standardized test scores, they later qualified for additional federal at-risk dollars. They have currently become a national forerunner in possibly increasing a child's success in school. Called the *Parents as Teachers Program*, (Horning, 1998) parents are required to register their child at birth. Early childhood development teachers and experts, pediatricians and nurses staff the program that makes bi-weekly home visits to the family. Visits are made at the convenience of the parent and can be in the evenings or weekends if that is the most convenient time for the parent. The visits last approximately thirty minutes and the child is evaluated physically, developmentally, emotionally, and socially. Observations are shared with the parent and recommendations regarding growth, play toys, feedings, etc. are made. Vision screening, hearing examinations, dental check-ups and immunizations are all available through the program at no cost. Participation is required and will be monitored throughout the first five years of a child's life. A certificate of monitoring is necessary for entrance into kindergarten. A relatively new program, it probably raises as many questions as it answers, but it does seem to address the issue that somehow the school, society, and the home all need to make the success of each child a priority.

Chapter Four

Alternative Approaches

“It ain’t working!”

The vast majority of our nation’s children are not in Edison Schools or any of the other innovative programs mentioned in the preceding chapters. They are in schools that have not changed much since their grandparents sat in the same desks they’re now occupying. Not only are many school facilities in dire need of physical repairs, especially in inner cities and poor areas, but our schools are in need of drastic changes in atmosphere, curriculum, instruction methods, and course offerings.

According to Bronfenbrenner, young people need to have adults who are “crazy” about them. Unfortunately, in many schools, teachers and students are driving each other crazy! A starting place for every school is to ensure a warm school climate for students and staff. Every student should walk into a school where they feel welcomed and cared for. “A climate characterized by safety and orderliness in a location that is accessible and nonthreatening can make a powerful contribution to dropout prevention.” (SIRS, 5) Schools often fail to create a caring environment and a caring school culture cannot treat everyone the same. Caring counts and it may well be the key to a successful program.

Parents must be an integral part of their child's school experience. There has been little systematic attention paid to the value of involving the *home* in the efforts to improve student achievement. "It is a fact that great schools can work miracles with children from miserable homes and awful neighborhoods. But it is also a fact that attentive parents are an irreplaceable asset." (National Still at Risk, 1998, 7) Schools must initiate contact and encourage families to drop in, be volunteers, go on field trips, plan workshops, etc. It is important that the only contact not be when they are called in to discuss their child's learning and/or behavior problems. Parents cannot be expected to think of the school in a positive light when they are made to feel unwelcome or "called on the carpet." Researcher Michelle Fines says that many people look to parents and ask "Why aren't you on the scene?" Why aren't they demanding that their children "not be driven from one institution which promises a better life?" (1991, 161) She goes on to say that like all parents, they do want a good education for their children but as poor parents, their relationship with the school is fragile, at best. "Unless they can risk making trouble, their involvement in schools will always be compromised." (162) Too often, teachers and administrators interpret the lack of involvement of an at-risk child as the attitude of an uncaring parent. It is much more an issue of powerlessness in a society based on class and race and gender discrimination. How is a black poor mother supposed to be a strong advocate for her child who is struggling in a middle-class white school run primarily by males? She's already experienced the hopelessness of that world and instead remains silent and appears passive.

Schools need to provide supportive services such as child care, job assistance, summer school, substance abuse, teen pregnancy/parenting workshops, suicide prevention, etc. Successful programs have committed staff

members who hold high expectations for student academic achievement and behavior and they show interest and concern for the “whole child.” (SIRS,6)

Teachers need to be trained in new methods that acknowledge the various types of intelligences and learning styles, and they need to use a variety of teaching methods within their classroom on a regular basis. Some children do better in communal learning settings while others prefer competitive activities. Some children are visual learners while others need to “do it!” Every child needs to feel that at some time during the day they have made a valuable connection with the information that is being taught.

Class size is currently at an average of about 24 students per classroom. (NCES, 1) Research shows that all students learn better as the ratio of students-to-teacher is reduced. Funding needs to be increased so that class size can continue to go down in all schools. Children of all ages need time to learn. They need time for questions and discussion and interaction. In large classes, many of our children who are most in need of attention are the children who never raise their hand to volunteer an answer. Small class size allows the teacher to know each student and interact with each student more frequently and on a more meaningful level. Donmoyer and Kos contend that research is designed to tell us about groups of people and that, by nature, at-risk students are highly idiosyncratic. There are variables and combinations of factors that place someone at-risk. Although research tells us about groups of people and policymakers think in terms of types of people, it is the one-on-one interaction *within* the school setting that maximizes the likelihood of success. Teachers need the flexibility to choose from a variety of instructional strategies, classroom settings, and curriculum to reach each child within the classroom in a framework that is familiar, assuring, and challenging to that particular student. Remember Jake from the introduction? Teachers at the alternative school

quickly recognized his love of books as he would immerse himself in reading at any possible free moment. In discussions with him, they found that he particularly enjoys American history and biographies of different authors and artisans. Sharing their own favorites with him, student and teacher became fellow admirers of a variety of different persons including Michelangelo, Samuel Clemens, and Stephen Crane. Purchasing books for Jake, taking him to their Masters' classes with them, and involving him in decisions regarding future books to use in class, Jake has taken ownership in his own education. He is part of the process now - no longer a labeled, passive/aggressive person on a meaningless journey.

Classroom learning needs to be meaningful to the student. "Many middle and high school students are more motivated to work hard if they view classroom learning tasks to be useful in the adult world of work." (Educ. Reforms, 1994, Chpt. 8, 1)

There is also reason to believe that adding positive race-sex role models may be particularly important to school-aged African-american males. (Educ. Reforms, 1994, 2) Programs of this type often generate considerable controversy on civil rights grounds. Other groups - females and Hispanic youth - have also been the subject of special projects to enhance their chances of school success through the use of role models. (Educ. Reforms, 1994, 2)

There is no one magical, quick fix solution to the dropout problem. The problem is complex and requires a complex array of solutions. Dropouts have dissimilar characteristics and therefore need different kinds of programs which respond to their individual circumstances and needs. Programs, to be effective, need to provide one-on-one intensive attention to at-risk students, who often must be convinced that they are competent and can be successful in school. ((SIRS, 13)

Chapter Five

One School

A light at the end of a very long tunnel?

It is probably fair and accurate to assume that as long as there has been the institution of formal education, there have been teachers who have tried extraordinary measures to help children succeed. Unfortunately, those efforts are often isolated within a system that isn't geared to recognize the many differences among children. Our schools have become factory settings where the desired end product is a young adult who can read and write and contribute positively to society. And, like a factory setting, our schools run like well-oiled machines that work well as long as all of the incoming material is identical and acceptable. As soon as a "different" material is introduced, the school "ejects" it as an unrecognized commodity and therefore a potential problem.

Many school districts across the country have responded to the increasing numbers of these "problem students" by developing alternative education programs. Some of them are good and many of them are not. The success of the programs may well hinge on the philosophy behind their existence. If they were created merely as a means of removing the nuisance from the traditional classroom, they are often viewed as stopgap measures until the child reaches the age of sixteen and is old enough to dropout or be expelled

from school without ramifications. These schools are often housed as a school-within-a-school and relegated to a specific area, usually a basement, a least-used wing, or another isolated location where the students will have little contact with the regular education students. Many districts do not pay these teachers the same scale as teachers in regular classes and new, inexperienced teachers often have to start out in these classrooms.

However, if the school district has created the alternative program with the goal of helping these students stay in school, the structure may be very different. Most students in alternative programs are a portion of those students who were labeled *at-risk* in their earliest years. The school system has known throughout the child's school years that there was a higher than normal chance that this child would not graduate. Some early intervention may have taken place in the form of pull-out reading groups or math tutoring in early elementary grades. In all likelihood, no further organized efforts were made to help this particular child succeed. Some districts are dedicated to providing another aggressive attempt at helping the student stay in school and graduate and they do this in the form of alternative education, almost exclusively at the high school level.

These programs are designed entirely different than just a stopgap measure. The student is central to every effort of the entire design - staffing, scheduling, class offerings, discipline, and curriculum. The program is supported by the district administration and appropriate funding, and is housed in its own facility. It is recognized as an **alternative** approach to teaching students rather than a warehouse for "storing" problem kids until they're old enough to drop out of a system that has failed them throughout their school careers.

While no one would claim that it is Camelot, one such school is Port Huron South in Port Huron, Michigan, a community of approximately 35,000 people about sixty miles north of Detroit and sixty miles east of Flint. The district has had an alternative education program under a variety of names and housed in a variety of places for many years. Many of the staff members had remained with the program for a number of years and six years ago, it was the staff of the program that started the ball of change rolling.

Several of the top administrators within the district, including the superintendent, had worked in the alternative program over the years and are deeply committed to its success. All teachers are paid the same scale as they would be paid serving at any school in the district. Most of the teachers were experienced teachers and as noted before, have been in the program for some time. When the long-term principal of the alternative program retired, the staff approached the district and asked for a complete renovation of the program that would be designed by the teachers and staff. The district agreed and appointed an interim principal to act as a facilitator for one year while the program was designed.

The program had to be designed throughout the school year while conducting classes with approximately 250 students at the school. Every aspect of the school was examined, redesigned where necessary, streamlined, changed radically, eliminated, re-written or whatever else the staff felt was necessary to help the program be one that would make a difference in the lives of the students.

Housed in its own facility, the halls of the eighty-year-old well maintained building began to experience an air of excitement. Students were included in renaming the program, selecting a school mascot, and school colors. The new name of *Port Huron South* replaced ENVY (an acronym that had been a joke in

the district for years), the eagle replaced a bulldog as mascot, and for the first time the school had its own colors - turquoise and purple. Students designed school t-shirts and a mission statement was developed proclaiming that Port Huron South wants to help its students become reasonable, respectful, responsible young adults.

All staff members would continue to be in the program by choice - from the janitor and lunch ladies to the principal, teachers, and secretaries. Decisions would be the consensus of the staff and not top-down edicts. In addition, all students would be at the school by choice. No longer would the other district schools declare "You have to go to ENVY!" The student who was struggling with inappropriate behavior, low grades, or excessive absences would be counseled at their home school about options and would be told about Port Huron South's alternative program and offered a tour of the school and a meeting with in-take personnel. If the child and parent were interested in enrollment at Port Huron South after the tour, they would schedule an appointment to begin the application process and go through an intake process which would ensure that each incoming student and family knew how the program operates, expectations, support available, etc. If an opening was not currently available, the student would be placed on a first-come, first-served waiting list.

Port Huron South has a capacity for 220 high school students and 36 middle school students. It is one of the only alternative programs in the nation with a middle school alternative program and is often visited by other districts as a model of potential alternative programming. The middle school is for 7th and 8th graders only and is housed in a separate wing of the school.

All classes throughout the school are broadly graded. All students are considered at-risk and most students have been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD. The school has two fulltime counselors, two fulltime outreach workers who

handle discipline problems, an in-house supervisor, a time-out supervisor, a school nurse, a social worker, and a continuity education teacher, in addition to a full staff of teachers. Since the restructuring of the program, there have been several new younger teachers join the staff also.

The school is serviced by the district's buses and follows the same school calendar as the other two district high schools. Students are included in the district's TEC program which trains older students for careers in health, manufacturing, and building trades. Graduation requirements are the same as at the local high schools

Subscribing to William Glasser's philosophy of choice theory, the school tries to provide opportunities for all of the students' basic needs to be met in a variety of ways. Many students come from extremely dysfunctional homes and the need for belonging seems to be at the core of many of their actions. Class size is limited to 20 students for high school classes and 12 students for middle school classes. Every student is assigned to an advisory class and the morning starts with the same teacher each day. Conscious efforts are made by the entire staff to know these twenty students better than anyone else on the staff as the advisory teacher will become the child's advocate in any matters that need mediation. On Fridays, students have an extended advisory time so that they can reflect on academic, behavior, and attendance progress throughout the week. Teachers plan community building exercises into advisory time and school-wide activities often use the advisory settings as a way to make teams for competition in designing the best Christmas door, Spirit Week competitions, etc.

Setting goals, working at them, and seeing the results is something that many students struggle with and it seems *at-risk* students are even less well-versed at this than other students. Recognizing the need for immediate results, the school has three-week marking periods. Although doubling the

amount of paperwork and time doing grades for teachers, it was the staff that decided it would be helpful if students got grades and the results of their work (or lack of it!) in three-week intervals. This also allows the school to accept students every three weeks. Teachers design their lesson plans and curriculum in three week segments acknowledging the addition of incoming students who will need to be at the same starting place as the rest of the class. Students may earn the equivalent of one general education credit for every six classes passed within one school year. So, if Johnny fails two marking periods in every subject, he will not lose the whole semester worth of credits. He will not have earned his necessary English, Civics, etc. credits but if he passes all six classes the other four marking periods, he will have earned four general education credits toward graduation. The ability to begin anew every three weeks has been a highly successful strategy with the students and staff.

Another unique feature at the school is a Level System which is designed around academics, attendance, and behavior. Students who miss no days in the marking period, pass all classes with an A- average, and have no suspensions are on Level 5 for the marking period. The requirements are adjusted accordingly and go down to Level 0. Students on Level 3, 4, and 5 are recognized by having their names posted on a large hallway bulletin board, printed in the school newsletter that goes out to all parents, given first chance to sign up for classes, and given first choice at signing up for Friday activities.

Fridays are different at this school. Building positive relationships with adults and peers is an integral part of the program. Friday mornings, students have a shortened class schedule, attending each class for just thirty minutes and then returning to their advisory for an extended time to review their progress. After lunch, each student goes to the ninety-minute activity they have signed up for earlier. They will be in this activity for nine weeks. Most activities are hosted

by teachers but the school has also been successful in recruiting various community agencies and people to assist in mentoring these young people. Some of the activities offered have been: basketball, rock band (taught by a professional musician), yearbook, movies, radio techniques (taught by a local radio personality), games, crafts, dance (taught by a dance school owner), Outdoor Education (funded by the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts), Make-up Techniques (hosted by Mary Kay personnel), computers, school newspaper, and cooking. At Christmas, a sit-down dinner was prepared by the students and staff and enjoyed by all. Students have enjoyed canoe trips, horseback riding, ice skating, camping, whitewater rafting, built props for a dance production, and participated in a variety of other activities that have expanded their world and helped build relationships.

On the Friday at the end of the three-week marking period, students are released two hours early. Staff meets together and gives grades and voices any concerns and celebrations over every single student in the school. Students know that this occurs and often asks "What did they say about my report card THIS time?"

Block scheduling of History, English, and Art is offered at the high school level and approximately sixty students have chosen that format. Middle school classes are divided by gender and staff reports that both male and female students appear to be more self-confident in this setting. Teachers were recently awarded a large grant to expand on project-based learning using the computers that are present in each classroom.

While the program is a vast improvement over past attempts at reducing the dropout rate, it is very difficult to measure its success as many of the students move to the adult education program at age 17 or 18 while working fulltime jobs. There are still students who drop-out, and the continual addition of

incoming students often causes disruptions in classes for a few days when students with past histories of conflict find themselves in the same class.

Parental involvement is an ongoing challenge.

The staff continues to refine and reform the program on a regular basis knowing that there is no one right method that will work for every child. Part of the success of the program is that individualized instruction and mentoring can happen with the smaller class sizes.

Chapter Six

So, what's the answer?

“It takes a village to raise a child ...”

“Schools must not harm their pupils. They must eschew classroom methods that have been proven not to work. They must not force children into programs that their parents do not want.”(Nation Still at Risk, 1998, 6) Schools harming children? Yes! It is often only in the classroom setting that children are made to feel different and deficient. Something is drastically wrong when that happens and yet it happens to many of our nation's children on a regular basis throughout their school career. Because of individual teaching styles and students' reactions to those styles, different teachers may have very different opinions about a specific student. Using Jake from our earlier case study, he seemed to be at-risk even during his elementary years because of his small stature. Doing well at an alternative school, he placed second in a dance contest with one of the tallest (and most intelligent and attractive!) girls in the school. Jake's size has not been an issue at his new school. Why? His height hasn't increased significantly. The alternative school doesn't have a uniquely short population. Jake doesn't **see** himself as disadvantaged within this school

setting and therefore, does not react violently or explosively as in the past. What's changed? Has Jake just matured and can now deal with conflict more appropriately? That may be a part of the answer. Within the alternative setting, Jake has classes with fifteen to twenty other students who, for a myriad of reasons, also don't fit the mold as defined by the traditional schools. Some have multiple body piercings, neon-colored hair, strange tattoos, etc. Others "look" very traditional but have very non-traditional backgrounds. They may be wards of the court, foster children, or have juvenile records with the police. All students at the school are classified as at-risk. But, they are in classes together doing quality work, receiving high school credits and looking forward to graduation. They are valued by their teachers and seem to value their peers and teachers as well. There is intentional mentoring happening between staff members, community members, and students. Students participate actively in various community service projects and for the first time perhaps, see themselves as having something valuable to offer others.

Arthur Pearl in *Slim and None -- The Poor's Two Chances* states that the poor fail to negotiate the school experience because they are never given a chance. The reason they are labeled *at-risk* and *disadvantaged* is "the result of being locked out of society ... the consequences of denial of opportunity." (1967, 313) He further argues that middle-class children succeed because they look, dress, and act much like the teacher who is teaching them. "The deprived [child] gets no reward from the system." (313)

Using the case studies presented in the introduction, all four students live in homes with incomes below the nationally determined poverty level. Two of the students live in single-parent homes. One of those lives in a single-parent home with seven minor children. One of the other students - Angel - is living with neither parent. Struggling to feed, clothe, and house themselves, she and

her younger brother are working minimum wage jobs after school. The remaining student, Jake, lives in a two-parent home, neither parent having completed high school. The mother works for low wages as an aide at a nursing home and the father struggles to find automobile repair jobs. How and why does family income make a difference for some children's failure at school, while others who are also in low income families succeed?

"A high school degree is economically more valuable to those who are already privileged by class, race/ethnicity, gender, and geography." (Fine, 1991, 23) Although Jake comes from a poor family, he is a white male. He views his diploma as a way out of poverty and with the privileges of race and gender, he has an optimistic view of his future possibilities. Angel is a young Latino woman who has grown up seeing her mother physically abused by her father. She is currently involved in an abusive relationship. While she personally values learning, her possibilities are much narrower as a minority woman with no strong role models to emulate. At home, her situation feels *normal* to her.

Statistics show that **all** children are more successful in smaller classes yet many of our inner city schools still have classes with thirty or more students in them.

Extensive research evidence indicates that a supportive climate for learning can be severely damaged by the very large secondary schools that are typical of major urban and suburban districts where many students at risk are enrolled..... It is often argued that larger schools tend to have more discipline problems, lower percentages of students who actually participate in school clubs and activities, and more student feelings of estrangement and alienation. (Educ. Reforms, 1994, 1)

And yet, communities continue to build huge new schools and boast about how they will meet the needs of the children they house. In 1930, there

were more than 262,000 public schools, compared with about 87,000 schools today. (Digest of Ed. Stats, 1998, 2) One solution that some progressive districts are using is the school-within-a-school approach. The huge building is home to three or four "schools" of students - sometimes divided by grade - and this seems to serve the students more appropriately and personally.

Every child needs to have at least one adult in the school that they feel a bond with and developing meaningful advisory settings and mentoring programs is quickly becoming a common workshop topic at educational seminars.

What happened to Mandy in our case study? Her school photos show her to be clean and smiling. Her mother graduated from high school. She is Caucasian. Her attendance is excellent and it appears her home is relatively stable. But standardized tests show she tests in the low-to mid-range. School records do not show what reading group she was placed in when she entered school, but it is probably safe to assume she was placed in one of the lower levels and probably didn't do outstanding work at that level as she was receiving D's as early as second grade. But she is a social young lady and she loves singing. Where does that fit in with the traditional academic program? It doesn't. And so, Mandy becomes a statistic - a failure - another throw-away kid who doesn't fit the mold in a traditional school. Labeled at-risk, she is merely living up to the expectations placed on her as early as Head Start. But Mandy isn't a statistic. She's a high school graduate, working and saving so that she can go to college next fall. And she was able to accomplish that **in spite of** the labeling she received as a child. She was recognized regularly for her excellent attendance and grades at the alternative school. She loves to read and checked out books regularly from her English teacher to read at home. She excelled in her Drama class and was a part of the Student Council. Why? Because Mandy believes in herself. She went to the alternative school with failing grades and a

poor self-image. She recounts that she didn't feel like she had the clothes and shoes to fit in at her other school and she was "dumb" in schoolwork, too. But, the clothes and shoes didn't matter at the alternative school - there was no "norm" - and none of the teachers would buy the "dumb" part. Encouraged to set goals, given positive encouragement and reinforcement on her journey, Mandy has internalized the affirmations she received and sees herself capable of doing things she never thought possible.

Remember Angel in our case study? She's now seventeen and enrolled in Adult Education. Both of her parents have left her and her younger brother and moved to other states. Angel is old enough to quit school. She is Hispanic and poor and statistics say that there is a high likelihood of her dropping out even if her parents had not abandoned her. In a recent survey of Communities in Schools done by the University of North Carolina at the alternative school where Angel attended at the time, only 20% of the student population said that "the adults in their home provide them with loving support and encouragement." Of the 23,264 students served in alternative education programs in Michigan in September, 1997, more than one-third of them qualify for the free lunch program, and over one-fourth of them are enrolled because of attendance problems. (MAE Study, 1998, 2) Angel fits into both of those categories and it seems apparent that she does not feel the adults in her home have provided her with support and encouragement. Her school records seem to leave many questions. Poor attendance seems to be quite consistent, yet she was able to maintain high grades throughout her middle school years. The only discipline problem appears to be one documented in her eighth grade year. Yet, in high school, her grades plummeted the very first semester. She had attended a large middle school located within the city so the move to the slightly larger high school setting a few blocks away would not be as profound as it would for a student who

had attended smaller, rural schools. What happened to Angel over the summer or during the fall to cause her grades to drop so significantly? Angel says that Spanish is the main language spoken in her home (another factor that places her at-risk) and that her parents are not comfortable with *Anglos*, so it is easy to understand that they would not initiate a conference with the school when the report card showed Angel's low grades. But someone referred her to alternative education. Why didn't **they** look at her records and try to find out what was happening in Angel's life? Some would argue that is the school's job to teach and the student's job to learn. Period. Too often that is exactly what does not happen.

So, why was Angel so successful academically at the alternative school? Her home situation grew significantly worse since enrolling in the alternative school with both parents moving out of state. Surviving on part time jobs, financial worries are a constant for this young teen and her brother. Angel says her teachers are her parents now. They show her love, concern, respect, and support. Phone calls were made to the older brother to remind him that he must get up earlier to get his younger siblings to school on time. A teacher gave Angel her home phone number so that she can be picked up if she needs a ride to school. She is taken to breakfast when she has perfect attendance for three weeks. She says she is learning how to be a family from her school. In today's changing society, schools must have the flexibility to meet the various needs of individual students.

In *Reclaiming our Youth*, Sylvia Rockwell writes:

What is done with, for, and to children and youth at-risk matters. They carry the lessons of kindness, compassion simple acts of grace with them their whole lives. For ultimately, it is not our treatments or our theories that help these youth get better, but the kindness lodged in

a difficult world. (Vol. 2, Issue 2)

Perhaps her insight answers an earlier questions regarding why some low-income children are not at risk of failure within the school system. They are poor but they learn kindness, compassion, and the skills to deal with a difficult world within the home setting. For many of our nation's children, this is simply not reality. Struggling with financial difficulties, many parents of children labeled at-risk are young and uneducated. They have not learned themselves how to survive in this environment which is often hostile to their circumstances.

The school climate must provide a place that is conducive to learning and that means the school staff must be able to really know their students and provide the support that each student needs. This is not possible in factory-type settings where classrooms range in size from 30-35 students. In addition to reduction in class size, schools need to be equitably funded with more local control for the best use of federal dollars for students.

As a result of the highly publicized *A Nation at Risk* (1983), governmental agencies across the country vowed to tighten up graduation requirements, increase accountability of teachers for test performances by students, and attempt to mainstream all students as they "demand the best effort and performance from all students." The word *demand* seems contradictory in an educational setting. Perhaps that is precisely what has been wrong with how we have dealt with children of poverty for centuries. We have demanded that all children be taught in a singular way, attain a specific test level, and adhere to arbitrary norms. When the child is not successful, he/she is labeled at risk of failure and, in essence, thrown away so that efforts can be concentrated on the students who do fit the norms and are willing and able to jump through the hoops of academia that white patriarchal America has decided are sacred.

Poverty is the predominant factor in labeling children at-risk. Identifying these children was supposed to lead to helping them be successful. It does not appear that is happening on a widespread basis. In the small pockets where it is happening, the main reason seems to be because there has been a real connection between the student and the school through personal relationships with caring adults who value the student and give positive support. The intent of at-risk funding was and is admirable. To make the system really work, the decisions and management involving the individual students need to be made at the lowest possible level rather than at the higher bureaucratic levels and then filtered down by theories and laws that leave little or no flexibility to the building principal or the classroom teacher.

Poverty is a national disgrace in this country and one that continues to be thrown back into the lap of the impoverished. *Get a job!* *"You just want a hand-out."* Until the federal government makes a serious commitment to substantial efforts to raise the standard of living for poor Americans, it will continue to throw dollars at the educational system as a token gesture of supporting equal opportunity for all citizens.

Federal funding to help provide an alternative program has benefitted Angel and Lonnie and Mandy and Jake. All four are considered at-risk. All four are from low-income homes. All four have been active participants in their own education in a nontraditional setting and have benefitted. One wonders if perhaps our federal dollars would be better spent on solving the problem of poverty itself?

Endnotes

- 1 Information on the students was taken from their cumulative school files (CA-60's). Students names have been changed.
- 2 This title was from a chapter in Profile of the School Dropout, page 313.
- 3 To qualify for the Federal free lunch program, a household is below poverty level.
- 4 Wording taken directly from *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994*. Section 1115 - Target Assistance Schools.
- 5 CRESPAR received a total of \$27,700,000 for research conducted by John Hopkins University and Howard University October, 1994 through September, 1999.
CREDE received a total of \$20,000,000 for research conducted by the University of California at Santa Cruz from July, 1996 - June, 2001.
OERI was created in 1994 and is a national institute supporting a range of research and development activities designed to improve the education of students at risk of educational failure because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantage
- 6 The bulleted programs described in this section were some of those highlighted in the School Improvement Research Series (SIRS)

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