ABSTRACT

GUY, JR, DAVID EUGENE. An Exploratory Inquiry of the Education of At-Risk and Special Education Students as Described by School Administrators, Central Office Personnel, and Parents. (Under the direction of Dr. Kevin P. Brady).

This study was conducted to explore the use and effects of administrative practices under current Federal legislation applied to at-risk and disabled students. Most of the current literature involving at-risk and disabled students revolves around administrative theory and not the practical aspects of administrative decision making on the success of students. The goal of this research was to discover from the experience of administrators currently leading other educators and the parents of students who are completing or have completed public school education if Federal legislation produces its intended results. The research uses a qualitative inquiry methodology using as data individual interviews with school principals, exceptional children’s directors, and parents to develop a sense of triangulation and therefore to provide some security in the quality of the findings. Dootson (1995) and others have described triangulation as “the use of multiple sources of data which all have a similar focus” (p. 184). The focus of this study is on the perceived level of success of schools whose administrators must adapt their leadership to the influences of Federal legislation designed to improve the education of at-risk and disability-labeled students. Areas discussed in the research are home and neighborhood environments, student resilience, legal influences, strategies developed from Federal legislation, and the effects of leadership practices on at-risk students.
An Exploratory Inquiry of the Education of At-Risk and Special Education Students as Described by School Administrators, Central Office Personnel, and Parents

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Educational Administration and Supervision

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, David Eugene Guy, Sr, who, more than anyone else, demonstrated the importance of education to an individual and the difference it could make in the quality of life you live.
BIOGRAPHY

David Eugene Guy, Jr was born on October 11, 1950, to David and Virginia Guy in Bennettsville, South Carolina. Graduating from Maxton High School in Maxton, North Carolina in 1968, he was accepted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC but only attended a short while because of indecision about the type of education he wanted at that time. He left the university and joined the United States Navy where he was able to develop GI Bill credits towards his future education.

After leaving the Navy, Mr. Guy returned to his education in 1976 at what was then Pembroke State University (now called the University of North Carolina at Pembroke) in Pembroke, NC. He graduated in 1981 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Music Education receiving recognition in Who’s Who in American Universities and Colleges in 1978. He did not begin teaching until he took a position teaching middle school students with Cumberland County (NC) Schools in 1983. Mr. Guy taught for five years but left teaching for a period of time to pursue other interests, including performing professionally as a musician.

In 2000, Mr. Guy returned to teaching primarily due to frequently meeting former students who commented on the positive experiences they had in his classes previously. He again taught middle school students in Cumberland County Schools. Desiring to have a positive effect on as many students as possible, Mr. Guy began seeking a Master of School Administration from UNC-Pembroke in 2003. He completed the degree in 2005, gaining his first position as an assistant principal at Luther “Nick” Jeralds Middle School of the Cumberland County Schools. In 2007, Mr. Guy applied for and was accepted into the Doctor
of Education in Educational Administration and Supervision Program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC.

Mr. Guy was asked to take a position as an assistant principal at Pine Forest High School of Cumberland County Schools in 2010, as a new administrative team was organized in support of the new principal, Mrs. Jane Fields. Mr. Guy continued working as an assistant with Pine Forest until August 15, 2014 at which time he took a position as an assistant at Liberty Middle School in Burke County. He is now actively pursuing a position as a principal.

Mr. Guy was married to the former Mary Kathryn Gust on December 10, 2011. He has two daughters, Margaret and Deborah, from a previous marriage and two step-children, Kara and David Totty. He currently lives with his wife in Hickory, NC.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge and thank all of those who have offered me help and encouragement throughout the processes necessary to complete this dissertation. To my wife, Mary, I apologize for all the stress I brought into your life over the past few years. You felt every bump in the road during the process but without the ability to do anything about it. Yet, you have always been my greatest asset in accomplishing this goal.

Thank you to Jane Fields, David Culbreth and all the other personnel of Pine Forest High School and Cumberland County Schools for the encouragement and actual assistance you have given me in this process. There is no way to sufficiently thank the parents who shared the stories of their students with me. I can only say none of this would have been possible without them. You have all been wonderful in your response to my need for your time.

To Dr. Kevin Brady, I wish to express my gratitude for your advocacy and expertise in chairing my committee and mentoring me through this process. I thank Dr. Lance Fusarelli for being the graduate school representative for the committee and acting as the liaison to the graduate school. Thank you to Drs. Lisa Bass and Greg Hicks for coming onto the committee late but doing such a wonderful job in ensuring a quality product from this research.

Finally, I want to thank my parents for instilling in me an understanding of the importance of God and education in the lives of everyone. My father, an eighth grade dropout, provided a tremendous role model as he pursued his own education, graduating from college with honors when I was a teenager.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In Victor Frankl's (1946) book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he explains the basis for logotherapy (his theory of psychotherapy) as a focus on "the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning. According to logotherapy, the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man" (p. 104). Frankl’s experiences in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany brought him to the belief that purpose was the saving element in men who had every reason to have lost all hope, yet persevered through all adversity.

If meaning or purpose is the primary motivation in an individual's life, would it not be an appropriate assumption that an “at-risk student” (Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owings, 1992, p. vi) in a public school would benefit from developing such meaning or purpose in their life? How are children helped to develop meaning in their lives when their disadvantage will place them two years behind before they even begin school (McDougal, Graney, Wright, & Ardoin, 2010)? Would it be possible to facilitate the attainment of meaning by helping these students develop specific goals for their lives that would be adapted to their abilities and interests, even if those abilities might be reduced by a disability? Could setting goals and understanding how to achieve those goals have an effect on the gap between the performance of the at-risk student and the performance of the already successful student? Can the act by at-risk students of setting life goals be the equivalent of making meaning in their lives? What role does the school administrator play in facilitating the at-risk student in their search for purpose or any cause-and-effect that pushes them to success?
As early as 1988, the National Center for Education Statistics defined the at-risk student as someone with the following characteristics (Kaufman et al., 1992, p. vi):

- Students from single-parent families, students who were overage for their peer group, or students who had frequently changed schools;
- Students whose parents were not actively involved in the student’s school, students whose parents never talked to them about school-related matters or students whose parents held low expectations for their child’s future educational attainment;
- Students who repeated an earlier grade, students who had histories of poor grades in Mathematics and English, or students who did little homework;
- Students who often came to school unprepared for classwork, students who frequently cut class, or students who were otherwise frequently tardy or absent from school;
- Students who teachers thought were passive, frequently disruptive, inattentive, or students who teachers thought were underachievers; and
- Students from urban schools or from schools with large minority populations.

Although the students originally researched were eighth graders, these listed characteristics have become commonly used to describe an at-risk student at any grade level.

The lives of at-risk students frequently appear to be without hope, without that reason for existence. To gain hope would require a reason to exist, a purpose or goal. Frankl quoted Nietzsche by saying, "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how" (1946). The exploration of this premise is the purpose of this study. The over-arching question is “How
can school administrators affect the performance of at-risk students if these administrators thoughtfully assist these students in developing a sense of purpose for their education?”

**The Purpose of the Study**

This study explored the experiences of school administrators, the system director of exceptional children’s programs, and the parents of at-risk children, within a specific school district as students considered at-risk go through the process of public education. The purpose was to discover from this exploration how these influential individuals understand the process and the effectiveness of the process of educating at-risk children. In addition, there is hope to discover how well the concepts of educating these children are understood by the participants. Areas of exploration will include the family and environment, development of resilience in students, legal influences and requirements, strategies developed from the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, and leadership strategies designed to meet the needs of at-risk students.

Kennelly and Monrad (2007) indicated as many as half of sixth graders who had an 80 percent absence rate, failing behavior grades, and failed either math or language arts had a 50 percent chance of dropping out of school. They also reported “Eighth-graders who miss five weeks of school or fail math or English had at least a 75 percent chance of dropping out of high school” (p. 1).

Barr and Parrett (2007) indicated that by the late 1990s, more than 45 percent of students were characterized by one or more of these factors:
1. Being culturally diverse and living in poverty (with limited English proficiency). Because so few of the poor make it into the middle class, the cycle of poverty tends to keep repeating itself.

2. Having parents with less than a high school education.

3. Living with a single parent.

They continued by listing factors presented by the Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute as influences of a child’s well-being and capacity to learn: readiness, community, race, economics, health, and family.

With the advent of the internet, a new risk with online learning has been suggested. Bulger and Watson (2006) indicated that the “learning flexibility and convenience” (p. 25) has led to a major increase in enrollment in online courses. The authors indicated that confidence in the use of computers and the ability to understand the programs being used were frequently hindrances in the successful completion of the courses. More studies of these effects are suggested by the authors.

Using data from the 2007 American Community Survey (ACS), Kominski, Elliott, and Clever (2009) established 22 “risk factors” (Para. 6) that were understood to have at least some effect on a child’s potential well-being. There the factors were listed under four domains of risk: Individual, Familial and Household, Economic, and Physical Environment. Based on existing research, approximately 68.5 percent of children display at least one of these factors. The authors state that “households with economic issues are also likely to have issues with the physical conditions where they live and some of the family circumstances associated with the household” (Para. 10). The 2011 poverty report from ACS indicated that
22.5 percent of children 18 and under live in poverty. Below is Table 1 which illustrates the arrangement of risk factor by domain.

Table 1
The Domains of Risk and the Factors of Influence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Familial and Household</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Physical Environment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence of disability</td>
<td>Single parent household</td>
<td>Receives food stamps</td>
<td>Overcrowded household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of multiple disabilities</td>
<td>Linguistically isolated household</td>
<td>Household receives public assistance</td>
<td>Household lacks complete kitchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enrolled in school</td>
<td>Non-English speaking household</td>
<td>Household below poverty</td>
<td>Household lacks complete plumbing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks English less than very well</td>
<td>Parent(s) foreign born and in U.S. for 5 years or less</td>
<td>No employed parent in household</td>
<td>Rented home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child is foreign born and in U.S. for 5 years or less</td>
<td>Parent(s) has less than high school education</td>
<td>Chronic unemployment in household</td>
<td>Not a single family home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cared for by grandparent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cared for by grandparent for 3 or more years</td>
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With such large numbers of students living in conditions that place them at risk and with so many factors influencing their behaviors in school, it becomes of extreme importance for school leaders to understand their students and what is needed to reach them in a way that is productive. The problem for school leaders is “How do we meet the needs of these students and still meet the needs of the more traditional student?” The purpose of the study
then becomes a search for answers to that question by raising other pertinent questions and exploring the dilemma this problem presents with practicing educational leaders and parents of at risk children.

**Research Questions**

Questions developed by the interviewer were based on the five areas of concentration explored in the second chapter literature review: environmental influences (including the family), resilience, legal influences, strategies employed, and leadership practices addressing the needs of the at-risk student. Each area, as the literature shows, has an impact on the potential of the student to be successful. The question we should be asking is “How can the school community best provide for the at-risk child, still maintain high level educational opportunity for those not at-risk, and assure the ultimate success for all?” Questions that led to my exploration and key to the research are:

1. As legislation continues to evolve in how public education is expected to educate disabled and other at-risk children, do school leaders feel they are able to effectively manage the education of all students under that legislation?

2. Do building administrators, central office personnel, and parents of at-risk students have a common understanding of the standards established in law and its ability to meet the needs of all students?

In this study, issues are discussed and explored both within the students’ environment and being, as well as, the effects of political policies and student outcomes. It begins with literature discussing environmental influences experienced by students outside of the school. The family connections and cultural influences, part of their everyday life from birth, play
the strongest part in determining where they begin their formal educational career (Bempechat, 1998). These continuing influences must be considered by educators to fully understand how to respond in fulfilling their continuing at-risk students’ educational needs.

The second area of exploration is the capacity of the student to succeed and persevere even when the experiences they are surrounded by have a generally negative effect. Frankl’s (1946) beliefs in having purpose come into play in a strong way. The literature reviewed in the next chapter shows that purpose and self-worth can be transformative regardless of the person’s origins.

The third and (arguably) the most generally influential area for discussion considers the legislative acts that have created much of the confusion in education and many years of tinkering by legislators and administrators trying to create the most perfect educational system possible. The goals of legislative advocates have always been to improve the educational lot of children but certain questions do arise: If legislation affecting public education improves the lot of some, is it necessarily beneficial to all? If legislation is meant to have a positive effect on a minority class of student, what is the effect on the majority class? What are the unintended consequences resulting from legislation developed for the benefit of parties of special interest?

The fourth part of the literature review discusses some of the programs that have been initiated due to the requirements of federal legislation. These include Response to Intervention, Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, and other less familiar options. These programs are relatively new in education but have shown great promise in correcting
early childhood deficiencies in learning when applied effectively, but effectiveness is sometimes hampered by lack of fiduciary assistance.

The fifth area of discussion delves into the area of leadership and its potential for influence on the at-risk student, disabled or non-disabled. This area is the primary focus of this research. Current research seems to reflect a haphazard approach to the influences educational leadership has on the at-risk student, especially at the school level. The researcher has selected literature that gives an overview of where school leaders’ knowledge currently stands.

Once the review of the literature is completed, the researcher will then discuss research-methodology of this qualitative study based on interviews with current administrators in various settings that explores how they involve themselves with educating at-risk students. Once the methodology and its parameters have been presented, the researcher will discuss his findings at length and elaborate on areas that need further study.

This study is meant to be a starting point, not the end of anything. Its purpose is to effect positive change in the lives of students, who have, until now, not felt purpose or perhaps never understood they could have a purpose, through the efforts of strong leaders of at-risk students.

**Significance of the Study**

This study brings together perspectives from the school, the school system, and parents about their experiences with at-risk and special education students. Bempechat (1998) expressed the importance of parent’s efforts in their child’s education, suggesting that
the quality of their early teaching of their children had a major impact on future success. Parental influences in combination with the schools actions are a major focus of this study.

This study gains its significance from the inclusion of parents of students who have been identified at-risk in some way and the discussion of how effectively schools educate their children. As the literature reflects, parents are seldom involved in the discussion of the administrative and teaching details and theory, so it is unknown how well they truly understand the application of processes used in educating their children. Parents are, in fact, the child’s first teacher and, in the case of special education students, the parents are integrally involved with their education from the beginning of the recognition of disability or being at-risk. This study makes the parent an equal partner in the discussion about their child’s educational experience and offers the opportunity to understand their level of comprehension of how legislation affects the business of public education.

Beyond the legal acts that affect the at-risk and learning disabled student, this study also explores resilience in those students and what is being done to combat the influences that exist outside of any disability they may have. Environment, culture, personal beliefs, and other such influences can be positive or negative depending on the individual involved and what they believe about themselves. Frankl’s (1946) philosophy regarding the importance of purpose as a driving force in the resilience of a life is worthy of exploration. The testimony in interviews with parents help to explain what about their students made them persevere through their disability to succeed.
Rationale for Investigative Interviews

The choice of using investigative interviews for this study is to develop as full an understanding as possible of administrators’ actual practice as they perform their daily functions. Student success is related to those practices. The research of Creswell, Hanson, Plano, and Morales (2007) supports the importance of listening to and learning from the experiences of those whose practices mold these students. Individual interviews with administrators and parents have assisted in developing a picture of how each level of a student’s education builds them to become a successful graduate of secondary education.

By choosing to interview principals from elementary, middle, and high schools, there is developed a sense of the continuity a child experiences as he or she moves through the public education system. Each level builds on the prior level, and the elementary level builds on what is learned from the parent and the child’s early environment. To fully understand the continuity of the student’s education, it was important to interview parents as well.

Whether a student is learning disabled or at-risk due to other circumstances, parents have certain expectations of the school system. The interviews explain the expectations of our schools and parents. Adding to that understanding, the exceptional children’s director of the school system was interviewed to provide a picture of the school system’s philosophy toward their at-risk and exceptional children. An analysis of all the interviews revealed how closely aligned the beliefs and expectations of the parents and school system are. The analysis also suggested strategies with potential and strategies without potential that are used to reach the at-risk student.
Validity and generalizability of the research are addressed by using three classes of data sources in this research (principals, parents, and directors). This strategy led to a data triangulation that provided a substantial amount of validity to the research. It is not expected that the research is broadly generalizable; however, there may very well be some analytic generalizability as certain aspects and conditions appear with more than casual frequency (Yin, 2013).

**Limitations**

Data for this study was gathered from a small sample of participants who have experiences directly related to the topic. Although they are education leaders in their district, they cannot present nor can this research encompass all possible thoughts on the subject. Parent participants all have students with major differences of at-risk status but all have been educated under the auspices of federal legislation. Taken together, the perspectives offered have the potential to build a core of understanding about the effect schools, operating under the current climate, have on at-risk and special education students. The value of the perspectives depends on the honesty of the participants in their response to the interview questions. The school system has an urban demographic and, as such, will not give any perspective of a rural educational setting. So, although there is the potential for a great deal of data, the data is only explicit for the given district setting.

**Definition of Terms**

At-risk student – Any student who meets any of the characteristics or “risk factors” of either the 1988 report of the National Center of Education Statistics or the report by Kominski et al. to the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America.
Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 – The most recent reauthorization of the Public Law 94-142, usually referred to as The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The act protects the quality of education of disabled students and provides procedural safeguards for them. The last prior authorization was called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997. Although both the 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations are referred to as IDEA, in this dissertation, we will refer to IDEIA when referring to the 2004 reauthorization.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Influences of the Home, Family, and Environment of At-Risk Students

Bempechat (1998) asked the question: “What goes on in homes where children are doing well in school that may not be going on in homes where children are doing poorly” (p. xi)? In partially answering this question, she stated “poor and minority parents are indeed involved in their children’s schooling” (p. xi). She continued to express, that regardless of achievement level among minority children, students felt their parents provided “academic” and “motivational” support by “articulating beliefs in the important relationship between education and future economic survival” (p. 85). Some mothers were said to find “themselves competing unsuccessfully with their children’s peers, who became increasingly influential in distracting their children from the good study habits they had instilled in them” (p. 88).

Bempechat (1998) feels attempts to “save” at-risk students often are unsuccessful because we actually perpetuate the belief system that these students “are incapable of problem solving and limited in their abilities to save themselves” (p. 15). It is Bempechat’s contention that “a child’s success—and a school’s success—is very much an indication of the commitment of family members, schoolteachers and administrators, and community leaders” (p. 15). Bempechat believes that educational research now acknowledges the importance of understanding the strengths that lie within families and capitalizing on these strengths and appreciating the positive consequences that come from nurturing a sense of efficacy and empowerment in family members.
Continuing to express strong views about the importance of family structure, the research of Reginald Clark (1983) reinforces the notion that highest performing students are from structured homes:

In these homes the parents’ expectations for their children’s social behavior and school achievement were very clearly stated, and the children knew the consequences that would result from transgressions of any kind. These were homes in which parents were very familiar with their children’s teachers and were aware of what and when homework assignments were due and when tests were to take place. Clark characterized these parents as being firm but warm in their child-rearing styles. (p. 17)

Comparing the homes of failing students as “disorganized, even chaotic,” Clark was summarized saying:

[T]here were no clearly articulated rules or expectations for either the children’s behavior or their academic performance. These parents tended to be out of the loop, so to speak, with regard to their children’s schools. That is, they often did not know the names of their children’s teachers, were unsure of what their children were being taught, and did not know if and when their children had homework to complete or tests to study for. Clark described these parents as being rather permissive in their child-rearing styles. (p. 17)

Clark (1983) also went on to say that “…most of these ‘low-achieving’ students are the first ones in their families to reach the twelfth grade” (p. 190) indicating there was still a drive to complete at least a secondary education.
Snyder and Dillow (2012) presented data in the *Digest of Education Statistics 2011* from the Department of Education illustrating the following:

- A total of 24.7 percent of households have a single-female parent present. There are 6.4 percent of households with a single-male parent present.
- A black student has three times the probability of living in a family with a female householder without a spouse than a white student.
- A Hispanic student has a 10 percent greater chance of living in a home with a single female parent than a white student.
- A white student has a 7 percent greater chance of living in a home with a single female parent than an Asian student.

Although most students still come from a home with married parents (68.9 percent [2012]), the large number of single-parent homes would indicate the potential for a less structured home life, and, with the large number of households without a male role-model for the young males in the household, it could be suggested there might be some inappropriate behaviors learned without proper guidance.

Karriker-Jaffe, Foshee, Ennett, and Suchindran (2013) highlight empirical research based on how teen aggression, physical and social, were affected by family and neighborhood. The study was conducted in a rural neighborhood instead of an urban one which separates the study from more familiar ones, but, also, recognizes previous research that has found many of the same influences existing in both (citing Chilenski, 2011; Lee et al., 2003; Osgood & Chambers, 2008; Trejos-Castillo et al., 2008; Vazsonyi et al., 2008). In this discussion of their research, Karriker-Jaffe et al. (2013) indicated a difference in the
development of aggression in boys and girls that may seem somewhat counterintuitive. Boys developed aggression much more quickly than girls but girls held their aggressive tendencies for a much longer period of time. High levels of family conflict produced more aggression in boys than the disadvantages of the neighborhood. The effects of “the interaction of neighborhood disadvantage and family conflict resulted in trajectories for the highest-risk girls depicting the most severe and long-lasting behavior problems” (p. 872).

Wacquant and Wilson (1989) described “hyperghettoization” as “a process by which the poor ghetto neighborhoods have lost nearly all of the social structure and organization that once existed” (cited in Khalifa, 2010, p. 622). He stressed the effect of home life from this environment on the “type of social and cultural capital students bring to school” (p. 622). Khalifa (2010) was able to illustrate the connection demographics in a neighborhood play in the development of a student’s behavior. The lack of incentives to change and an overlap of the characteristics of prison and the ghetto have created a different type of cultural capital: “The cultural capital that Black male students embody is more likely to be criminalized than validated in the public schools” (p. 623). Khalifa (2010) continues by generalizing in this statement:

In this modern time, hip-hop-oriented street culture had many markings that led to even more marginalization in their traditional school environments. Hyperghettoized students’ swagger, language, dress, and threatening behavior, all became too much for traditional school leaders to bear. The most common response is to remove students from the school environment. (p. 624)
In referring to capital and race, Khalifa (2010) quotes Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999): “Black and low-SES students tend to receive less educational return, probably because of micro political evaluative processes at the school and classroom levels” (p. 158). They further explained that cultural and educational resources and racial gaps were a function of family background; in their view, these cultural and educational resources that many Blacks lack, “have strong and positive effects on both GPAs and standardized achievement.” (p. 171) [p. 624)]

In the conclusion of his study, Khalifa (2010), in explaining the seeming indifference to education by hyperghettoized students said:

Families of the at-risk students did not use the educational system as a means to attain a position or status in society. Generally, these families had no position to maintain in society. Therefore, parents had no incentive to interact or use schools to help their children. (p. 642)

**Student Resilience Theories of At-Risk Students**

In writing about how seven at-risk students had unexpected positive outcomes in their lives despite their differing physical and environmental factors placing them at-risk, Aronson (2001) reported on “educational resilience” (p. 5) as the common element in their success. Students are successful due to their individual response to their perceived shortcomings or adversity. Aronson defines resilience as “successful adaptation despite risk and adversity” (p. 5).

Aronson supported her conclusions by first using references to several published works describing how societal pressures make it difficult for the at-risk youth to fit in within
the educational system because of the disparity between the haves and have-nots. In Jay MacLeod’s (1987) book, *Ain’t No Making It*, many students’ sense of cultural alienation leads to frequent dropping out of college after attaining entry to that level of educational opportunity. Reference is made to a study by Patrick McQuillan (1998) where he concluded “that schools—instead of acting as conduits to social mobility—push away and deny students of urban centers their right to an education” (p. 8). Summarizing Stephen Jay Gould (1981), Aronson determines “that science, far from being neutral, has often worked to legitimize inequalities through ‘the laws of nature’” (p. 9). Once establishing the idea of society’s part in reducing the possibilities for at-risk students, she offered examples of how adversity was overcome by resilience. She recognized Victor Frankl’s (1946) contribution to understanding how resilience can be the determining factor in overcoming one’s damaging environment. She describes the relevancy of Frankl’s research by summarizing it this way:

Resilience is not about ignoring or avoiding pain at all cost. Understanding the meaning of one’s life can offset the effects of adversity and trauma. It is in our consciousness, then, not in engaging in certain behaviors, that we can transcend our hardships. (p. 10)

From Richard Rodriguez’s (1982) book *Hunger of Memory*, the differences in the culture of the home compared to the culture of the school required Rodriguez to make an emotional decision about the direction his life would take. Aronson (2001) described the situation Rodriguez faced in these terms:

Rodriguez describes the gap between home life with its intimate atmosphere and a successful academic life, cold and impersonal—two worlds (low-income, working-
class home and school) that never meet. Torn between the two, Rodriguez chose school and public life over his private family life. Torn between two cultures, he chose mainstream America over his Mexican roots. (p. 11)

In essence, he felt it necessary to completely cut his ties from his home culture. Aronson sees this as resilience coming “with an irreparable loss of part of oneself” (p. 11).

As a final example, Aronson uses the fiction of Toni Morrison (1998) from her novel *Beloved*. Aronson (2001) summarizes what she has gleaned from Morrison’s writing:

> We learn that resilient individuals and groups have a lot of “un-doing” to do, a lot of painful memories to relive and release, before their resilience bears fruit for them. Resilience, then, is not just about bouncing back, but a process that can take many different directions. Sethe, for instance, cuts her own baby’s throat and leaves it for dead in order to stop her master from taking them back into slavery. In an extreme case of tragic irony, this infanticide is what it takes for him to stop and for her to escape to freedom and life. Like *Hunger of Memory*, we encounter the theme of sacrifice and loss necessary to gain access to a non-pathological environment. Thus, resilience tells us more about environment and institutions than about individuals. (p. 12)

Aronson (2001) deduced from her research there were specific barriers having specific effects on at-risk students. Under the general heading of “Adversity” she produced the following list of six indicators:

1. Poverty (represented by low-income families and environments). The National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), in their report of the 2011 school year on
the percentage of recent high school completers enrolled in 2- and 4-year
colleges, indicated 53.5 percent of students from low income families, 66.2
percent of students from middle income families and 82.4 percent of students
from high income families were enrolled [per the U. S. Department of Commerce]
(2012). Reardon (2011) concluded in his research that the income gap has
become greater than the perceived racial gap.

The forces at work behind the rising income achievement gap are likely
complex and interconnected. Certainly more research to understand the
causes of these trends is necessary. Equally important, however, is
research to understand the consequences of these patterns. At the same
time that family income has become more predictive of children’s
academic achievement, so have educational attainment and cognitive skills
become more predictive of adults’ earnings. The combination of these
trends creates a feedback mechanism that may decrease intergenerational
mobility. As the children of the rich do better in school, and those who do
better in school are more likely to become rich, we risk producing an even
more unequal and economically polarized society. (2011, p. 27)

2. Racial and ethnic identity (the specific experience of being nonwhite). The
dropout rate in the 2012 report by Snyder and Dillow indicated that 5.1 percent of
Whites, 8.0 percent of Blacks, and 15.1 percent of Hispanics dropped out of
school in 2010.
3. Isolation and lack of exposure (few educational and cultural opportunities).

Snyder and Dillow (2012) reported that in 2007 parents of children from kindergarten through fifth grade reported education related activities in the following categories: Visited a library (48.8 percent); went to a play concert, or other live show (31.4 percent); visited an art gallery, museum or historical site (26.3 percent); visited a zoo or aquarium (19 percent); and, attended an event sponsored by a community, religious, or ethnic group (58.9 percent). Of course, there were wide discrepancies in the frequency of these opportunities based upon family income.

4. Hostile environments (social institutions and environments introducing difficulties in the development of their lives).

In 2012, Roberts, Zhang, and Truman (2011) in their research “Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011” reported:

Preliminary data show that there were 33 school-associated violent deaths from July 1, 2009, through June 30, 2010 (Indicator 1). In 2010, among students ages 12-18, there were about 828,000 nonfatal victimizations at school, which include 470,000 victims of theft and 359,000 victims of violence (simple assault and serious violence) (Indicator2). In 2009-10, about 74 percent of public schools recorded one or more violent incidents of crime, 16 percent recorded one or more serious violent incidents, and 44 percent recorded one or more thefts (Indicator 6). [p. iii]
5. Lack of educational tradition: The difficulty of learning how to learn (no educational culture to draw from).

6. Linguistic and cultural adjustment (adaptation to a different country and culture).

In 2011, the NCES reported that 11 percent of fourth graders and 5 percent of eighth graders who were tested were English Language Learners (ELL).

7. Conflict between school and home (negative influences competing with the school for the student’s attention).

8. Neglect and abuse (physical and emotional torture as a child or youth).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level of Parents</th>
<th>Attended a General School Meeting</th>
<th>Attended Parent-Teacher Conference</th>
<th>Attended a Class Event</th>
<th>Volunteered at School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school/GED</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational-technical or some college</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree/some graduate school</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate-professional degree</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from “Digest of Education Statistics, 2011, Chapter 2” (2012) by the National Center for Education Statistics, Department of Education, Washington, DC

The research further illustrated that as a result of the adversity there were certain affectations and responses exemplified by her respondents (Aronson, 2011):
• Fear and anxiety (fear of retaliation, unjust punishment, anxiety produced by being out of one’s comfort zone)
• Resentment (anger at injustice and the inability to rid oneself of injustice)
• Internalization (an internal sense of futility)
• Shame (sense of being less because of being poor, seeming less)
• Growing up too fast (responsibilities forcing the individual to accept more adult roles)
• Self-protection (creating walls to prevent greater hardship)

After determining the barriers and effects they had on her respondents, Aronson (2011) was able to create separate lists for helping conditions to reverse the effects of adversity and then strategies that helped them to cope. She found six conditions she considered as “enabling” (p. 97):

1. Strong family (providing a sense of security, valuing education). The specific institution of the nuclear family is becoming less familiar. In its 2012 report, the NCES found the following percentages by race were found in a single parent home: 24.2% of Whites, 62.3% of Blacks, 35.6% of Hispanics, and 13.3% of Asians (2012).
2. Support systems (extended families, social services, community groups, churches),
3. Good teachers (made students feel good about themselves, motivated them),
4. Other caring adults,
5. Role models (individuals who inspired), and
6. Turning points (significant life changing moments).

Once conditions were met to produce opportunities for change, the respondents used the following strategies to achieve success. They include the following six conditions:

1. Perseverance (continuous effort to succeed),
2. Resistance (oppositional perseverance),
3. Friendly competitiveness (athletic or intellectual activities that provided successes),
4. Faith and spirituality (recognition of their lack of power to change the present but providing the means to dream),
5. Putting an optimistic spin on the journey (despite adversity, life is good), and
6. Creating distance (physical, geographical, emotional, and/or intellectual distance from adversity).

Remarking about her subjects reflection, Aronson had this to say “Respondents looked back on their journey in three different ways: by often remembering, by helping others, and—not unlike Victor Frankl (1946)—by searching and finding meaning to their experiences” (2011, p. 117).

Knesting (2008), in a qualitative study of students at risk of dropping out, reported in her discussion of the study that:

When it comes to the topic of high school dropouts, there is a cacophony of voices participating in the conversation. There are teachers, administrators, school board members, and district superintendents. There are parents, politicians, school counselors, and researchers. However, students are seldom involved in the
conversation, especially students who either have dropped out of school or are thinking about leaving. (p. 7)

Bempechat (1998) explained her primary goal of researching student motivation was to learn how attitudes and beliefs of students were developed and then creating strategies that would reverse their “feelings of intellectual inferiority” (p. 19). Performing her research, she found quantifiable intelligence was not as prevalent a predictor of student success as might be expected. She states “…it is more often the case that children’s confidence and their beliefs about their abilities are better indicators of how well they will do in school than their actual IQ or achievement test scores (see Dweck & Bempechat, 1983)” (p. 19).

In continuing her discussion about the importance of the beliefs of children towards their education, Bempechat (1998) made reference to four causes they might cite to explain their performance in school:

The first of these is innate ability or intelligence, which many students acknowledge is an important factor in their academic success. The second is effort. Many students credit trying hard as a necessary component in their school achievement. The third is the relative ease with which they believe they succeeded at the task. Finally, students will mention external factors that in all likelihood had nothing to do with their performance, such as having been lucky enough to study the right material or being the teacher’s pet. (p. 21)

Bempechat (1998) contrasted students who believed intelligence was a fixed commodity as opposed to flexible and fluid. The child with a fixed perspective would choose less challenging opportunities:
These children will actually opt to sacrifice an opportunity to learn something new in order to demonstrate that they are indeed smart. Far from being resilient in the face of difficulty, children who believe that intelligence is limited tend to fall apart quite easily and quickly when they encounter a challenging problem, especially if their confidence is low. Instead of trying out different ways to solve a problem, they may for example, try the same ineffective strategy over and over again. Even if they previously experienced some success with a similar problem, they will denigrate their ability to complete the task, saying things such as “I was never good at this kind of stuff.” (p. 24)

In speaking of students who see intelligence as “unlimited” she had this to say:

Specifically, children who view intelligence as a fluid and changeable quality will tend more toward undertaking challenging tasks, even when their confidence is low and they risk mistakes and failure. And when faced with difficulty or failure, they tend to rebound and behave as though they believe they have control over the situation, or that they are in command. They become persistent and absorbed with finding effective ways to strategize their way to a solution….In addition, children who tend to believe in a flexible view of intelligence will also tend to describe intelligence in others on the basis of the actions they take to become smarter….These children seem to be oriented toward the notion that learning is a process, one that allows them to increase both their skills and their knowledge. For children so oriented, worries about how “smart” they are relative to others do not figure prominently in their concerns about their schoolwork. (Bempechat, 1998, p. 23)
In her discussion of academic support, Bempechat (1998) showed special regard to the influences of parents in the early development of thinking skills in their children. She speaks to how parents help their children to think abstractly by doing more than asking for “observations” or “pointing at pictures” in a story. Instead they ask about “alternative explanations of character’s behavior” or “differing resolutions of conflict” (p. 35).

The commonly recognized educational term “scaffold” (p.35) was used in reference to the research of Rogoff and Gardner (1984) by Bempechat (1998) as applied by parents building connections of previous learning to new situations in their children. Specifically:

Rogoff likens this process to a scaffold, a framework that provides physical support as an individual climbs. With such verbal scaffolding, parents facilitate the learning of new skills by controlling the level of difficulty of the task in question, providing advice, and actually showing their children different kinds of strategies for solving a problem….They tacitly help their novice children by creating a context in which new information eventually becomes consistent with the skills and knowledge that the children already possess. (pp. 35-36)

Students’ success generally reflects the teaching abilities of the parent: The more effective the tutoring, the more successful the child. Low-income parents who have successful children “mix learning into daily household activities, supply more books, and, in anticipation of later schooling, set appropriate academic goals for their children to accomplish” (p. 37). The unsuccessful students had parents who attempted to teach more formally and illustrated lower expectations (Bempechat, 1998).
Bempechat (1998) stated pressure from parents encouraged children to excel and reinforced the “authority “and “status of the teachers. A growing research literature has shown that parents own beliefs, attitudes, and values about learning serve to guide the behavior of their children around school-related issues” (p. 38). A child’s perception of their own academic skills is influenced more by their parents’ perception of their academic ability than by the actual academic achievement of the student (Bempechat, 1998).

From her research, Bempechat (1998) established a list of recommendations for parents and teachers she called “lessons” (p. 101):

- Set education as the family’s top priority
  - a. Think of the future as a long-term proposition.
  - b. Be willing to sacrifice in the present for future gain
  - c. Academic achievement is the result of “diligence and practice.” (p. 103)
- Let children suffer: “…the ability to be resilient in the face of failure or setbacks does not develop mysteriously. Rather, these qualities are believed to evolve and strengthen over time and after much experience coping with difficult situations” (p. 105).
- Orient children toward the process of learning: “…we need to find ways to communicate to children that there is more than one way to reach a solution, that it is virtually impossible to learn without making mistakes and taking the time to understand errors, and that despite all evidence to the contrary, day-to-day schooling is not a race to see who can be the first to find the right answer” (p. 109).
• Maintain high expectations and standards: “Barring serious learning difficulties or mental retardation, all children are able to learn and should be held to high expectations and standards for academic achievement” (p. 110).

• Encourage healthy self-perception of ability: “Parents and teachers need to convey to children that effort…can compensate for any perceived lack of ability” (p. 111).

• Strengthen home-school partnerships: “…researchers such as Joyce Epstein (1987) have shown that when successful models of partnership between home and school are put in place, math and reading achievement tend to increase; truancy, suspension, and expulsion tend to decrease; and students tend to participate more in extracurricular activities (National Educational Goals Report, 1995)” (p. 112).

• Learn from Catholic schools: “Catholic schools have always embraced the view that learning cannot take place devoid of family and community concerns” (p. 113).

• Practice cultural sensitivity: “…cultural sensitivity—ever more necessary in our schools—is realized through a healthy balance between respecting the ways in which culture and ethnicity guide the academic and motivational support that parents provide for their children, and maintaining high academic goals for all children” (p. 115).

• Encourage school choice: “Families do not need to be fixed—they need to be supported in their efforts to educate their children in ways they see fit. For many parents, this has recently come to mean the ability to choose the schools in which they want to see their children educated” (p. 115).
In coming to her conclusions about her research, Bempechat recognized the many different ways students can reach the same outcome. She stated that the major goal of her research was “to extract lessons from the findings—principles, if you will, that teachers and parents can apply to help their children reach and even surpass their current intellectual potential” (p. 101).

Knesting (2008) indicated that “school personnel need to seek out students who are struggling to stay in school; ask them questions about their experiences, why they want to leave and what would help them stay; and listen to their answers” (p. 7). Further she recognized that students found support from teachers who “…demonstrated respect and acceptance of all students in their classrooms…maintained high expectations…[and] stayed on their backs as they worked to achieve their goals” (p. 8).

Chen (2008) wrote this observation about the perceptions of at-risk students concerning their career possibilities:

At-risk students demonstrate a tendency to foreclose prematurely and adhere to career myths that could hinder their career exploration and commitment. To conceive from the social leaning framework, this tendency to foreclose can be understood as the result of the observation of generalizations of the target group, based on interactions with challenging environmental conditions. At-risk students may foreclose on exploring their occupational preferences or various career opportunities because they perceive barriers in their career myths. Such myths form and reinforce their false belief systems that drastically limit and reduce the number of perceived feasible career possibilities. (p. 10)
At-risk students have difficulty in seeing a “direct connection between their education and its relevance to their future, and consequently will be more likely to drop out of school, thus seriously limiting future career options” (p. 10).

Chen (2008), speaking from the perspective of a counselor, presented several strategies to help overcome the misconceptions at-risk students have about their possible future careers:

- First, the guidance process ought to foster and strengthen the student’s self-concept system so that he is able to create or reinvent a healthy and positive inner selfhood to cope with issues and problems emerging from the exploration.

- Second, there is a need to direct the student’s attention to the present effort that is directly tied to his schoolwork and other related efforts for positive change. A more motivated and wholesome self-awareness should be the real driving force to initiate and maintain a concrete effort toward a more optimal outcome, translating good will into effective and beneficial behavior.

- Third, aiming to enhance the critical and constructive functioning of self-efficacy, students are guided to modify the incorrect and/or low self-efficacy beliefs as they approach their schoolwork and explore career prospects….The counselor can direct and challenge students positively to become aware of personal capacities which have received little or no attention. (pp. 11-12)

Once the myths students carry with them have been addressed and corrected, issues of engagement and environment can be explored and skills to cope with concerns may be developed.
The Legalities of Educating Students with Disabilities

Turnbull stated in 2005 “that law is a form of behavior modification. It regulates the behavior between the government and the governed, and it shapes the behavior of both” (p. 320). The initial move to the establishment of recognition of special education began with the 1954 decision in the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. This decision brought about the first court directed requirement for equal education for all children. Initially, thought as applying specifically to racial equality, it soon became the driving force for educational equality for the disabled. This great step toward equality was to ignite an enormous change in the expected behaviors found in American education. Lyndon Johnson led the movement for educational equality with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the compensatory education program known as Title I. Among changes that came during the mid-1970s was Title IX seeking equality for women and culminating in 1974 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Barr & Parrett, 2007).

Title I was particularly hard to develop because of its need for so many disparate ideologies to come to agreement. The coalition of legislators not wanting any federal interference in their schools, civil rights advocates wanting no federal funds in segregated schools, and religious leaders willing to support federal involvement only if parochial schools were included while civil libertarians wanted no involvement of government with any form of religion-based schooling was very difficult to negotiate. In addition to the political difficulties, there was the problem of producing instruments of effective practice to produce the intended results of the legislation (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009).
The commissioner of education, Francis Keppel, Congressman Carl Perkins, and Senator Wayne Morse worked together to develop a compromise for those factions who had their objections to the legislation. Keppel applied the Supreme Court decision from *Everson v. Board of Education* of 1947 to allow federal funds to parochial school students because it could only be applied to improving education and not religious education. The ambiguity of the bill made it possible for those favoring general aid to vote in favor because there were no obvious strings attached to how the money was to be spent (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). Once the legislation passed, it became obvious one of the most glaring weaknesses with Title I was the lack of strong state education departments available to manage the influx of federal funds. Up to this point, state education departments were sparsely manned with few staffers specializing in the practice of teaching. In addition, most education decisions were made on the local level and delegated to the schools (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009).

The impact of this weakness was first introduced by a study initiated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF). The study claimed federal monies were basically being spent to supplant monies from the local education agency’s (LEA) general fund for things other than better education. In addition, the federal government had no protocols for finding abuse or monitoring practice. At the same time, the Department of Health Education and Welfare (HEW) reported the link between increased funding and improved student achievement did not exist. These two reports taken in context produced a real danger to the continuation of the Title I program (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009).
To correct the problem required becoming more targeted with the funds to assure they got to the students they were meant to reach. Those, who might have felt this would take some of local autonomy away, would accept some small amount of loss to keep the funding that Title I would bring. To help assure these funds were spent as intended, the original regulation became a legally enforceable law. Failure to follow the law could result in a penalty of reduction or elimination of their Title I grant (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009).

A second element in the correction of the program flaws addressed the issues of practice. Without a change of practice, the teaching culture of the schools would not change. Incentives were initiated to promote change in practice. If problems were found then administrative changes were expected or the funds would have to be repaid. This was meant to incentivize those needed practice changes. In the Education Amendments of 1972, the United States Office for Education (USOE) was given the ability to help State Education Agencies (SEA) develop capability (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009).

By the 1980s, there was a major change in the direction of Title I. It became more important as an instrument for the decrease in the achievement gap between black and white students rather than simply a means to equity in education (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). The need was highlighted by the Coleman et al. (1979) 1966 report which revealed “average differences by race and social class” (p. 100) in testing of American students. Achievement was to be improved across the board (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009).

Coleman et al. continued creating a stir in public education with his 1966 report when he stated:
Schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. (1979, p. 325)

The result of this comment would leave one to think that schools were of little help in improving the condition of a student’s life. This conclusion initiated uproar in the educational community (Coleman, 1972).

Coleman, in a discussion for *Educational Researcher* in 1972, made several comments concerning the use of his 1966 report. The following are highlights from that article:

- “The long range impact of the report will probably be to strengthen the move toward evaluating schools in terms of their results rather than their inputs” (p. 13).
- “In their search for evidence, judges view this report as one of the few which provides some kind of evidence on which they can base a decision” (p. 13).
- [The 1966 report] was not initiated by a grant from the OE (Office of Education) Bureau of Research, but in implementation of legislation from the congress. That fact in itself created the presumption of policy relevance, and automatically created audiences among policy-making bodies, from the presidency to local school boards. (p. 14)
- The question of heritability of intelligence is very complex. I don’t think data from studies like the one I did contributes at all to such knowledge. Questions as to how
much variation in child or adult performance is accounted for by genetic backgrounds and how that genetic background varies from one large ethnic or racial group to another can only be answered through studies of extremely sophisticated experimental design. I don’t see that that data is available now. I think the controversy is not fruitful until that research is done. In my opinion, (Arthur) Jensen’s conclusions are based in part on research which is not relevant. Until better research is done, I think the whole discussion is premature. I do regard such research as important to carry out, however, I don’t believe, as some of my colleagues do, that such knowledge can have only bad, or primarily bad, consequences. (p. 14)

Coleman’s prediction of outcomes rather than inputs for schools has proven very prophetic, especially in light of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Courts and policy making entities have, as he noted, used the report to support court decisions and for the development of legislation such as Title I. The controversy created in comparisons made in achievement level differences and causes between majority and minority students is still controversial and will remain so until someone is capable of a longitudinal and definitive study that takes in all parameters that might influence student performance and is proven acceptable to all parties.

Herrnstein and Murray attempted such a study in 1994. In the introduction of their report they remark “one of the problems about writing about intelligence is how to remind readers often how little an IQ [Intelligence Quotient] score tells about whether the human being next to you is someone whom you will admire or cherish. This thing we know as IQ is important but not as a synonym for human excellence” (p. 21). Even with this being said,
they proceeded to attempt to establish how much of intelligence is heritable and how much is developed through environment. Their methods of analysis made them come to the conclusion that the correlation coefficient of heritability as part of the intelligence quotient is between .4 and .8.

This pronouncement brought immediate outcries from other statisticians who felt that one’s environment had a much greater influence. Stephen Jay Gould (1996) admitted that the use of “multiple regression” (p. 371) and the “National Longitudinal Survey of Youth” (p. 371) were appropriate for the research but erred in “two categories: omissions and confusions, and content” (p. 371). He explained that of the three major schools of psychometric interpretation only the classicists would support the basis of Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) conclusions. He also felt that cultural bias was an ignored part of the testing of intelligence and therefore made the results of The Bell Curve incomplete. In content, he pointed to the lack of the coefficient of determination being presented in the general text but instead being relegated to Appendix 4.

Regardless of the philosophical and academic discussion that was and continues occurring, leaders in business, politics, and education, thinking in more practical terms, began to seek higher educational and accountability standards. Much of this desire was fueled by the emergence of international competition in industry where there had been little. American students began showing poorly in comparison studies with students of other nations. Where Title I had begun with the idea students needed to be fixed, by the 1980s the thinking was schools are what needed to be fixed. Cohen and Moffitt (2009), referencing the 1993 report A Nation at Risk, said “Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their
fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones” (p. 103).

The move to equality of opportunity became a move to standardize the proficiency of all students. Legislatures in the states of Kentucky, Texas, Colorado and North Carolina established policies applied to standards, achievement, and consequences for failure. On a national level, in 2002 the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required proficiency for all in reading, math, and science (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). The need for such changes came to the forefront because of changes in the marketplace and new science in teaching and learning. The economic marketplace changed in four significant ways:

1. The world of work has given way to the “age of the mind.”
2. There is an ever-growing demand for new skills.
3. New technology continues to develop.
4. The relationship between education and income is becoming increasingly significant.

(Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 5)

As these changes have taken hold, it becomes more apparent the needs of the at-risk student and learning disabled student (frequently one and the same) have changed with them. What are the methods and strategies we must use to help them adjust? How do we as educators change to meet their needs?

Harry and Klingner (2006) said, “The most consistently replicated findings link student achievement to their opportunity to learn the material, in particular to the degree to which teachers carry the content to them personally through active instruction and move
them through the curriculum at a brisk pace” (p.1069; emphasis added). Without sufficient opportunity to learn, it becomes impossible to determine if a child truly has a learning disability. This aspect is too frequently lost in the investigation of a child’s disability.

In making their investigations, Harry and Klingner (2006) resolved that poorer schools also had poorer teachers. It seemed Socio-Economic Status (SES) “was the determining factor regarding teacher quality” (p. 68). Compounding this circumstance, ethnicity had a definite effect on the education of students with the “highest-poverty Black schools tending to be worse off than the highest-poverty Hispanic schools” (p.68). Many blamed the home life, specifically the parents, for the students’ inability to perform but examples from several classrooms proved the fallacy of this thinking. “[W]e argue that school practices, such as limited opportunity to learn, present a powerful explanation for many children’s educational outcomes” (p. 68, emphasis added).

The failure of exploitation of family strengths is an error of public schools. This failure is marked by disdain and disinterest in these families and what could be accomplished by using them in a positive way. Part of it is due to biases that interweave race with poverty and marginalized family structures or lifestyles. Delpit (1995) explains:

Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socio-economic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households….When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths. To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of their children’s lives outside of school so as to recognize their strengths. (cited in Harry& Klingner, 2006, p. 172)
How much has high stakes testing changed the processes for determining a students’ classification as disabled? Harry and Klingner (2006) feel their research tends to indicate a definite change for the over recognition of disability. “Principals who were trying to ‘identify’ all the special education students before they were tested felt vindicated in their efforts when they discovered…children…who could not read, and whom everyone seemed to have ignored up until then” (p. 110). The increase in recommendations is excused because after all “the children ‘had to qualify’ for those services” (p. 110). Their findings indicated that psychologists are put under pressure and frequently succumb to the pressure by administrators. Some psychologists were even found to use unreliable and biased tests in making their determinations.

Harry and Klingner (2006) point to Skrtic (1991) to express the goals of special education as “essentially those of an ‘adhocracy’—‘a problem-solving organization in which interdisciplinary teams of professionals collaborate to invent personalized programs’ [p. 185]” (p. 111). They continued to use Skrtic’s suggestion of two other models found in special education: a “professional bureaucracy” perfecting standard goals and a “machine bureaucracy” where “worker behavior is controlled by procedural rules [p. 184]” (p. 111). With such a dichotomy in approach, the legal requirements become more important and controlling than the actual needs of the student.

The primary legal document applied to special education is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA 2004) but other statutes also have bearing on special education. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 became known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The
importance of the alignment of these two pieces of legislation was expressed in Congress’
own words [citing 20 U. S. C. §1400 (c) (5) (A)]:

The education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by…having
high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education
curriculum in the regular classroom…to meet developmental goals and…the
challenging expectations that have been established for all children. (Wright &
Wright, 2010, p. 46)

The purposes of IDEIA as stated in Section 1400 (d) of the statute are:
to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate
public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to
meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and
independent living” and “to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and
parents of such children are protected. (Wright & Wright, 2010, p. 48)

With the mission defined by these purposes, IDEIA 2004 defines the requirements of the
school to meet their legal responsibilities for the special education student.

The process begins with an initial evaluation with informed parental consent. Per the
IDEIA 2004, the evaluation requires “a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather
relevant functional, developmental, and academic information” (Wright & Wright, 2010, p.
93, footnote 51) about the child. A reevaluation occurs no more frequently than once a year
unless the school and parents agree to a greater frequency. The school is required to
reevaluate at least every three years unless an agreement between school and parents finds it
unnecessary (Wright & Wright, 2010).
To determine the qualification of a student for services a “Determination of Eligibility and Education Need” is convened with qualified professionals and the parents. When complete, an evaluation report is given to the parents along with documentation of eligibility, if so determined. If the student is not accepted for eligibility, the parent may seek an opinion from an expert from the private sector. A student should not be accepted for eligibility if the reason for the apparent disability is actually due to the lack of appropriate instruction. Many students are labeled as disabled but actually have had poor teaching. Disabled children are children diagnosed with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities and needed special education and related services (Wright & Wright, 2010).

Two areas of disability that needed some clarification to be fully understood were the areas of other health impairment (OHI) and specific learning disability (SLD). From the IDEIA 2004 Regulations other health impairment meant “having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment…” (Wright & Wright, 2010, p. 194). Health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome that interfered with the student’s educational performance were considered to be OHI disabilities.

SLD was defined generally as:
a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (Wright & Wright, 2010, p. 194)

Specific learning disability did not include learning problems resulting from visual, hearing, motor disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Once a student has been determined to have a disability recognized by IDEIA 2004, an Individualized Education Program team meets to develop a plan for the student’s educational future. Members of the team include the parent, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative of the public agency who will supervise the provision of specialized instruction, have knowledge of the general education curriculum and available resources, other individuals with special expertise the parent or agency desires, someone to interpret instructional implications, and, when possible, the student. The program will include the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, measurable annual goals, benchmarks or short-term objectives, a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services (based on peer-reviewed research), a statement of program modifications or supports for school personnel, and a statement of any individual appropriate accommodations on state and districtwide assessments (Wright & Wright, 2010). Turnbull (2005) noted that IDEIA 2004
placed many new responsibilities on parents and students for their behavior including a need for a direct relationship of the disability to misconduct by the student for discipline purposes, parental duties in the initial evaluations and reevaluations, parental duty to express what the disability of the child is, if a complaint is made it must be correct the first time, sufficient time must be given to allow for mediation of a complaint, and parents are responsible for their attorneys’ fees if the complaint proves frivolous. Other duties are enumerated beyond the scope of this dissertation.

IDEIA of 2004 codifies several areas of civil rights protection based on the Constitution’s 14th Amendment’s “equal protection” clause (§1). The zero rejection principle requires the state to plan for the education of all students. Evaluations must be nondiscriminatory. The disabled student must be educated in an appropriate manner. A perceived procedural violation of a free appropriate education must impede the student’s right to that education, impede the parent’s participation in decision making, or cause a loss of educational benefit (Turnbull, 2005).

Harry and Klingner (2006) asked the question Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education? They began by reflecting on a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) study of the ethnic representation in special education from 1998-1999. The study revealed a risk index of being labeled disabled in the following categories and percentages: African American-14.28 percent; American Indians/Alaskan Natives-13.10 percent; Whites-12.10 percent; Hispanics-11.34 percent; and Asians-5.31 percent. Since their book was written, updated figures indicate between 1998 and 2007 there was an increase of 1 percent (to 9 percent of all students) in the total number of the student population covered by IDEIA. The
latest figures found are (rounded): African American-12 percent; American Indians/Alaskan Natives-14 percent; Whites-8 percent; Hispanics-9 percent; and, Asian/Pacific Islanders-5 percent (Aud, Fox et al. 2010). The total youth population from ages 14 to 21 in 2007 was roughly 34,209,000 (Aud, Kewal-Remani et al. 2011).

In disaggregating the data, Harry and Klingner discovered that African Americans and Native Americans had even higher risk rates in the areas of “Mental Retardation (MR), specifically Mild Mental Retardation (MMR), also referred to as Educable Mental Retardation; Specific Learning Disability (SLD), also referred to as Learning Disability (LD); [and] Emotional Disturbance (ED)” (pp. 2-3). These areas happen to be the disabilities that rely on “clinical judgment rather than on verifiable biological data” (p. 2). This clinical judgment brings into play the prospect of influences ranging from racial stereotypes to social and political pressures. The ambiguity created by the variability in recognition of the disabilities led to Harry and Klingner’s main argument that “the categories do not necessarily reflect real disabilities within children. Rather, their differential usage supports the perspective that the categories are reliant on definition and interpretation, which are influenced by social and political agendas of various states, groups, and individuals” (2006, p. 5).

Donovan & Cross (2002) discuss disproportionality. Specifically:

For students having difficulty in school who do not have a medically diagnosed disability, key aspects of the context of schooling itself, including administrative, curricular/instructional, and interpersonal factors, may contribute to their identification as having a disability and may contribute to the disproportionately high
or low placements of minorities. The complexity of culture and context in schools makes it nearly impossible to tease out the precise variables that affect patterns of special education placement. (Harry and Klingner, 2006, pp. 25-27)

The essence of their argument became that “the process of determining children’s eligibility for special education is anything but a science. Rather, it is the result of social forces that intertwine to construct an identity of ‘disability’ for children whom the regular-education system finds too difficult to serve” (p. 9).

In a discussion of federal policy on disproportionality in special education and the states’ monitoring of disproportionality, Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, and Middelberg (2012) saw what they described as “flaws with general education, saying that “racial and ethnic disparities appear to be multiply determined by a number of interacting factors, including but not limited to classroom management, cultural mismatch, and unequal opportunities in general education” (p. 15). The Congress placed greater emphasis on disproportionality in special education when IDEA was reauthorized in 2004.

James (2011) cited Balibar’s (2007) definition of racism as today involving less the color of one’s skin as the culture from which one comes. It becomes an incompatibility of a way of life and thus the culture of the school does not meld with the culture of the student. James is in effect blaming the traditions of the white majority in schooling for the current dissonance experienced from the minority in school and thus resulting in minority students being over-represented in the criminal justice system and in special education. Speaking about black males in particular he says:
In a society where males’ lives are structured by Anglo-white, middle class, heterosexual masculinity—the socially constructed set of ideals, norms, roles, values, and expectations for and of men (Leach, 1994)—it is expected that they would demonstrate and live up to the requisite dominance, strength, aggression, competitiveness, athleticism, and control (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; James, 2009; McCready, 2010). In situations where boys and young men are unable to live up to these masculine norms against which they are measured, invariably, they, as Kimmel (2007) asserted, will be “found wanting” (p. 76). [p. 470]

From this, James (2011) assumed the possibility “that for many adolescent males who find themselves on the margins of schooling and society as a result of their subordinated racial and class status, the resultant performance of masculinity is the performance of ‘at riskness’ as defined, understood, and legislated” (p. 470).

Emphasis was placed on correcting the sense of disproportionality in the 2004 amendments to IDEA. States were expected to have in place policies and procedures to prevent any sense of overrepresentation of any race in special education. They also required the states to monitor districts for any behaviors that might lead to overrepresentation. There were 20 indicators created by the Secretary of Education that would guide the states in avoiding overrepresentation (Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middelberg, 2012). Indicators that were to examine discipline issues by racial and ethnic representation became very controversial. Civil rights organizations and advocates for disabled children objected and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) thought the collection of such information might be unconstitutional. Those indicators were dropped and new indicators
put into place. The new indicators have been considered ineffective but, as of this writing, there has been no move to improve those (Albrecht et al., 2012).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has the intent of protection of disabled individuals from discrimination. Under Section 504, a student can receive accommodations and modifications not available to non-disabled students. Students under IDEIA 2004 are already under the protections of Section 504. Eligibility for services under Section 504 is determined by an individual’s physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity. Examples of a major life activity could be walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, reading, writing, performing math calculations, working, caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, and any other activity required of the individual for a normal life. The intent of Section 504 is to prevent an otherwise qualified individual with a disability from being excluded from participation in, receiving benefits of, or being subjected to discrimination under a program associated with the Federal government (Wright & Wright, 2010).

As stated earlier, IDEIA 2004 introduced new language to the statute because of the passage in 2001 of the No Child Left Behind Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization). Aspects such as the requirement for teachers to be highly qualified in the core subjects and students not to be considered disabled due to “lack of appropriate instruction in reading” (Wright & Wright, 2010, p. 299) were additions to IDEIA. The purpose of No Child Left Behind was stated in these terms: “This title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and
reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (Wright & Wright, 2010, p. 299).

Although the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act itself is not applied directly to disabled children, it does have much to do with the legalities of helping children who are at-risk due to displacement from their home. The Act is an attempt to assure that students, whose families lose their homes, can continue to receive their education with the least amount of interruption. The policy statement of the Act intends “to ensure that homeless children and youths are afforded the same free, appropriate public education as provided to other children and youths” (Wright & Wright, 2010, p. 319). Each school district is required to do what is in the best interest of the child including: keeping the child in the same school, if wanted, allow for an appeal process if there is a change of placement, and ensure there is a liaison to represent an unaccompanied student in decisions regarding placement and enrollment (Wright & Wright, 2010).

**Strategies Developed from the Requirements of IDEIA 2004**

The change in the IDEIA of 2004 allowing for the use of early interventions to help in identifying learning disabilities has led to new strategies for discovering and educating the learning disabled student. Where previously, learning disabled students were found by establishing a discrepancy between some standard of ability (most commonly IQ) and the suggested appropriate level of attainment (such as grade level at an appropriate age), the changes occurring in 2004 now permitted a possible disability being recognized but allowing applied interventions to be used to repair any perceived discrepancies before the student is labeled as disabled (McDougal, Graney, Wright, & Ardoin, 2010).
The requirement in the law that interventions be research based has strengthened the use of two popular intervention strategies. The first of these is *Response to Intervention* (RTI). In a joint paper, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education and the Council of Administrators of Special Education (2006) described RTI as “the practice of (1) providing high-quality instruction/intervention matched to student needs and (2) using learning rates over time and level of performance to (3) make important educational decisions” (p. 1). Specifically, if a perceived difference in a student’s expected learning and actual learning is established, interventions are employed to help bring the student to his correct level. Should those interventions be inadequate, then more intensified efforts are attempted. Over a specified period of time and depending upon educational growth, decisions may be made “about the necessity of more intense interventions, including eligibility for special education, exit from special education or other services” (p. 3).

McDougal et al. (2010) offered a three tiered model of RTI that could be labeled in the following way:

**Tier 1**: Effective general education and universal screening/progress monitoring. In this tier, effective instruction in all areas is the core principal and refers to the way instruction is delivered. School-wide data is collected for screening purposes and outcome decisions to determine the standing of the individual student in relationship to the student population and to make decisions in general education.

**Tier 2**: Targeted interventions and problem solving for students at risk for failure. Interventions may be small group (standard-treatment protocol) or individual (problem-solving model).
**Tier 3:** Eligibility determination is not truly considered until “Effective core instruction, universal screening, timely and effective supplemental services, and ongoing progress monitoring must be in place prior to deeming that students are ‘nonresponsive’ to intervention” (p. 181). Decisions about eligibility are determined by teams, as opposed to an individual decision, and based on comprehensive data collected during prior service rendered.

Table 3  
*Models for Planning Interventions*

| 2. Schedule a single, daily building-wide time for all classrooms to perform group-level interventions.  
| 3. School-wide interventionists schedule blocks of time each day to assist teachers in running group interventions. |
| Problem-Solving Model: Has four steps | 1. Problem identification through screening or referral.  
| 2. Problem analysis resulting in a hypothesis for the cause of the student’s academic or behavioral problem.  
| 3. Intervention planning that outlines interventions to be used with the student.  
| 4. Plan evaluation is conducted at specified intervals to determine progress by the students. |

*Note:* Adapted from “RTI in Practice: A Practical Guide to Implementing Effective Evidence-based Interventions in Your School” by McDougal et al., 2010, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., Hoboken, NJ

As RTI has become more in use in elementary education in particular, there have been more incidents of litigation brought forward due to what is frequently perceived as a delay in the recognition of a learning disability due to the need for a gradual increase in interventions. Litigation has been brought under sections in IDEIA specifically in regards to
child find, evaluations, and eligibility. Although there have to date been no United States Supreme Court decisions pertaining to early intervention systems or RTI, Walker and Daves (2010) have chronicled several key cases in lower courts that have a bearing on their use:

- In *J.S. et al v. Attica Central Schools* (2007) the judge decided that regardless of the difficulty in determining the existence of a disability, legislation required a local education agency (LEA) make an effort to make that determination if a disability is suspected.

- In *Marshall Joint School District No. 2 v. C.D. by Brian and Traci D.* (2009) the U. S. District Court of Western Wisconsin said that although, after modifications, a third grade student performed at the same level as his peers, the LEA was still responsible for determining the eligibility of the student for IDEIA services.

- In *El Paso Independent School District v. Richard R.* (2008) a U. S. District Court judge produced a two prong process to determine the compliance of an LEA in its child find responsibilities. First, was there a suspicion of a disability and was there a reason to think that special education services would be needed to remedy the disability? Second, if the first prong is true, did the LEA have the evaluation performed within a reasonable time after the recognition of a possible disability?


  There is nothing in either the IDEA or in the state or federal implementing regulations to indicate that a student would qualify as a “student with a disability,” when the school voluntarily modifies the regular school program by providing differentiated
instruction which allows the child to perform within his ability at an average achievement level. (p. 4) [p. 43]

Walker and Daves (2010) developed the following conclusions from the literature pertaining to the litigation applicable to intervention services:

- When students no longer show below standard performance due to pre-referral interventions, the student should no longer be considered eligible for special education services.
- The parent’s right to seek an evaluation of their child supersedes any LEA policies concerning intervention.
- Due to the 45 to 60 day time constraint most states require as the maximum time allowed before special education services begin, it is important “that the staff within a district knows the characteristics of students who have a high risk of having a disability so that they may be referred for a special education evaluation concurrent with the implementation of RTI” (p. 44).

Another program that has developed from the desire for early interventions is *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*. This program developed from the difficulty many schools have with discipline of special education students under the restrictions placed upon them by Federal legislation. Disabilities must be considered in any discipline issued toward a student covered under IDEIA. When disciplining students under IDEIA, functional behavioral assessments and positive behavioral supports are to be used. Aron and Loprest (2012) describe positive behavioral support as:
a general term that refers to the application of behavioral analysis to achieve
functional behavior changes; positive behavioral interventions and supports are often
based on functional behavioral assessments and involve long-term strategies designed
to reduce inappropriate behavior, teach more appropriate behavior, and provide
supports necessary for successful outcomes. (pp. 106-107)

Carr et al. (2002) describe Positive Behavior Support (PBS) as an applied science.
They define positive behavior as “all those skills that increase the likelihood of success and
personal satisfaction in normative academic, work, social, recreational, community, and
family settings” (p. 3). Support is said to be “all those educational methods that can be used
to teach, strengthen, and expand positive behavior, and all those systems change methods that
can be used to increase opportunities for the display of positive behavior” (p. 3). The
objective for the student is to improve his/her quality of life and develop socially accepted
behaviors.

Carr et al. (2002) determined that PBS was developed from three sources. The first
was Applied Behavior Analysis which produced the idea of “stimulus-response-reinforcing
consequence” (p. 3) strategy. Second was the Normalization/Inclusion Movement.
Normalization requires that disabled students are afforded the same opportunities as non-
disabled students. Inclusion has brought the disabled student fully into the general education
classroom. The third source is based on Person-Centered Values: “PBS represents a
melding of values and technology in that strategies are judged not only with respect to
efficacy (a technological criterion) but also with respect to their ability to enhance personal
dignity and opportunities for choice (a values criterion)” (p. 5).
Because PBS is person-centered the individual’s needs are the determinant of the strategies used. The intent is to “empower individuals with disabilities” (p. 5) leading to “a focus on the issue of *self-determination*” (p. 5). This self-determination is facilitated by changes in society’s viewpoints and environmental adaptations to free the disabled to be more independent.

Carr et al. (2002) reference Clark and Hienemann’s (1999) term *wraparound* as a similar strategy as PBS. They describe it as

[A] self-determination philosophy in its reliance on a support team whose membership is balanced between experts on the one hand and the individual with disabilities, family members, and advocates on the other hand, all of whom function to help identify and act on the individual’s needs with a view to empowering that individual (Ebner, 1997; VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1998). [p. 6]

They summarize it by stating, “The guiding hypothesis is that if an individual’s needs are met, then quality of life will improve and problem behavior will be reduced or eliminated altogether” (p. 6). The main impetus in all early intervention programs is to “avoid or alleviate future service needs by lessening the effects of a disabling condition and in some cases actually reducing the occurrence of additional disabling conditions” (Aron & Loprest, 2012, p. 107). Aron and Loprest (2012) also indicated by using high quality services early there is a cost savings that is developed “over time and across public programs” (p. 108).

Because many elementary students did not receive early intervention services to which they were entitled, it is not surprising that assessment of outcomes of the services have not been readily discerned. Aron and Loprest (2012) suggested several areas that needed
accurate measurement to determine the effectiveness of interventions. Measures of “academic achievement, attendance, grade promotion, engagement in school activities,…amount of services delivered, …and effectiveness of specific special education practices or programs” (p. 111).
| Table 4  
Critical Features of Positive Behavior Support |
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<td><strong>Comprehensive Lifestyle Change and Quality of Life</strong></td>
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The Needs of At-Risk Students and What Leadership Is Doing to Meet Them

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2004) suggested that school leaders in “good” (p. 471) schools work from a series of “moral principles:”

These principles are in direct conflict with the essentialist philosophy, narrow curriculum, and restricted learning that accompany the standards and high-stakes emphasis of today [prior to the acceptance of the Common Core Standards currently in place]. Let us, therefore, consider 10 moral principles which, taken together and taken seriously, foster development of a school much more likely to prepare students to use their education well in contributing to better society. (p. 471)

- Compassion: “Teachers first teach students, not test objectives” (p. 471).
- Wholeness: “In addition to concern for cognitive growth, the good school is committed to students’ physical, emotional, creative, social, and moral development” (p. 471).
- Connectedness: “The education provided to students must be relevant to both their present and their future” (p. 472).
- Inclusion: “The good school reaches out to all categories of students, e.g., from low socioeconomic backgrounds, minorities, migrants, international students, non-English speaking students, gay and lesbian students, and even students with serious behavioral problems” (p. 472).
- Justice: “Holding teachers accountable for effective instruction and holding students accountable for learning, but in an educational context accountability ought to mean
the provision of feedback on one’s performance and assistance for improving future
performance, not the issuing of rewards and punishments” (p. 472).

- Peace: “In referencing the significance of student misbehavior on other students, it is
suggested that schools “change from a school characterized by ‘effective student
discipline’ to a ‘school of peace.’” Moving toward this vision will require the
supervisors, teachers, and students develop or enhance communication, collaboration,
and conflict management skills” (p. 473).

- Freedom: “All members of the school community should be moving toward
increased freedom of choice in what they learn, how they learn, and how they
demonstrate learning” (p. 474).

- Trust: “Authentic learning is based not only on the transmission of knowledge and
skills but also on personal relationships, and trust is the ground on which those
relationships are built” (p. 474).

- Empowerment: “Empowerment means changing assumptions, norms, roles, and
relationships that act as barriers to educators’ and students’ growth toward self-
reliance and self-actualization” (p. 474).

- Community: Is “a moral principle if we understand the term as a group committed to
the overall well-being, growth, and development of each member. An authentic
community will develop values, norms, relationships, and practices consistent with
this common purpose” (p. 474).

- Priorities: Setting priorities based on moral principles is in itself a moral principle.

“Educators in the good school realize that leadership, teaching, and learning based on
moral principles offers the best chance for students to reach their human potential” (p. 475).

Crockett, Becker, and Quinn (2009) did a “content analysis of 474 abstracts of articles published in educational journals” (p. 55). This analysis was defined, in its title, as a review “of the knowledge base of special education leadership and administration from 1970-2009” (p. 55). In the findings of their research, they found the abstracts clustered under eight areas:

1. Law and Policy (77 articles)
2. Personnel Training and Development (89 articles)
3. Leadership Roles and Responsibilities (68 articles)
4. Leadership Preparation and Development (48 articles)
5. Learning Environments (70 articles)
6. Accountability for Student Learning (62 articles)
7. Collaboration and Communication (38 articles)
8. Technology and Leadership for Special Education (22 articles)

Of the eight topics (or themes) shown in the research, the first five listed accounted for 74% of the published content. These themes were long standing in nature. Although law and policy considerations have been of interest for administrators since the beginning of special education law, the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind created a more energetic response in the literature. Personnel training and development articles are fueled by issues of “shortages and retention of special education and related services staff since the 1970s” (p. 64). Articles on the learning environment result from “changing governance
structures in schools with site-based management” (p. 64). The diversity of student populations shifted concerns “from inclusion to accountability for the success of all learners” (p. 64) and affected the roles and responsibilities of administrators. Leadership preparation and development created interest due to new special education programs, revised professional standards, and “redefined models for moving toward shared and sustainable leadership models for school improvement” (Crockett et al., 2009, p. 64).

Crockett et al. (2009) found that “the special education administrative knowledge base is informed primarily by theoretical or interpretive professional commentary rather than by data-based research studies that could guide effective leadership practice” (p. 65). The thought is that more talk about special education leadership practice has occurred than empirical study. Crockett et al. (2009) felt that “systemic efforts supporting the delivery of evidence-based instruction, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences, could shore up and strengthen the special education administrative knowledge base” (p. 65).

What do principals perceive as their critical needs as administrators of special education programs and students? General education has become intertwined with special education broadening the responsibilities of the school leader. Using a questionnaire developed by Wilson and colleagues in 1996 that assesses 30 competencies important to administrators, Rita Stevenson-Jacobson, John Jacobson, and Alan Hilton (2006) were able to survey 81 principals about the critical skills they felt were needed to administer special education. In describing their roles, principals with a special education certification spent “more time on special education issues than principals without certification” (p. 41).
Principals with special education certification were also more likely to be involved in pre-referral activities and sent fewer students out of the school for services. Principals, with or without special education certification, in the majority reported the following eight competencies:

1. Managing education of students in a less restrictive environment (LRE);
2. Case-study process;
3. Collaborative teaching strategies;
4. Parents’ rights;
5. General/special education procedures;
6. Federal/state special education laws;
7. State/federal requirements; and
8. Listening, consensus building, and conflict resolution (p. 42)

What seemed to be the most important implication from the study was that administrators with special education training seemed more capable in working in settings with larger special education populations (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006).

No Child Left Behind requires that students with disabilities be taught the same academic content as students without disabilities and IDEIA 2004 requires special education students be taught differently (sometimes different material) and have a personal plan (the IEP). The differences in students must be recognized and strategies employed to address those differences in the students to insure their opportunity to participate in society. “Principals are considered essential to ensuring the delivery of high-quality special education” (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 144).
Bays and Crockett (2007) refer to Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond in describing the methods of instructional leadership as “the identification, acquisition, allocation, coordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning” (p. 144). In the area of special education, however, there are recognized problems that cloud the application of instructional leadership. Bays and Crockett (2007) list “student and teacher demographics, varied instructional settings, shared leadership responsibility, and the impact of legislation, policies, and reform movements” (p. 145).

Examining their findings, Bays and Crockett (2007) devolved what they described as “patterns” (p. 150) in their grounded theory:

The instructional supervisor’s role is assigned by school board policy to the principal, the principal must negotiate among competing priorities and contextual factors to fulfill this role, and the outcome of this negotiation is the dispersal of responsibility for special education among administrative and teaching personnel. The principal collaborates with the special education director, trusts teachers as instructional experts, and engages in practices of open communication, formal evaluations, and informal observations in supporting the delivery of special education. (p. 150)

As the instructional leader, the principal must give specific feedback on instruction to all teachers (including special education teachers) in spite of limitations that might exist in the knowledge base of the principal. Electronic media and literature have been developed to enhance the knowledge base a principal needs to give such advice to special education teachers. Unfortunately, interactions between principals and special educators often center
on paperwork and regulatory compliance (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 157). Instructional leadership was often seen to be distributed in such a way as to lose its impact on students and teachers. Bays and Crockett suggested four requirements for instructional leadership by a school leader:

- First, principals should pursue an instructional vision that addresses improved conditions in special education teaching and learning. . .

- Second, principals could foster learning for students who have disabilities, and cultivate trust and collaboration among those who teach them, by providing ongoing professional development that enhances the collective teaching practice of special and general educators as they work together within schools. . .

- Third, in providing meaningful support to teachers, principals could differentiate supervision to meet the needs of educators at varying stages of their careers and at varying degrees of professional competence. . .

- Fourth, principals engaged in efforts to improve the quality of special education in their schools should monitor instruction and look for evidence of teacher quality when distributing instructional leadership (pp. 158-159).

The accountability measures of the No Child Left Behind Act have created an imperative for all principals to be aware of the performance of the at-risk student in their schools. NCLB and IDEIA have each forced educators to recognize areas of inequity in the education of some students. Principals as the chief practitioners of instructional leadership are in the position of leading change to address these inequities (Lashley, 2007).
Current law requires “students who have disabilities have access to a standards-based curriculum, that they participate in statewide assessments, and that their performance results be reported publicly” (Lashley, 2007, p. 178). The requirements of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) integrated the special education student into the general education population. Even with these legal requirements, the law for many years had no sanctions or incentives for principals to do more than maintain the minimum requirements of the law and at times ignore the law (Lashley, 2007). Not only is it necessary for principals to focus on academic performance and discipline, but, they must “develop the dispositions necessary to embrace the needs and enhance the performance of all children as central to their leadership” (p. 182).

Lashley (2007) expressed “four approaches to ethical analysis…that influence the practice of school leaders” (p. 182):

- The *ethic of justice* considers issues related to individual rights and laws.
- The *ethic of critique* sensitizes educators to inequities of social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference, including disability, as they occur in society and especially in schools.
- The *ethic of care* challenges decision-makers to address values such as loyalty and trust.
- Citing directly Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005), the *ethic of the profession* considers “those moral aspects unique to the profession and the questions that arise as educational leaders become more aware of their own personal and professional codes of ethics (p. 19)” [p. 182-183].
Regardless of what expectations there may be for school leaders in implementing the laws of special education, the use of “evidence-based leadership practices” (Boscardin, 2007, p. 190) are required just as the use of research based strategies is expected in the special education classroom. Prior to the recognition of the importance of student outcome data “leadership models emphasized process over outcome” (p. 190). The new data-driven culture allows for an analysis of the effects of leadership and “connect the results to a variety of outcomes for students” (p. 190).

Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) presented research speaking to the ethics of “Responding to the Collective and Individual ‘Best Interests of Students’” (p. 207). In their research it was stated:

Participants indicated a distinction and clear difference between the best interests of one student and the best interests of students as a group. Participants viewed the work of deciding and acting in the best interests of the student body as being qualitatively different than working and acting in the best interests of individual students (p. 208).

In the findings of Frick et al. (2012), they were able to derive several themes. They began by defining the reference to “students’ best interests as needs” (p. 221). The derived definition was couched “in terms of what a student or students needed in order to be successful” (p. 221). Principals recognized that their duty was to organize their schools in ways to present the greatest opportunity for success by all students.

The tension experienced by principals while trying to balance “the collective versus individual best interests of students” (2012, p. 222) was the next theme mentioned.
Principals felt that best interests were primarily of an “educative interest” (p. 222) but also included safety and health. The “dilemma” (p. 223) as described by one of the participants was “what is going to be the best situation for that child, as well as others in the classroom” (Frick et al., 2012, p.223).

Frick et al. (2012) found that the ethics of special education “when multiple and discrepant interests are in conflict” (p. 223) was yet another theme. Full inclusion of students may be the utopic ideal for special education but is beyond what IDEA’s least restrictive environment requires:

IDEA and special education case law indicate that maximizing educational benefit is not the intent of special education protections (Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley, 1982). Rather, the intent of the law is to provide appropriate education services tailored to meet the individual needs and abilities of each student who is eligible for special education programs and services. (p. 224)

All but one principal in the study felt that the best interests of one student cannot take precedence over the interests of the whole. Each student must be placed where they gain the most good but not at the expense of the majority. That placement could be inclusive or separate.

The fourth and final theme recognized by Frick et al. (2012) was around the “equality versus equity” (p. 225) issue. It may appear appropriate to give to everyone equally regardless of need but as educators it would be more just to pursue equity to assure those in need could get more of what that need is. “Part of the work of leading schooling efforts is to
instill a robust sense of fairness” (p. 226). Because of the desire for fairness and the want to see that the special education student is given the opportunity for success, there are requirements placed on the classroom teacher to be a specialist in both special education and general education (Frick et al., 2012). Hess (2012) spoke to this in an Education Week article stating:

I find it unfathomable that anyone thinks every school should or will be able to competently cater to every sort of student need and interest (para. 5)….If we told the owners of the terrific local burger joint that they also need to start serving sushi, pizza, enchiladas, and French cuisine, because people have different preferences, and everyone has a right to eat, I suspect it'd have an adverse impact on quality. If I told a first-rate high school math tutor that he had an obligation to also tutor in science, Mandarin, and history, because he's the only tutor in the neighborhood, the quality of his work might decline. Yet, this "duh"-caliber observation is largely absent when advocates are asking schools to shoulder yet another burden, especially when discussing how to best serve kids with special needs. It's hard to find adults who are skilled at teaching certain subjects or doing a good job mentoring and instructing kids with particular needs. (para. 6). . . . Let's be clear: the issue is not whether we ought to serve all kids. That was resolved decades ago. We all agree that we should. The question is whether we think every school, or every classroom, ought to be expected to meet every need of every student. And that strikes me as a recipe for mediocrity. (para. 7)
Boscardin (2007) describes evidence-based leadership practices as those “that promise better outcomes for students under certain cultural and ecological conditions” (p. 190). Because leadership performance is linked to student performance, data presented should be “meaningful data linking leadership, instruction, and learning in ways that are understandable and clear to stakeholders” (p. 190).

Boscardin (2007) presented a concept of “responsive leadership interventions and system progress monitoring” (p. 191). The idea is presented as an administrative practice based somewhat on the construct of response-to-intervention (RTI) and its application in student instruction. She described the concept in these terms:

Applying the concepts of RTI to administrative practices suggests a similar pattern that anticipates: (a) the concept of multiple stages of administrative interventions to improve teaching in ways that lead to improved student achievement; (b) the implementation of differentiated administrative approaches; (c) leadership provided by staff other than designated personnel; (d) varied duration, frequency, and time of administrative interventions; (e) traditional and non-traditional administrative decisions; (f) situational conditions for decisions; (g) urgency for administrative decisions; and (h) the use of standard protocols for determining the use of specific administrative approaches or interventions. (p. 191)

Progress monitoring is another concept that Boscardin (2007) took from the RTI construct. Instead of monitoring the progress of students she suggested system-progress monitoring that uses leadership interventions to respond rapidly to immediate system needs, to discriminate between schools and programs that are
delivering poor instruction from those schools and programs that are not adequately resourced, to discriminate between schools and programs in need of evaluation from those that need to stay their current course, and to deliver special education services and programs through a unified, inclusive model. All of these RTI components represent a shift from special education practices that focus on student progress alone, to leadership practices that focus on implementing and monitoring system benchmarks that promote district and school-level reform initiatives. (p. 192)

In a study concerning the beliefs and attitudes of teachers and principals towards at-risk students, Calabrese, Hummel, and San Martin (2007) reported six findings from their research. First, teachers viewed themselves as difference makers. These teachers “contributed a positive outlook toward students, especially those bearing the label of at-risk” (p. 282). The building of relationships was considered integral to the success they had with these students. Second was a “core of experiences:”

Helping students stay engaged in meaningful and relevant work to experience success, empowering students to make positive choices, developing trusting relationships with students, and viewing themselves as role models by having a theory-in-use that matched their espoused theory. (p. 283)

Third was a “positive core of experiences when working with parents of at-risk student” (p. 284). Fourth is a vision shared by the administrators and teachers to motivate at-risk students. Fifth is “an espoused value of caring” (p. 285). Sixth was a use of “prescriptive language” (p. 286) and a “problem-based pathology” (p. 286). Prescriptive language was described as “statements regarding at-risk students and their parents that were highly
prescriptive” (p. 286). Problem-based pathology references “words or statements that expressed problems with, or deficits of, at-risk students, their parents, or their home environment” (p. 286).

Cabrera, Deil-Amen, Prabhu, Terenzini, Lee, and Franklin (2006) performed a study to “examine the aggregate, or overall, impact of CIPs [Comprehensive Intervention Programs] on students’ preparedness for college, as reflected in their reading and mathematics achievement” (p. 84). The CIP used in this particular study was Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs or GEARUP. In their conclusions, they found that differences between students in CIP programs and those not involved in such programs were positively significant even after “controlling for school-related factors” (p. 94). The researchers felt that the impact was greater in the first year and further research would be needed to determine the full impact in succeeding years.

**Summary**

This chapter is not to be seen a definitive discussion of the at-risk student and the administrator who might be leading their school. Some insight has been presented here into what is generally known of the background of many at-risk students and how their homes and families can influence their perceptions about education. Beginning with a discussion of the differences of the happenings in the homes of successful students as opposed to the homes of those doing poorly, I presented statistics and research to help expose the condition of the homes and neighborhoods that produce the at-risk student.

The discussion then moved to the area of resilience, a most important characteristic of the student who has the ability to overcome his or her at-riskness to perform beyond his/her
perceived capability. With an understanding of the barriers these students experience, it can be seen how these students build personal expectations that permit them to see beyond the limitations experienced as part of their daily lives. Frequently, this is achieved by the support of some individual or individuals who mentor them to success.

The most common form of at-riskness is frequently found in the experience of the disabled student. The laws developed to address the plight of the disabled student in education are covered in some detail so that the reader might understand the weight these laws carry within public education in the United States. I offer descriptions of Title I, IDEA, NCLB, Section 504, and McKinney-Vento as well as incidental mention of other legislation to hopefully clarify how the management of educating the disabled student can occupy much of the administrators’ time and efforts.

From the special education legislation some very important intervention strategies were developed. Due to the need for early interventions for students showing some signs of being learning disabled, Response to Intervention and Positive Behavior Interventions and Support were developed. A description of each of these programs is offered to explain how they are meant to work and also why they are very difficult to get to work as intended.

The final section is meant to illustrate some of the current thought on school leadership as it specifically applies to special education and at-risk students. The studies examined here are primarily of a qualitative methodology which seems to be a common thread in research of this area. The chapter offers several theories that present themes found within the research that give some sense of the need for more exploration in this area. This
research is meant to further that knowledge base and hopefully open areas for further investigation.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The intent of this research has, from the beginning, not been to develop theoretical resolutions to issues surrounding the at-risk and disabled student but to seek understanding of how issues surrounding the at-risk and disabled student are resolved in school leadership practice. From the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, I have shown various theories and themes of how school leaders might approach the complications of teaching at-risk students (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Boscardin, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2006; Calabrese et al., 2007; Crockett et al., 2009; Frick et al., 2012; Glickman et al., 2004; Lashley, 2007; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006). What has not been studied until now is how the practitioner is handling the at-risk student population on a daily basis. Existing research also lacks perspectives on how the parents view the schools’ practices effect on their children.

As school leaders view their school community, how do they view their responsibility toward at-risk students and the exceptionality they present? How do they relate to the families of these students? What are their visions for maximizing the possibilities for the students who are at-risk? Through this qualitative study, I will present an easily understood story of what the daily complications might be and how the practitioner meets the challenges they find.

In addition to school administrators, I examined the perceptions of parents of children who have been educated under IDEA and other federal acts. I explored with them their opinions on the effectiveness of the education received by their children under this legislation. Were the dreams they held for their children met? Advocates for special
education with children currently under the auspices of IDEA are frequently heard from but little is found from parents whose children who have completed their educational careers.

**Selection of Qualitative Research Methodology**

A qualitative exploratory inquiry of interviews was chosen by the researcher to develop a continuum of conversation which allowed him to highlight points of view and build a structure of commonalities, both positive and negative. Do principals, directors, and parents share the same understanding of what is being accomplished relative to the at-risk child? Do they all share a common understanding of the idea of the “best interest of the child?” Does current legislation really create the expected benefits for the at-risk student? What are the effects on the entire school?

**Participant Selection**

Interviews with all participants were conducted over a month and a half time frame. Each principal (three elementary, one middle, and one high school) interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. These principals were chosen because they lead or have led schools within the school district being explored. Their input reflected how students experiencing at-riskness are educated in the continuum of the district. In all research interviews, the researcher used the open-ended questioning recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2007).

The Director of Special Education of the district was interviewed at about the midpoint of the interview process using basically the identical questioning discussed with the principals. An examination of these administrative interviews offered some insight into the alignment of school administrators’ ideas and concepts about special education and at-risk
students and the central office leaderships’ ideas and concepts about the same. By grounding the research in the practice of educating at-risk students, there was a basis for a discussion with the parents from the district.

Parents have been with their children from the very beginning of their receiving an exceptional child label. They know what their students have experienced from the elementary level until graduation. For twelve or more years, they have been through every change of the status quo of their students. Their insight is what makes this research valuable. The researcher heard the stories of the students through their parents and discovered whether the pictures of the educators match the pictures developed by the parents. Questions asked of the parents were influenced heavily on where the individual stories led.

Parents were chosen by others from the district high school and without specific input from the researcher beyond the criteria needed to fulfill the requirements of the research. The parent participants were purposefully chosen because their children had some element of at-riskness in their lives but yet were able to successfully complete their public school education in June, 2014. The researcher played no part in the selection of the parent participants but relied instead on the advice of the Exceptional Children’s Case Manager of the high school, an assistant principal of the high school and a faculty member. Each was asked to recommend any students they knew with some element of at-riskness based on the characteristics listed by Kominski et al. (2009). Six students were recommended but only four were willing to be interviewed.
Research Questions

Interview questions were developed based on the five areas of concentration explored in the literature review: environment (including family), resilience, legal influences, strategies employed, and leadership practices addressing the needs of the at-risk student. Each area, as the literature shows has an impact on the potential of the student to be successful. The question we should be asking is “How can the school community best provide for the at-risk child, still maintain high level educational opportunity for those not at-risk, and assure the ultimate success for all?” Key questions for this exploratory inquiry are:

1. As legislation continues to evolve influencing how public education is expected to educate disabled and other at-risk children, do school leaders feel they are sufficiently able to effectively manage the education of all students?

2. Do building administrators, central office personnel, and parents of at-risk students have a common understanding of the standards established in law that permits them the necessary capacity to serve the needs of all children?

Research Design

Because this is research of practitioners of school leadership and also parents of students labeled at-risk, this is a qualitative exploratory inquiry based on interviews with present or recent school principals from three elementary schools, one middle school, and a high school from an urban school district in North Carolina. The elementary and middle schools in the district are feeder schools to the high school. Additionally, there were interviews with the director of the special education department of the school system that
contains the school district and interviews with parents of at-risk students whose children have been educated in the district.

Richard Elmore said in the Foreword of *Leading with Inquiry & Action* (Militello, Rallis, & Goldring, 2009) “that educational leadership is—hold onto your hats—about learning, both in the sense of enabling and supporting the learning of teachers and students in classrooms, and in the sense of managing one’s own learning as a leader, through collective inquiry with others” (pg. viii). It is with this collective inquiry that the researcher seeks to inform the audience about the practice of educational leaders who are at the forefront of education in their district.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated, “The best-known representatives of qualitative research studies…are those that employ the techniques of participant observation and in-depth interviewing” (p. 2). Questioning should be open-ended leading the respondent to share their personal experiences and thoughts in a free flow of ideas. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) listed five features of qualitative research. Not all qualitative research will contain all these features but will to some extent have a sense of them. The features are:

1. Qualitative research is naturalistic because actual settings are the source of data.
2. The data in qualitative research is descriptive because it is in the form of language or pictures instead of numbers.
3. Researchers are more concerned with the processes of how an effect is accomplished rather than the outcome or product.
4. Data analysis is inductive because, rather than proving a theory, themes are developed from the research.
5. Qualitative researchers seek meaning from the perspectives they learn from the respondents in their research. (pp. 4-7)

Data Collection and Analysis

Each area of concentration was explored with special emphasis upon the legal influences because of how so much of what exists in the school environment is affected by state and federal legislation. Although I hoped to conduct the interviews in the order of principals, director of special education and then parents, it became necessary to intersperse the interviews as schedules would permit. There were a total of five principals interviewed with one middle school principal unable to be scheduled. A total of four parents were available to be interviewed.

Upon completion of the interview process, the interviews were transcribed and data compiled. An interpretational analysis was made “to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 453) the findings of the research. The researcher looked for similarities and differences in thoughts by the participants that indicate the perceptions they have of the effectiveness of the current methods of educating the at-risk student. As the analysis was performed, data was placed into the following categories: (a) Family and Environment, (b) Resilience, (c) Legalities, (d) Applied Strategies, and (e) Leadership Practice Applied to At-Risk Students. These categories are suggested from the literature review and the topics of the interview questioning.

Once the analysis was completed and the data was properly coded, a further analysis was made of the data to locate sub-categories that were revealed. There was a constant
comparison (Gall et al., 2003) of the data used until all categorical and cross categorical data were isolated and then grouped appropriately so that the correct conclusions could be drawn. Chapter four presents the resultant findings, and chapter five presents conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice.

The researcher has taken all steps possible to maintain the validity and reliability of the study by keeping a proper audit trail reflecting the (a) methods used to collect and maintain the data, (b) documentation used in the data analysis, and (c) miscellaneous documentation and material developed from the research. Data gathered through interviews that was recorded and transcribed to retain the multivocality (Gall et al., 2003) of the sessions, a reference to the variety of opinions that were expressed in those interviews. The breadth of information gained from leaders who work within the full spectrum of the public education of at-risk students from elementary school to central office and the testimony of parents who have total familiarity of their children’s experiences offer a form of triangulation for the data that is collected.

**Interview Protocol**

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) said, “Interview protocols become not only a set of questions, but also a procedural guide for directing a new qualitative researcher through the interview process” (p. 2). Being relatively new at doing qualitative research, the researcher’s using an interview protocol is a necessity to assure that the maximum amount of information on the correct topics is garnered in the interview exercise. The following steps were taken to help insure a thorough interview where valid information was developed.
1. The participants were invited by the researcher by phone call, email, and personal invitation.

2. All participants were given an option to continue or cease participation in the interview. All participants consented to continue and signed an informed consent form.

3. Interview questions were not revealed until the actual interview was held.

4. All participants were interviewed individually using the specified interview questions as the basis of conversation. As other questions were developed in conversation, they were explored with the interviewee. Parents were interviewed individually to reduce hesitancy in responding to questions about their children.

5. Follow up phone calls to participants were kept to a minimum.

6. Time for the interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 50 minutes.

7. Interview appointments were negotiated to fit the active schedules of the participants.

8. The interviews were recorded to assure accuracy of representation in the research. Transcribing began immediately but took several weeks to finish.

9. Copies of the transcripts of the meetings were delivered to all participants.

10. Once the transcriptions were finished, data analysis began.

Following these steps resulted in a consistent collection of data that produced valid research.
Developing an Interview Script

Turner (2010) suggests that to maintain consistency and structure but still allow for flexibility in the interview process an interview guide should be developed and followed for the interview. The guide used in the interviews with the principals and then the director for exceptional children’s programs of each district was strictly scripted to insure the opportunity for answers to all questions. However, due to the open-ended quality of the questions, there was time for extemporaneous conversation on the topics. Questioning of the parents had the identical introduction as that given to the administrators but the questioning was centered upon the stories of parent and student involvement with the schools as the student pursued his or her education. The interviewer’s script as envisioned by the researcher for each class of participant is found in Appendix A.

Informed Consent

As required by the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University, all participants were required to sign an informed consent form (Appendix B). By signing the informed consent form, the participants agree to allow the researcher to use the data garnered from their interviews in the report. In return, the researcher promised to keep the identity of the participants confidential and to provide them with a transcript of the conversation. Pseudonyms were maintained for participants.

Research in the district selected requires permission be granted by the Superintendent or his or her representative. To obtain permission from the Superintendent, a letter must be issued (a) stipulating the purpose of the research, (b) an explanation of the methodology, (c) assistance requested from the school system, (d) a point of contact, (e) signed approval of the
agency administrator requesting to conduct the research, and (f) a signed agreement to provide to the board, upon request, a final report of the research findings at no cost.

**Limitations of the Study**

Data for this study was gathered from a small sample of participants who have experiences directly related to the topic. Although the educators are leaders in their district, they cannot encompass all possible thoughts on our subject. Parent participants had students with major differences in at-riskness, but all have been educated under the auspices of federal legislation. Taken together, the perspectives offered have the potential to build a core of understanding about the effect schools operating under the current climate have on at-risk and special education students. The school system has an urban demographic and, as such, will not give any perspective of a rural educational setting. So, although there is the potential for a great deal of data, the data is only explicit for the given district setting.

**Subjectivity of the Researcher**

As the researcher, I refrained from being actively involved in the conversations of the participants, other than follow-up questioning, and strived to maintain my role as a facilitator hoping to avoid any undue influence on the direction of the conversation. I was an assistant principal at the high school in the subject district and have been, prior to being an administrator, a secondary school music teacher in the same district. In my experiences, I have encountered many at-risk students who greatly influenced me to pursue this particular topic. My experiences have been used as a guide in the decision making made during the analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), yet every effort was made to guard against an
unwarranted influence on the findings. There is no power position in any of the relationships between the participants and me.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This research was done in order to explore the education of at-risk and special education students in a specific district within one of the five largest local education agencies (LEA) in North Carolina. The original intent was to interview four to six parents of at-risk or special education students who had completed their public school education in the district, the principals of three elementary schools, two middle schools, and the high school, and the executive director of special education in the district. The researcher was able to interview four parents (two whose children were considered exceptional under federal legislation and two whose children met the criteria of at-risk as indicated by Kominski et al. [2009]) and six of the administrators, having being unable to schedule an interview with one of the middle school principals.

Although the interviews from which the data is collected were originally intended to be conducted in the order of principals, exceptional children’s director, and parents, timing conflicts prevented such a schedule from being possible. It became necessary to do the interviews when the participants were available over a period of approximately a month and a half. Timing of the interviews, however, did not seem to interfere with the collection of pertinent data since all interview questions were asked and answered as planned with the findings being reported here.

The Local Education Agency

The District Profile of the local education agency indicates the following data:

1. There are 87 schools (52 elementary, 17 middle, 17 high schools, and 1 year-round classical school [grades 6-12]).
2. There are approximately 52,000 students.

3. Approximately 67% of the students are part of a minority race in the United States.

4. There are approximately 6,600 employees in the district.

5. The Class of 2013 graduated 3,441 students.

6. Approximately 59% of all students receive free or reduced meal prices (District Profile, 2014).

Participants

The parent participants for this exploratory study were provided from recommendations by the Exceptional Children’s Case Manager of the high school, another administrator from the school, and a faculty member. Through phone calls and emails, four of the parents agreed to be interviewed for this study. Each student represented by these parents graduated from high school with a diploma in June 2014. They were assured of their anonymity and signed Informed Consent Forms allowing permission to use their responses. The students represented by the four parents are described below.

A. Parent1 (P1) was the single mother of a son who also had to spend a great deal of time away from his mother due to her work. His mother described him as someone who always liked to read and that helped him to outperform other students in his class. She said “I’ve always instilled for him to do good in school and he has been an “A” student all through his whole entire life. Um, the adversity with he, me and his father had gotten a divorce, um, so it was just like nothing affected him and we made sure of that.” The mother went to college but the father did not. The student is attending college on a football scholarship.
B. Parent2 (P2) was the single mother of a son who was diagnosed as learning disabled in the 8th grade of middle school. The mother commented, “He was so doing some classwork and he was falling behind and they did a test on him and discovered he was below his grade level. So, that qualified him to be in the EC program.” His testing accommodations included extra time and a separate setting.

C. Parent3 (P3) was a divorced but remarried mother of a son. She was a college graduate. The family, including the grandparents, was connected to the military. The mother felt that the military influence helped her son maintain his focus and was the reason he joined the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps in his school. He graduated with a 3.8 Grade Point Average and will be attending college.

D. Parent4 (P4) is actually a grandparent who raised her grandson, a student with Asperger’s Syndrome. Although he has Asperger’s, he was high functioning. The student began showing signs of disability in kindergarten and spent eleven days in an institution while doctors made the diagnosis. They recommended he be institutionalized but the grandmother refused. He went to a doctor he called his “talking doctor” almost monthly until the year before he graduated. After kindergarten, he went to a private Christian school for two years where he made good grades but did not have the focus to make A’s. The grandmother decided to homeschool him during second grade. When tested, he was able to skip the 3rd grade, so his grandmother began working with him in the 4th grade. When the mathematics curriculum became too difficult for the grandmother to teach during his 6th grade year, he was enrolled in public middle school where he was tested and found to be
Other Health Impaired for his Asperger’s. He was initially placed in a self-contained classroom but was in full inclusion by the time he got into high school. After graduation, he was enrolled into a community college. Please note that there were occasional interjections during the interview by the grandfather (P5).

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Student Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Single/Divorced</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>EC/LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>EC/OHI</td>
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The administrative participants were a natural selection based on the schools within the district being explored. Each of them was initially contacted by either email or phone call with interviews scheduled as soon as was possible. All participants were assured their names would be held in confidence and each signed the Informed Consent Form prior to the interview. Biographical information from the participants is presented below.

A. Principal1 (Pr1) has completed twenty years in education, primarily in elementary education. She has worked in two districts. Eight years were spent in the classroom before going to graduate school as a Principal Fellow to earn her Master of School Administration (MSA) degree. During the spring of 2014, she completed her Doctor of Education. She is beginning her tenth year as a principal.
B. Principal2 (Pr2) is beginning her ninth year as a principal. Prior to that she taught elementary school for six years and then spent two years as a Principal Fellow gaining her MSA. She has also gained a Doctorate in Educational Leadership. She spent four years as an assistant principal before gaining her first principalship. Her current school is her fourth, and each has been a Title I school exposing her to a large number of at-risk children.

C. Principal3 (Pr3) is beginning her eighteenth year in education and her fifth year as a principal. All of her experience has been at the elementary level.

D. Principal4 (Pr4) has been in education for thirty years. He has been a teacher and a coach and was an assistant principal for a number of years. He is in his sixth year as a principal of a middle school.

E. Principal5 (Pr5) was the principal of the high school in the subject district for three years. She was named the Executive Director of Secondary Education about two months into the 2013-2014 school year. She has an MSA and recently received the Education Specialist certification. She is currently pursuing the Doctor of Education degree.

F. The final participant is the Executive Director of Children’s Services (ED) for the LEA. His undergraduate degrees were in Psychology and Education as a NC Teaching Fellow. He has a Master of School Administration and Master of Psychology. He had this to say about himself “I probably would be considered an at-risk child in the sense that I came in as an ESL [English as a Second Language]
student….I spoke no English at all.” There are approximately 7200 children receiving EC services in the LEA (District Profile, 2014).

Table 6
Administrator Participants

<table>
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<th>Administrator</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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Parent Interviews

Among the first questions asked in each interview of the participants was for them to define the term “at-risk” as they understood it. Answers to describe at-risk ranged from descriptions of “an at-risk child is somebody who needs that extra help” (P1); “at-risk of not achieving” (P2); “being in a single parent home” (P3); and “not getting the education you need because of your disabilities.” P4 had a unique perspective on at-risk, suggesting that “the teacher…not cooperating with the parents in trying to teach the kids in a special way, taught in a certain way and the teacher doesn’t want to be bothered with that. A lot of times it seems like they just push them aside.”
I continued by asking what the parents felt gave their students the persistence to compete their education. P1 initially commented “being grounded and knowing what’s expected.” The problems of the house were never hidden from him, even the shutting off of the lights and water. She told him, “You have to surround yourself with people that want more because when you surround yourself with people that don’t want nothing, then you are going to subject yourself to that….always surround yourself around (sic) positive people.”

P2 was usually briefer with her answers. She began by explaining she did not complete high school. She explained his persistence by saying, “I didn’t graduate, um, I had some issues and I dropped outta school and he wanted to do something that I didn’t do.”

P3 replied, “I think-ah-by seeing his grandparents. Ah, education is big in our family. Everyone is a big source. They are in college. They graduated with masters degrees and myself, I’ve graduated with a bachelor degree…. So, the thing that he’s seen from both his parents as well as his grandparents and seeing what things that we have and can achieve—so, that’s what drives him for education.”

P4, as was revealed frequently, showed a more emotional response from her grandson than the others. The key to his persistence is “he wanted to make us happy….I think he wanted to make us proud….I always make him aware. So much so, when we’re in a conversation….Sometimes he would say, ‘Did I say something wrong? Did I say that wrong?’ He wanted to know if the way he did it was right or wrong….He just wanted to make sure he was doing it right, I guess, say it right, whatever because we made him aware.”

The next concern discussed involved the possibility of a misperception of the parent’s understanding of the school’s responsibilities for educating the child and what the school
understood its responsibilities to be. P1 felt that perhaps teachers were too quick to blame the behavior of her son on a possible disability instead of delving deeper into the reason for his behavior. As an example, she gave the instance when he was in the 7th grade and the teacher considered him “troubled and always getting into arguments or whatever with her.” The mother asked if he was completing his work, and the teacher acknowledged he was finishing and then disturbing everyone else. The parent then said, “Then give him more work.” She insisted he be placed in Algebra I his 8th grade year and, as she said, “He aced it.”

P1 believes that frequently when schools have children being disruptive it is because they are “bored” and not being challenged. She, as the parent, recognized that in her son and insisted he be placed where he could be challenged. The key to her is “being involved. You can’t let the school system raise your kid. They gonna help them but you can’t say OK, well, they’re with your [child] for 8 or 9 hours a day and that’s it. It’s way more than that….Parents raise kids. School systems help but you also have to know your child. You know, your teacher should come tell you nothing about your child.”

P2 gave an example where her desires for her son were overridden by the school to her son’s benefit. “Last year he didn’t pass a calculus class. So they put him in the online calculus this year and, um, he still was not passing the online [class]. So I wanted him to be in the classroom. That way he could get the hands on that he wasn’t getting through the online but, us come to find out, he ended up passing the online course. So because if he had went back to the classroom, he’d of had the same teacher that he had last year and he said he could not do that. So we kept him on the online and he barely passed but he passed it.”

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P3 believes when there is a conflict between the students “the leadership should…step up and say, hey, you know, we understand this and show them the information on what is required of them and what’s not and if they don’t do what they are supposed to do, then, not just leave them out there, you know, and sit there and say you know what…happened? Let’s go ahead and talk about it and let’s move on….There was an incident that happened that made him, that he had to leave out and, ah, there was no proof, no real solid proof of anything, but it was, just the fact, you know, how everything was done. I thought it could have been handled better going down from the principal on. I did email the responsible parties on that but I didn’t get a response but one and I would have liked to have got a response from the principal that he got involved but I didn’t get that.”

P4 seemed to have most of her difficulty with the guidance department of the school when her grandson needed to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test and again for the ACT assessment. When both grandparents went to the guidance counselor about the needed accommodations for their grandson, he told them he would take care of it but instead sent in the wrong information and the student didn’t get the accommodations. When the student took the ACT assessment, he was given accommodations without the permission of ACT and therefore did not get a score.

The parents were asked what they saw in the laws applied to education they felt might need emphasis or change. P1 presented thoughts about parent involvement. Specifically, she said, “Parents need to get more involved. They need to see what their kids are doing and I think, if they get more involved, the kids would be less bad. They won’t be as bad as much. They won’t be disruptive as much. I mean, hey, they’re gonna have their moments and of
course, teachers have their moments too. So, I think some of the laws, they need to say, ‘Hey, if you see a kid and mom have not seen their face within three months of the school year, then, yes, they need to contact the parent and say hey we haven’t seen you.’”

P2 addressed what she felt was a need for two teachers (an exceptional children’s teacher with the general education teacher) in a much smaller classroom. Her comment was, “Well, um, I don’t think they have…the classroom setting that they have these children in is, I think, it should be a little smaller so they can get the hands on what they need um, because…in some of the classes he didn’t get what they were doing. So, if it might’ve been a little more smaller room setting and maybe another teacher. I think they need more EC teachers, um, someone to come in the classroom with the regular teacher but to help them a little more.”

P3 was in agreement with P1 about parent involvement’s importance: “You instill in your children the principles, you know, you try to tell them that this is wrong….I think that sometimes the parents are not involved enough and then they criticize everybody else and they blame everybody else for their child not learning, cause they’re not in their children’s life and that’s not how it’s supposed to be….You have to have parents, you have to have the teacher, and you have to have everybody involved to help the child.

P3 also commented on the expansiveness of what children are learning today. She expressed a concern that “they don’t know how to be kids anymore. They don’t. It’s like you sit here and first grade you, to know all these words, wow, multiplications, doing all this in second grade. We didn’t do all that, you know, but we turned out fine. But a lot of the kids, I think that some of them, some of them are growing up so fast to me and that’s the
reason they act the way they do. Some are made to do that and some of them…can’t. They are not mature enough.”

P4 opened her answer with, “I’m not sure of the laws that really benefit the kids.” She expressed concern that the IEP did not carry through in the untested courses like electives. There was a music class in which the teacher required a thirty page handwritten paper. Her grandson was capable of typing the paper but did not have the ability due to his disability to handwrite the paper. An accommodation was not allowed because the class was not covered by the IEP.

Comments were requested about perceived negative effects on general education students from legislation that benefits others. P1 did not understand why parents were not aware of some of the benefits that legislation might offer the general education students. She used as an example her understanding that during a certain period of time you can make up to four college applications without having to pay for it if your child was receiving free or reduced lunch. She felt the schools did not advertise that enough. P2 said she had never really encountered any general education students or their parents. She said, “I’ve never experienced anyone that’s in a regular because I have another EC, my youngest one. So, um, I haven’t experienced anyone in a regular classroom setting.” P3 did not seem to have any reference for the question as well. She was more inclined to talk about the law as a means to change behavior. Two areas she mentioned were an increase in the age of compulsory attendance from sixteen to eighteen years and requiring uniforms as a means to reduce bullying and other forms of violence in public schools: “If you do uniforms, no one has to
worry about making fun of what you’re wearing because you’re wearing the same thing that
I’m wearing. Or, you know, you might cut down more on fighting and bullying.”

P4 responded by saying, “I think they need to have a separation there. Somebody
who needs it, they get it. However, I do think there are some that have it that don’t need it
that are just goofing around and could do a whole lot better. I haven’t had that much
experience with the other kids and how other people feel about it. Having been a substitute
and spending—what’s that little room called where they all go, ISS—you know, most of
them in there had IEP’s but, I’m telling you, they all didn’t need them. It was just a
discipline problem, a breakdown somewhere at home, that’s my opinion.”

The last question asked requested a summary of the student’s experiences with the
school system throughout their education career. P1 felt that communication was the key in
the experiences of her son during his education: “I was involved in every, every year my
kids was in school. I was involved. Um, I let them see my face. They knew I did not play. I
gave them, uh, I gave them all contacts. You can contact me anytime. And, I think with that
that let them know, hey, I know your Mama. I know your Mama don’t play so you know
what you need to do. And that was all they had to say, you know. By me having that
communication with the teachers, I didn’t have no problems with the school system
whatsoever.” In her concluding comments, P1 said “I would definitely like for the public
school system to offer a lot more education to the parents and let them know what’s available
as well. They shouldn’t rely on the students to relay the message because you know the
students are not relaying all the messages, you know. The parents need to be more aware of
what the public system offers.”
P2 remarked “they kept me informed. We had IEP meetings regularly so I knew exactly…what he was getting, per se, over the other students. Like I said, he got regular, I mean smaller classroom setting, extended time on testing, read aloud, um, so he got exactly what he needed to me. I was informed and I knew exactly what was going on.” The son of P3, like the grandson of P4, went to school for some time in a private Christian school. In describing the difference between the private school and the public school she described it in this way: “There was more structure and a little bit, there was more, I guess there was more focus on his education. This in the public schools they are more open, I understand their diversity, but they are more on their own. They have to figure out a lot of things on their own….You could tell some of the teachers care, some don’t, ah, and I think that all plays with some of the parents, too. You know, because they see a lot of parents not involved in their children and they’re trying to help and not seeing any results. I mean it plays on both parts but I think that the private school was a more structured and they are a little bit more strict and focus a little bit more academically than the public schools.”

P4 felt that her grandson had a good experience in school. She indicated, “I think after so many years, they finally got [him]. That’s who [he] is. He’s this little Bible toting boy….He has no fear and that’s part of the Asperger’s Syndrome. He has no fear….He is a bully target and he knows he’s a bully target. We’ve discussed it. We’ve looked at books, there are movies, whatever—he knows he’s a bully target…. He knows who he is, he knows what he has. He knows there are problems there and he knows he’s a target.” To conclude her comments P4 said, “What I read today, when I pulled up the site [from the TEACH program through the Autism Society], it said the ones who were 8 years old in 2002
are now looking for a job. So we have adult Asperger’s looking for employment and now they are actually working with that age group. So I think that is wonderful. I have in there a whole top shelf of books on nothing but Asperger’s, Autism, Attention Deficit. When I would substitute in an EC class I could manage that but, if I went into a regular classroom, I’d wonder what was normal about that?”

**Principal Interviews**

The first question asked each of the principals was meant to discover their definition of an “at-risk student.” Pr1 said it started with “teacher recommendation, teacher observation. [W]e have a support system entitled our Student Services Team. That is the initial referral team in which students are identified for either academic problems or behavioral problems or the referral also could come from parent initiated request. So it varies, but usually those two key stakeholders of either the teacher or being the parent to initiate that referral. Once that referral is made, interventions are put in place to determine whether we’re going to monitor their case in Student Services or does this child need to move up to the next level to the IEP team, Individualized Education Program.”

Pr2, who had been in four Title I elementary schools, felt she had a full grasp of the at-risk student. She explained, “They’re very needy. They crave a lot of attention. They ask you if they can go home with you. They tell you about all of the various situations that go on in the home. They come up to you and say to you that the lights were cut out this weekend. They sometimes come unkempt which means the clothes are dirty. They tell you what they need or what they lack. They also come and tell you that, ‘I didn’t have a lot to eat this weekend. I’m hungry.’ One student told me that one time he had to share a Big Mac all
weekend with his other four siblings. So those are the signs. You know immediately to let me know. Also, most of the time, they have low academic achievement. They have low grades. They miss a lot of school.”

Pr3 and Pr4 tended to answer all questions in very succinct and direct ways. Pr3 simply expressed, “We look at their test data, their socioeconomic status and then just observational data to identify at-risk students.” Pr4 made a broad statement that, “Any student that, because of any reason, he is academically, economically, socially, or whatever puts him at risk of not making grade level” is at-risk.

In her explanation of the identification of the at-risk student, Pr5 could speak from the perspectives of both a high school principal and as a central office administrator because of her current position as the Executive Director of Secondary Education. She believes to identify an at-risk student, the administrator must first have “a genuine understanding of what an at-risk student is. It’s not one that necessarily has a legal label associated with it, but it’s a child that is at risk of not being successful in school, not graduating and that can be done—identified—students can be identified in various ways. And I think the piece, aside from the formal data, that can be looked at as far as grades, attendance, performance, proficiencies, growth: You can look at all these things to identify an at-risk child but I think that, that before you even look at a test score, maintain that open line of communication with teachers and administrators keeping the counselors in the loop too, um really build a relationship and know the child….You can identify whether or not you feel a child is at-risk, or in need of additional support if you know the circumstances in which that child is living. I think it’s important for teachers to build relationships as well as counselors. And the one area that I
think we could all probably do a better job in is really tapping into their expertise and their
talents and helping them bridge the gap between home and school and community and
school.”

The next area of investigation delved into the strategies each principal thought were
most effective for involving the families of at-risk and special education students in the
school community. Pr1 focused on the processes used through various teams within the
school community to influence the family members to be a part of their child’s school. She
describes her methods this way: “It has to be a strategic, aligned process and the procedure
does not change. During each IEP meeting the parents are always offered a Parents’ Rights
Handbook, but at every meeting, either Student Services or IEP meetings, the parents are
invited. Accommodations are made if parents are not able to physically be present. Through
phone conferencing—whatever needs to be made to offer the parent an opportunity to
provide input—we try to accommodate….If social workers have to provide transportation,
we go through those lengths and parents are aware, so it’s a good partnership but they have to
be involved.”

Pr2 liked to get the social worker involved with strategizing methods to help the
students. She would “call in the parent and me and my social worker sit in my office and we
have a discussion with the parent…. One of the things we do is we talk with the parent, and
most of the time they’re very open and very receptive because they want help. They break
down in my office; they start crying and tell me, ‘You know, we’ve been evicted. I’m living
in another house with nine other people. My children are not eating. We need help with
school uniforms.’ So, we begin to get the back story of what’s going on, and from there we
begin….We begin to talk with the parent to see what exactly what’s needed. If we need to make any calls to social services or any other kind of resources or services or entities, we’ll do that as well. There we get the ball rolling.”

Pr3 was focused on parent meetings to develop involvement similar to Pr2: “We do have monthly parent meetings where we take different topics to show, to teach parents how they can help their students. We also invite them to student services meetings, IEP meetings. We employ a full time parent facilitator who reaches out to the parents and to the community.”

Pr4 used the support staff, consisting of a case teacher and guidance counselors, for outreach to the parents: “We have an exceptional case teacher here, and we have had some pretty good guidance people where we’ve done some outside things. We didn’t have anything last year, exactly, but we have had organizations and meetings and things where we have called in parents to find out what’s going on in their lives and if there is anything we can do. If so, what is it we can do to help? The case teacher, for example, treats all those darlings like her own, and she is a very good link to the community for us.”

To influence parent involvement in the high school, Pr5 “required contacts home with, we started with asking that maybe a positive communication first….Build that rapport with the parents so that they know you’re an advocate for the child in the first communication home is not going to be a negative one. I think that this is a process. It’s not something that just happens….Have an open-door policy, you know, that’s so cliché. However, I think that when you are there to listen to their concerns and you don’t shut them out, they’re going to be more apt to hear your concerns.”
Because there are so many things that can interfere with the success of at-risk students, the next question explored how school administrators were able to help these students develop the personal resilience to succeed. Pr1 began by expressing the need of maintaining high expectations: “The expectations for those students are never lowered. But the nurturing, the trying to meet them at their level and give them the modifications that the need in order to help reach those standards but never are expectations lowered. They are required to reach those expectations but it’s a little different. I guess it’s not a one size fits all curriculum. So whatever modifications, whatever accommodations we need to make to those students, those things are put in place, but never are expectations lowered. So therefore and really and truly we know through the research of James Comer that no significant learning takes place unless there is a significant relationship. So we take very seriously that nurturing, that caring piece for those students to help them with their deficiencies but never are expectations lowered—Never!”

Pr2 speaks of the character and background of the students: “They have a very, very tough exterior, and they are very resilient—they can be. Now, I have had a few that have had a hard time, like, for example, a situation that I had this year, a little boy and his family had been evicted and had to go stay with some other people and the people were very, very mean to him. I did see during that period of time his grades dropped and behavior increased. So, trying to remove those barriers is very hard, but, most of the time, they’re able to be resilient and really not affect them. I’ve also noticed a lot of sadness in these kids as well. That is something that I’m very concerned of but I always try to be positive. I talk with my teachers all the time about trying not to nitpick about the small things. I tell them all the time this
child is coming to school, they’re living in another home, and they’re considered homeless. Why are you talking to me about his belt color? I just thank God that he showed up for school. I have had to teach them that they have to learn to pick and choose their battles because they come to school with so many things. There are a few who it bothers and then the others are yet resilient and seem to do well as we continue to help them.”

Pr3 emphasized relationships, which is a recurring theme in other parts of this research: “I think the first step is identifying students and then building relationships with them. I found that those students, they’ll do anything for you if they know that you care about them and caring about their success, so, really, building that personal relationship with them.”

Positivity is the theme of Pr4 describing his approach as trying “to be positive at all times. Some of these kids are being asked to take tests there is no way they should be asked to take, and these scores are being attached to their names unfairly. So, what we try to do, as a staff and as our teachers, is to continue to be positive. Try to find something positive—whether they grew a little bit, may not have made grade level but they may have grown some—continually try to find the positive anywhere we can.”

Speaking of the school’s environment, Pr5 indicated the importance of “having that environment in which children know that they’re cared for, not just as a test score or as grades or a statistic on the graduation rate but they, as a human being, matter to the individuals within that school….If you get to the heart of caring for and nurturing and supporting people, that if you’re lucky, the results are going to kind of fall into place….So empowering the students also to take ownership for their learning and including the parents

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in the process as well….I mean it was evident that, when you walked in the building, you were going to be surrounded by people that cared about…cared about your learning, cared about your health, your overall well-being. We cared about the whole child.”

The next area of exploration dealt expressly with the effect federal legislation on the education of the children and the actions taken by the school. Several questions were asked in reference to this effect, whether positive or negative. Pr1 expressed her displeasure with “what is mandated from us and what is allotted for us to do those things in terms of financial—it’s a little disheartening….I think educators, most of them are called, and so therefore despite what mandates come down or what limited resources, we find a way….Never do we say, ‘Well this is all we have and this is all we’re going to get,’ but sometimes I think those mandates come down and they’re really not on the front lines like we are. But, we as the called educators—the professionals—we are going to do whatever it takes in order to help those children meet those specified goals.”

Speaking specifically to the effect on the students, she said, “Children may grow, but they still did not meet proficiencies. So they’re still having to go through, I guess, the constraints….Are they making their intended growth? Making those outcomes of where they’re expected because they are an exceptional child. So, therefore, I think sometimes mandates come down for one size fits all and it really and truly needs to be a case by case basis…when we look at what the state or what the federal is saying as proficiency. I think we really get caught up sometimes with proficiency and not, really and truly looking at a child’s growth from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. So, I think sometimes those children do fall into that category and because they have not met a specific cut off,
they’re not sometimes given those extra services or extra provisions whereas they may need some of those.”

Pr2 indicated a need for more legislative emphasis on the behaviors in the home. She remarked, “I don’t think that they [elected officials] really address the root issues and situations. I feel they need to go into the home. I do. Somehow, go in and study and investigate the family dynamics and then start from there and from there come to the school. I feel like a lot of things are put on the school that we can’t handle and can’t address.” As far as the effect on student performance and behavior, Pr2 felt, “The way that they pass these students and let them get by with various things is going to be a problem. You’re not going to get away with things when you get older and get out there in this world. The way that we pass them, we allow them to not be able to pass these tests, but then again we promote them to the next grade. It bothers me because you’re not going to receive passes when you get out in this world. I feel like that’s one of the things that they do that’s wrong. I do feel like they’re really good about making sure that the kids have their rights and things are being followed; they’re getting their instruction and it’s being modified and all of the strategies and research proven things, we do that as well, but I really just think that the way they give them a pass, I would say, is something that is not going to be beneficial but is going to be detrimental in the long run.”

Pr3 was very blunt in her response. When asked if legislation gave the desired effect she said, “No, I do not. I think that it does not set high expectations for students. They do not try to achieve high because that is not what’s expected. It’s helpful in the sense that students that are identified with special needs get some individual instruction….The cookie
cutter type classrooms, the cookie cutter type programs, it’s not as individual as it needs to be.”

Pr4 expressed his frustration by saying, “I’m not really sure the legislature knows what they’re doing when it comes to at-risk children. It seems like some of the ones that are the worst disruption to the school environment have the most protection and the ones that really need the help don’t really get all they need. So, I’ve questioned a lot of times whether anybody in the legislature really knows anything about it—an at-risk or exceptional child or whatever. I question it frequently.” In discussion of the effectiveness, Pr4 commented, “A lot of times the kids know the rules better than we do. They know where their limits are, what we can do to them or allowed to do. Once they reach a certain point in their discipline or grades, whatever, they know what we’ve got a right to do or not do and they’ll tell us right quick what they’re going to do and how we can’t affect how they do it. I just think they’re out of touch [legislators]….They’re making rules and regulations that are really more harmful than good. I don’t think no matter how hard you yell or say, they have their own way of thinking and their own way of doing things. I don’t know what motivates them or where they’re coming from.”

Pr5 was another leader who feels a sense of inadequacy in the legislation. She remarked, “My decisions as far as exceptional children or at-risk children or any child, rests on my ethics—doing what I think is in the best interest of that child. While there is an abundance of the legislation…IDEA, I think that you’ve seen how many times, you know, it’s been changed and referred to, and, you know, with the additions, with the legislation, with the Section 504, and how that can be manipulated pretty much any way, any way a
parent or SST team seems fit. I do think the best interest of the child is at hand in the legislation, but, I think, there’s a common sense piece of it that has to be considered as well. Just like with everything, it can be black and white but there are gonna be ways around it and I’ve seen that especially with the EC legislation.” In speaking of its effectiveness, Pr5 said, “I think it’s helpful because it does identify that these children and their exceptionalities require additional support and it makes the school and the family and everybody involved come up with a focus plan but I think it’s harmful because it can be…manipulated. We’ve dealt with it on the school level where parents thought it would be in their child’s best interest to have a disability because it would make them more marketable when they went to apply for a scholarship and I’ve literally dealt with situations such as that.”

Pr1 felt that modifications of testing for the most part were beneficial: “Because we were just limited with personnel, we had so many modified groups that I had to be a test administrator and I think that my AP [Assistant Principal] gave me the students who really would benefit from an administrator testing them. For those particular children on that day, they needed those modifications. Multiple test sessions, extended time, mark in book, so really and truly, it was helpful to see that we’re not just saying these modifications need to be done on the paperwork. Those students really and truly benefited from those modifications and I have seen where they have received those modifications and they have yielded positive results. So, yes, I will say in most case scenarios modifications are in fact a benefit for those students.”

Pr2 felt that effectiveness of modifications were dependent upon the student, stating, “I’ve seen some EC students who have all the modifications and they finish their testing in
two seconds. It didn’t matter how many modifications they had—extended time, write in book, separate setting, work twenty minutes and take a five minute break or whatever modification you have—they’re still not going to give their best on the test. I feel that they have been taught that, ‘Hey, I’m going to get a pass anyway’ and ‘it’s going to be okay’ and ‘mama is still going to get her check.’…I’ve actually had parents come to me and ask me to fill out information so that their children can receive these checks and they tell their children they want them to come to school and act in an unorderly manner in order to continue to receive those checks. I mean, it’s just so amazing the things that I’ve been exposed to.”

Pr3 and Pr4 both thought modifications were effective but to different degrees. Pr3 said simply, “I think they are somewhat effective but not effective as it could be.” Pr4 thought, “I think they’re very effective. One thing we pride ourselves in is really following those modifications. They’re not perfect like everybody else. I’m sure we’ve made mistakes in the past but we try to really follow them. I think it’s very helpful and beneficial to the kids. That’s a good thing.”

When Pr5 spoke about modifications as determined in the IEP or 504 plans, she recognized “a fine line between meeting the modifications and not. And in our minds, as educators, we’re doing what the plan says but on the opposite end it can be manipulated to seem as if the plan were completely ignored. So, I think it’s harmful because it’s become a tool to get the desired outcome with maybe not the desired results. As long as they’re getting the outcomes, I think sometimes, in some cases, the legislation allows the path that leads up to the outcome be manipulated along the way.”
When asked about legislative effect on discipline in the schools, Pr1 began with, “That’s a loaded question. We realize, as educators, a lot of accountability has been put on us, and so therefore we understand and, I think you have to understand what variables you can control and what variables you cannot control….That stems from what type of school culture you’re going to have. Here, what has worked well for us—we state our mission every day. And we try to remind boys and girls that the only two things that go on here is teaching and learning…. We’re thankful for our local district’s code of conduct to kind of give us some guidelines but I’m also thankful because these are elementary who are just molding into the right behaviors, so we can get some flexibility on what we issue them because elementary children really don’t do fights. So, I have some flexibility helping them to understand what those discipline expectations are….We understand what variables we can control.”

Pr2 did not really discuss the legislation per se but did suggest a change in legislation that is introduced later. Pr3 felt that “because of how the discipline as far as suspensions and how we deal with at-risk students, I think that we sometimes, I don’t want to say ‘doctor the results,’ but sometimes we don’t approach things the way they need to be approached.”

Pr4 regarded the legislation as having a “huge effect with the at-risk child.” His focus, however, was on the ten day rule affecting the discipline of exceptional children. His comments were directed at “those kids that realize they do things that the other kids do and they get away with a lot of different things. The Regular Ed[ucation] kids aren’t dumb, they know what’s going on. Then when a kid gets to a certain number of days, they know it and they know there’s not a whole lot you can do. Then we send them off [to an alternative
placement] and then they send them back with no days. You’ve really got to do a good job using ISS and maybe only sending them home for a short period of time so that when they come back you have some days left. You know, it impacts (we have a very high EC population here) a lot of our time…spent in those situations which I wish wouldn’t.”

Pr5 had this idea relating to discipline issues. Thinking in terms of discrepancies in treatment of exceptional children and regular education students, she said, “Is it something that is their exceptionality that really impacted their decision to misbehave? The fact that you might have a non-EC child and an EC child that commit the same, and I can be much more stringent on the discipline I give the child that does not have the exceptionality. So, I think, you know, you really have to truly rely on your ethics and morals—use that moral compass—to know, ok, look at the act itself and not the student but then breakdown and look at the… ‘Ok, well, if I’m doing this for one child, I have to be equitable in my decisions with the non-EC child.’ So, I think it does. There are many incidences I’ve seen in a school where I’ve had to become a lot more lenient based on, I knew I could only suspend this child for a total of ten days and this first infraction, while it might be a major strike for a child that’s not EC. I had to be very cautious knowing the mandates from legislation, so for me, I didn’t just look at it as that child but how I had treated other children without a label. You just really have to be careful that you’re sending the same message to all of your population.”

Since each administrator (except for Pr2) had fairly strong opinions about the current legislation, they were each asked what they would like to change in the law. Pr1 wanted to see “educators contact our legislators or influence policy” more. She also felt we did not “do enough advocating for what is in the best interest of the children.” She did, however, “think
we’re moving towards that. But, traditionally, we have been a career related people that have just taken whatever has been issued to us but we’re having more of a voice now.”

Pr2 probably gave the most surprising answer to the inquiry. She responded with, “I really wish that we had corporal punishment. I know that when I was in school we had corporal punishment and I knew that if I got out of hand I was going to receive, you know, some licks. I feel that nowadays children know that we can’t touch them. That all we can do is put them in timeout or suspend them. If we could have corporal punishment back again, I feel it would be something that is very effective. All of this having to call parents, to tell parents about their children, all of that would be alleviated because we would be able to give them licks as needed.”

Pr3 only commented that “more people at the school level need to…be involved in creating the legislation.” Pr4 spoke in terms of the difficulties of the effects of the legislation but offered no direct suggestions as to how to change it. He ended it with “It’s what it is, I guess.” The exasperation of Pr5 is easily seen in her response when she says, “I think that the legislation is so broad that it allows the gray area, you know, with anything. I think with any type of legislation there is room for interpretation and how it’s interpreted depends on any given day in a court, with any given judge. You know, I think you’ve got to be very, very, specific and I don’t know…that there’s any way to really write it so that you can avoid these interpretations.”

Since RTI and PBIS were developed as research based strategies from IDEIA of 2004, the administrators were asked to comment on the effectiveness of those strategies from their experience. Although the discipline numbers in the school of Pr1 are very good, “we
don’t have an aligned strategic program to say ‘this is the program and this is how it looks.’ We need to implement PBIS. We have some elements of it but no way is it the level what it could be….We’re doing a lot of good things but how can we make our things and our processes even better for the betterment of children so that they have a clear picture of what is expected of them. So I think, yeah, it helps you to get a clear picture of what it is you want to do.”

Pr2 spoke of her experiences in a PBIS school where she had worked. She described it as working “very well at our school. We had a PBIS incentive closet. The kids would receive tickets for their good behavior: Such things as walking quietly and in a line in an orderly manner, uniform shirts tucked in. They would have received tickets and, of course they would be able to use those tickets toward the PBIS incentive closet, toward dances we were going to have, [or] various events at the school. It is a very, very effective framework. I like PBIS. Actually, that’s something I’m looking at now to promote here at my school now because it did so well at the other school.”

Pr3 was very negative about both programs. Her comments were, “I think they sound good on paper, they look good, but it’s just another thing put forth by the legislators. It’s more than one size fits all thing for students instead of it being directed toward the individual student.”

Pr4 had just completed his first year of PBIS in his school. He was pleased with the results, explaining, “I thought we cut down on discipline referrals. My only issue and my teachers’ only issue was it takes so long for some of the kids to come to the administration because you have to go through four things. So, we are going to do some amending to those
things. But as far as the program, I liked it….It gave, you know, contacting parents and giving them [teachers] discipline type things to do. If they continue to mess up, then they come to the administration where they get a Class I or Class II [level of discipline violation].”

When questioned about a possible increase in parent contacts, he replied, “I hope not, but it could have because we require, we’ve always required that they contact parents before they come to us. If I ever had a parent in here and they said they never heard from the teacher then I would say ‘Go talk to the teacher’ and I wouldn’t do anything. So, we’ve always required that….Our parents, if you communicate with them, there’s a whole lot they can help with.”

Pr5 spoke again both as a principal and a central office administrator: “I see that the data from our district demonstrates that PBIS definitely is making strides in a lot of the schools. It’s not anything we ever implemented while at [high school], but we did do some things that were very similar with the WCRB (Work, Cooperate, Respect, Belong) to a lot of teachers in the classroom, but I think the premise relies on having a common language and sharing the same beliefs and values and it prepares teachers to all speak the same languages so that the expectations from one classroom to the next classroom, you know, they need to mirror one another. So that I think that’s critical in any school building, especially in schools that have high at-risk student populations. But you look at the discipline data for our district, and the numbers are down while there are still a lot of schools in excess of over 1,000 suspension days for the year. The number of disciplinary reassignments and the number of suspensions, you know, students and the actions are different. So, I think that as we continue
to, as a district and employ programs such as this then you’re going to continue to see the numbers come down because it’s more of a—it’s understood. The expectations are understood and they are modeled in every classroom.”

After speaking to strategies suggested in legislation, the principals were asked what they considered as their core strategies, the strategies they considered most effective. Pr1 indicated her strong belief in relationships: “If you don’t have that one person or that several people that the child can relate to, and, you know, give them some expectations to give them a belief to believe in, it’s not going to happen. It’s not going to happen, and to have an individual or individuals to set those expectations to say that regardless of what you may have…, they continuously believe what they hear. All of us need feedback, and, so, therefore, I think putting them with the right persons is going to really and truly impact their growth. None of us learn the same. All of us learn differently, and, so, therefore, tap into how they learn the best because all of us have a certain degree of talent or gift in all of us.”

Pr2 stressed consistency: “You have to have an awesome, strategic discipline plan. You have to back up what you say. If you say you have to do something, you have to do it. You have to make sure you stay in constant contact with the parent and the parents need to come in and get to know the school and how it’s run and how we are going to be consistent when it comes to our disciplines. They need to know the teacher very well, the administration very well, know we have a zero tolerance for certain actions. Regardless of whether you’re EC or whatever your label is, when you do certain things there are going to be certain consequences that you’re going to have. They also need to be aware of the student code of conduct and read it as well. Form a relationship with the kids of course, but, also,
know, let them know, that you’re going to be strict and discipline them as needed. You let them know immediately the routine and how things are going to be because kids are more comfortable when they have a routine and structure as long as they know you mean business and you’re going to follow what you say.”

Pr3 wanted to make sure students are placed correctly: “Make sure those students are identified with the teachers they are placed with. Make sure the teachers have the correct training to deal with those students because there is a certain bag of tricks or tools the teachers have to use to make sure they understand where they’re coming from.”

“Know the kids” was the focus of Pr4: “I guess maybe smaller settings are good. Following the modifications is imperative. If they need preferential seating or whatever it is that they might have to follow that [IEP]. As far as homework and tests, modified assignments in that respect are good. And I think that teachers and administration need to get to know the kids and that’s where my case teacher is very good….We try to get to know them and there might be some circumstances that we’re not aware of on the surface that is going on here. I just think you have to take more care and more time and get to know them better because a lot of those kids are coming to school with things going on in their home. It’s hard for a middle school child to adjust. A regular middle school child can adjust but if there is any kind of at-risk or EC situation going on it’s even tougher. If there’s home life going there’s just a lot of variables that come into play that we have to look at.”

Pr5 reiterated the need to know the students, but also emphasized communication: “You know, I don’t want to sound like a broken record but I think that you’ve got to know the students—in the summer looking over every transcript of every child—looking at the
discipline folder and cumulative folders. You know we work closely with the social worker and the guidance counselor to formulate that list. You know their list doesn’t just go by grades and test scores. It’s comprehensive and they identify children that are dealing with social or family issues that could potentially impact the child’s quality of their education. So, once again, it’s knowing the child and this is, I think,… increasingly challenging when teachers are having to deal with larger class size and counselors are dealing with heavier caseloads and , truthfully, a lot of the problems that children are having to deal with are far greater than I could even imagine.”

She expressed the need for communication not only at school but in the family. “I think you have to be strategic and…structure that line of communication in a school so that, not just within the school but in the child’s family, you know, including the family….Communication is key and it’s going to be, again, that trusting culture. I think that the peer mentors that we implemented are an example of that. Ninth grade is the transition year that research shows that you’re going to lose a large portion that are going to…drop out of ninth grade….So, identify[ing] those students and putting them with strong peer mentors and, also, the adult mentor within the school building really, surrounding that child with people that are going to build them up and help them along the way.”

The next question was based totally on the personal wish list of programs and strategies to assist exceptional and at-risk students each of the administrators might favor. Given “carte blanche” with no encumbrances, what would they choose? Pr1 began with “Time. I don’t understand why we have a structural time where elementary children have to go to school the earliest. Again, I know that that’s a society thing where parents having to go
to work, but, if we could have something in place? Our little children are here at 7:15 in the morning and that’s a variable of which I cannot control of what time they go to bed at night. If I could have some flexibility with time.” Then she came to the issue of money. Pr5 said, “When I came to [elementary school], we were still Title I but were the last school to qualify because of our free and reduced lunch rate, but it seems as if the better you do, the less resources are given to you. I did all those games because of the abundance of resources so don’t take those things away and, if it could be in continuation, this program yielded good results—let’s keep this program. Our program Fast For Word—children were making huge gains but because we changed from Title I to non-Title I, I had to X that program because we don’t have the funding to support it. That’s what I wish it would be: No limit on the resources. If it works, give me what I need in order to move children.”

Pr2 believed we should start in the home. “I think we should focus more starting in the home. To look at the dynamics and see what we can do differently to assist. And, I know they tell us you can’t do but so much in the home, that’s why when they are here we have to give them our all and do our best….Learning and all begins at home and a lot of that stuff, a lot of that baggage is brought to school and it does cause a problem….I really do think that we ought to invest more in the home—they need to go in the home and see what’s going on—and try to help these situation so that when they come to school all the burden will not be placed on us to try to remove the barriers before we even try to teach them.”

Pr3 is at odds with the labels we put on children: “I would like to see some of the labels taken away as far as students with disabilities. I think that, um, because we have labels, we do what we can to fit students with labels and they don’t always fit. And the at-
risk students—I’d like to see more programs that extend the school day, um, even before or after school, um so that we have more time to work the social aspect that they’re missing.”

Pr4 thinks “that some of the kids are required to take like the Extend II test that is no longer available—we’re making them take the regular tests. To me that’s not going to be successful. None of them are going to pass. I think that’s going to be very frustrating thing for those kids to handle. Like I said before, we’ve already talked about trying to show that they’ve grown. If they make some growth and they don’t pass it, at least we can make something positive. Otherwise, I think they ought to have more than ten days. We don’t have an SED class here anymore, but when we did, you had to be a magician to try to discipline kids because you need consequences. Everybody needs consequences. These kids know when their days are getting close. We’ve had a number of them just about laugh in our face especially if they get sent off to the alternative school and come back with very limited days or no days. You’re talking bloody murder there.”

Pr5 is very disappointed in the way individuals manipulate the legalities for gain more for the parent than the child. She commented, “I’m dealing with situations now in my position where I look at, speaking as a former principal that now is in a district level position, I’m receiving retentions, middle grade students and a parent just blatantly argued with the decision of the school to retain their child because a 504 plan not being put in place when initially requested. The only thing in the 504 that was a modification was something that required the child to write down assignments. I think that you see that happening so much. That we’re losing sight of the true journey of helping the child get to that point where they can stand on their own two feet and be successful. You know that support that has been in
place is designed specially to help that child not just in the classroom but in the community, at home and beyond and the next phase. But, what we are so focused on is outcome....Often times the process of getting there is forsaken and that’s not benefitting the child. So I think there do need to be protections in place but we need to tighten up on, on what is a 504 plan that just says we’re gonna write assignments in the planner….Do I think that child would have been anymore academically prepared? No, and what’s not being focused on is the inputs. That’s what’s being ignored and that’s what’s going to get the results, not just in 6th, 7th, 12th grade. The input and what the child learns is what’s going to be required in the next level of education and in life.”

I next questioned how the school community could best support and assure the ultimate success for all students. Pr1 describes the effort in terms of a three-legged stool: “In order for a child to be successful, our ‘Three-Legged Stool’ for our school has to have all three legs in order to serve its purpose. The school has to be involved. We as faculty have to be involved. The child has to be involved and the parent has to be involved….The community part comes into play with that. What I like about the [High School] District—the community is involved with their schools. These are their [High School] District schools—their schools and they are going to do whatever it takes.” Pr1 then discussed how she employs field trips for cultural exposure: “I require all my grade levels to take out children on an out of town field trip. Not all my children can afford that $30 or $40 charter bus price, but through our PTA’s, through our community, I get sponsorship for these children to understand there’s a much larger world. It’s not because they don’t know. It’s because they haven’t been exposed to it. They haven’t had the experiences. So, that’s where I see
providing more and more experiences for these children. So, they can understand they are just a little speck in this whole spectrum of this whole world. They don’t have a clue. They don’t have a clue and they have such a limited, limited vision of what the possibilities are for them.”

Pr2 wants the community to “help out and be an excellent resource. The things that we need, these food drives that we have, and the supplies that they give us, and the money we raise for [organization], all kinds of things, they need to make sure they are giving us the services and the goods and the support we need. This is a community thing. It takes a village and then some to raise these kids. So, they need to make sure they’re in the schools and calling the principals and asking us what we need and then making it happen, being a part of it, letting these children see that they are role models. So they [the children] can say I want to be a fireman or a teacher or a policeman when I grow up. So, they need to make sure they maintain their active involvement in the schools and continue to ask us what we need and then give it to us.”

“More personnel” was the call of Pr3: “I think that we need to put more money into hiring, not just programs. Programs are great but you have to have personnel to deal with, um, at-risk students…. Extending the school day as far as dealing with the social aspect.

Pr4 thinks that efforts are being done to achieve success: “The [Executive Director of Children’s Services] is really, really good with the EC kids and he’s very accessible for questions. Having a case teacher here, we have the guidance people who work with the at-risk kids a lot. I think there are a lot of programs and things out there we’re trying and we’re
doing. I would just say just continue to find out what the need and make sure that we’re doing it as best of our ability.”

Pr5 sees all facets of the school community playing a part in the education of the child: “It takes an entire school community, and in doing this, I look at our school and the relationships that were built in the cafeteria and the relationships that are in the student services. It’s all departments working together and doing their part, and it’s got to expand beyond that. With at-risk children the community has to become involved or we have to look to the community to see what they might already be doing that might benefit these young people.”

Speaking about the discrepancies in economic backgrounds, she asked, “What can we do as a school community and as a district to support equitable learning practices for all students? Because I think, oftentimes, it’s the at risk children that don’t have the supportive environment that’s going to help with the homework. I think district-wide we’re working the Rec Centers. We’re providing Chromebooks and Wi-Fi so that students can go there and have that adult mentor that’s going to offer them a place to do that homework in the evenings….We’re putting stickers up in restaurants. You know we support, you know our Wi-Fi supports eighty-seven schools but, once again, it’s not just about devices and access, it’s about having that person that’s going to offer that structure and I think that that’s what’s missing.”

At this point, formal questioning of the principals was completed and each of them was asked if there were any further questions or comments they wished to make. Pr1 concluded by saying, “In working with the at-risk child, who I like to always call ‘at
promise’ because these students have something to offer, you gotta have the most qualified. It cannot be somebody who just chooses to work with EC as an afterthought. You gotta have the best qualified. I had the opportunity to work with a TMD teacher at my previous school, and the expectations she had for those severely disabled children was absolutely amazing to see. Never did she lower the bar of standard for them. So, therefore, in their way, in their own path, they could in fact be successful. So, it has to be the most qualified.”

Pr2 closed her thoughts by saying, “The at-risk student is the only student I have ever known, and I’m very concerned about the future of the at-risk student. I know that I have big dreams for the at-risk student. I would love for the at-risk student to go to college one day. That is my dream. But, when I sit back and I think about the dynamics, what is life going to be like when they get older and to fill that FAFSA to go to college. Is that going to be possible? …Are they really going to be able to be a productive member of our society? Will they be equipped with the skills they need and know conflict resolution and get along with others and work toward a common goal? …Will these children be able to live a productive and successful life? That is my only concern and issue at this time.” Pr3, Pr4, and Pr5 had no further comments.

**Executive Director (ED) of Children’s Services Interview**

The questioning of the ED was similar to that of the principals. The initial questions pertained to recognition of at-risk students and the strategies for involving families in the school community: “Typically, at-risk students are identified based on risk factors such as high absenteeism, truancy, um, being late for school, chronic lateness, especially at elementary school. Also, you look at students that are on free and reduced lunch. You know
socio-economic statuses are a risk factor that is utilized. Predominately, the risk factors that we look at are academic and behavioral performance in the classroom.

“The way that we try to reach out to families is by not only just building relationships between teachers and parents but also by other school functions such as parent teacher conferences or, um, parent teacher associations. Student services teams are primarily your first avenue, especially at the elementary level. Those are structured to have a multi-disciplinary team come together—which includes the parent to discuss any concerns that they may have about a particular student and to put some interventions together. Typically, that’s generally, at the elementary level, that’s where you start bringing parents in to the fold, relative to the intervention planning. Now, parents will be brought in—requested to come in, and parent teacher conferences and one-on-one meetings with the teachers based on teachers’ concerns. Middle school is a little bit different in that they tend to try to work on the team approach. So, they may have team meetings and bring the teachers in or bring parents in to discuss any concerns that they may be having to kind of put some interventions in place with the next step being a referral to the student services teams. High school, high school level, you’re dealing primarily with individual parent teacher conferences as well as student services teams as well.”

In response to a question about interference with the success of at risk children and the development of resilience in them, he said, “I think one of the things that you do is, uh, you try to target those students early with some effective intervention practices. What you really try to do is remediate those skills deficits as much as you possibly can, the earlier, the better. We have a strong emphasis on early education...with not only our preschool
programs but then, also, the focus on heavy intervention at the elementary school level as well as school wide programs like positive behavior interventions supports programs and our student services teams: Things that we can do to ‘wrap,’ so to speak, services around the child and ensure that we’re developing special relationships with not only the child but their families.”

Since his position as ED involves him heavily with federal legislation, his input on the effectiveness of that legislation seemed particularly pertinent. He explained, “Within the legislation, you know you have a range of protections and requirements as part of the legislation. There are some things that I don’t consider as intended consequences, for example, like the disciplinary protections of IDEA. You know, if you look at [it] historically, those protections were really put in place to ensure that students were not being, almost, discriminated against, that their disability status was not something that was negated as part of disciplinary practices. Whereas, the original intent, when you read the comments in the original federal register, was really to be targeting students with low cognitive, you know, low cognitive functioning. Students who may engage in a disciplinary action without them really understanding the consequences of that action. Whereas, now you’re seeing that more applied to every single disciplinary category where a student may have a mild learning disability, to a speech language disability, all the way to your serious emotional disabilities and, so, to me, I don’t think that has the intended consequence of keeping kids, of tying up schools in the process of determining of whether or not that’s a manifestation of their disability. I don’t think that was the intended consequence. Also,…I don’t think litigation was really an intended consequence when the federal government was putting together these
policies and procedures but when you start doing that in the 70’s and you know from 1973, when they first started having these discussions, now we live in a very litigious society. I think that as society has changed that some of the things that are in place have resulted in some unintended consequences like that.”

He continued, “Any time you have a required function within a federal policy, especially, you open the door to that especially with IDEA because they have requirements to have administrative law judges and hearing officers and those types of things. Whereas, [for] a local board policy you may have a board hearing but it’s not gonna graduate to the level of going to a federal judge and going through all the processes that any other lawsuit would go through.”

In commenting on the effectiveness of modifications for special needs students, he remarked, “I think what you tend to see is, you see a lot of people as IEP teams…making a lot decisions on what they think may help the child versus what the child actually demonstrates the need for….Almost every EC student seems like they have extended time, and I said, ‘Well, there’s no way that all of these kids need that modification.’ A lot of times, they are put in place as a safety net as opposed as a true need…. What we always say is it should be about equal access and sometimes I think it’s done to protect children, sometimes I think it’s done to minimize some children’s lack of motivation as opposed to really a disability, a disability issue that is causing failure to produce a particular outcome…. Those alternate types of assessments, especially the Extend II, did not produce the types of results because when you have a child who cannot read, giving them less answer choices and a little bit less complex text does not really solve the issue which is the fact that they can’t read. So
I don’t think you get an accurate measurement of that child’s progress because they are measured on the standard course of study.”

To describe how the unintended consequences of legislation affected school discipline he stated, “I think part of it is, it ties up the school in a lot of meetings. I think middle school and high school, especially high school, your IEP teams, the manifestation teams, are probably the most difficult meetings you’re going to ever have as an IEP teams….I think it takes up a lot of time, takes up a lot of effort. You know tracking suspension days, trying to make decisions as to what constitutes a disciplinary change of placement and do we need to do a manifestation or do we not need to do a manifestation? How do we provide the services for the child when they do exceed their maximum days of removal? I think it sets up, sometime, there’s the unintended consequence of schools trying to, I guess, rationalize why one student has disproportionate discipline. Why an EC child who does something may get less days of suspension then a non-identified child or two children in the same exact incident, you know, two children fighting. One child is determined a manifestation of his disability, so they’re gone for the remainder of the year. So, one of the unintended consequences is that it leads to a disproportionate doling out of discipline, so to speak, because of all the procedural safe guards. I think sometimes in some schools, from talking with administrators, a good thing could be that they would give pause to putting a kid out of school because we want all of our kids to be in school. But, then it gives pause in situations where there’s a severe action that really does necessitate some sort of disciplinary action based on violating the code of conduct.”
When questioned about desired changes in legislation, he would encourage a change in how it “is not necessarily written but implemented in the way, in sense of funding because, you know, we’re funded in a very small percentage of the scale that is actually required in legislation. The federal government only funds a very small portion of what the federal requirements are and they’ve never fully funded IDEA and, so, part of that would be to fund it as it was originally intended. I’d probably look at certain eligibility criteria. I would probably look as a group. I would probably try to define the term ‘social maladjustment.’

You know, within our area of serious emotional disabilities, we have a high/large number of students who are identified who if you look at a lot of research out there as well as just talking with folks out there in the school system, it may not be that the child is disabled but may be a product of an environment that leads to that behavior which is more maladjustment than disability. The term resides in the legislation but no one’s ever defined that term. So, it’s very hard for teams to say, you know, this child is socially maladjusted versus a child with a serious emotional disability, so, some of it may be clarifying those terms that are out there in the law.”

The ED sees the methods for resolving disputes as a major roadblock to the effective application of the law. His thoughts were to, as much as possible, look “at the kind of dispute resolution process, really, really trying to remove some of the litigiousness out of the system…. I think that sometimes that stifles communications at the team level, you know, when parents are threatening to sue and the schools know that they can be sued. Sometimes it stifles communication and it puts the school on a defensive posture, and then it kind of goes downhill from there….Some of the ancillary things like teacher licensure and things that
impact who can teach kids with disabilities and how much they can teach them, you know, the ‘highly qualified thing’ could be examined.”

Legislation concerning discipline is always a hot button issue, and he had several specific comments about the issue. Regarding discipline in areas such as the possession of drugs or a weapon, he felt “those make sense now. I tend not to agree with the federal definition of a knife being 2-1/2 inches long versus a 2 inch weapon or a 1 inch weapon. I think 2 inches can do just as much damage as 2-1/2 inches. Same thing with serious bodily injury, you know, they’ve taken the law enforcement definition of serious bodily injury so, you know, I can stab you and that would not be considered serious bodily injury unless I hit a vital organ or I disfigured you. So, I think there needs to be a little bit more, um, specificity or openness into certain types of violations depending on children’s cognitive functioning level. A child who functions at an IQ level of 60 or 50 whose got an intellectual disability who bites someone and injury’s them, that’s more understandable than a student who has above average cognitive functioning who picks up something and hits a student over the head with it and then seriously injures them. So, I think part of it is kind of just tweaking some things in place.”

Although RTI and PBIS are programs used in the district, the ED spoke about those and other programs with which he was familiar. Speaking about effectiveness he said, “I think the theory behind them is great. Part of the issue has to do with fidelity. I think with any program that you have, it’s all about the fidelity of implementation of that program, responsiveness to instruction or response to intervention. And the new wave that’s coming in is MTSS, which is Multi-Tier Systems of Support. It’s all about if you’re not implementing
the interventions the way that you say you’re doing them or with the way that they were designed to do them, then you’re not going to get the intended consequences. So, I always use the example of: If I’m doing S.P.I.R.E, which is a reading program based on Orton Gillingham’s approach with a child having difficulty reading, well, the program really says to get the maximum benefit of the program, you need to use it daily for at least 30-60 minutes. So, if I’m not implementing it the way that it’s supposed to be implemented then I shouldn’t see…any progress.”

In querying him about whether the program was meant for an individual or a group, he explained “Either or both. Now, typically if you’re doing groups what you’re trying to do is you’re limiting [it to] two to three students for the intensity, but you’re also focusing on students that have the same skills deficits. But that’s with any intervention because whether it be, you know, one of the programs like Corrective Reading or even like Study Island or any of these things that we have all throughout our system…they’re only as good as the person whose implementing that program or whether you’re implementing it with fidelity because what we tend to see…when the classroom teacher is required to implement that intervention, there’s only a limited time during the day that they can do that….So, sometimes you get the: ‘[Student’s] not making progress.” And then if you’re using the lack of progress to place in a special education program, you’re not going to get the intended consequence of responsiveness to intervention. I do agree that, you know, you need to make decisions based on more than just an IQ test or the test that you’re doing. I think all of that data together (and I think that’s what the laws [are] really driven to) is that you look at all of that data together to make decisions….So, it’s going away from the discrepancy model of: ‘[Student’s]
referred.’ I evaluate him. He has that 15 points. Boom, he’s in, to really looking at, you
know, how’s [Student] doing? Let’s try some things. Let’s put more onuses on general
education teachers to try interventions and then if all the data shows that [Student] is not
progressing, then we’re not seeing increases in performance then that’s probably when we
need to look at other services.

In a follow up question, the ED was asked about the consistency of training the
teachers receive in the programs. He answered, “Our current student services team model is
focused a lot on the responsiveness to intervention. The problem that we find is that with all
the other professional development out there, it’s hard to get time to teach a high school
teacher, especially your middle school teacher. Elementary is already difficult. To say, well,
this is what intervention is, this is what intervention means, this is how you implement
interventions and there’s so many different ones out there. The other issue with RTI that
you’ll hear a lot of people say is that a lot of it depends on the makeup of your school and the
reason I say that is, at a school, if you’re in a low performing school, your highest performing
student may be the lowest performing student at a high performing school. And so,
sometimes you see a disparity there in RTI models because…you have to factor out what
everybody else is doing. You have to look at what is considered the average performance of a
student. A 3rd grade student—what is an average or typical performance? Not how does
Johnny perform compared to every other 3rd grader in my building. It requires a shift in
thinking. So, I think that in its heart the policy is great. I think—I’m a very big supporter of,
especially, RTI because you get kids earlier—it really opens up the need to or the ability to
help a larger population of kids that really need it as opposed to just the people that have a 15 point discrepancy or those that have an intellectual disability.”

Continuing the discussion about RTI, the ED was asked about the kinds of assessment being made and what specifically were the teachers trying to discover. His response was, “Well, you’re trying to be as specific as you possibly can….As part of our process, we use My Track now. It was PEP track and really the whole focus of that was to really help teachers focus in on the real, true difficulty that the child is having and part of that goes to right now. We have so many assessment tools in helping teachers really understand what the data means.”

He addressed the difficulties teachers face in determining why a student cannot read. “Is it, he can’t comprehend what he’s reading? Is it fluency? Phonetic-awareness? Decoding? What exactly is it? Blending? Sound symbol segmentation? Those types of things and I think now we’re getting a lot better at—it’s a fluency issue or it’s a comprehension issue, so, we're tailoring our intervention around those specific deficits.

Behavior is one of those that we have a lot of difficulty with because it’s just [boy’s name] is bad or [name] is not listening. Well, what is it? Very, very specific. The other thing is that progress sometimes is measured in inches and not miles and I always say that when you look in RTI models, it shows is the child making progress. It doesn’t say is a child on grade level so the difficult thing in an RTI process is, I’ve had to explain to a teacher ‘Well, [name] used to blurt out 100 times a day. Well, now he’s only doing it 50 times a day. Fifty times is still not acceptable but he’s reduced his blurring 50% and, so, it’s understanding what progress truly is…. [T]he same thing goes with PBIS. It’s about the fidelity of the implementation.”
He continues: “PBIS is more than putting a banner on your door or wall saying we’re a PBIS school or giving out some tickets to some kids. It’s about really developing school wide expectations, looking at discipline data, disaggregating that data and using that for action planning and making plans within your school based on the data that you’re obtaining and so part of that is, you’re only as good as the fidelity of your team. Is your team collecting data? Is the data accurate or are you reviewing it? Are you making plans, because if not, your PBIS, as a model, is only going to be as effective as your implementation. I’m not a big fan of saying ‘You must be a PBI school’ because I know that any implementation of any program is going to start with staff buy in. And, if your staff doesn’t feel like you need it, and if the principal doesn’t feel like it’s needed, then it’s really something you’re just being required to do and go through the motions and you’re not going to see effective results in anything….if you’re doing it because you have to do it as opposed to seeing some value in it.”

The length of time taken to determine the success or failure of interventions in RTI was explained this way: “It’s going to be a case by case situation. Generally, you’re probably looking at about six to nine weeks. But what we say is, you shouldn’t wait six weeks to change your intervention and that’s why you have to keep that data. I remember working with a child. I had a bright idea that we were going to do some fluency activities from the Florida Center of Reading Research. So, I started to look at her data and she was actually getting worse and I said ‘Well, let me stop doing what I’m doing and try something different.’ And what I found was that changing the types of intervention, the activities that I was doing with her, impacted her reading performance. So, I started to see her improve and,
so, generally what we say is, if you start seeing growth in that first intervention, you want to keep implementing it and collecting data. Generally, you’re looking at four to eight data points of collecting data and then you’re saying ‘his ain’t working for David, so, let’s try something different.’ Collect some more data… You want to try different programs.”

In speaking about what he would consider the most effective core strategies for use with at-risk students, the ED made this astute observation, “It’s almost very simplistic: It’s building relationships. I think that it’s building connections with colleagues and the same thing, I think goes with parents and children. I think it’s building those connections. Most of the times when I get complaints from parents or difficulties from parents, it’s due to a breakdown in the relationship either between the parent and the teacher or the child and the teacher or the parent and the student and the administrator. In terms of working with an at-risk child, I think it’s doing things with fidelity. I mean, I think it’s understanding that progress may be measured in inches and not miles and collecting data and making decisions based on the data. You may hear the term that it’s a mile wide and an inch deep. I think we collect a lot of data but we’re not necessarily at the individual teacher to student level using that data to inform instructional practices which is the whole point of collecting that data. I think between building relationships, developing protocols, implementing them the way that they’re designed and collecting data, I think you’re going to do a lot to address the needs of the at-risk child that way.”

Just as was asked of the principals, the ED was asked what he would do if given a carte-blanche authority to make changes to the current approach to at-risk students. His reply was multi-faceted: “If you haven’t learned to read by the third grade, you probably aren’t
ever going to be a full on reader. So… I’d probably focus more on early intervention. Title I, if you look at Title I in its inception was really focused on, not only on students of poverty but it was also focused on early intervention. What we tend to see is that it ramps up about third grade and the correlation at third grade is you’ve got your first set of End-of-Grade tests and so that’s almost your sort right there. I would front load the requirements for remediation intervention at preschool and kindergarten because I think that’s where you’re going to get your biggest bang for your buck. I think, you know, when you look at all the research on neuroplasticity and more brain development. That’s why it’s easier for children to learn languages at an early age. So, I would focus a lot of my pre-referral or intervention type of stuff at K-2 as opposed to right now we’re doing a lot of our remediation on 3-5 because I think that’s when we’re going to get the biggest bang for your buck. Also, I think services for children with disabilities, I would probably focus more on students being out in the main stream or out in the general education classes as much as possible. Under the law you have to require, you have to consider the full range of the continuum which generally speaking is typically your regular resources over a continuum.”

The ED felt there should be more analysis in the reasoning used for placing students in separate settings: “I think a lot of times, from a standpoint of that a lot of times you see kids being placed in separate classrooms primarily due to behavior or students who are functioning, who have low cognitive functioning. And, so, I would really push for kids to be out in the mainstream more, especially for those subject areas: reading and math.”

He stresses the importance of special education as supplementation to regular education, saying, “I think at elementary level, we’ve had a big focus here, is that children
should be given, kind of the double dose. Special Ed should not replace, it’s like a supplement…. Sometimes you see because it’s easier, sometimes, from the scheduling standpoint to have some of these EC kids pulled out versus having the teacher go into the classroom and do something with them.”

Without sacrificing the desire for every child to work to their fullest potential, the ED presented a belief in the necessity of recognizing that the wants and capabilities of each student is different: “I think when I went to school, we had different tracks. You had vocational track or college tech prep and all the different tracks and I think as we’ve gotten away from that, we’ve seen our students suffer because there are some students who, not that we don’t want them to go to college, but they don’t see the value in it. And that’s not something they want to do, nor do their interest line up in that. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with children who say ‘Well, I want to be an electrician; I want to go to trade school; or, I wanna do air conditioning’ because we need that and there are people that are mechanically inclined to do that. What used to be designed for children who were 4-5 years below grade level focused on reading and self-determination and skills at their cognitive level with a focus on transition to employment, where now it is Algebra I, Biology and the heavy academics that’s not really aligned to where they’re cognitively able to perform along. So, when you focus on that, you take away some of the focus on the opportunities to learn some of these self-determination skills that are important for them to transition to employment. So, I probably would look at that curriculum very heavily. Same thing for our extensions kids, moderate, severe, you know, focusing…on reading and writing and math, social studies and that type of stuff, which I think is great but I think more time developed
towards adaptive skills and independent living functioning because the reality is, that’s what they’re going to need to be successful citizen or productive citizens.”

The ED was asked about methods available for helping to determine the capabilities of those students who might have a different agenda. He responded calling attention first to an online program being used: “We have a system called MECA system where children go and take like little modules on different areas of employment, our focus on transition. You know we really focus very heavily on transition as they turn and leave middle school. We were trying to ask the kids ‘So what is it that you want to do?’ And try to lead them into, in courses that are going to align and that’s a frustration of mine in a sense….I picked up a transition plan the other day for a kid who they want to go to college. They’re in the standard course of study so their transition plan…had nothing to do with going to college. I said their transition plan should have focused on, you know, let’s research colleges, let’s see how you fill out a college application. What are the things when I do get accepted to college, how do I go about going to their special population’s office? Those are the type of things that should be aligned. If I want to leave school and be a chef, then why am I taking fashion merchandising if that’s not anything that I have an intention to do? So, it’s aligning interest and into their exploration at the high school level. And then just more opportunities, I think especially for our lowest function group of kids is giving them more opportunity to be, to have opportunities to learn different skill sets. One of our big focuses and that why we went out to [school] to work with a couple of your moderate teachers on how do we get these kids career based instruction without just having them wipe tables. I said that’s the thing I’ve been pushing. That’s a pet peeve of mine when I go to a high school or a middle school and
all I see is your moderate kids that clean up the cafeteria. I said, you know, I said they need other skills than how to sweep and wipe tables, so let’s really focus on teaching them some skills on sorting and doing some other types of things that may help them as they transition in a secondary life.”

To maintain success for all students while sustaining a high level of opportunity for the at-risk student, he suggested the school community should emphasize differentiation and knowing their customer base. He commented, “Well, if you look at our curriculum, it’s really heavily slanted on the college ready, not the career ready. I’ve been here, not only in this position but as a student here, have seen vocational programs—vocational high school, vocational programs. I think a lot of these at-risk kids, you can help them a lot by having opportunities available that aligned to what they want to do when they leave school….I hear principals tell me all the time,…a lot of kids have no interest in going to college because they know they want to work on a farm. They wanna do this and they’d rather learn those skills than be taking some of the courses they’re required to take. Like your English, your algebra, you know, history, things like that. You want well rounded students but then also providing more options and flexibility. I think within the Special Ed side of it, I think it’s continuing to just have high expectations for those kids. I see a lot of kids who…people kind of give up on quickly or feel like they’re so limited that they cannot be successful in a particular area and sometimes they’ll really surprise you, so you know.”

Are the Research Questions Answered?

In an initial analysis of the findings, it could be said that the research questions were answered. School leaders affirm the feelings they have about the ability to effectively
manage the education of all students, but there is recognition that the entire school community (internal and external) is needed to be successful. Administrative personnel and parents have dissimilar understandings of the legal standards that influence the treatment of disabled and at-risk students. The disparity is explained in terms of the amount and quality of exposure to the law by administrators and parents. Administrators are exposed to legislation repeatedly in their schooling to learn how to function within the boundaries established by it. Parents, generally, are given minimal exposure through the legally required publications distributed to them by special education departments and may not fully understand what questions may need to be asking.

**Themes**

There are a few themes that appeared from the perspectives of each group of participants. From the parents there were:

1. **Student support at home and at school.** Parents expressed understanding the responsibility they had in supporting their student’s educational experience. As P1 indicated the student should not “settle.” P3 discussed the need to protect the student from environmental influences.

2. **Student success.** P1 told her child to, “Do what you want to do but you cannot quit.” All the parents expected their children to succeed and indicated that they had an inner desire to perform better than their parents.

3. **Being positive.** Regardless of the circumstance, each parent had the highest expectations of their child and this carried over to the administrators who also expressed equally high expectations.
From the administrators these themes emerged:

1. All administrators found a need for developing methods to recognize and meet the needs of at-risk students. No administrator depended on one source for determining at-risk status, but each depended more heavily on one element more than another. Those could include committee recommendations, data gathering, or even personal experience.

2. Parent involvement was essential to success with at-risk students. There were the traditional organizations that induced parents to come into the school. There was required parent contacts by teachers and support staff might be used for contact as well as just the maintenance of an open-door policy for easy access.

3. Maintain high expectations of the students from every level. Belief in the students’ abilities and developing a nurturing atmosphere where the student could feel free to grow without the fear of recrimination.

4. General frustration with law makers. There is a sense from each of the administrators that legislation is ineffectively developed and shows a disconnect with the actual environment of the school.

5. Discipline is unfairly employed in legislation. Rightly or wrongly, the perception is presented by the administrators that there is a need to present a more fair and effective application of discipline.

6. Know your students. This theme was the most strongly recognized area of focus for each of the administrators. The key to recognizing the needs of any student, as suggested by Pr1, was for each student to have someone to help them gain a
sense of belief in themselves or something that made it possible to persevere to the successful completion of their education.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

As an exploratory investigation, the current study’s research was based on the reflections of the participants about their experiences as education professionals or recipients of education. To reiterate, the research questions that were answered through this research are meant to offer only the understandings of a particular group of individuals whose one commonality is the success of students in the school district. The results cannot be generalized to all similar adults in the population. The following questions were explored:

1. As legislation continues to evolve influencing how public education is expected to educate disabled and other at-risk children, do school leaders feel they are sufficiently able to effectively manage the education of all students?

2. Do building administrators, central office personnel, and parents of at-risk students have a common understanding of the standards established in law that permits them the necessary capacity to serve the needs of all children?

As the questioning of the participants centered around five areas of exploration, the study’s conclusions are based on five areas: Family and environmental influences, resilience, legislation, strategies evolved from legislation, and leadership approaches to at-risk students.

A baseline understanding of how the at-risk student is defined by parents and educators alike is very closely aligned with the description provided by Kominski et al. (2009). Low achievement, single parent homes, disability and other at-risk characteristics were reflected in their discussion. Students were seen by the administrators to have barriers to their education due to the home experiences they were living. Bempechat stated in 1998
the importance of family and cultural influences in forming the educational basis of a student. Although these experiences could create apparent barriers to their education, the schools were expected to know how best to remove those barriers (Aronson, 2011) and successfully educate these students. Pr2 commented that “trying to remove those barriers is very hard.” There is some argument as to whether removing these barriers is in the purview of schools considering the limitations they experience in funding, time, and their specific obligation to deliver at least a basic education. Pr1 said, “What is mandated from us and what is allotted for us to do those things in terms of financial—it’s a little disheartening.”

This research revealed an understanding by the parents and guardians that schools are not meant to usurp the parental role (P1), yet much of what is asked of the schools would be considered traditionally as a parental responsibility.

One of the key strategies in the recognition of at-risk students is the need to develop relationships with the students and their families. Getting to know them was considered by participants to be the most effective way to recognize at-risk potential that may be hidden from observation. Bempechat (1998) felt a commitment from the family, school, and community was essential to the student success. Administrators use several strategies to involve the families of at-risk students: Parent-teacher conferences, parent-teacher associations, outreach from guidance counselors and social workers, and IEP meetings. As much as possible, attempts at contact are made with a positive face and an attempt to support the parents as they try to counteract the negative influences to which their students are exposed. Pr5 said, “Build that rapport with the parents so that they know you’re an advocate for the child in the first communication home is not going to be a negative one.”
The persistence and resilience of students was felt to be supported by their own inner desires plus the expectations of those around them, much in agreement with previous research by Frankl (1946) and Aronson (2001). Some number of Aronson’s six enabling conditions seemed present in each of our student’s lives, thus producing elements of the six conditions of success she listed. Parents felt that understanding what is expected (P1), the desire for more success than their parents (P2), and being exposed to things positive (P3) were influences for their student’s success. P4 stressed her grandson’s desire “to do it right.” Administrators felt that maintaining high expectations for students was the primary influence, an influence that again is supported the research of Bempechat (1998).

Maintaining high expectations is not a nebulous desire but is an action that is maintained by not lowering standards and by empowering students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning. Pr5 explained the nurturing atmosphere within the school made possible the “empowering of the students also to take ownership of their learning.” The relationships built in support of those expectations and the positive influences shown by the educators added to the opportunities for success. This supports Knesting’s (2008) contention that questions should be asked of students and their answers should be closely listened to.

Early recognition and effective intervention for discrepancies in abilities and environment can help to counter the negative influences students’ experience. The opinion expressed through this study is the heaviest intervention should be done in elementary school. This is because of the early ability of children to learn and adapt to an intervention that is prescriptive for a specific educational deficit. The ED expressed it this way:
I would front load the requirements for remediation intervention at preschool and kindergarten because I think that’s where you’re going to get your biggest bang for your buck. I think, you know, when you look at all the research on neuroplasticity and more brain development. That’s why it’s easier for children to learn languages at an early age. So, I would focus a lot of my pre-referral or intervention type of stuff at K-2 as opposed to right now we’re doing a lot of our remediation on 3-5.…

The opinions of parents and educators of the law and its application are hardly in total agreement but they all share a belief in the value of legislation. There is a common belief in the need for the schools to guard the protections for students guaranteed by legislation, but the thought that parent involvement might be legislated as well seemed to be an unusual concept—especially coming from the parents. For instance, the comment from P1 when asked for suggestions for changing education law was, “Parents need to get more involved. They need to see what their kids are doing and I think, if they get more involved, the kids would be less bad. They won’t be as bad as much. They won’t be disruptive as much.”

Administrators, too, indicated a need for more legislation putting stress on parents to remain involved with their children. Pr2 said, “I don’t think that they [elected officials] really address the root issues and situations. I feel they need to go into the home. I do. Somehow, go in and study and investigate the family dynamics and then start from there and from there come to the school. I feel like a lot of things are put on the school that we can’t handle and can’t address.” Such comments are perhaps significant in that administrators recognize for themselves a lack of attention by some parents to the behaviors and needs of
Turnbull (2005) noted that IDEIA 2004 does increase the required level of parental involvement in the IEP process.

There was a sense from at least one parent/guardian (P4, the grandparent of an exceptional child who had substituted in the high school) that some students did not deserve to be protected by the same laws that protected her grandson: “I think they need to have a separation there. Somebody who needs it, they get it. However, I do think there are some that have it that don’t need it that are just goofing around and could do a whole lot better.” Her experiences substituting in in-school suspension (ISS) brought her to the conclusion that many of the students under IDEIA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004) were less disabled than representing a “breakdown somewhere at home” leading to discipline problems, especially since so many students in ISS had IEPs. Some of this thinking was also reflected in comments made by the administrators. For example, the ED said:

Within our area of serious emotional disabilities, we have a high/large number of students who are identified, who if you look at a lot of research out there as well as just talking with folks out there in the school system, it may not be that the child is disabled but may be a product of an environment that leads to that behavior which is more maladjustment than disability.

This thinking is in spite of the legal stipulations of IDEIA and Section 504 that define what is and is not a disability covered by the law. To accept the ED’s comment would entail a belief that recognition of a disability is more subjective than objective in its determination in that area.
It was universally agreed by the respondents in this study that help for the exceptional and at-risk child is needed. The way the legislation was developed and applied was, however, in question. As Frick et al. (2012) and Hess (2012) lamented, the varied demands of teachers to be both special education and general education teachers are simply “a recipe for mediocrity” (Hess, 2012, para. 7). There was some concern found in the interviews about the lack of experience legislators might have in the schools and, perhaps, a faulty understanding of the populations being served and the educators’ abilities to serve them. It was felt that a commonsense element had been left out of the legislation, opening the door for manipulation of access and behavior. Pr4, expressing his frustration, said:

I’m not really sure the legislature knows what they’re doing when it comes to at-risk children. It seems like some of the ones that are the worst disruption to the school environment have the most protection and the ones that really need the help don’t really get all they need. So, I’ve questioned a lot of times whether anybody in the legislature really knows anything about it—an at-risk or exceptional child or whatever. I question it frequently.

In at least two instances, principals had been asked to participate in the manipulation of the system for the purpose of financial gain by the parents.

The modifications of testing as indicated by a student’s IEP are considered in general to be appropriate, but with a value that is only as effective as the willingness of the student to employ them with fidelity. P3 felt her son got and used the modifications he needed effectively, but Pr2 and Pr3 indicated a sense that many children did not obtain full benefit from them. It is much too frequent an occurrence that the students are not taking advantage
of what is offered, and therefore fail to achieve at the level they could have. Modifications might also be placing too much emphasis on the outcomes at the expense of the inputs. Outcomes may reflect more upon the willingness to forego true mastery of the objectives for the sake of appearance and to avoid conflict. Pr5 echoed Coleman (1972) in reference to inputs versus outcomes, saying “We’re losing sight of the true journey of helping the child get to that point where they can stand on their own two feet and be successful. You know that support that has been in place is designed specially to help that child, not just in the classroom, but in the community, at home and beyond and the next phase. But, what we are so focused on is outcome. Oftentimes the process of getting there is forsaken and that’s not benefitting the child.” A modification that does not pay attention to the inputs the student receives but does emphasize a specific outcome may more easily be manipulated to achieve that outcome.

The effect of legislation on student discipline in the schools is a frequent topic of discussion among administrators. The ten-day rule as applied to discipline of students under IDEIA limits the time allowed for out-of-school suspension to ten days per year. Regardless of the infraction, a student cannot be suspended from school for more than ten days without receiving services/instruction from a certified teacher in their academic courses. This is an area that many administrators feel is manipulated by some students to allow less consequence for their behaviors (Pr4). For instance, an offense that might normally result in a ten day out of school suspension for a regular education student could only result in a five-day suspension for a special education student due to the need to preserve days for possible future offensives. This can bring about a sense of imbalance in how discipline is dispensed. Pr5
commented that her “sense of ethics and fairness” often determined how she would approach the decisions she made toward exceptional children, especially when there are general education children involved as well.

The management of schools is constantly being influenced by legislation. The requirements for “highly qualified” (Wright & Wright, 2010) teachers have necessitated new licensing prerequisites even on teachers who have been teaching for years. Parents become angry with schools for perceived procedural errors in presenting a free appropriate education (Turnbull, 2005) to their student resulting in legal action. The relationship between the schools and community is too often fractured with a loss of trust, and much capital is spent trying to renew and maintain that trust. Glickman et al. (2004) suggested that community is “a moral principle if we understand the term as a group committed to the overall well-being, growth, and development of each member. An authentic community will develop values, norms, relationships, and practices consistent with this common purpose” (p.474). The ED suggested looking “at the kind of dispute resolution process, really, really trying to remove some of the litigiousness out of the system…..I think that sometimes that stifles communications at the team level, you know, when parents are threatening to sue and the schools know that they can be sued. Sometimes it stifles communication and it puts the school on a defensive posture and then it kind of goes downhill from there.”

Strategies developed because of the requirements of IDEIA have been implemented within the district. Each administrator indicated some research-based strategy they particularly favored, but the single most important aspect required for the success of each is the fidelity shown in the implementation. Following all of the requirements of the particular
strategy is the most important part of any protocol and is also the most difficult part to maintain. Aron and Loprest (2012) pointed out the need for measuring the “effectiveness of special education practices or programs” (p. 111). One unique perspective expressed by Pr5 about the implementation of these programs was the idea of a “common language and sharing the same beliefs” with other educators as a means of establishing consistency in expectations and modelling of behaviors in the classroom.

Before any intervention can be implemented, there must be a determination of why the intervention is needed. There are multiple assessments available for determining a specific area of need. Once the area of need has been assessed, an intervention that is meant to bring growth in the individual is applied. The measurement of that growth is based on a correct and consistent application of the intervention protocols and the recording of multiple performance data points (McDougal et al., 2010). Unfortunately, the process requires time and, as reported in the administrator’s remark, finding the time to follow the protocols becomes difficult.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is meant to remedy a specific need in a student. RTI is a multi-tiered strategy that makes an increasingly intensive effort to correct a recognized deficiency in a student’s performance before it is shown necessary to consider the child in need of special education services (McDougal et al., 2010). It is prescriptive for the specific deficit with a prescription developed along the lines of the report of special educators in 2006.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Support is a school-wide effort aimed at resolving discipline issues within a school based on data accrued. Students learn
characteristics to make them successful in all of their life’s endeavors. The most important requirement of the program is the buy-in by all of the staff so that implementation of the program will have the greatest chance to be done with fidelity (Carr et al., 2002). Fidelity is the keyword in the implementation of every possible program. Every one of the programs discussed in this research has a specific protocol that must be followed. Failure to follow the protocol makes it virtually impossible to assure success with the program (Carr et al., 2002; McDougal et al., 2010).

The one strategy that seemed to be a constant with all educators in this study was the importance of building relationships. The teachers in the study by Calabrese et al. (2007) considered relationship-building as integral to the success they had with their at-risk students. Relationships are built through open channels of communication between all stakeholders and consistency in practices. By getting to know the students and gaining their trust, an educator has the opportunity to recognize situational difficulties that arise much more quickly. Relationship-building is reflected as the single most important strategy in every administrator’s toolbox. Glickman et al. (2004) presented a list of moral principles that, when used as described, are meant to help in the development of those relationships. These moral principles are developed on: Compassion, Wholeness, Connectedness, Inclusion, Justice, Peace, Freedom, Trust, Empowerment, Community, and Priorities. Considering the importance principals place on relationship-building, there is a certain wonder as to why more attention is not paid to this area by academics.

The variety of opinions relating to what is important in education is fully demonstrated when educators are given the chance to ask for what they would most like to
have the capability to change. One asks for time and funding (Pr1), another focuses on inputs (Pr5). Someone else wants a focus on early interventions (ED). The gist is, no matter how you may ask, is that each desire of the administrator is a reasonable hope and would certainly help students succeed but would require the cooperation of a public whose leaders are guided by political influences with little desire to jeopardize their own political careers. To achieve the kinds of changes they want, educators will have to express themselves as the expert activists they can be. Several comments were made in the interviews suggesting the need for more political understanding and the need for greater political involvement by educators. Pr1 expressed the current desire that “educators contact our legislators or influence policy” more. She expressed educators did not “do enough advocating for what is in the best interest of the children.” She did, however, “think we’re moving towards that. But, traditionally, we have been a career related people that have just taken whatever has been issued to us but we’re having more of a voice now.”

At this point, the discussion focuses on how closely this research came to answering the research questions. Do school leaders feel they are sufficiently able to manage the education of all students? The research seems to indicate perhaps they can, but not in a vacuum. Reiterating what the research of Frick et al. (2012) found, there is a difference between what is in the best interest of a single student and what is in the best interest of the student body as a whole. The individualized needs of each student places stress on the school building principal to organize the school in such a way as to provide an environment of success for every student. There is certainly an expressed need for more funding for personnel to implement the programs for at-risk students, and only the most qualified should
be employed. The community must be involved and asking what they might do to help these needy students. Education’s leaders need to consider what the needs of the students themselves are, recognizing not all students have the desire or ability to attend a four year university, and, therefore, need an alternative educational choice.

As far as the understanding of the legal standards built around at-risk students are concerned, there is a difference between what the educators know and understand and what the parents know and understand. Although legislation requires parents be notified of the rights of their children under the law, the parents still question the protections that are guaranteed and can have expectations that may not be available in the law. P2 made comments about the need for information from the schools stating, “I would definitely like for the public school system to offer a lot more education to the parents and let them know what’s available.” Only one parent indicated they did any independent research on their child’s disability. P4 stated, “I have in there a whole top shelf of books on nothing but Asperger’s, Autism, Attention-Deficit.” Even though the general education experience of the students represented in this study was a good one per the parents, there was a feeling that the private school experience of two of the students was more structured than what was shown them in public school. The parents themselves recognized the need for parents to be more familiar with what was available to them and their children.

The educators were much more aware of the standards, but they also knew how difficult it could be to meet the criteria required of the law. The difficulty in meeting the criteria and the frequent misunderstandings by parents of what the protections are have led to a marked increase in litigiousness by the public. The ED expressed it this way:
I don’t think litigation was really an intended consequence when the federal government was putting together these policies and procedures but when you start doing that in the 70’s and you know from 1973, when they first started having these discussions, now we live in a very litigious society. I think that as society has changed that some of the things that are in place have resulted in some unintended consequences like that.

More than anything, there is a sincere desire by administrators for the students to be successful and there was a distinct feeling they would always do what is necessary to that end.

One aspect of how legal standards are perceived by educators is their desire to see more understanding by the lawmakers of the mechanics of education as opposed to the theoretical aspects. As practicing educators who deal with the positive and negative elements of education, they see in depth how the laws, regardless of their intention, truly affect the lives of all the students in the school. There appears to be a feeling that the separation between the politicians and the culture of the school leads to a superficial understanding of the work of a school without ever getting to the heart and soul of what the school is all about. Making popular decisions to maintain power does little to further the well-being of the students they represent.

The four requirements for instructional leadership developed by Bays and Crockett (2007) were reflected in the comments of numerous administrators. There is an expressed vision of high expectations and relationship-building. They believe in collaboratively and professionally developing faculty and staff. They believe in supporting their staff in the
endeavors of the school. They expect quality in their staff and are engaged in strategies to improve the performance of their students. In sum, regardless of the hand that is dealt them, leaders of education persevere to overcome the roadblocks to successfully educate children.

**Areas for Future Research**

This study offers some interesting areas for future research. One question that arises centers on the parental responsibilities of educators towards their students. It is commonly understood the depth of changes that have occurred in society. Khalifa (2010) discussed the condition of hyperghettoization as it affected students in poor neighborhoods. Karriker-Jaffe et al. (2013) described how aggression in both boys and girls is being affected by social pressures. Snyder and Dillow (2012) noted the large percentage of students living in non-traditional families. The parents from this study recognize a difference in the way families relate to their children. What are the expectations of parents for the schools their children attend? Are our schools equipped to handle the expectations? How much responsibility should schools shoulder for the moral education of students? Does any government entity have the authority to conduct a moral indoctrination of someone’s child?

How pervasive is the belief that the *ten day rule* creates an unfair imbalance in discipline for exceptional children in contrast with the treatment of the discipline of general education students? Does the restriction to ten days create the intended positive result? Is there a correlation in the success of disabled students and their treatment through the discipline restrictions? Also, is the rule being applied correctly? There was a suggestion in this study that it is not being used as it was originally and expressly defined. The belief is that the rule was first meant to protect students who were unable to understand the right and
wrong of their actions. Over time, however, it became generally applied to every child supposed to have a disability.

What is “social maladjustment” and how is it currently being applied in the criteria for special education services? If students are being misdiagnosed, who is responsible and why has there not been more research on the topic? Social maladjustment appears to more likely be the result of an environmental condition or condition of choice and not a result of true disability and, therefore, would not be acceptable for coverage under IDEIA. If that were the case, what would be the effect on students who had already been misdiagnosed?

How effective is the current curriculum at meeting the capabilities and the needs of exceptional children for their future? The ED questioned whether our current curriculum with its emphasis on academics at the expense of career orientation is beneficial to many of our exceptional children, and, in reality, any child who has not the desire to obtain a four-year degree. Are we assuming a life based on a four-year college education is better than a successful life based on a more limited education? We in education need to consider our motives for choosing what we teach.

Everyone has a memory of their own education, but with the recent changes in education that have taken place, school is much different than the school most of us remember. Students have been exposed to a different world either from the experiences in their neighborhoods or the social and broadcast media that is everywhere. Teachers have to be as adept in technology as they are the curriculum they teach. Administrators have to relate to a public that often has a sense of entitlement they may or may not be qualified to enjoy. It is, therefore, going to be increasingly important that research be undertaken to
determine the efficacy of the legislation being produced and accurate data developed to assist in the development of beneficial legislation that will truly support an effective education system that considers all stakeholders. Of equal importance is the need for research on the efficacy of legislators themselves at all levels of government as they legislate behaviors in schools. Do they have accurate and appropriate data and advice to guide them in making decisions of such profound importance to so many? Is the research on which they make their decisions well-grounded and correctly interpreted?

**Implications for Practice**

The first and what seems the most important finding in this research is the universal need to develop relationships between the students, parents, and schools. The areas of communication need to be refined to encompass all stakeholders in a full, open and continuous dialogue. Each parent stressed the importance of their being available to the school as an integral part of the success of their child. Each administrator at some point brought out the need for developing the trust of the students, parents, and faculty through communication and collaboration as a central element to the success of the school as a whole.

Areas that might need to be examined in future research include the following: (1) the accuracy of phone numbers and addresses for students, (2) contacts to the home with positive information about the students, (3) welcoming the community into the school, (4) getting to know the students as individuals, (5) ensuring the faculty is qualified and student oriented, (6) using the support staff as community liaisons, and (7) as the school leader, leading by example, be in the community. To develop a list of strategies for a school, there should be a collaborative input of information and ideas from students, parents, faculty, and
administration that would fit the needs of the specific school within the parameters of the envisioned culture. As can be seen, a fully developed list could be very lengthy, but, because of the collaborative nature of its development, cooperation should be fairly easy to obtain.

The requirements of IDEIA 2004 for the use of research-based strategies to help correct deficiencies in student performance has led to the creation of several popular programs to meet that need. The key element required for each program is the need for performing the protocols with fidelity from beginning to end for each of them. This research has indicated that the time constraints on the implementers of the programs often lead to a less than stringent attention to the detail of the protocols, thereby resulting in a less than expected level of attainment by the student. As a result, it is paramount that the conventions for instruction, data keeping, and general implementation of the programs be followed with absolute fidelity so the student can indeed receive the full benefit as intended. Impatience is not an option where student achievement is concerned, and school leaders must assure that implementers are following the correct procedures.

Education administrators face a dilemma that is often found in public service occupations. Their careers are predicated not only on their job performance, but also on the goodwill of the elected officials who oversee the operation of the business of education. This political element of the job often makes it difficult for an administrator to make critical comments that might be construed as contrary to the elected officials to whom he or she answers. Yet administrators with their faculties are the individuals who have the most practical knowledge and experience concerning the culture and activity of schooling.
In this research, it was determined there is a need for more input of practicing educators into the policy decisions of elected and appointed officials affecting education. The perception is that there is an insularity that exists between the policymakers and the policy implementers in education. Administrators must do all they can to encourage political activism among their staff to assure that elected officials fully understand the implications of their actions. Administrators must feel free to speak their opinion about what they see as deficiencies in the system through print, if not in speech. Administrators have a duty toward the improvement of education by understanding the political influences being brought to bear and using their knowledge to help alleviate misconceptions and fallacies perpetrated through myths about education. It is possible to do this without becoming personal. Policies and policy proposals should be the target of the administrative expertise.

Federal legislation for exceptional and at-risk children continues to grow. The parameters change and the administrator has to know how the changes will affect their schools. School leaders must be aware of the activities occurring in the exceptional children departments in their school and assure they are performing within the guidelines of current federal regulations. Attention has to be paid to the relationships developed with the parents of these children. Much of the difficulty that arises from the implementation of federal legislation stems from poor communication between the parents and the school and a failure by teachers to fully follow the IEP (Individual Education Plan) of a student. In conjunction with the IEP, there is frequently a BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan) in place to address certain behaviors that may occur. Regardless of who has immediate responsibility for these plans, the administrator in charge of the school is the individual who represents the local
education agency when any question of fidelity arises. It is therefore commiserate on the administrator to show due diligence in his or her efforts in assuring appropriate application of the guiding documents for each student’s plans.

Summary

The term “at-risk” as it relates to students in our education system has many elements, only a small number of which revolve around the fact of disability. Most legislation, as has been shown by the literature, has as its main concern the disabled student, yet, many more students qualify as at-risk based on established criteria for at-riskness. These students show many of the same learning difficulties and behaviors as disabled students, but because they do not have an identifiable disability, there is no procedure for helping them individualize a plan for their future education or career. From this research, it can be seen that the need for discussion on this subject as a means to repairing the misunderstanding about the pervasiveness of at-riskness is pervasive.

As in all things involving the education of children, relationships are central to the success of the child. This is probably more significant when it involves an at-risk student. The relationship of the child to the parent in their most formative years has a strong influence on what that child will have learned and been exposed to prior to beginning his or her formal education. Once the child begins school, the relationship and cooperation between the school and the parent at the elementary level will have a great bearing on how well the child adapts and whether the child will learn to their ability and trust the adults in the school. As the child matures, there will be a greater need for positive role models in the home and the school to show the student the appropriate way to become an adult. The relationships built between
the student, parents, and school will determine much of how the student develops educationally and emotionally. The school must be a place that feels nurturing to the student and a place he or she wants to be. The leader of the school will either succeed or fail with his or her at-risk students dependent on those relationships.
REFERENCES


U. S. Const. amend. XIV, §1


Principal

“I wish to thank you for taking the time to join me today in my research on the topic of school leadership experiences with the at-risk student. Unless you consent to an extension of time, I hope this interview will take no longer than 90 minutes. Information from this interview will be used to inform a dissertation within a graduate program at North Carolina State University. This is the only purpose of the interview and your identity will be maintained in confidence. No mention of your name will be in the report or in conversation with others. You have the right to withdraw from this research at any time, without penalty, and you are encouraged to ask questions and offer any pertinent information you deem beneficial to the research. The interview session will be recorded so that your responses will be accurately reported. You will receive a transcript of this interview once it has been transcribed. Do you have any questions before we start? Let us begin.

1. Would you please give me some background information about yourself?
2. How do you recognize at-risk students? What strategies are used to involve the families of at-risk and exceptional students in the school community?
3. With much interference encroaching on the success of at-risk students, how do school, as a school leader, negate those issues and develop resilience in those students?
4. Since Federal legislation strongly influences the behavior of schools towards exceptional children, do you have a sense that the legislation produces the desired effect? How would you describe the effect on the students? In what ways do you
perceive the legislation helpful? In what ways harmful? How effective are modifications of testing for special needs students? How do you think current legislation affects discipline in schools? How would you change the legislation?

5. Since RTI and PBIS have evolved from the current IDEIA, do you feel these programs or other such programs are truly effective? In what ways are they or are they not effective?

6. As a school leader, what core strategies do you feel are most effective with at-risk and disability labeled students?

7. As an experienced school leader and if provided carte blanche to make decisions, what would you like to see changed in the current approach to at-risk and disability labeled students and why?

8. How can the school community best provide for the at-risk child, still maintain high level educational opportunity for those not at-risk, and assure the ultimate success for all?

This concludes the questioning that I have at this time. Do any of you have any further questions or comments you might like to offer? I wish to sincerely thank you for the time you have spent with me today and the data you have provided for this research. Please feel free to contact me at (910) 322-5939 if you have any questions about the research.”

Executive Director of Children’s Services

“I wish to thank you for taking the time to join me today in my research on the topic of school leadership experiences with the at-risk student. Unless you consent to an extension of time, I hope this interview will take no longer than 90 minutes. Information from this
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6. As an administrator, what core strategies do you feel are most effective with at-risk and disability labeled students?

7. As an experienced administrator and if provided carte blanche to make decisions, what would you like to see changed in the current approach to at-risk and disability labeled students and why?

8. How can the school community best provide for the at-risk child, still maintain high level educational opportunity for those not at-risk, and assure the ultimate success for all?

This concludes the questioning that I have at this time. Do you have any further questions or comments you might like to offer? I wish to sincerely thank you for the time you have spent with me today and the data you have provided for this research. Please feel free to contact me at (910) 322-5939 if you have any questions about the research.”

Parent of Student

“I wish to thank you for taking the time to join me today in my research on the topic of school leadership experiences with the at-risk student. Unless you consent to an extension of time, I hope this interview will take no longer than 90 minutes. Information from this interview will be used to inform a dissertation within a graduate program at North Carolina State University. This is the only purpose of the interview and your identity will be maintained in confidence. No mention of your name nor your child’s name will be in the report or in conversation with others. You have the right to withdraw from this research at any time, without penalty, and you are encouraged to ask questions and offer any pertinent information you deem beneficial to the research. The interview session will be recorded so
that your responses will be accurately reported. You will receive a transcript of this
interview once it has been transcribed. Do you have any questions before we start? Let us
begin.

1. Please tell me the story of your child and how he/she became considered in
need of special help in his/her education?

2. What do you think being at-risk means in education?

3. What do you feel gave your student the persistence to complete their
education?

4. Tell me of any occurrence in your student’s school experience where it was
felt there might have been a misperception of your understanding of the
school’s responsibilities for educating your child and what the school
understood?

5. What would you change about the current laws to benefit children like your
own?

6. How would you respond to someone who feels some legislation might be
having a negative effect on their general education student?

7. Please summarize for me your experience with the school system throughout
your child’s education career.

This concludes the questioning that I have at this time. Do you have any further questions or
comments you might like to offer? I wish to sincerely thank you for the time you have spent
with me today and the data you have provided for this research. Please feel free to contact
me at (910) 322-5939 if you have any questions about the research.”
Title of Study: An Exploratory Inquiry of the Education of At-Risk and Special Education Students as Described by School Administrators, Central Office Personnel, and Parents

Principal Investigator: David E. Guy, Jr.  Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kevin P. Brady

What are some general things you should know about the research study?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form, you will find details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to better understand school leaders’ daily experiences with at-risk students.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed by the researcher. You will asked questions about your experiences with at-risk students. The focus-group interview will last approximately 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded. The audio-recordings will be reviewed by the researchers following the interview.

Risks
There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. You are free to share your questions or concerns during the interview or to speak with the interviewer following the discussion. During the study, you have the right to withdraw from the research project at any time without penalty and to ask questions throughout the process. You also have the right to be informed of any new finding(s) that may affect your willingness to continue in this study.
Benefits
The information gathered in this study may be helpful to school principals as they try to improve the level of services to at-risk students.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a password-protected computer. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which would link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

Compensation
There is no compensation for participating in this research study.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, David E. Guy

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919) 515-4514, debra_paxton@ncsu.edu.

Consent to Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject’s signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________
Investigator’s signature: ______________________ Date: ____________