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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EXAMINE PRACTICES, OBSTACLES,  
AND ACTION PLANS FOR DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL REFORM

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Ann M. Allen  
Norman, Oklahoma 2002

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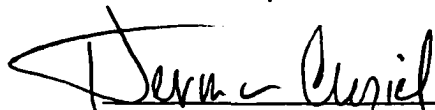
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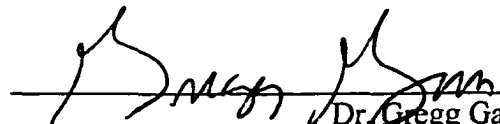
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AND ACTION PLANS FOR DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL REFORM


A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE  
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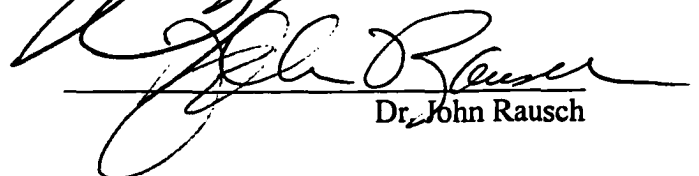
BY

  
Dr. Mary John O'Hair, Chair

  
Dr. Herman Curiel

  
Dr. Gregg Garn

  
Dr. Jeffrey Maiden

  
Dr. John Rausch

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving mother, Nancy, who was my coach, my mentor, my model, and most of all, my fan. She always believed in me and in turn made me believe in myself. To my father who always made me conscience that he was the son of a freed slave which made the pursuit for excellence in education necessary. Daddy your belief in me has pushed me to complete this great work. Thank you for your love. To my children, the struggle of completing this dissertation is to give you living proof that hard work pays off.

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## Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of at-risk high school students to the application of the nine practices of the high achieving schools (O'Hair, 1999). The research method was qualitative naturalistic. Data sources included individual and focus group interviews, observations, documents, and the responses from a Rubric. Six students were observed and interviewed.

Results indicated that once these students practiced the use of the I.D.E.A.L.S., a change in their approach to learning took place. Reoccurring themes in their perceptions focus on action plans they developed to overcome obstacles. Findings can add to the body of knowledge related to school reform efforts that prompt educators to reach out and expand school boundaries to include students who are at risk of academic failure.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction, Purpose, and Rationale

"Education, and its schooling, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men - - the balance wheel of the social machinery . . . It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor. That political economy, therefore, which busies itself about capital and labor, supply and demands, interests and rents, favorable and unfavorable balances of trade but leaves out of account the elements of a widespread mental development, is naught but stupendous folly." Horace Mann (1848).

Developing democratic school communities can be useful in the practice of educating students who are considered at-risk of school failure because it provides a framework whereby all children can learn and grow. The term democratic schooling refers to a process that is constantly striving to support a system that respects all members of its community. In a democratic school community, students are empowered to participate, behave like responsible human beings, attain subject mastery and acquire knowledge constructed out of the interaction of ideas and personal experiences of teachers and other students. Comparatively, a democratic school is contextually different from a traditional or conventional school in that students in traditional schools often feel powerless, are treated like mindless sheep, receive one shot at learning and are forced to learn in an environment whereby the knowledge resides in the teachers and is presented to students (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Newmann, 1996; O'Hair, McLaughlin, Reitzug; 2000)

Democratic school communities have at their core the democratic ideals of inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, shared leadership, and service (referenced throughout this study by the acronym I.D.E.A.L.S.) which assist educators in bringing

about high achieving educational goals and outcomes (O'Hair, et al, 2000). The I.D.E.A.L.S. framework includes both the school culture and a learning process that promotes educational access and equal opportunity for all, especially those students that demonstrate at-risk characteristics. This population of students represents a failure of traditional schools to address their academic fragilities.

In the subsequent sections, the background and current problem is provided. Also, the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework are followed by the research questions that guide the study, significance, definitions, assumptions, and limitations under which the study was undertaken.

### Background of the Problem

Many disadvantages result from the bureaucratic way of organizing schools. A top down, autocratic structure is harmful for students especially students at-risk of academic failure. Research confirms that "in most bureaucratically organized schools, students feel alienated from teachers, who appear to have little time for students unless they are unusually 'bright' or 'problematic'." Teachers feel at odds with administrators, who appear to have little time for them unless their concerns pertain to contractual matters, mandates, or paperwork. Everyone feels victimized by 'the system,' which demands priority to reports and procedures when teachers, students, and administrators would prefer devote their time to each other and to learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 16). Structure, which often consist of written rules and procedures, frequently become obstacles that add to students at-risk experiencing a feeling of failure in traditional schools. In a traditional setting, students at-risk are challenged to perform in a structure that limits their potential.

Democratic schooling reinforces a commitment on the part of educational researchers and practitioners to support equal educational opportunities for all students including those who are considered at risk. For the purpose of this study, Steven's (1991) criteria defines the student at-risk as one who (1) has been retained one or more times in grades 1 through 6; (2) is performing two or more years below grade level in reading and math; (3) is limited in English proficiency; and (4) scores below grade level on one or more sections of a standardized test.

In spite of supportive research findings on democratic learning communities (Apple & Beane, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 1994; Glickman, 1993, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1994; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; O'Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000; and Wood, 1998) educators of students at-risk are not convinced that the democratic education model will increase the academic performance for students at-risk. This skepticism stems in part from a lack of understanding of the I.D.E.A.L.S. practice model and how schools working with at-risk student populations can apply the I.D.E.A.L.S. to improve the school environment to enhance teaching and learning.

While democratic schooling seeks to empower students, help them to become participants in their own learning, act responsibly, attain mastery, and construct knowledge through their interaction of ideas and experiences with faculty and peers, often their teachers and administrators have not developed these needed skills and practices themselves and thus find it difficult to model or facilitate these characteristics in their students. Perhaps the single biggest obstacle to maintaining progressive, democratic reforms in schools is the extensive skill needed to teach both subjects and students well (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.12).

Some educators suggest that the designation of a high achieving school is misleading because it infers a well defined set of practices that tend to make a school successful even though it is impossible for any school to maintain a consistent state of high achievement. The truth is . . ."schools are never in a constant state of high achieving but rather always in a process of becoming more academically high achieving and more democratic" (O'Hair, 2000), and at-risk student characteristics can be mitigated by knowledgeable academic practice and informed understanding (Kershner, 1991).

### Current Problem

Research suggests that America's schools are failing to educate an alarming number of youth. In large urban districts, for example, more than half of the students drop out before completing high school (Smey-Richman, 1991). Some finish their schooling, but many of these students fail to acquire the minimum levels of competence in basic academic skills that most jobs require. Even with access to equal opportunities, many of our youth are not measuring up to societal norms or standards for educational success (Apple, 1982; Mulkey, 1993).

Educators and policymakers are constantly faced with the challenge and responsibility for addressing educational as well as societal deficits in the classroom. In addition, educators who aspire to expand the democratic I.D.E.A.L.S. are charged with the task of moving the exceptional aspects of democratic schools into the mainstream of practice and, at the same time, move anti-democratic and ordinary schools into the margins (Glickman, 1993; Goodlad, 1992).

Unfortunately, what we are finding in this fragmented academic society, is that students are failing to acquire a coherent view of knowledge and a more integrated and



authentic view of life (Boyer, 1993). In Oklahoma, "termed pressure" is placed on schools, teachers, and students to meet the state requirement on measures of standardized tests. In an effort to address the issue of fragmented learning of the at-risk student, educational practitioners must strive to connect the acquisition of knowledge in the classroom with the real world contexts of this population. Therefore, a critical challenge in the development of academic competency is making the connection between classroom and life experiences in an effort to raise academic achievement performance.

Whether school failure is the direct result of a failing fabric of society or a failing education system, schools have been charged with rectifying the problem. The role of an innovative educator is to find ways to incorporate the exceptional aspects of the democratic perspective that sometimes find themselves in public schools into the mainstream of practice and, at the same time, put the anti-democratic and ordinary schools into the backdrop (Glickman, 1993). Such efforts should be consistent with the fundamental principles of American democracy that embraces all students. Successful education improvement is most often a result of simultaneous bottom-up and top-down initiatives that converge into a clear, moral center (Fullan & Stiegobauer, 1991; Fullan, 1993). That moral center is the motivating force that supports the necessity for the democratic education for all students especially those that present at-risk indicators. Therefore, an emphasis on authentic performance is viewed as a way whereby acquisition of knowledge can be transferred into practice in real world contexts making authentic performance critical to the development of competency.

Authentic performance suggests that meaningful scholarship in real-world contexts need to become both the driving force of the curriculum and the focus of

assessments. A focus on authentic achievement would provide a better fit between the world of the learner and the content found in the curriculum in many schools.

### Conceptual Framework

The challenge of creating programs that effectively reduce the number of at-risk students, continue to perplex advocates of the educational community. Although a plethora of alternative educational programs exist, only a few systemic programs are designed to meet the needs of the educationally at-risk student. Empirical evidence and moral arguments indicate that student outcomes in schools that function as democratic school communities are substantially higher than those in traditional schools( O'Hair, et al., 2000). After studying over 1,500 schools, researchers found that not only were students' achievements in the first two years significantly higher in professional learning communities (as described above) but those gains also were distributed more equitably. That is, the achievement gap between students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and students of higher (SES) was narrower in professional learning communities (Lee & Smith, 1994). Although research supports the efficacy of these schools (Lewis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann, 1996) such schools remain the exception rather than the rule. According to the research literature, democratic school communities have the following practices in common. Each of the practices has been linked directly to enhanced student learning (O'Hair, 1999).

#### Practice 1: Developing a shared vision and core learning principles

This practice involves developing a shared set of goals, commitments, and practices enacted throughout the school. It is referred to as a school's core learning principles that help guide decision-making (i.e., "How does that decision fit with what we

believe in?”) (Allen, Rogers, Hensley, Glanton, & Livingston, 1999; Glickman, 1993; 1998).

#### Practice 2: Developing authentic teaching, learning, and assessment

Students learn best when they 1) are required to personally construct knowledge about the topics being addressed; 2) engage in disciplined inquiry to gather more information and data about the topic, and 3) work on tasks that have some value beyond the classroom lesson and assignment (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Newmann, 1996).

#### Practice 3: Developing Shared Decision-Making

Shared decision-making structures are designed to involve students in making critical decisions that impact their learning. Decision-making structures emphasize the importance of hearing all voices in the school community and emphasizing decision-making based on critical study and data (Darling-Hammond, 1997; O’Hair, McLaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000).

#### Practice 4: Helping Students Collaborate and Learn Together

Students form study groups to examine their learning. They work to make connections between their life experiences and the curriculum. They learn to examine each other’s work in an effort to guide one another.

#### Practice 5: Developing reflective practice and critical study

Reflective practice is critically studying one’s teaching practice by considering relevant perspectives, data, and knowledge. It involves asking questions such as:

- On what basis are we doing what we are doing? What evidence or support do we have to justify our practice? How do we know whether what we are doing is effective?

- What information, data, knowledge, and perspectives can we gather to assist us in studying our practice?
- How does what we are doing fit with our values and beliefs as students in this school?
- How does what we are doing serve the needs of the diverse individuals and groups who make up our community? Whose interest do our practices serve? Whose interests do they not serve? (Glickman, 1993; O'Hair, et al., 2000).

#### **Practice 6: Developing Supportive Principal Leadership**

Supportive principal leadership requires regular public and private communication indicating support for democratic efforts, personally participating in such efforts and providing time for discussing the schools' movement toward democratic schooling (O'Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000; Reitzug, 1994).

#### **Practice 7: Developing Caring and Collective Responsibility for Students**

In schools where collective responsibility for students exists, students feel cared about and important (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

#### **Practice 8: Enhancing the Connection to Home and Community**

Schools are concerned with issues of equity and justice not only within the school, but also in the local and global communities (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Epstein, 1995). A democratic school must connect itself with families and communities in the effort to address the needs of students. The school must be responsive to the needs of parents and communities. In a democratic community, the school must also involve itself with the family and the community.

### Practice 9: Acting on Equity Concerns

Schools are concerned with issues of equity and justice in the school and the local and global community. Equity issues may include: disparity between races in achievement in schools, providing less affluent students with equitable access to technology, asking what instructional practices legitimize the background and culture of some students at the expense of others, determining whether grouping affects different groups of students, determining whether classroom and school discipline policies and practices affect students from non-dominant cultural groups, and determining where shared decision making procedures ensure that the voices of all teachers, parents, and students are heard (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1996).

While we understand the practices above are linked to improved student achievement, research is lacking which provides student perceptions regarding these practices, in particular, at-risk student perceptions. With a better understanding of student perceptions, researchers and practitioners could help accelerate the movement from traditional schools to democratic school communities

### Purpose of the Study

This study describes the perceptions of six students identified as at risk learners, at an urban alternative school who gave regards to usefulness of the application of the I.D.E.A.L.S. of “democratic schooling” in an effort to help at-risk learners improve their academic performance. This purpose will be achieved by examining the responses to the Rubric of High Achieving Schools (O’Hair, 1999) which connects I.D.E.A.L.S. to specific school practice, and by personal interviews with and observations of students at-risk.

### Context of the Study

Like most urban school districts across the nation, schools within the major urban public school district in Oklahoma are faced with the challenges produced by a rapidly changing community. To that end, a secondary alternative school is the designated school for eight comprehensive high schools that serves as an alternative to long term suspension for students who are rule violators or present other at-risk indicators. The curriculum includes (1) a comprehensive academic program with curricular numerous extracurricular opportunities for students with varied learning styles, and (2) necessary auxiliary services to compliment unique personal and social needs. The selected alternative school has a 25-year history of serving at-risk students. The school offers individualized instruction with flexible scheduling designed to meet the unique individual needs of students. Educational programs available for these students range from special education to advanced placement courses with added enrichment programs that encompass community resources. This urban school district offers several programs for at-risk adolescent students. Students selected for this case study were enrolled in the "Metro Program," a program designed for students presenting socially unacceptable behavior.

These students were identified as at-risk of school failure because they present a history of anti-social behavior or lack academic success in their traditional schools. According to Stevens (1991) a student must exhibit at least two of the criteria to be considered a qualifier for an at risk program. The program was designed to provide a comprehensive curriculum aligned with their referring high school. This program schedules students in classes and provides a semester credit involving 65 seat hour

minimum as regulated by the Oklahoma Department of Education. Teachers address subject matter on an individualized basis which allows students to develop academically at their own rate. The program also includes the needed support of social workers, volunteers, mentors and close follow-up procedures for the successful re-entry of students into their "home"/traditional schools or other companion alternative programs.

### Research Questions

The research questions are designed around the Rubric for High Achieving Schools (O'Hair, 1999) which consists of democratic school practices linked to student achievement. Major themes are provided with research questions that focus on perceptions of students at-risk to the practices, obstacles, and actions plans for each identified democratic practice.

### Shared School Vision/Purpose for Student Learning

- 1a: How do students at-risk perceive the process of developing a shared vision/purpose for student learning?
- 1b: How do students at-risk perceive obstacles encountered when developing a shared vision/purpose for student learning?
- 1c: What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles in developing a shared purpose for student learning?

### Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

- 2a: How do students at-risk perceive authentic teaching, learning and assessment?
- 2b: How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to authentic teaching, learning and assessment?

- 2c: What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to authentic teaching, learning and assessment?

### Shared Decision-Making

- 3a: How do students at-risk perceive shared decision making?
- 3b: How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to shared decision making?
- 3c: What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to shared decision making?

### Critical Study Process

- 4a. How do students at-risk perceive the critical study process, often referred to as action research and reflective practice?
- 4b. How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to the critical study process?
- 4c. What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to critical study?

### Supportive Leadership

- 5a. How do students at-risk perceive supportive leadership from the principal,
- 5b. How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents?
- 5c. What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents?

### Climate of Caring and Collective Responsibility

- 6a. How do students at-risk perceive a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school?



- 6b. How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school?
- 6c. What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school.

#### School, Home, and Community Connections

- 7a. How do students at-risk perceive a close connection among the school, home and community?
- 7b. How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to a close connection among the school, home and community?
- 7c. What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to developing a close connection among the school, home and community?

#### Collaborative Learning

- 8a. How do students at-risk perceive the way they collaborate and learn together?
- 8b. How do students at-risk perceive obstacles that stand in the way of collaborating and learning together?
- 8c. What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to collaborating and learning together?

#### Equity

- 9a. How do students at-risk perceive equity issues?
- 9b. How do students at-risk perceive obstacles to acting on equity issues?

9c. What strategies and techniques do students at-risk perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to equity issues?

It is hoped that responses to the research questions will provide educators with guides to teaching methods and strategies designed to increase success of students at-risk. Further, this research may suggest support for the practices of a democratic learning community, its existence and persistence.

Thus, by examining the way students learn to apply the daily practices of the I.D.E.A.L.S., of democratic schooling findings will demonstrate how these students learn to foster a democratic school community and use the concepts that improve their academic performance. This study will examine student responses in an attempt to increase knowledge about how to stimulate the academic performance of students that present at-risk characteristics.

#### Statement of the Problem

Although though alternative programs exist to meet the perceived need of students at-risk, the district experienced frustration similar to educators across the nation in finding a model that would mold an alternative learner into one who might resemble other students from high achieving schools. The district chose the initiative designed to allow administrators and teachers to develop "pockets of programs" that addressed the at-risk behaviors of its constituents.

#### Significance of the Study

The study is unique in studying at-risk students' perceptions of the democratic practices of high achieving schools, obstacles they encounter, and practices to overcome the obstacles. Very little research exist which uses at-risk students' perspectives on

examining their learning environment, especially in a school striving to become democratic. The findings from this investigation may provide guidance to theory building and practice involving organizational climate, community building, and academic performance for students at-risk.

Findings from this study may inform other educators, who work with non at-risk students. As societal problems creating at-risk conditions continue to excel rapidly, all educators are quickly assuming the responsibility for innovation and change to better meet the needs of students at-risk.

The problem statement theoretical framework, research questions, and purpose guide the study. A definition of terms for practice implications, assumptions, limitations, and the researcher's perspective, provide further organizational layout of the study.

### Definition of Terms

The following definition of terms will assist the reader in understanding terminology associated with the study.

**Students At-Risk** - Students who (1) have been retained one or more times in grades 1 through 6, (2) are performing two or more years below grade level in reading and math, (3) are limited in English proficiency, and (4) scores below grade level in one or more sections of a standardized test. (Stevens, 1991).

**Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment** - The act of engaging students in the personal construction of new knowledge that results in their conducting disciplined inquiry about a topic at hand that has some value beyond the school. Authentic teaching, learning, and assessment occur when teachers focus on the development of understanding

and meaning which stimulates a connection with the students' interest and experiences.

This type of teaching, learning and assessment is much more effective than the conventional teaching and learning method and focuses attention on creating meaningful learning opportunities that have a value beyond school (Newmann, 1993). Researchers found that students learn more when (1) teachers teach authentically (2) pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students' learning; (3) engage in collaborative activities to achieve that purpose; and (4) take collective responsibility for student learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Newmann, 1996).

**Conventional Schooling** – Is a term used to refer to schools whose collective practices reinforce a climate in schools more consistent with bureaucratic principles than with democratic schools. Conventional schools or adhere to traditional education standards whereby the locus of control and decision-making within the school rests with the administrative staff. A characteristic of conventional schooling is teaching in isolation (Louis & Kruse, 1995) and more often that not the focus of instruction relies heavily on standardized tests and textbook assignments.

**Core Learning Principles** - Collaboratively developed, shared belief systems that guide curriculum, instruction, and instructionally related operations of the school (Glickman, 1993).

**Democratic Schooling** - The act whereby democratic school communities are chartered as personal, collaborative, and participatory as compared to conventional schools.

Democratic schools are characterized by administrative respect for both teacher, and student knowledge. In democratic schools, power, authority and decision making are shared by all (Glickman, 1993). These schools encourage shared values and work in

cooperation with staff to develop effective learning strategies (Darling -Hammond, 1997).

**Collective responsibility** - A form of shared connection and relationship whereby teachers believe they are responsible for all students' learning and well-being as approved to only their assigned classroom (O'Hair, 1999).

**Connections to home and community** - The process of a school making connections with families and communities in the work of the school in an effort to educate students for democratic citizenship (O'Hair, 1999).

**Critical study, action research, and reflection** - The main goal of critical study is the improvement of teaching and student learning in the classroom. Teachers who engage in critical study do so by asking relevant questions such as the following: on what basis are we doing what we are doing? What evidence or support do we have to justify our practice? What studies can we obtain to assist us in studying our practice? How does what we are doing as a profession fit with our values and beliefs as a school? How does what we are doing as a profession serve the needs of the diverse individuals and groups who make up our community? (O'Hair, 1999)

**Democratic Leadership** – refers to the development of shared understandings that lead to a common direction and improve the school experience for all members of the democratic school community (Lambert, 1995). Leadership in democratic schools is embodied in acts that may come from anyone in the school community (i.e., teachers, support staff, students, parents, community members, principals, and superintendents).

**Discourse** – Process of drawing from the diversity of all voices on critical issues involving teaching and student learning (O'Hair, 1999).

**Equity** - Fostering an awareness of issues of pupil equity and seeking fair and just practices both within and outside schools. For example, responding to the question, “Does it work for all students?” (O’Hair, 1999).

**Experiential Learning Theory** - An educational approach to learning that requires students to be actively engaged in exploring questions they find relevant and meaningful; a challenging, active, student centered process that impels students toward opportunities for taking initiative, fulfilling responsibility, and engaging in decision-making and cooperative group learning (Carem, 1994).

**Full Service Schools** -The availability of or access to integration with education, medical, social, and human services within one school (Dryfoos, 1994).

**O.N.E.** – O.N.E. is an acronym for Oklahoma Network for Excellence in Education. O.N.E. was established in 1996 as an effort to form partnerships among schools, communities and the University of Oklahoma as a catalyst to promote student learning. The O.N.E. network connects teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members, business leaders and university faculty together to share ideas, observe best practices, discuss concerns, and develop strategies to improve teaching and learning. O.N.E. was developed to assist school communities in their efforts in moving from conventional schools to democratic schools. Democratic schools are characterized by a respect for teacher and student knowledge and a collective sense of responsibility for student and teacher learning. (See [www.ou.edu/center](http://www.ou.edu/center)).

**Inquiry** – Process that establishes an ongoing critical study process of examining practices, theories, philosophies, and structures of schools drawing from internal and external research to reform school practice in decision making (O’Hair, 1999). Inquiry

involves asking and answering probing questions i.e., why are we doing what we are doing? Is there evidence to support what we are doing?

**Service** - Schools and communities supporting each other; process of encouraging students to find their role in the community and share in the responsibility of creating strong communities thus creating strong schools (O'Hair, 1999). Service is partially exemplified by learning projects designed to help children learn to serve others in their classrooms, schools, and local communities.

**Seat Time** - For the purposes of alternative education program approved by the State Board of Education (2000), seat time in a school day consists of not less than 4 hours and 12 minutes per day devoted to school activities for the locally approved 180-day school calendar.

**Shared Decision-Making** - Process that enables members of the school community (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) to collectively decide which decisions are consistent with the school's purpose, core values, and learning principles, and how to best promote these purposes, values, and principles (O'Hair, 1999).

**Supportive Leadership** - The practice of leadership that regularly (publicly and privately) communicates support for democratic efforts, personally participates in such efforts, and providing time for discussing the school's movement toward democratic schooling (O'Hair, 1999).

**Termed Pressure** - A term used to describe the expectation placed on schools and teachers to have students master minimum state requirements on standardized tests in a designated grade. (State Department of Education, 1995).

### Implications for Practice

The findings from this study suggest that utilizing the practices of “high achieving schools” reduce the obstacles that may cause academic difficulty, and may benefit adolescents at-risk in actualizing their academic potential. Chances for academic improvement of adolescents with documented at-risk characteristics are reportedly improved when addressed in a democratic learning environment. Documenting evidence and obstacles found in the practices of high achieving schools is critical for a school striving to become democratic. Therefore, this descriptive case study will attempt to examine components that enhance the academic achievement related to the alternative school's existence and the democratic elements that may contribute to its persistence. Merrian (1988) says that a descriptive case study design is appropriate for investigating “innovative programs and practices . . . in areas of education where little research has been conducted” (p.27). An investigation of these practices may be useful for educators who have an interest in promoting the cognitive development of at-risk youth who overcame learning deficits in a democratic learning community.

The model program is located at an alternative secondary school in a large metropolitan area in Oklahoma. The school provides comprehensive, integrated education and social intervention. This school serves adolescents between the ages of 15-19 who present at-risk characteristics. The students are utilizing the principles of democratic schooling to enhance their academic performance.

Using the practices of high achieving schools as an enhancement to an alternative school curriculum for students at-risk is unique and merits description and study. These practices were appropriate as another instructional tool for an ever-expanding democratic



community. The literature describes schools that integrate a variety of support services as full-service schools. According to Dryfoos (1994, p. 142), the "full-service school integrates educational, medical, social and/or human services that are beneficial to meeting the needs of children and youth and their families on school grounds or in locations easily accessible. The ideal full-service school has administrators, teachers, school social workers, and other professionals working together to provide "one-stop" service delivery (Drotar, 1993). Furthermore, the ideal full-service school emulates the philosophy of a democratic environment in which all stakeholders create a conduit for students to learn and grow. In concert with that theory, Darling-Hammond (1997), purports that "schools need to build connections to families and communities as a means of deepening the relationships" (p.144). Just as the literature relates to a communal approach to addressing the needs of students at-risk, attempts to understand students' perceptions of reform strategies.

The research strategy for this study originated in a naturalistic environment with a focus on student perspectives. More specifically, this study is a descriptive case study using qualitative data. Conclusions drawn will add to the existing body of knowledge on democratic schooling.

### Assumptions

One assumption is that interview participants understand the line of questioning and answer with honesty. A second assumption is that the participants fully understand the practices of high achieving schools or the I.D.E.A.L.S. as it relates to democracy in education.

A third assumption is that the school administrative documents presented for review (such as program descriptions, printed literature, student records and other data) were complete and accurate.

### Limitations of the Study

The focus of this study is to examine how students at-risk perceive the practices of high achieving schools and the application I.D.E.A.L.S. to improve their academic performance. The study is limited to one school site. The study's population is limited to students enrolled in a program in an alternative school setting and relies on the unbiased views, opinions, and experiences of participants currently enrolled in the program. The results from this study are not generalizable beyond the population studied given the nature of the case study methodology.

### Researcher's Perspective

Placing myself in the role of a researcher, as opposed to playing the role of a school principal, forced me to look at school practices differently. As principal, I reign as custodian of a half million dollar budget while enforcing the assertive discipline plan, or seeing to the facilitation of the needs and/or wants of students, parents and other public school stakeholders. I talk the rhetoric that accountability calls for, specifically the image of a no-nonsense, take charge leader that gets the job done. Such principals are described as "committed, innovative, and entrepreneurial," even "heroic" and "charismatic" (Carter 2000). However, as a naturalistic researcher, my goal was to assess how the individuals in the alternative school habitat perceived the application of the I.D.E.A.L.S. of high achieving schools in their daily practice. Throughout the year of my investigation, I

discovered that the road to educational democracy was extremely rocky and filled with reform related land mines.

More importantly, I found that my own view on practices of high achieving schools began to change as I began to walk, talk, and breathe the I.D.E.A.L.S. and practices of high achieving schools. I found my rhetoric changing. I knew that I had a school where all children and adults could learn and grow. I was never challenged to look at the intricate pieces that allow the learning and growing to take place. When synthesizing Glickman's (1993) core learning principles, I became focused on whether the school stakeholders school shared my purpose of preparing students to contribute to society. While reflecting on core learning principles for the alternative school, I found it rewarding for students, teachers, and parents to have input on the school's mission statement and commitment to work to actualize democratic schooling.

Criterion- reference test scores show that the at-risk students at this secondary alternative school learn more effectively when they are required to construct new knowledge from issues that reflect the world around them. Research supports theories that at-risk students function best when relating life experiences to classroom theories and practices of a high achieving school (Allen, 1991; Parker, 1992; Tollette, 1983, 1991).

Throughout my student perspective-seeking journey, I saw the democratic concept challenged when it came to teachers having to truly acknowledge sharing and decision making with students. The researcher observed teachers grapple with their own maturity, decision making skills and their confidence in subject matter. A quick discovery revealed the training teachers needed in basic interpersonal and professional interaction. They needed training in self-confidence that would help them to develop

unconditional respect for students while ushering them through principles of the democratic process.

While prodding through the research questions with each respondent, it was interesting to watch the differences in students when given the opportunity to express themselves in an environment that allowed them to have a voice. Students perceived themselves as being part owner. Students and teachers began to listen to themselves and to each other. Students often compared their experiences at the alternative school with those in their conventional high school. Students spoke of the coldness and the feeling of isolation that they felt in not being able to fit into a conventional setting. One student said, "I knew that I learned differently from other students, but no teacher would hear me. They would always say, 'Just read the materials if you have a question, just ask. I was confused about everything. How could I ask a question about anything when nothing made sense to me?" On the other hand, teachers responded by saying that they never had a voice in the structural operation of the school and the way they felt it affected kids. As I analyzed the various stake-holders' reflections, I began to internalize the frustration that appeared to stifle the students' ability to learn and grow academically.

Students at-risk described democratic practices and an easier way to achieve academically. Students were encouraged to make suggestions and to find solutions. All ideas were considered, and many were adopted. Lessons were designed to teach skills that were helpful in the "real world". Students were challenged to work at or above their grade level. Students in a democratic environment take the responsibility to influence core educational decisions that are related to their curriculum and instruction.

## Summary

Democratic education can be useful in the practice of educating at-risk students, as it provides an educational model that utilizes the I.D.E.A.L.S. of high achieving schools, which serve as a framework whereby all children can learn and grow. As stated above, this type of learning environment is one in which the core ideals of inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, shared leadership and service are used as a framework and guide the daily practices designed to assist helping students achieve educators in desired educational goals. Through observation, interview, documents and survey data using a naturalistic design, student perspectives are sought to enhance our understanding of democratic practices in educating students at-risk.

Chapter one provides an introduction and background of the problem. A discussion of the current problem and conceptual framework was provided. Also provided were the purpose of study, context of the study, research questions, statement of the problem, significance and definitions, assumptions, limitations under which the study was undertaken. The researcher's perspective concluded the chapter. Five additional chapters complete the dissertation.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature pertaining to the study.

Chapter three describes study design, the procedures and methodology. It includes school site information.

Chapter four provides the results of four data sources: individual and focus group interviews; observations; individual student written responses to Rubric for High Achieving Schools (O'Hair, 1999), and analysis. An analysis of the identified school site's democratic climate is included.

Chapter five includes responses to the research questions and links responses to common themes emerging from the data sources. Results of the document analysis and findings are discussed.

Chapter six, the final chapter includes conclusions, recommendations, and implications for future research and practice. Additional recommendations are provided for both administrator and teacher preparation programs.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

Why have at-risk learners become a central concern of American education, and how does the learning or non-learning of such students relate to the tasks of teaching thinking in our schools? The reform movement in education that characterizes the 1980s has come to grapple with such significant issues. At the heart are the basic challenge to educate youth to live in a democratic society and the need to understand how all the citizens of such a society come to terms with the cognitive, social, and affective demands of modern living. Daniel Levine (1988, p. 117)

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature related to the I.D.E.A.L.S. model and the practices of high achieving schools and how those practices affect the academic performance of students at-risk. This chapter includes five sections of related literature. Section one includes an overview of school reform and democratic school community. Section two includes school renewal and democratic practices in high achieving schools. Section three presents the I.D.E.A.L.S. framework. Section four offers the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a way to promote academic performance. Section five focuses on the application of the I.D.E.A.L.S. to students at-risk.

#### Section One: Overview of School Reform and the Democratic School Community

This section gives an overview of school reform and how it is linked to the democratic school community. Specific democratic initiatives are cited.

This nation's ability to embrace and enhance the talents who have long struggled for voice and educational opportunity will determine much of its future. Darling-Hammond, 1991.

Thomas Jefferson said that "public education's ostensible mission, the development of an intelligent populace and a popular intelligence, requires that all

individuals have access to an education that prepares them to debate and decide among competing ideas, to weigh the individual and the common good, and to make judgments that sustain democratic institutions and ideals.” Thus Jefferson argued in 1880 that education must go through a new wave of reform - - democratic education which goes to the heart of the learning process, by focusing on how schools are run, how teachers teach, and what students do. Democratic schools, like democracy itself, does not happen by chance (Apple & Beane, 1995). Education and educators must progress from a conventional model to democratic school that Thomas Jefferson viewed as the untapped potential.

The American school is radiant with a belief in its mission, and it works among people who believe in the reality of its influence, in the necessity of its labors, and in the grandeur of its task. Michael Sadler (1903)

If the United States is to maintain a healthy democracy, its education system will need to sustain a shared social life and a more ambitious pursuit of human possibility. Schools will need to develop knowledge, skills, and talents that cannot be fully specified or predicted in advance, creating "the kinds of conditions in which people can be themselves" (Green, 1984, p.4). For public schools to survive the current crisis involving alternatives to public school systems, practitioners and theorists indicate that the schools must become more inclusive and collaborative - including expanding the scope of decision-making allowed to students (Apple & Beane, 1995; Glickman, 1993 & 1997; Meier, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Nearly three decades of school reform literature have taken on a frightening and almost macabre tone. *No More Public School, Death at an Early Age, Savage Inequality, School is Dead, Crisis in the Classroom, Murder in the Classroom, The*



*Neglected Majority*, and the infamous *A Nation At Risk*, which accused public school educators of "intellectually disarming a generation of American youth." The reform efforts that have been generated by a century of studies, reports, and recommendations are impressive. The following is a review of reform efforts over the past four decades.

### The Comprehensive High School

Following the studies and recommendations in the 1950's, efforts successfully occurred throughout the United States to consolidate small, often rural public schools into single, comprehensive high schools (Comer, 1980). In spite of the fact that comprehensive high schools have been established throughout the country, few learning gains results were ever documented. This is true even in the areas of math and science, where new laboratories and accelerated academic programs were expected to produce impressive improvement.

### Research and Development

A number of important efforts have attempted to use the techniques of research and development to improve public education. Perhaps the most significant early effort was the Eight -Year Study led by Ralph Tyler. Conducted during the late 1930s and early 1940s, students graduating from thirty select high schools in the United States were released from traditional college entrance requirements, and the schools were encouraged to create new curricula and new approaches to teaching and learning (Hemming, 1948). Using concepts developed by John Dewey and the Progressive Education Association, each school used a new approach to education. Many schools replaced required courses with competencies or projects.

During the 1970s, a number of public schools were created based on the concepts and research of the Eight-Year Study. By replacing graduation requirements with outcome-based performance competencies, the schools have been able to replicate the impressive learning gains found earlier in the Eight-Year Study (Jennings & Nathan, 1977). More recently, research and development have focused on student outcome related to the effectiveness of Alternative Public Schools, and the privatization of public schools.

### Curriculum Revolution

The 1960s were a time of a national curriculum revolution. Almost every professional association initiated comprehensive curriculum reform initiatives. Many were supported by funding from the federal government, private foundations, professional organizations, and universities. The curriculum revolution developed what proved to be a collection of the most creative and sophisticated educational materials that had ever been available (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977). A new "modern mathematics" was developed, along with a "new science", a new "social studies", and other new instructional approaches with their accompanying materials. The curriculum revolution was driven by the ideas of Jerome Bruner who believed that any child could learn any concept at any age as long as the instructional program was developed carefully (Bruner, 1960). Unfortunately, few of these curriculum materials made a significant change in the mainstream of urban classrooms. Many of these materials were expensive and packaged as large, complicated sets, making wide spread distribution difficult in public schools. By the early 1970's, a number of studies reported that the public school curriculum had changed little from the curriculum found in schools at the turn of the century.

### Instructional Revolution

During the 1970s and 1980s an arsenal of new instructional and organizational techniques and approaches were developed and tried. These included team teaching, behavioral objectives, structured lesson planning, assertive discipline, value clarification, learning styles, phase electives, modular scheduling, open classroom education, middle schools, and more recently cooperative learning, developmentally appropriate learning, whole language, and dozens of other approaches. A large number of these creative and often franchised concepts have contributed to the feeling that public education is "just one damn fad after another" (Barr, 1973). Sadly, few significant long-term improvements have been noted in public education in spite of decades of experimentation with these various instructional and organizational approaches.

### Model School Approach

Another approach to school reform involved the development of experimental showcase schools that would model the aspects of educational innovation of new curricula, new instructional approaches, new organization, new techniques, and the latest technologies. This approach to education reform was based initially on the belief that if educators could only observe and experience a truly reformed school, change would be easier to stimulate in other schools. The model schools were to serve as lighthouses of educational reform. A major national effort was funded by the Ford Foundation in the 1960s and early 1970s. Unfortunately, the evaluation of the Ford Foundation's model school program entitled *"A Foundation Goes to School"* concluded that after the external funds ran out, the principals of these schools tended to be promoted into other positions or recruited away to other school districts, and the schools ultimately returned to their

previous approach (Nachtigal, 1972). A second wave of model schools were developed when the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University was created in the late 1980's. Annenberg's Fifty High Schools Project was an attempt to highlight examples of restructured high schools throughout the United States. Unfortunately, just like the Ford Foundation's work, these schools returned to their previous states as a result of principal and teacher turnover.

#### State and National Mandated and Legislation.

School reform has been attempted through the adoption of state mandates, statutes, and legalization an approach used frequently since the early 1980s in an effort to improve public schools. Many of these changes have focused on increasing school graduation and college entrance requirements and have been used to establish minimum competencies applied to both students and teachers, extending the school year or the school day, and the use of a variety of student attendance rules. During recent years, as governors and state legislators have discovered the political power of educational reform, almost every state has legislated some aspect of reform in public education. Perhaps most significant, nearly every state has increased graduation requirements for math and science. Again there have been few indicators that the state-mandated requirements have positively affected the learning of children and youth in any significant way. The federally-funded Head Start program, the free lunch program, special education legislation, Upward Bound, and even court-ordered school desegregation have had a positive dramatic impact on at-risk children and youth. Head Start may well be the most successful education program ever implemented (Schorr & Schorr, 1989). These

programs have received the comprehensive support to ensure their availability for all youth who need them.

### Technology

Over the years, technology has been perceived by many as one of the key aspects of educational reform. At one time, films, media, and even the overhead projector were identified as essential to the learning process and were believed to hold great promise for dramatically improving learning. To date, computers and related computer technology, distance learning, networking videos, and even commercial television in the classroom have transformed the modality of classroom instruction and assessment. Many have concluded that computers will eventually revolutionize public education or perhaps even replace public schools as we now know them (Bell, 1993). Some schools are attempting to provide one computer for every three to five students.

### Teacher Education

Impacting teacher education was once said to be a way to reform public schools. The idea has always been compelling. With new and better trained teachers entering schools each year, it was thought that the cumulative impact over time would ultimately result in reforming schools. Research has documented that new teachers do not change schools. In fact, the opposite is true that schools seem to change new teachers. Over time, student teachers tend to conform to the expectations of the school in which they teach (Zeichner, 1984). Most states now require some type of minimum competency teacher testing, often requiring both a basic skills test and a professional knowledge test. Some states require a content knowledge test. During recent years there has been a move by the Holmes Group and several individual states to move teacher education to the

graduate level, requiring pre-service teachers to complete a fifth-year program of study (Tomorrows Teachers, 1986). Others, like John Goodlad, are working to create professional development schools where teacher education programs become partners with the local schools to prepare teachers as well as to join in reform efforts (Goodlad, 1990).

### Choice

The most recent national effort at educational reform has focused on school choice. The idea is to break up the public monopoly of public education by giving parents and students the opportunity to select the school of their choice. Many states now permit home schooling. For those families who can afford it, there has always been the choice of private and parochial schools. Many fear that school choice will permit parents of the more affluent students to choose either newly restructured public or private schools, leaving at-risk youth in their local schools without the benefit of their more successful classmates (Boyer, 1983).

### Systemic Pressures

Institutions, especially schools, develop an elaborate web of interrelationships that contribute to an incredible rigid stability (Fenstermacher, 1992). For schools, these interrelationships developed rather quickly after the turn of the century and continue to exercise a powerful influence on public school curriculum, instructional approaches, and organization. One of the earliest and continuing influences on public schools is college admission requirements. Almost every change in college admission requirements has precipitated a mirror reaction in high school graduation requirements. Teacher certification in each of the states regulates teacher preparation through the provision of a

license to teach those specific required courses found in the public-school curriculum. Other systemic forces in the school or school district include transportation and bus schedules, grading practices, a host of federal rules and regulations, and state regulations regarding legal liability and funding formulas. School districts' contracts reflect state laws which render significant reform efforts that are all but impossible to implement. Too often teachers have learned that there is a reason, often a rule or law, that prohibits, prevents, or discourages them from doing almost anything unique, distinctive, or different.

### Section Two: School Renewal and Democratic Practices in High Achieving Schools

This section describes how school renewal and democratic practices of high achieving schools are linked to practices that improve student performance. Democratic learning communities require accommodations from all school stakeholders. Routine collaborative problem-solving and learning processes are needed to carry the long-term burden of developing structures and practices that challenge taken-for-granted organizational values and assumptions. To bridge the gap between assumptions and practice, many school stakeholders have committed to democratic school renewal. This concept identifies the need of a change process designed to replace the traditional, bureaucratic model of school organization with a learning community that hears and respects all voices. This is a change process that concerns not just organizational (Cuban, 1986) or even political change (Muncey & McQuillan, 1992), but the transformation of school culture as well (Sarason, 1982, 1990). A growing body of research provides evidence that democratic school renewal has beneficial effects on students' achievement and psychological well-being. However, studies of the reforms themselves, the change

process, and the trade-off involved in implementing democratic practice are less common.

There is an abundance of education research to guide efforts to increase the effectiveness of schools (Apple & Bean, 1995; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Glickman, 1993, 1997; Goodlad, 1984; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995), but traditional methodologies still prevail. The challenge for educators and policy makers is to stimulate a culture that will raise the level of learning and access to equal education for all students by restructuring schools to prepare students to engage in a democratic community.

Democratic education is best described as schooling for democracy. The focus on schooling for democracy has emphasized reconnecting schools to their original purpose, that is, to prepare all students for life in a democracy. Many argue that the number one goal of schools is to prepare students to engage productively in a democracy to promote understanding and practicing their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy. Schooling for democracy requires schools to practice authentic teaching and learning designed to connect students with the real issues of their communities and their lives. The democratic school renewal concept is grounded in the recent work of (Glickman, 1993 & 1998), the successful school restructuring (Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Newmann, 1996) and the democratic I.D.E.A.L.S. framework (O'Hair, McLaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000). As Glickman (1993) states in democratic schools, we often hear students describing schools as "a hassle you put up with." If the primary goal of schools is to prepare students to engage productively in a democracy, then students and teachers would be working on the concerns of students' immediate and future lives and on the concerns of their immediate and local communities. Democratic school communities



exert a positive influence on the success of all students. Not only is overall student achievement significantly higher in a democratic school community, but achievement gains are also distributed more equitably (Lee & Smith, 1994). Students learn to speak and listen, read and write, and understand mathematics, science, art and music in order to gain the power to make a better life for themselves and their communities (O'Hair, 2000, p. 9-10). Glickman (1998) asserts that school stakeholders must understand that democracy is the best way to learn to make individual and collective choices - - and, until that understanding is put into practice in classrooms, schools, and communities, democracy will continue to be merely a pipe dream that lacks commitment.

People often think that I'm being very presumptuous when I talk about this as being "my school," but that's exactly how I feel. In my entire life I have never felt that way about any school until now. I actually have input in the way I teach, in what I teach and the decisions that are made within the school. When I talk to a parent about their child, I speak from a level of authority because I had a part in making it happen. Alternative School Teacher, Oklahoma City.

You could have never made me believe it. I had been a principal for 12 years and had thought I had seen it all. I considered myself as aging, burned-out, cynical and tough. Then the damndest thing happened. I started to put into place this democratic stuff and decided to use it with about 150 of the little tough guys I had been working with every day at the high school. Then something remarkable happened. It's hard to explain. The practice has not only transformed these kids . . . it has transformed me. I have learned what an enormous force a good school can be. My hope has been renewed, and I have become a disciple of the practices of a high achieving democratic school. Alternative School Assistant Principal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

### Continuum from Conventional to Democratic

If educational development is placed in stages of the continuum from conventional to democratic schooling, it is important to note that not all schools and teachers will experience the rich journey toward democratic schooling in the same way.

Some will move more rapidly than others from conventional practices like teachers teaching in isolation and in competition with each other- - to more authentic practices, such as working together based on trust and cooperation. Some schools will move further along the continuum than others as they struggle to become more democratic. Some will progress to critically studying struggles and practices, developing authentic teaching; truly sharing power, and acting on issues of equity. Others may never get beyond sharing best practices. Finally, some schools may move through an entirely different set of stages. But whether that movement is called renewal, paradigm shift or change, they all fall into a continuum of schools striving to become democratic learning communities. The stages described here are not presented as the only way schools progress toward democratic schooling. They are, however, representative of the stages that teachers and schools have gone through as they moved toward democratic schooling (O'Hair et al., 2000). The stages that schools and teachers experience as they move from conventional school toward democratic schooling are: teaching in isolation, sharing best practices, establishing trust and cooperation, sharing leadership and non-critical decisions, critiquing struggles and practices through critical study, developing authentic practices and relationships, sharing power, authority, and critical decisions, examining and acting on equity issues; and serving other learning communities (O'Hair, McLaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000, p.39)

Such practices are critical to the democratic school culture that has a direct effect on the academic performance of the at-risk adolescent. The role of both schools and teachers must be to reconnect and educate students at-risk. Fundamental school support and educational goals for students at risk of academic failure should be defined on the

basis of need. Teachers and schools must not only reconnect educational opportunity and social responsibility but they must provide the skills and knowledge students need to acquire, use, and produce information meaningfully and critically. These students must be taught to solve real problems related to their lives and society's goals. Teachers must guide the at-risk learner to become independent learners as well as learners in collaborative contexts. Teachers committed to a democratic school environment must undergo their own professional progression that moves their actions from top to bottom indicating conventional school behaviors to stages seeking the ultimate goal of leading students to a democratic community stage. Listed below is the continuum of practices that move schools from conventional to democratic in the school community.

Table 1

|  |                        |                                  |                                     |                                  |   |   |   |  |                |
|--|------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|---|--|----------------|
| Teaching in isolation & other conventional practices | Sharing best practices | Establishing trust & cooperation | Sharing leadership & some decisions | Critiquing Struggles & practices | Developing authentic & democratic practices | Sharing power, authority & critical decisions | Moving from individual classroom concerns to collective school identity | Examining & acting on issues of equity | Serving others |
|--|------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|---|--|----------------|

O'Hair, et al, 2000, p. 41)

#### I.D.E.A.L.S. Framework: Systemic Change for Democratic Schooling

It is impossible to discuss education and democracy without exploring teacher leadership. The most interesting of which is the "process" of teacher leadership which examines the way in which teacher leadership is practiced. The conventional perspective holds that the process of teacher leadership involves influencing the direction of the school in a way that the individual teacher leader believes is most appropriate. Perhaps most significant is that focusing on individually predetermined notions of best practice closes down the conversation among members of the school community about what

constitutes best democratic practices in the school community. Teacher leadership involves processes that promote a set of I.D.E.A.L.S. in the school community that are constructivist and democratic (O'Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000).

### I.D.E.A.L.S. Systemic Change Framework

The I.D.E.A.L.S. framework includes inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, (shared) leadership, and service and is connected directly to improved student learning through empirical research and practices (O'Hair, 2000). I.D.E.A.L.S. are key components in actualizing the movement from conventional to democratic schooling. Listed below is a description of each I.D.E.A.L.S. concept.

#### Inquiry

Inquiry refers to the ongoing study, reflection and analysis of both individual teaching practice and the collective practice of the school. Inquiry allows educators to examine their practice, school's programs and policies to enable decisions that are based on careful study rather than on educational trends or fads.

#### Discourse

Drawing from the diversity of all voices on critical issues involving teaching and learning. The objective of discourse is the development of a clear, shared purpose for schooling and for student learning.

#### Equity

Equity refers to seeking fair and just practices both within the school and outside the school. Equity in discourse and in having a voice in school decision-making process for teachers, students, and the community is one dimension. A second dimension of equity is access to schools, school programs and educational opportunities (e.g., how

does school attendance area and choice policies, in structural practices, discipline policies, and other practices intentionally or unintentionally favor white, middle, and upper class students and discriminate against students from economically poor families or students from racial or ethnic minority groups?) Darling –Hammond, (1997), purports customizing teaching to each child's level best reflects equity and fair practices that transcend cultural uniqueness brought by each student. A third dimension of equity is achieving a balance between the rights of the individual and the welfare and/or the common good of others.

### Authenticity

Authentic instruction actively engages students in disciplined inquiry and in constructing new knowledge that they see as having some value beyond their classroom. Conventional "more is better" fragmented curriculum, reduces authenticity. Other factors that make authenticity in instruction and relationships difficult are heavy teaching loads, rigid school schedules, and lack of planning time. These factors serve to isolate teachers from their colleagues and from personally knowing students- - a factor which hinders the formation of authentic relationships and connected curriculum. Furthermore, conventional practices seem to support the transmission of isolated facts, and skills, while democratic followers connect teaching with in-depth understanding and complex problem solving which carries beyond the classroom and into everyday living (Newmann, 1996). The application of facts to "real life" projects activate authentic student learning.

When teachers teach authentically, their students learn more (Newmann & Wehlage (1995). Furthermore, teachers that pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students' learning, engage in collaborative activities to achieve that purpose, and take

collective responsibility for student learning,” students achievement is higher as reported on standardized achievement tests (Newmann, 1996) as well as on authentic assessments (O’Hair, et al., 2000).

### Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is grounded in assumptions that hold that all individuals in the school community have knowledge and insight that can contribute to and enhance the work of the school. While traditional leadership is thought of as being the responsibility of someone in a particular position, leadership in democratic schools is collaborative and shared. Shared leadership in democratic schools involves asking questions, starting discussions, and otherwise facilitating processes that cause individuals or groups to examine, challenge and determine goals, directions, and practices. Shared leadership is dedicated to creating strong collaboration among faculty, parents, and community members.

### Service

Reaching beyond the schoolhouse door connects instructions with the outside world (Wood, 1992). Simply engaging in inquiry and discourse and being concerned with equity, authenticity, and sharing leadership is insufficient for democratic teacher leadership. Democratic teacher leadership requires connecting process to practice within and outside the school. In the democratic school, teacher leadership would work toward developing a caring community culture in schools facilitating high quality intellectual growth, and engaging teachers, students, and the community in public problem solving.

Teacher leadership should focus on a stimulating and facilitating process that causes members of the school community to examine what it means to be a democratic school and how the education of students can be made more democratic.

Table 2

Types of Teacher Leadership  
Focus for teacher Leadership

|                | Classroom  | Classroom & School   | Classroom, School, & Community  |            | Classroom   | Classroom & School   | Classroom, School, & Community   |
|----------------|--|--|---|------------|---|--|--|
| Conventional   | Influencing students to pursue teacher-desired classroom outcomes                                    | Influencing school decisions, programs, practices, & policies to conform with the teacher's personal agenda or conception of best practices  | Influencing parents and the community to conduct themselves in a manner that supports the teacher's and school's work   | Democratic | Developing and facilitating processes that engage students in inquiry and the construction of knowledge   | Developing and facilitating processes that engage others in inquiry, discourse, and the construction of knowledge.   | Developing and facilitating processes that engage others in inquiry discourse and the construction of knowledge  |
| Constructivist | Focus on leadership as a role (teachers)   | Focus on leadership roles (e.g., committee chair, site council member)   | Focus on leadership roles   |            | Focus on<br>*content and processes that have value beyond the classroom<br>*leadership acts in instruction and relationships<br>*insuring equity within the classroom (e.g., constructing & facilitating democratic learning experiences) | Focus on:<br>*what decisions, programs, practices, and policies are appropriate for the school<br>*leadership acts (in leadership roles or through daily actions)<br>*authenticity in relationships<br>*insuring equity & providing service within the school. | Focus on: *how schools, families and community can support each others' work with children & youth<br>*leadership roles or through daily actions)<br>*authenticity in relationships<br>*insuring equity and providing service within the school & the community. |
|                | Developing and facilitating processes that engage students inquiry and the construction of knowledge | Developing and facilitating processes that engage others in inquiry discourse and the construction of knowledge.<br><br>Focus on:<br>*what decisions, programs, practices & policies are appropriate for the school<br>*leadership acts (in leadership roles or through daily actions)<br>*authenticity in relationships | Developing & facilitating processes that engage parents, educators, and community in inquiry, discourse & the construction of knowledge<br><br>Focus on:<br>*how schools, families and community can support each others' work with children and youth<br>*leadership acts (in leadership roles or through daily actions)<br>*authenticity in relationships |            |   |  |  |

(O'Hair, et al., 2000)

Teachers who entrench themselves in professional communities have an intrinsic desire to assist student learning and growth. These individuals seek on-going learning opportunities. They work at developing building-level leadership skills rather than individual teachers' options. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) and Lee and Smith (1994), purport that students learn more in schools that function as professional communities. "Professional communities" are characterized by practices that are grounded in democratic ideals" (O'Hair, 2000). Teachers in democratic schools have the following characteristics:

- The emphasis is on on-going technology-based, self-directed learning and problem-solving rather than on one-time lectures and workshops.
- The emphasis is on job-embedded professional development rather than externally resourced professional development (in other words, educators assess their classroom and building needs and address those issues through resources rather than selecting from a variety of unrelated options).
- In-depth collaboration with an institution of higher learning. Provides support to future urban educators from the university through professional development in current urban education.
- Involves parents and community representatives intimately in the experience. The experience will be benchmarked by each school team's exposure to efficacy training, which will better position schools to provide a challenging student-centered curriculum and school experience for all students in a safe stimulating learning environment.



According to the literature, school renewal or systematic school reform, can promote positive student outcomes that transform schools that have the potential to assist in raising student achievement to the extent reformers have envisioned. (Berends, 1992; Lee & Smith, 1992).

The decision to undertake change more often than not is accompanied by a kind of optimism and rosy view of the future that, temporarily at least, obscures the predictable turmoil (Fullan, 1993).

Historically, three perspectives that have been most influential in the educational change process are: 1) the rational-scientific perspective which posits that change is created by the dissemination of innovation techniques, 2) the political perspective (top-down approach) which brings about change through legislation and other directives imposed by parties outside the school or district, and 3) the cultural perspective (the bottom-up approach which seeks to influence change by encouraging value changes within organizations. The strategies used for change in schools are even more varied than the perspectives that propel them. I choose to use a layman's explanation 1) fix the parts (curricula, teaching methods), 2) fix the people, 3) fix the schools, and 4) fix the system.

#### Strategy 1 - Fix the Parts

The focus of this strategy is on the transfer and implementation of specific education innovations. These programs may involve specific curricular content such as new materials for teaching English or mathematics. Or, the focus might be on teaching practices, for example, the way teachers' present materials to students or the way school principals provide leadership to become instructional leaders. The idea is to fix the ineffective or inadequately performing parts of schooling by implementing one or another new idea that, if used properly, will produce better outcomes for students. Just as the

effective schools presents such an innovation so does the practices of high achieving schools. The effective schools approach is aimed at creating social-organizational change, not just a set of technical changes such as new curriculum, new equipment, or new teaching techniques.

### Strategy 2 - Fix the People

#### Training and Developing Professionals.

Improved educational outcomes are best achieved by first improving the knowledge and skills of teachers and administrators, making them better able to perform their assigned roles. Most research has focused, not on whether developed staff proceeds to improve the educational enterprise, but on how to develop staff. One exception is the recent work of Michael Fullan (1990). He attempts to link staff development to institutional development that is changes in improvements." Staff development, in Fullan's model, links classroom improvement to school improvement. The link between the classroom and the school is the "teacher as learner."

### Strategy 3 - - Fix the School

#### Developing Organizations' Capacities to Solve Their Problems.

This third strategy centers on the school as an organization. The approach grew out of a practice field called "organizational development" (OD). The efforts of OD aim to help people in organizations learn to solve their own problems more effectively.

### Strategy 4 - -Fix the System

#### Systemic Reform.

This fourth approach goes beyond new techniques and innovations, better teaching and more effective administration of schools, and more effective problem

solving at the school building level. Systemic reform is based on what and incorporates a change approach called "restructuring." The term restructuring seems to become the watchword of the 1990s. Systemic reform holds the most promise for successful change by means of a new wave of education reform.

The publication of *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education NCEE, 1983), brought about national concern for the identification and prevention of educationally at-risk students. The report focused primarily on deficits of high school students, which may account for the term "at-risk" being viewed frequently as descriptive of adolescents who are not succeeding educationally (Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992; Cage, 1984 Walker & Sylwester, 1991). The report implied that the nation's schools were losing ability to compete with the rest of the world in quality education. The report sent shock waves throughout the United States. More recently, the term at-risk has been used to describe students of varying ages at risk of school failure for a variety of reasons.

Despite these classifications, a wave of education reform grounded in a democratic theory has begun to promote individual growth and participation in a democratic society i.e., elements that are critical for impacting at-risk behaviors. In an effort to connect a theory in a form that encompasses opportunities for all students, one must accept that democracy is integrally linked to education and schooling.

Democracy is a process rather than a product and extends far beyond merely decision making and governance structures (O'Hair, 1999). The resurgence of democratic education provides considerable cause for optimism, thus providing hope for those that are educationally disenfranchised. Glickman (1998) states that democracy in

education gives students access to social understanding developed as they actually participate in a pluralistic community. The contention is that educators, students, and parents in local schools meet to participate as equals in the decisions about district, state, and national concerns regarding student learning. In effect, the result of such change is that no one is coerced into doing what is wrong. Instead, everyone works toward what is believed to be right for students. In this regard, teachers of the at-risk believe that the following conditions under-grid a democratic way of life.

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
  2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
  3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
  4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
  5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
- (Apple & Beane, 1995)

Historically, schools have struggled with educating the masses with variations in culture, economic status, intellectual ability, and familial structures and situations that do not reflect the norm. This substantiates the reasoning why critics have long challenged the inadequacies of the American educational system for not being able to bring about effective results with all students, particularly those that show low-ability and/or weak preparation. At-risk students often enter school with little understanding of the tasks of learning or of the connection between work and grades. For the most part, schools, especially schools for the at-risk, do little to help students see these connections.

Students who come from low income; minority status; intellectual, emotional, or mental

disability; divorce; and abuse must be provided with real life collaborations that translate directly into improved student achievement and performance.

In order to realize true academic growth, the democratic learning community must connect with the learning environment of the at-risk. The literature states that democratic practice can work to set ideals that provide a learning community where all children and adults learn and grow. (O'Hair, 2000).

In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learners usually find themselves beautifully equipped to live in a world that no longer exists (Eric Hoffer, 1972).

The use of unique learning theory in diminishing at-risk characteristics in students was supported in the literature (Gardner, 1983; Newmann, 1992; Newmann, 1994). Yet, in spite of the research linking democratic schooling to improved student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1994; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; O'Hair & Reitzug, 1997; Woods, 1998), little is known about the at-risk students' perspectives as it relates to the democratic schooling process. Most of the research compares conventional and democratic schooling by focusing on standardized test scores, organizational structures; such as block scheduling and team planning, and perspectives of adults (i.e., principals and teachers). An investigation of the perception of practices of high achieving schools may result in theory building, establishing a relationship to educational theory, organizational theory, and /or sociological theory.

Using a Rubric for High Achieving Schools (O'Hair, 1999) to gather student perceptions of the practices of high achieving schools, researchers may learn how to impact student issues more creatively and efficiently. This same information may assist participants to improve self-concept, confidence, and a sense of competence which will in

turn overcome pervasive passivity, apathy, and noninvolvement (Prouty, 1990; Shore, 1977; Smith, 1976). The literature repeatedly connects these elements of motivation to academic success in school (Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992; Cage, 1984; Conrath, 1993). Thus emphasizing that democratic learning communities have become a significant part of, and catalyst in, the educational mainstream across the school levels, especially those of the at-risk. Additionally, democracy is not a state that you achieve but rather, "an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that guide our life as a people" (Apple & Beane, 1993).

In a democratic society where human potential is maximized, potential at-risk student attitudes, values, and behaviors can be directly correlated to the I.D.E.A.L.S.

These attitudes, values and behaviors are demonstrated by:

- appreciating the joy of discovery and learning as a lifelong process  
(Inquiry)
- appreciating the value of group synergy in problem solving (Inquiry)
- appreciating the value of planning long-range goals (Authentic  
Assessment)
- developing a positive regard for fellow students, staff, and adults in the  
community (Service)
- developing a sense of service to the school and community and ability to  
work with adults in the community (Service)
- honoring of agreements and promises to self and other (Equity)
- aspiring for higher goals-going for their dreams (Leadership)

Utilizing the I.D.E.A.L.S. as an artery to promote student success was beneficial to the at-risk learners at this alternative school. Students viewed themselves as a part of the whole. Students began to internalize that they were what the school stood for. Through shared values and the development of core learning principles, the at-risk students at this site began to relate to school and the construction of new knowledge.

### Section Three: I.D.E.A.L.S. Promote Academic Performance

This section will discuss the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a direct link to improve student learning particularly to those students that demonstrate at-risk characteristics.

A triad of fundamentally related premises carves the framework for this study. A clear understanding of the significance of democratic education and what makes up its core is critical to the general concept of democracy in education. In general, the acronym I.D.E.A.L.S. embodies the fundamentals of democratic education. The first construct of the triad are the I.D.E.A.L.S. and their application. In this discussion, the I.D.E.A.L.S. is often parallel to the characteristics of the at-risk. Abbreviated versions of definitions of the I.D.E.A.L.S. are as follows:

Inquiry: Students establish an ongoing process of examining practices, philosophies, and structures of their school; drawing from internal and external research to inform school practice and decision making.

Discourse: Drawing from the diversity of all voices on critical issues involving teaching and learning.

Equity: Fostering an awareness of issues of equity and seeking fair and just practices both within and outside schools.

Authentic Achievement: Focusing attention on creating meaningful learning opportunities that have a value beyond school.

Leadership: Facilitating and encouraging participation in collaborative leadership and shared decision making.

Service: Schools and communities serving each other; encouraging students to find their role in the community and share in the responsibility of creating strong communities, thus creating strong schools.

Embedded in the I.D.E.A.L.S. are a set of practices (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Glickman, 1993; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Newmann, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994,) intended to connect knowledge and learning experiences particularly relevant to the student at-risk. Based on the education renewal knowledge base and O.N.E.'s Rubric of High Achieving Schools (O'Hair & Reitzug, 1999), nine practices have been identified to increase student achievement while facilitating the movement from conventional schooling to democratic school community. Addressing these practices are critical and relevant to the democratic concept and advocates the school being the type of environment that respects all members of its community i.e., students, parents, teachers, administration. High student achievement is linked to democratic school community that focus on the following characteristics: engage students in the personal construction of new knowledge, conduct disciplined inquiry about the topic at hand, develop a value beyond the school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

In chapter four, each practice is described within the rubric as catalyst to determine evidence, obstacles, and an action plan. A review of the literature reveals relationships for this study when the outcomes examined for utilizing the I.D.E.A.L.S.



concept demonstrates a direct relationship to the desired characteristics of the at-risk adolescent. When examining ways to promote academic performance, certain traits became evident that keep students at-risk from succeeding? A critical question to be asked is how do the practices of high achieving schools and the I.D.E.A.L.S. that are embodied within, impact the academic performance of adolescent students characterized as at-risk? What is it about the I.D.E.A.L.S. that effects this population? Actual traits that at-risk adolescents exhibit, often sabotage their own success. The traits in the literature were parallel to those found as descriptors of the I.D.E.A.L.S. However, when examining the literature, many of these traits could be obtained by implementing the I.D.E.A.L.S. in instructional practices within the classroom.

Democratic, community-oriented schools are more personal, collaborative, and participatory. Schools that are democratic communities frequently embrace collaboratively-developed learning principles, which guide curriculum and instruction, and the daily operation of the school. In such schools shared leadership exists among teachers, administrators, parents and students (Glickman, 1993).

#### Section Four: Connecting I.D.E.A.L.S. and Students At-Risk

Students at-risk provide a lens through which educators can see a need for a change in the educational system that is in question across the board. This section describes the many characteristics that are exhibited in students characterized as being at risk and their connection to the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a model to improve the academic performance.

The term "at-risk" is a metaphoric expression that appeared with increasing frequency in the early writings of the current educational reform movement. Rather than

drawing its metaphor from religious orientations, as many educational movements of the past—"the crusade of the 60s," or "save the children", "at-risk" employs an association based on medical or epidemiological sources. The label suggests that populations of young people are being threatened by a systematic, external danger in the larger community.

Placier (1991) suggests that at-risk is an "all-purpose, unspecified term for children exposed to any and all kinds of negative conditions" (p. 3). The term at-risk is often used to refer to those students who are, by no choice or control of their own, being raised in families with varying kinds of social situations. For example, minority or ethnic group membership, unemployment, poverty, and/or fractured families (divorced, separated or single parent or foster care), often are denoted as indicators of oppressive conditions (Blount & Wells, 1992; Conrath, 1993; Placier, 1991). Common characteristics of at-risk student behaviors include: poor or failing grades, low self-esteem, difficulty completing assignments or projects, high absentee rate, lack of problem-solving skills, short-attention span, lack of motivation and violating norms of school discipline (Bowers, 1990; Ibanez-Velez, 1991). Students that exhibit one or more of the above characteristics are identified at risk for academic success. Many writers described students, who because of making poor choices, place themselves at-risk. "These are students who were not merely at-risk; they were already in trouble" (Placier, 1991, p.16). Students who elect to engage in activities such as abusing or selling drugs, sexual activity, gang membership, delinquent unlawful behavior, poor school attendance, and drop-out are characteristically at-risk of school failure. The problems that these

students incur, resulting from poor behavioral choices and/or a lack of education, potentially affect their personal success.

The National Governor's Association (1987) defined at-risk students as those who are deficient in the basic academic skills of reading, writing, computing, and communicating (p. 39). However, non-attendance was cited as the most prominent behavioral outcome related to the academic deficiencies of these students (Cage, 1990; Richardson, 1989; Trevino, 1991) supported the view that academic achievement is the most frequently identified characteristic in the definitions with dropping out of school being the condition for which these students are at-risk.

The literature offers a variety of definitions of students at-risk. For this study the literature indicates that definitions have primarily focused on adolescents, ages 13-18, in need of academic improvement (O'Sullivan, 1990; Trevino, 1991; Westheimer, 1992). Definitions of the at-risk adolescent student also included characteristics related to students' individual academic achievement. For example, Stevens (1991) developed a list of five specific categories for classifying the at-risk student.

Steven's limited at-risk classification to a student who meets one or more of the following conditions: has been retained one or more times in grade 1-6, is two or more years below grade level in reading or math, is of limited English proficiency, has failed one or more sections of the most recent standardized tests, failed at least two courses in one or more semesters. This study will refer to at-risk adolescents as low-achieving students whose poor performance hinders subsequent success and frequently leads to withdrawal from the educational system.

"At-risk" appears to be the latest semantic label of American education attached to several groups of students who have experienced difficulty or, in fact, failure in their careers as learners. Historically, other category names have been associated with these same populations: culturally deprived, low income, dropout, alienated, marginal, disenfranchised, impoverished, under-privileged, disadvantaged, learning disabled, low performing, low achieving, remedial, urban, ghetto, language-impaired, etc. Each label mirrors the many issues of social designation. Chances are we would have great difficulty in characterizing a typical member of any particular group (Stevens, 1991). Most often students in all these categories come from poverty-stricken economic backgrounds where they are more prone to social and familial stress, characterized by a lack of control over their lives, and by a limited view of their own personal worth and self-esteem.

Frequently, these youngsters are members of a minority group they are racially, linguistically, or socially partitioned from the members of the mainstream or majority culture. They are a vulnerable underbelly of a complex sometimes callous or naïve society.

Research supported semantic labeling (Doughtery, 1990; Office of Research and Evaluation (1986; Williams, 1989). The label suggests that populations of young people are being threatened by a systematic, external danger in the larger community. Obviously many concerns are mirrored in each group label and chances are there would be great difficulty in characterizing a typical member of any particular group. But there is also a positive side to the at-risk term. Through proper treatments and/or positive interventions, at-risk students can improve. They can achieve success. In most cases the

more compelling problems are rooted outside the adolescent, in the institutions that serve the learner, perhaps in the society itself. Risk can be mitigated by knowledgeable practice and informed understanding (Goodlad, 1984). The student at-risk can generate potential in their instructors and the educational system that encourages and facilitates their best academic performance. Utilization of the democratic education framework and the I.D.E.A.L.S. can be one forum for maximizing potential in the adolescents themselves, if the education system encourages and facilitates the students' best performance. The I.D.E.A.L.S. framework consisting of inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, leadership, and service is linked directly to improve student learning through empirical research and practices (Conversations, 1999, 2000).

When practiced in a democratic environment, the I.D.E.A.L.S. provide a systemic change in the characteristics that are inherently embedded in at-risk students. The characteristics most impacted by the I.D.E.A.L.S. are: poor or failing grades, low self-esteem, difficulty completing assignments or projects, high absentee rate, lack of problem-solving skills, short-attention span, lack of motivation, and violating norms of school discipline (Bowers, 1990; Ibanez-Velez, 1991). Students that exhibit one or more of the above characteristics are identified at risk for academic success. Moreover, at-risk possess other self-defeating traits namely, the values of academic credit and quick graduation rather than learning, a belief that learning simply involves acquisition of facts and information needed to complete assignments for school, a tendency toward isolation and the manipulation of staff and peers to just get by in school, a tendency to do things for "me" only and disassociate from adults in the community, a tendency to break agreements and promises to oneself, and low aspirations for easy jobs (Slavin, 1990).

Each one of the six I.D.E.A.L.S. of democratic schools contains built in strategies that when practiced can bring about desired learning.

Inquiry is the critical study of practice by gathering and considering data, new knowledge and other's perspectives. The primary purpose of inquiry is the improvement of individual practices within school practice. Inquiry involves asking and answering questions such as: On what basis are we doing what we are doing? Is the current instruction meeting the individual needs of these students? Should the curriculum be more flexible to meet the needs of the students? Are the decisions based on data or are they trend-related? Do our current curriculum offerings benefit these students beyond the school setting? What evidence or support do we have to justify our practice? How do we know whether what we are doing is effective? Echoing the words of a school superintendent, "Engaging in inquiry helps educators to constantly ask 'Is this the best decision for students'?" Fullan (1995) and Glickman (1993, 1998) purport that inquiry enhances students' chances to learn. Inquiry involves the at-risk adolescent asking and answering questions that focus on the physiological reflection dealing with why do I do what I do. (O'Hair, McLaughlin, Reitzug, 2000).

Discourse refers to conversations, discussions and debates focused on teaching and learning issues. Discourse nurtures professional growth, builds relationships, results in more informed practice and improves student achievement (O'Hair, McLaughlin, Reitzug, 2000). The objective of discourse is the development of a clear-shared purpose for schooling and for student learning and the exploration of how classroom and school practices fit with this shared purpose (O'Hair, et.al., 2000).

Discourse involves asking ourselves and discussing with our colleagues difficult questions such as: How can we talk about and share our best practices? How much can we trust each other? Is our teaching authentic? How do we know what students know?

Equity refers to seeking fair and just practices both within the school and outside the school. Equity results in asking and acting upon questions such as: What makes this a best practice? Does it work for all students, or for only some students? Does it serve to keep students under control, or does it enhance intellectual growth? Is there a difference? (O'Hair, et.al., 2000)

Democratic school communities have a positive effect on the success of all students. Not only is overall student achievement significantly higher in democratic school communities, but achievement gains are also distributed more equitably. That is, the achievement gaps between students of lower socioeconomic status, and students of higher social economic status are narrower in democratic school communities (Lee Smith, 1994).

Authentic achievement refers to learning that is genuine and connected rather than something that is fake and fragmented. Teachers who practice authentically help students connect learning to life. They judge students not by a test but by the quality of their lives. Authentic teaching actively engages students in developing new understandings and knowledge. It connects teaching and learning to tasks and products that students see as having a value beyond the classroom (O'Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000).

Leadership in democratic schools is the development of shared understandings that lead to a common direction and improve the school experience for all members of

the school community (Lambert, 1995). While traditional leadership is often thought of as being the responsibility of someone in a particular role, i.e., the principal, leadership in democratic schools is collaborative and shared. Leadership in democratic schools is embodied in acts that may come from anyone in the school community (i.e., teachers, support staff, students, parents, community members, principals and superintendents (O'Hair, McLaughlin, Reitzug, 2000).

Student achievement is greater in schools with strong, collaborative leadership from the principal; undivided support from the district administrators; and engagement of support from citizens who live in the larger community (Newmman & Wehlage, 1995).

Service as a democratic ideal refers to the belief that making a difference in the lives of children and families requires serving the needs of the community as well as the school. One of the primary responsibilities of public education is to enable students to develop a strong sense of individual and social responsibility. Service is partially exhibited by learning projects designed to help children learn to serve others in their classrooms, schools and local communities. Service is the "doing of democracy." In doing democracy, we provide students with the opportunity to construct and connect knowledge as a result of addressing the social, economic and political concerns of their local and immediate communities. Consequently, student learning becomes connected and meaningful rather than fragmented and abstract (O'Hair, Mclaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000).

The demands of modern society are such that America's public schools must now provide what they have never provided before: a first-rate academic education for all students. Phil Schlechty. (1996, P. 235)

A second construct in the triad of the understanding of democratic education is



Glickman's (1993) model involving the development of core learning principles, decision-making charters, and critical study process. When working to maximize the potential of students at-risk, the emphasis on democracy focuses on authenticity, relevance, and making connections between what at-risk adolescents are being taught and their real-life experiences. Glickman (1993) states that students can learn to speak and listen, read and write, and understand mathematics, science, art, and music in order to gain the power to make a better life for themselves and their communities (p. 9-10).

However, no matter how strong a practitioner's belief is in the democratic process, one must fully understand that democratic schooling is more of a process or a continuing journey of working to become more democratic . . . a place that continually assesses its practices in terms of the democratic I.D.E.A.L.S. This place where all children and adults learn and grow must include practices that hold within its framework.

Practices demonstrated in Glickman's Model of Renewing America's schools help support the I.D.E.A.L.S. and their impact on students at-risk. They include:

**Shared value systems** in a democratic school community work as components to one another. First and foremost, the democratic school community is in agreement about what is important to the school. For the purpose of working with the student at-risk, a democratic school may value the importance of providing life skills education across the curriculum in an effort to provide the students with survival tools for their future. Or the goal may be to prepare students for democratic citizenship and believe that personal and professional interaction should be defined by intrinsic worth and positive regard. Secondly, in authentic schools, a shared value system is developed in collaboration with all stakeholders

in order to establish a set of core learning principles that guide curriculum and instruction of the school (Glickman, 1993).

**Critical study** is described by (Glickman, 1993) as the driving force behind successful shared decision making and other practices in democratic schools.

When teachers fail to engage in critical study, they have no way of telling if what they are doing works or if it coincides with the things they believe in. Whether formal or informal, critical study should be used to guide school-wide as well as classroom decision-making. In addition, critical study should guide instructional practices and the development of school policies, curriculum and programs.

**Shared decision making** - where stakeholders in the school community, i.e., teachers, administrators, parents, and students, are at the heart of the journey of a democratic school. In conventional schools, where most students at-risk are unsuccessful, decisions are made by one individual or by that individual's select inter-sanctum. This authoritarian type decision making results from one individual, or a select few individuals, promoting their perspectives and reduces the perspectives of the remaining school community to perform merely as technicians.

Authenticity is the third construct in the triad of democratic schooling. Newmann (1996) may have easily written a prescription for the student at-risk plan for success. In Newmann's (1996) discussion of a democratic school, a practitioner in a high achieving school might embrace learning principles which hold to the fact that students learn best when they (1) are required to personally construct knowledge about the topics being addressed, (2) engage in disciplined inquiry to gather more information and data about

the topic and (3) work on tasks that have some value beyond the lesson and the assignment.

Dedicated educators continue to design and implement programs that meet varied learning styles. In light of the trust of democratic education, the literature is suggesting that only a few programs have reported increases in student academic performance.

Recent research shows that when teachers use authentic teaching methods, students perform at a higher level of achievement than those students taught using conventional methods. This researcher observed that when teachers used authentic teaching practices as part of the democratic school design, students performed at a higher level than those did in a conventional school design.

### Summary

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental . . . The freedom to learn . . . has been bought by bitter sacrifice. And whatever we may think of the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn, the right to have examined in our schools not only what we believe, but what we do not believe; not only what our leaders say, but what we do not believe; not only what our leaders say, but what the leaders of other groups and nations and the leaders of other centuries have said. We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought might be. W.E.B. DuBois, "The Freedom to Learn" ([1940] 1970, pp. 230-231).

The literature reviewed in this chapter explored the literature related to the I.D.E.A.L.S. model and the practices of high achieving schools and how those practices effect the academic performance of students at-risk. This chapter includes five sections of related literature. Section one includes an overview of school reform and democratic school community. Section two includes school renewal and democratic practices in high achieving schools. Section three presents the I.D.E.A.L.S. framework. Section four

offers the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a way to promote academic performance, and section five connects the I.D.E.A.L.S. and at-risk students.

To strive to help all students become independent thinkers and understand the importance of their own autonomy as builders of their own knowledge systems - - - is the objective that has come to be recognized by those that advocate the democratic learning community. By utilizing the I.D.E.A.L.S and the practices of high achieving schools, educators have the resources to build on the constructive perceptions of students who exhibit at-risk characteristics. Recognizing the value of these perceptions is at the heart of the educationally, democratic journey. That journey is the conduit for what schools do best - - that of providing sound educational practices that are derived from the I.D.E.A.L.S. of democratic schools and their impact on the academic performance of students at-risk. The literature supports that American schools cannot solve all the ills of our complex society, however they absolutely must help all students develop the expertise to use their own minds well.

In Chapter 3 an explanation of the population, research setting, and the sampling selection is provided. An explanation of the methods and procedures include: data collection, data analysis, and triangulation will be discussed. Chapter three will conclude with a summary statement of the chapter's content.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Design and Methodology

#### Introduction

As described in Chapter One, the purpose of this study is to apply the practices of high achieving schools to impact the academic performance of adolescent students characterized as at-risk. The focus of the research questions were on at-risk students' perspectives of the application of the model.

Chapter two presented a review of the literature in five sections as it relates to school reform, democratic school community, practices that impact a democratic learning community in an effort to increase academic performance, the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a way to promote and successfully address the academic performance of students at-risk.

This chapter describes the methodology selected to research the application of an educationally systemic model of the I.D.E.A.L.S. of democratic schools and their impact on the academic performance of adolescents at-risk. The descriptive case study design was used to examine aspects related to applications of the I.D.E.A.L.S. The case study method is appropriate for investigative innovation practices in areas of education where little research has been conducted (Merriam, 1988). A case study is described as a method as such: "Case studies and ethnographies very appropriately focus on a certain situation, a group, a culture, or an institutional location to study for what goes on there, how these individuals or members of this group perceive things, and to describe accurately an existing state of affairs" (Van Manen, 1990, p.22). The qualitative naturalistic inquiry was guided by student responses to research questions, based on the

rubric developed by the Oklahoma Network of Excellence in Education (O.N.E.) and student case studies. The study focused primarily on contextual interpretation.

#### Rationale for Method Selection

A case study method was selected to look at the application of a democratic systemic model that focused on the perspectives of students who exhibit at-risk characteristics. The study focused on how the application of an educationally systemic change model, I.D.E.A.L.S., impact the academic performance of adolescent students characterized as at-risk. The research strategy of this study originated in a naturalistic design and was perspective seeking. Naturalistic inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument sensitive to the underlying meaning in gathering and interpreting data. More specifically, this investigation employed a descriptive case study method for qualitative data collection.

Qualitative research utilizes empirical practices. It studies qualities and seeks to understand them in a particular context (Langenbach, Vaughn & Aagaard, 1994). This approach, using the O.N.E.'S Rubric of High Achieving Schools, is based in an inquiry method to create a better understanding of the supporting evidence and/or obstacles that help students mature and develop academically while they are emerged in the precepts of the I.D.E.A.L.S. and the practices of high achieving schools. The types of data to be gathered will be considered qualitative data and analyzed qualitatively. Merriam (1988) purports that qualitative research allows for thick data to be collected that demonstrates an interrelationship with content. Merriam goes on to explain that qualitative research requires that inquiry be inductive, focusing on process, understanding and interpreting. Humans are best suited for using methods of interview, observing, and analyzing

Merriam (1988). Conclusions drawn, help to add to the existing body of knowledge on educational reform. This case study relies on interviewing of students, their responses to a Rubric designed by O.N.E. that focuses on the practices of high achieving schools and researcher observations of behavior, focused on student knowledge of the I.D.E.A.L.S. This approach illustrates the importance of developing meaning for at-risk adolescents from a systemic approach within a democratic school environment. The foundation of this qualitative process involves the need to understand the culture of the at-risk adolescent. Culture affects what the researcher hears and understands. Findings from the present study may stimulate further research.

#### Population and Research Setting

The focus of this study is to examine student perceptions of the practices of high achieving schools and their impact on the academic performance of adolescent students characterized as at-risk. Further, the study will demonstrate how the practices and the I.D.E.A.L.S. components support its existence and persistence. The purpose of the study is to gain insight into how the practices and the I.D.E.A.L.S. affect the academic performance of students at-risk. For this study, the researcher was not interested in predicting behavior or statistical data, but rather in studying a real life educational phenomenon.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) defined five characteristics of qualitative research as: natural setting being the direct source of data, the researcher is the key instrument, gender, age and race. The six students were followed, personally interviewed, and recorded the researcher is descriptive, the researcher is concerned with process rather than simply outcomes, and data is analyzed inductively, and meaning is essential (p.27).

Because the study took place in a school where the researcher was the principal, it was important to have the students voice their perceptions regarding how the I.D.E.A.L.S. practices affect their own academic performance. The researcher's role was to interview and collect data in an effort to define the democratic process. The researcher collected data on the school site from a number of perspective seeking formats as various sources for analysis. The student's perspectives were gathered by obtaining responses to open-ended, focused interviews. The initial subject population pool consisted of 90 alternative high school students (62 males and 29 females) in grades 9 through 12 in a program designed for students at-risk of failure due to classroom behaviors that resulted in poor academic performance. Six students selected for this study were chosen by teachers based on consistent attendance and positive attitude. This descriptive case study investigates a design to serve secondary at-risk students. Case study investigators employ 'maximum variation' as a strategy to represent diverse as well as multiple perspectives (Creswell, 1998).

The program is located at an alternative school, in the center of an urban city in Oklahoma. The location of the study was granted permission by the school district to conduct the study in which students volunteer to participate. The school is a cooperative effort among the public schools, a university in the Big Twelve conference, a human service agency and the Department of Human Services. The school was established 107 years ago making it the second oldest building erected in the district and the only school building of that age that has been kept in continuous use. Twenty-five years ago the school began its journey toward addressing the needs of the non-traditional learner by becoming a woman's day school where adult education was taught.



Later, a small day care was added so that infants and toddlers of young women could receive day care while their mothers attend classes. Since 1975 the school's existence has been used as a holding place for identified at-risk adolescents i.e., a place to legitimately get a student out of the mainstream of public education. While in this holding pattern, earning one school credit was the only requirement for students to remain before returning to their original (often traditional) school setting.

In 1992, the initiative to make this school a democratic learning community began. At the time, the initiative seemed almost mandatory to transform the school from a mere holding place for students who misbehaved to a place where real learning took place. That effort, which has since been renamed the "journey," was further defined when the school became a member of the Oklahoma Network for Excellence in Education (O.N.E.) in 1995. O.N.E. provided a vehicle in the form of an instrument through which educational stakeholders could express their perspectives of whether there was evidence to support the I.D.E.A.L.S. The instrument gave stakeholders a non-threatening opportunity to discuss obstacles in the democratic journey and to network with other schools on a similar journey.

Attempts were made to have 100% participation of the identified students to ensure all voices and possible perspectives were heard. Efforts were made to explore all perspectives to increase validity and reliability of results. In an attempt to free the researcher from biases, all efforts were made to intentionally probe for negative results and responses to interview questions. Permission was secured with the school district to review specific student documents necessary to validate the background of each informant. Interviews were conducted with the total number of students indicated to

secure comprehensive sampling. None declined to be interviewed. All interviews were conducted during the fall semester of the 2000 school year to reduce the potential for confounding influences of time-of year and mortality rate (losses and gains in membership) of informants in the investigation. Data from transcribed interviews and observation notes were kept for analysis.

Data collected from identified sources will be used for analysis and to identify themes related to the utilization of the I.D.E.A.L.S. and their practices.

Permission to refer to the title of the program, its location, and the name was secured using informed consent forms. All interview informants signed an informed consent form. The questions explored the informants' perceptions of the vision and intent of the I.D.E.A.L.S. and their practices. The study will include the students' family history, self-description, and reflections/perspectives about the utilization of the I.D.E.A.L.S. and their practices and how those practices can influence systemic change and instructional delivery in a democratic learning community environment. Through the use of O.N.E.'s Rubric of High Achieving Schools, informants will identify obstacles encountered throughout their "journey" toward democracy in education and how they developed strategies to overcome those obstacles. The way the students overcame obstacles will be referred to from hence forward as action plan.

#### Selection of Participants

Selection of the case study subjects was based on the following student criterion: knowledge of the I.D.E.A.L.S. process and its intent, awareness of the differences between the practices of the conventional school environment and that of a democratic

school environment, a demonstrated responsibility for maintaining improved attendance rates, and acceptance of a mature attitude toward their own academic performance.

Listed below are at-risk behavioral indicators that describe the pre-study background of these students.

Table 3

| Student       | # of Schools<br>attended since<br>8 <sup>th</sup> grade | Reading Score<br>prior to<br>research study | Number of<br>referrals the<br>semester prior<br>to research<br>study | Number of<br>absences the<br>semester prior<br>to research<br>study |
|---------------|---|---|--|---|
| #1Amber       | 3   | 6.7   | 7  | 10  |
| #2Shaquita    | 2   | 5.2   | 3  | 8   |
| #3`Willie     | 3   | 4.9   | 10   | 10  |
| #4Renardo     | 1   | 11.8  | 5  | 5   |
| #5Addis       | 7   | 8.8   | 6  | 7   |
| #6Christopher | 3   | 4.2   | 5  | 6   |

### Methods and Procedures

Merriam (1988) claimed the descriptive case study approach is appropriate for investigating innovative programs and practices to support construct validity, data from the study were collected from four sources for this ensuing a degree of triangulation (Borg & Gall, 1989). This type of analysis refers to the strategy of using multiple and

different sources of data collected for analysis. The use of multiple and different data sources builds construct validity (Borg & Gall, 1989).

This section provides an overview of the technique of data collection used in this study. Preliminary investigation began with an on-site description of the program. The purpose of the description is to explain the intent to secure permission for the study, and to review the documents available. This type of analysis refers to the strategy of using multiple and different data sources and builds construct validity. The data in this study were, thus, solicited through the following: Open-ended, individual and focus group interviews for analysis of perceptions of students, audio-taped for retrieval, perusal of pertinent documents such as printed literature, notes, audio tapes, student records, and quantitative test results and data; and direct on-site observation by the researcher of the at-risk organizational structures and culture, responses to O.N.E.'s Rubric of High Achieving Schools.

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with students to ensure a comprehensive sampling. All interviews were conducted during the fall semester of the school year 2000 and spring of 2001 (a duration of one school year) to reduce the potential for confounding influences of time of year and mortality rate (losses and gains in memberships) of participants in the investigation. Data from the transcribed interview and field notes were kept on computer disc to increase reliability and to support construct validity (Yin, 1994).

Permission to refer to the alternative program and its location was secured using informed consent forms. No other names (from interview, documents, and observation records) were used to protect, as much as possible, the confidentiality and anonymity of

the students. All interview participants signed an informed consent and/or assent form. Research questions were designed to solicit the participants' perceptions of the nine practices of high achieving schools.

Preliminary investigation began with the researcher/principal holding a staff meeting at the school site soliciting perceptions of democracy in education and how those perceptions played role at the school. Using teachers as a springboard, the researcher asked teachers to refer students who may be viable candidates for participating in the study. The viability of a case study subject was based on students enrolled at the alternative school for at least one previous semester, with improved attendance, and not a discipline problem to the teacher or the administration. Selected students and their parents were invited to an informative meeting where the researcher went over the same criterion that was presented to the staff. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the intent, secure permission for participation in the study, and to grant permission to review the documents available. The documents included interview questions responses to the Rubric of High Achieving Schools as well as consent and assent forms approved by the University of Oklahoma's Human Subjects Review Board. If a student was self-supporting the student was allowed to sign the assent form and did not have to sign a Parental Consent Form. If the student was under eighteen, a parent consent form was required.

The initial interviews relied heavily on the practices described in the Rubric for High Achieving Schools. An average of thirty minutes was spent reading through every Rubric. Each informant was then scheduled for a one on one interview session with the researcher to answer questions that might have arisen from the Rubric. Students were

observed and some were videotaped regarding their perceptions on democracy in education. Six student interviews were conducted. The six interviews, which are characterized as a stratified sampling, provided a broad variety of perceptions that addressed the research questions.

Each individual interview was approximately thirty minutes long. Fuchs (1969) contended that collaboration from multiple informants is a technique that controls for misrepresentations in the data. These collaborations increase credibility of the information given in the interviews. The interviews, observations, and interaction with focus groups provided a comprehensive picture of the concept and perspectives related to the research questions.

Secondary sources of data included reviewing school records for the purpose of gaining insights on the student's academic background. A field log was kept to record items of interest and to recall information and events. Observations of student/teacher interaction in classrooms and at school events served as a fourth means of data collection. Using these methods of collecting data insured triangulation of data sources and trustworthiness.

Triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity (Merriam, 1988). The most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of data is the development of converging information from inquiry (Yin, 1984).

The on-site data collection began the fall of 2000. Data were collected for as long as necessary to gather pertinent information. Each individual interview lasted for a minimum of 30 minutes; however, some lasted longer depending on the mood and the enthusiasm of the student. Observations proved to be a powerful source of the data

collection. Merriam (1989) states that participant observation is a major means of collecting data in case study research when coupled with interviewing and document analysis case studies allowed for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated.

One of the strengths of qualitative research is the interview process. Yin, (1989), suggests that the interview is the most important resource for information. Interviews were critical in this study because many of the students in this setting exhibit at-risk characteristics that reflect differences in attitudes, values and behaviors. Many of the students in the alternative setting experience problems in the district's conventional secondary schools. Many of these students come from single-parent or step-parent families, many of which are reported to be dysfunctional, involving neglect or physical abuse, drug and alcohol dependency. Because of these sometimes insurmountable odds, the risk for school failure and dropping out of schools is high. The interview gave the researcher insight into their lives, their view on life, their joys, and pain.

Documents collected indicated evidence of the students' academic history. They included school transcripts, records of family history if available, and discipline referrals. Documents also provided evidence of the practices. Observations also provided opportunities to view the student in their naturalistic habitat without being disturbing.

A critical instrument in the data collection was the Rubric of High Achieving Schools: Practices, Obstacles, and Results. The Rubric was developed in conjunction with O.N.E. and external evaluators through the Center of Educational and Community Renewal at the University of Oklahoma.

### Data Analysis

Data from each source were compared and contrasted to crosscheck the accuracy of descriptive information with the other and for discovery of emerging and recurring themes or categories (Strauss, 1997). The data collected were broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences for building concepts. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this process as “open coding.” These concepts were then grouped using two criteria: concepts similar in nature or related in meaning. The results generated categories that were closely examined to allow for fine discrimination and differentiation among major themes. Using the collection of responses and viewpoints extract emerging theories. The study sought to examine the perspective regarding the relevance of the I.D.E.A.L.S. and practices of high achieving schools and how they influence at-risk adolescents. Information obtained from the document analysis and interviews described as a perspective relative to the development of this project. Interviews and observations provided a base for the conceptualization of the process. The data collected from the variety of sources were used to describe and generate concepts related to the existence and persistence of the program. The emerging themes and the frequency of responses were closely examined, allowed for fine discrimination and differentiation among themes. Analysis of data was ongoing and recursive. The data collection replicated in the Interview Protocol Form and summarized in the rubric form facilitated the organization of the content by categorizing (Stake, 1995). Erlandson, et al., (1993) describes the process of desegregating chunks of information into smaller pieces as unitizing. Utilizing the “axial coding” process, statements about the nature of relationships among categories developed into hypotheses.



The use of the "selective coding" process develops statements in an effort to trim off excess categories or to fill in poorly developed statements. The ongoing analysis was focused on identifying recurring themes that deal with the results of the application of the I.D.E.A.L.S. in the practice of high achieving schools.

Triangulation of data sources provided a method of reviewing multiple sources. Its use increases the reliability and validity of qualitative research (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). The Rubric proved to be a viable instrument of data collection due to its format. The Rubric form allowed the researcher to document the respondent's perception of supporting evidence, obstacles that get in the way of democratic practices, and an action plan to overcome obstacles and strengthen democratic practices.

Another source of the triangulation process centered around personal interviews. The personal interview process sought to document the authentic depictions and descriptions of the perceptions of each respondent. This qualitative method is a method of capturing the richness and complexity of the subjects inherent in the qualitative work (Rubin, 1995). The face to face interview process proved to be rewarding due to the fact that it allowed the researcher to ask probing question that gave insight into the life of each respondent.

The other source of the triangulation process centered around observation. Observations enable the researcher to gather data from direct experience that enabled the researcher to understand and interpret the setting and behavior of the respondents. Patton (1990) asserted that observations generate another layer of understanding of the environment in which the researcher can arrive at a conclusion based on the respondent's viewpoint. Data collection analysis continued through the spring of 2001.

### Researcher Bias

Glickman (1997) purports that educators must have the ability to understand the best way to learn to make individual and collective choices - - and until that understanding is put into practice in classrooms, schools, and communities, democracy will continue to be merely a rhetorical device obscured by the lack of belief and commitment. Poor children and children of color often suffer from structural barriers that are prevalent in traditional schools. This researcher felt compelled to research a methodology that might create a systemic application in the way students who exhibit at risk behaviors learn and grow. Recognizing that these young people will become a significant percentage of the future work force, educators must answer the sense of urgency to provide them with strong academic proficiencies. By serving as building principal in a school where students are in academic risk of failure, I was emotionally drawn to the participants. Personal ability and professional experiences should be taken into consideration when determining a research problem (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Langenbach, Vaughn & Aagaard, 1994). In order to allow students to become immersed in the democratic process, staff would have to be nudged into a zone that was both uncomfortable and stressful. It means encouraging teachers to let go of what they have grown to know as their comfort zone. It means allowing students to have voices, as well as, develop a level of respect for opinions that they may have that are clearly not founded in research. It was essential to the validity of this study that the researcher spend time viewing students, in an environment that was within their normal routine. Student interviews reinforce traditional programs that stress educational excellence, often do not provide a coherent plan for effectively educating students at risk.

### Validity

Judging the validity or truth of a study rests upon the researcher representing adequately student perceptions. Internal validity is considered a strength of qualitative research. Goetz and LeCompte (1992) listed four factors that lend support to the claim of strong internal validity in a naturalistic research design, two of these factors were used in this study. The researcher spends time with the subjects doing what they normally do. The researcher spends time in their school, and work to increase the subjects' level of comfort.

The uses of triangulation to analyze the data also lend strength to the internal and construct validity of this study. The uses of multiple sources provide a holistic view and understanding of the perceptions to allow conclusions to be drawn. Limiting the time frame for data collection also increased construct validity. The validity of the Rubric has been tested to facilitate change at O.N.E. schools in Oklahoma as well as with the League of Professional Schools in Georgia. Data were collected in the fall and spring semester of the school year of 2000 and 2001 to increase construct validity and increase availability of informants for interviewing.

### Summary

This chapter described the methodology used to research the application of democratic I.D.E.A.L.S. to enhance the academic performance of students at-risk. Included in this section is a description of the methods for collecting data, the interview process, and the data analysis. Utilizing triangulation gave valid insight into the perceptions of the respondents in what is thought to be a democratic environment. A qualitative methodology was utilized in this study. Six participants responded to a rubric,

interview questions and were observed in their school site environment. The Rubric was the instrument that allowed the researcher to obtain perceptions of democratic school practices, obstacles and action plans for those practices. The data analysis process consisted of transcribing the data, aggregating and condensing it into concise statements clustered into themes. The results of the study are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine at-risk student perceptions to the practices of high achieving schools and their connection to the I.D.E.A.L.S. This chapter profiles student responses to a Rubric that places qualitative data in categories of supporting evidence, obstacles and an action plan to the practices of high achieving schools. The study attempts to answer a critical question: Can practices of high achieving schools which embodies the I.D.E.A.L.S. of democratic schools impact the academic performance of adolescent students characterized as at-risk? The research method which guided this case study was qualitative naturalistic. Data sources included individual interviews, observations, documents, and responses to the Rubric for High Achieving Schools designed by the Oklahoma Network for Excellence in Education.

Six (6) individual, face-to-face interviews of a minimum of 30 minutes were recorded. The students were racially and gender mixed. Each student was asked to provide some background about him/herself. In addition, to the research question, the researcher probed for answers to questions that would help in drawing conclusions i.e., Do the practices of high achieving schools provide evidence that benefit students that exhibit at-risk behaviors? Are students that exhibit at-risk behaviors able to identify obstacles to practices and to develop an action plan to overcome obstacles in order to increase academic performance?

This study provided an opportunity for students to give their perceptions of the practice of high achieving schools and their connection to the I.D.E.A.L.S. Throughout

the research, students discussed teacher and school support to the practices that embody the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a model to increase academic performance in students that exhibit at-risk behaviors. Following are excerpts from interview with the participating students. Student quotes have not been altered. The data sources are presented as (a) individual responses to the Rubric (b) observations (c) interviews (both individual and focus groups) and (d) documents including school records. Eleven students who expressed an interest in the project and met the criteria of continuous improvement were called to the media center of the alternative school. Students were told of the time and commitment required to participate in the study. They also were told that parent consent was necessary for further participation if they were under the age of eighteen. Six students agreed to continue. Six individual interview sessions of a minimum of 30 minutes were recorded. Each student was asked to be prepared to provide a personality profile. The information gathering procedure was designed to provide an opportunity for students to give their perceptions of the application of the I.D.E.A.L.S. model. Pseudo names were used to protect each students' identity. All other responses were designated by number and are authentic. No response has been altered.

### School Context

#### Historical Data

The school was established 107 years ago making it the second oldest building erected in the District and the only school building of that age that has been kept in continuous use. The school was built as an elementary school. Old yearbooks (1931, 1933, 1935) indicate that this was a section of the city that was involved in the educational welfare of a growing city. In 1936, construction began to add a cafeteria, an

auditorium, eight classrooms and two offices. Many of the elders that were students in early years have come back to visit the school and talk about the pride they felt for their school. Thirty years ago the school began its journey toward addressing the need of the non-traditional learner by becoming a woman's day school where adult education was taught.

Later, a small day care was added so that young women's babies and toddlers can receive day care while the mothers gain an education. Twenty years ago, the school became known as a Womens' Day Center for pregnant teens. Five years later, the school expanded to accept males in a behavior modification program. During the past few years, the school has been used as a holding place for identified at-risk adolescents i.e., a place to legitimately get a student out of the mainstream of public education. For the last ten years the school has been a partner in a cooperative effort by the school district, a university in the Big 12 conference, a social service agency and the State Department of Human Services.

In 1992, the effort began to make this school a democratic learning community. At the time, the effort seemed almost mandatory to transform the school from a mere holding place for students who misbehaved to a place where real learning took place. That effort, which has since been renamed the "journey," was further defined when the school became a member of the Oklahoma Network for Excellence in Education (O.N.E.). O.N.E. was established in 1996 as a partnership among schools, community members, and the University of Oklahoma. It became a think tank with a mission to enhance the quality of student learning and democratic citizenship. O.N.E.'s objective is to bring teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members, business

leaders, and university faculty and students together to share ideas, observe best practices, discuss concerns, and develop strategies to improve teaching and learning. O.N.E. provides an instrument through which educational stakeholders can express their perspectives of whether there was evidence to support the I.D.E.A.L.S. The instrument also gave stakeholders a non-threatening opportunity to discuss obstacles in the democratic journey and to network with other schools on a similar journey.

#### Current School Context

Through the years, two very separate, but equal, programs were designed to meet the needs of pregnant and parenting teens otherwise named the Outreach Program, as well as those students that had become consistent rule violators and/or behavior problems. This program is called the Metro Program. This study will focus on the Metro Program. The Metro program was designed for long-term suspended students and students promoted to ninth grade because of age. Due to the open-entry/open-exit policy, instruction is individualized. Course syllabi defined the curriculum and requirements for completing each course and were parallel to those of the district's. Instruction is delivered through a combination of textbook assignments and computer-assisted software. Internet access is also available. Credits are earned on the basis of Carnegie units, required 65 hours of class time. An option to accelerate the rate of course completion is available. This option required students to demonstrate mastery of the material (mastery is defined as 80% correct). Students are required to complete at least one credit and complete the term of their suspensions before returning to their home schools.



### The "Journey"

For the purpose of this study, the "journey" that is referenced throughout the study, refers to the organized educational growth that has occurred in this school as a result of the school being a participating member of the Oklahoma Network for Excellence (O.N.E). In 1996, this alternative school was one of the founding schools of O.N.E.

The "journey" began as early as 1992 when a new principal was assigned to the alternative school site. Her assignment was based on strong recommendations from another state where she had documented experience in building programs for students at-risk. Upon arrival, the principal found a school where both teachers and students existed in isolation. Teachers were suspicious of one another and the mere mention of one teacher assisting another in a classroom setting was met with opposition. Teachers taught classes behind closed doors. Even the windows of the classroom doors were covered. The corridors were dimly lit and there were no signs of student work anywhere. The building was dirty and what paint that wasn't chipped was prison green.

The principal knew of O.N.E. through her affiliation with the university and viewed the participation in O.N.E. as a way of providing a framework for the school renewal that was needed to make the school a positive atmosphere for students at-risk. The membership and participation in O.N.E. provided a binding practice to govern reform efforts that would meet the needs of *all* students. O.N.E. also became the conduit for a school that provided collaboration involving new practices, a support for teachers, and an involvement of students and their ideas. Throughout the years of participating in O.N.E., the principal watched the school transform from a cold and isolated institution to

a warm and clean, inviting and highly collaborative. Teachers and students were encouraged to go on school site visits to see the practices of other schools. Likewise, the staff and students self esteem was boosted when other schools came to their site to see *their* transformation. When asked about the O.N.E. experience, both staff and students responded that it truly made them feel that they were a part of a bigger picture. The principal speaks of the foresightedness she had to use O.N.E. as a catalyst to change the way the public viewed an alternative school as well as to change the way staff and students viewed themselves. She felt her effectiveness was a credit to her transforming a minimum security facility that served as a warehouse to behavioral challenged students to a school that was on the cutting edge of fresh ideas and innovative instructional practices. The principal's leadership style was motivating. The building became a safe learning environment that practiced structured behavioral practices and sound instructional expectations for *all* students. Through her belief in the democratic model, she was able to promote a shared vision and innovative goals that were made as a result of collective decision making. The frequent use of a share vision survey was her method of tapping into the pulse of the school community. Staff, students, and the community all felt a sense of ownership when they entered the building.

#### The Participants

Because the school was a participating member of O.N.E., all students were exposed to the practices of high achieving school which embodies the I.D.E.A.L.S. as an instructional enhancement in the 2000-2001 school year. Six students were selected, observed and analyzed for the study. The following exit data and discussion provide an overview of the population of the Metro program.

Table 4

## Metro Program Exit Data May 2000

|                              |     |             |              |                    |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Program Exit Data            |     | Program     |              | State Average      |
| Dropout rate                 |     | 37.9%       |              | 14.8%              |
| Graduation rate (seniors)    |     | 51.5%       |              | 64.1%              |
| Suspension rate              |     | 0.2%        |              | 3.4%               |
| Pre-and Post-Test Measures   |     |             |              |                    |
| Variable                     | N   | Pre-program | Post-program | Difference*        |
| GPA                          | 225 | 1.20        | 2.13         | Favorable change   |
| Courses attempted            | 225 | 6.16        | 2.56         | Unfavorable change |
| Courses completed            | 225 | 2.97        | 1.50         | Unfavorable change |
| Percentage classes passed    | 225 | 47%         | 61%          | Favorable change   |
| Courses failed per semester  | 225 | 3.19        | 1.05         | Favorable change   |
| Days absent per semester     | 225 | 21.19       | 22.77        | No change          |
| Days of in-school-suspension | 225 | 0.88        | 0.00         | Favorable change   |
| Days suspended out-of-school | 226 | 5.88        | 0.00         | Favorable change   |
| TABE Reading Standard Score  | 102 | 487.21      | 521.25       | Favorable change   |
| TABE Math Standard Score     | 111 | 465.35      | 508.13       | Favorable change   |
| TABE Total Standard Score    | 107 | 467.62      | 497.24       | Favorable change   |

\* $<.05$ . Changes noted in italics are statistically significant. A significant difference is determined by the use of specific statistical techniques which take into account the number of students who made a particular change, as well as the direction and size of the change. The purpose of statistical significance tests is to determine where changes in students are reliable – if we should count on similar results with other students.

- The pre-program data suggest that the Metro program serves students at extremely high risk of school failure or school drop out school. In the semester prior to enrollment in Metro, they failed more classes than they passed.
- Substantial improvement was noted in student G.P.A. for the alternative students and a decline in the percentage of courses failed. They still failed an average of one course per semester, even though they were enrolled in only three courses.
- Increases were noted in students' scores on a standardized measure of academic achievement.
- Students enrolled in the Metro program attempted and completed fewer classes than they had in the traditional high schools. They successfully completed only 1½ courses in their most recent semester at the alternative school, and thus made unsatisfactory progress toward graduation.
- Although these students decreased the number of disciplinary infractions (in-school and out-of-school placements), the number of absences remained high.

#### Data Sources

The following sources provided data for this study. Data sources included: individual interviews and student profiles, responses to Rubric for High Achieving

Schools, focus groups and observations, and school and classroom documents. The remainder of this chapter will provide a description of each data source.

### Individual Interviews

One of the most important resources for information is the interview (Yin, 1989). Because the researcher was the principal, the interview served as an important tool to put the students at ease so that free dialogue could be exchanged. These interviews proved to be both rich and valuable to the research process. The interviews gave students the opportunity to reflect and gave a significant amount of knowledge to the researcher. The answers to personal questions provided evidence to why at-risk students do not become actively involved in the day to day operations of a traditional or democratic school. Rubin and Rubin (1995) purport, there are three distinguishing characteristics that qualitative interviews share in common: the interviews are modifications and extensions of ordinary conversations, the basic interest of the interviewer is understanding, knowledge, and insight of the participants as opposed to categorizing people or events in term of academic theories, and the content, flow and choice to topics can change to match what the participant knows and feels. Certain probe questions add to the researcher's understanding of unique issues of the at-risk and obstacles they perceive in their quest for education. The following biographical sketch is the description each respondent has of him/herself. Pseudo names are used to protect their identity.

### Student Profiles

Amber is bi-racial and extremely beautiful. Her mother is black and her biological father is white and incarcerated. She is the eldest of three children born to a

teen mother. **AMBER:** I started school in Ardmore when I was six years old. I always learned quickly in the early years. When I was 13, my mother and stepfather divorced. He was the only father I ever knew and I think he kept things together. After he left it was hard for me to stay on track. When I started middle school, I went to the classes I liked, mostly in the morning and skipped the others. After a few months, I just dropped out of eighth grade. I ended up in court custody. At the age of thirteen, I was taken from my mother's home and placed in DHS custody after she was charged with "failure to protect" when her boyfriend confessed to sexually molesting me at the age of twelve. Amber continued to talk as she cried. As she explained, her first placement was with a white family in a rural area. This meant Amber was placed in an all white school where she says she was the object of racism, both in the home and at school. She eventually ran away. During this unsettling time of her life, she became pregnant by a convicted drug dealer. DHS then placed her in a group home for pregnant and parenting teens. This group home is a partner of the alternative school and refers all its students. Like many at-risk students, Amber has truly fallen through the bureaucratic cracks. Amber immediately stood out. She was intelligent, witty, and could analyze and synthesize quickly on her feet. Though, Amber is well above average intelligence, she has only earned 19 credits with a mere 2.47 GPA in the three years she has been in high school . . . far too few for a young lady that is about to turn eighteen and should be at least a junior. Amber began to gain composure and began to talk freely about her school experience. **AMBER:** This is the first alternative school I have attended. I was afraid to come to this school. Once I got here, I was happy to know that every student could learn at their own pace and could complete a course as soon as they were finished. I had a hard time sitting in a class with

other students so my math teacher made sure I had a separate spot in her room. This helped me to concentrate. Another time I was having problems with my job. I was so worried about it I couldn't concentrate. I told the counselor and she called my job. Just having that support was important. That was so different from those other schools where I just had to sit there until the end of the semester. Teachers had a concern for me.

The researcher became involved with her when her teachers began complaining that her high mobility needs were causing them nightmares i.e., she would get up and walk in and out of class and often verbally challenged the teacher. Immediately, Amber was assigned to a teacher who is experienced in the Inquiry method of teaching. Through test scores, attendance, discipline referrals and grades, the teacher found that Amber had great potential but many challenges. A team was formed to analyze the school's practices to see if there were congruent with her misbehavior. The role of the educators was to find a way to illuminate this diamond in the rough into a brilliant stone. Because she was articulate and a quick thinker she was selected to be a part of a mock trial team that was forming to represent the school in the state competition. Amber's teacher began using questioning techniques to probe her thinking ability, looked at her verbal scores and compared them to her classroom scores. They then began the questioning technique. These questions included "Why are you in this classroom activity. How does this classroom activity connect with your life experiences? How will you know if this classroom activity is adding new knowledge and is what you're doing effective?" Negotiating extends the idea of guiding, by allowing students a part in developing the curriculum and determining how they will learn (O'Hair, McLaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000). Amber would often ask, Am I doing this correctly? Is this the only way I can get to this

answer? Inquiry serves to identify the reasons for current practice as well as to inform future practice. Amber's scores have increased analytically by being able to apply the inquiry method into her learning style.

**Shaquita** is Black, and is the first child of a mother that was also a teen mom. Her mother quickly had three other children by the time she was 21 years old. **SHAQUITA:** I started school at the age of six. I never knew my biological father. I was forced to take on the role of the mother to the other children because my mother was in and out of drug rehab. I came to this school from middle school. It was difficult for me to focus. As I remember, the middle school was big and we did a lot of changing and it seemed that no one particular teacher had time for me. I missed a lot of school because I was with the dude that I ended up having a baby with. Not long after I was enrolled in the seventh grade I found out I was pregnant. My principal, at that time, talked to me about going to the alternative school. I came to the alternative school from the middle school (14 and pregnant). When I got to the alternative school, I found it to be different but not scary. I was real young and stupid when I came to this school. But I did pay attention when the counselor told me that there was a day care at the school and the only thing I needed to do to use the daycare was to come to school everyday and finish my classes. There were no bells in the school. Teachers expected me to do the right thing. I felt so free.

Shaquita was in jeopardy. She had a poor self-image and rarely talked in class. She was shy, but had a brilliant smile, was very unsure of herself in most situations, and tried to avoid problems by running away from them. She was forced to live as an adult at a young age. When Shaquita's mom learned that she was pregnant, she moved out of her apartment and into an apartment with her boyfriend leaving Shaquita, then fourteen, with



a place to live with her 20-year-old boyfriend. The boyfriend was abusive. Shaquita often came to school with bruises but refused to turn him in. When the school tried to intervene, she denied everything. Shaquita quickly had two children within thirteen months. She became a recluse talking to no one, having no friends, and not interacting in class. It was important for the school to reduce Shaquita's isolation and to increase the amount of sharing and learning. In a team meeting, one of Shaquita's teachers mentioned that he started using deliberate questioning and Shaquita was responding. Dunn and Dunn (1998) stated that at-risk students who engage in discourse grow experientially and intellectually. This is primarily because the at-risk learner has proven to be more auditory. Their lives are in such disarray that they seldom focus when presented work on the written page and their lack of concentration forces their words and thoughts to jump off the page. Because of one or more of the at-risk indicators, this population experience devastating gaps in their learning spiral. Teachers in the alternative school have reported that promoting discourse in the classroom allows students to move beyond their comfort zone and stretch into new learning patterns in a democratic community. Discourse helps provide the constant and steady growth accompanied by the support of other caring adults, which helps to stretch without causing extreme panic and fear to their often fragile self concepts. Discourse in educational settings draws on the fundamental beliefs, skills, and concepts necessary to build strong relationships. By utilizing the ability to connect to the classroom setting and interact with other students, Shaquita verbal ability scores have increased three grade levels. When teachers have the opportunity to engage in regular professional discussion with their peers and receive honest, but supportive feedback, not

only does their own practice benefit, but student achievement also improves (Cushman, 1998).

Willie is Black and one of nine children. His mother died six years ago and his father was imprisoned 10 years before that for trafficking crack cocaine. He has lived with his maternal grandparents since his mother's death. According to school records, Willie started school at six and was retained in kindergarten and second grade. Willie is seventeen and in the tenth grade. **WILLIE:** I never had any motivation to go to school. It was all I could do to find a way to live. I hadn't finished a grade since I was in the seventh grade. I didn't get into much trouble. I just wouldn't go to school. I don't remember teachers doing a whole lot to help me learn but that could have been my fault 'cause I was hardly there. One of the days my grandmother was trying to get me back in school, the assistant principal told her that I was too old for middle school and that I would have to go to the alternative school. I was numb. I didn't know what to expect. I'll never forget the day I arrived at this school. This school was different. The first time I was absent, the office called to ask my grandmother if I needed homework. Homework? What was that? The next day the counselor had me meet with my teachers. They told me that they wanted me to be successful. In this school, I could finish a class as soon as I completed the work. They even set up a study session for me in the library just because I said I wanted it. Teachers put me up to participating in student council. I never would have been chosen in my other school because I wasn't in the right group or I just wasn't there enough. I felt good about helping to make decisions at the school. I have never felt like I was worth anything until I came to this school.

Willie has a quick smile, is pleasant and cooperative. He, by far, is the most talkative participant. Yet, to see him would make a grown man or woman cry. He is dirty and tattered. Willie is respectful to adults but seems awkward with students his own age. To some extent, Willie is a loner. His family has limited income, and is existing on social security benefits and small wages from Willie's part-time minimum-wage job. Although Willie is seventeen, he has no driver's license because the family does not own a car. Willie does have a 10 -speed bike that his grandfather found and repaired so that Willie would have transportation getting back and forth to work. Like many at-risk students, life has not been kind to this teen. At-risk students experience a low level of identification with the school. Being in a democratic, caring, community, a team closely assessed this situation and others like his to see if the school environment was doing everything it could to provide an equitable learning environment for Willie. A bus pass for transportation was provided and clothes were donated. (Teachers even agreed to keep some clothes at the school so that if he came to school dirty he would have a change of clothes). Willie is always tired and rarely contributes in his classroom. Research states that students who work after school have little time or energy left for homework or active participation in school activities. Another reason stems from their inability to compete with material objects of their classmates. Students want to dress in the same style, as their peers, need money to participate in the activities, and want basic school supplies. Willie's lack of self-confidence and self-worth lead him to feel helpless in dealing with school. His lack of academic skill development led him to believe that he was "dumb" rather than school-disabled. In order for our team to make an impact, it was important to match our teaching methodology to his learning style. He had to have some short term

goals or projects that were successful. His vision of his future had to be positive. Willie was given an afternoon schedule so he would have the mornings to rest. He was placed in a class where the teacher encouraged cooperative learning. A conference was held with his grandfather so that he could be given a basic medical examination from the school clinic. His eye exam confirmed that he needed glasses for reading. With a request from the Lion's Club, the school was able to obtain a pair of glasses. By providing an equitable environment for Willie, his self-esteem has improved allowing him to feel free when participating in classroom and school activities. The achievement gap between students of lower socioeconomic status, and students of higher socioeconomic status is narrower in democratic school communities (Lee & Smith, 1994).

Renardo is sixteen and Hispanic. He is the eldest of three children. He has never known his biological father and his mother had been incarcerated for four years. He and his siblings live with his grandmother. **Renardo:** I am smart. I didn't start reading until I was eight, but when I started, it came easy. My problem was that I couldn't obey rules. My home life was so messed up that I couldn't concentrate. So I did a lot of things that would make people laugh. The teachers didn't think it was funny. The school was a good school but it was uptight. I mean, there was a rule for this and a rule for that. I never could live up to all the rules and before I knew it I was at the alternative school. The alternative school was a little more relaxed. It was a much smaller school than the one I came from. The classes are small, like maybe 10 or 12 students in each class. They realized my potential right away. The teachers were there to help. The first time I lost my temper, the principal came to my house and talked to me and my grandmother. I was surprised when my homeroom teacher asked me to represent the class. I was even more

surprised when students talked me in to running for an office in student congress and I won. The principal was always talking to us about the I.D.E.A.L.S. and soon I got to the point where I started to think about their meaning when I was just hanging out. I started to watch myself change.

In any other setting Renardo, at age 16, would be a superb scholar. His academic talent was recognized in middle school and he was placed in the Promise Program, a gifted and talented program for the middle level student. When he transferred into high school, he was immediately placed into the ninth grade academy, a high school for academically talented youngsters. Because the high school is a large cavernous building, and because Renardo has extremely high mobility needs, it was hard to keep him focused. Once he enrolled at the alternative school, the teaching staff looked at ways to challenge his intellect as well as address his high mobility needs. Teachers administer the Dunn and Dunn Learning Styles inventory to focus in on his needs. The inventory revealed that Renardo worked best by himself and enjoyed research. He was articulate and loved to argue issues. The staff immediately began to have him research topics in every subject. He began connecting his research with issues in the school. He was placed on the academic decathlon team and was selected as the defense attorney in the Oklahoma Bar Association Mock Trial Competition. Because of this research and dedication to both those activities, he won first place in the district's oral competition in the academic decathlon and won first place in first year competition in the Mock trial competition. Researchers found that students learn more when teachers teach authentically: pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students' learning; engage in collaborative activities to

achieve that purpose; and take collective responsibility for student learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Newmann, 1996).

Addis is 19, bi-racial and an only child. His mother is Hispanic and his father is Vietnamese. Addis started kindergarten at six years of age and did well until he got to middle school. He was an average reader and scored just a little below average in math. Addis started missing school in middle school and soon began to get into neighborhood fights. Addis is a senior. He was referred to this school two years ago because he was a repeated rules violator and would not respect authority. When he learned that his mother was dying of congestive heart failure, he began to take on a new attitude.

**Addis:** I came to this school two years ago because I had gotten kicked out of every other high school in the district. I was just mad and wanted to fight. I don't even know why. When I got to the alternative school the adults started talking to me with respect. They started calling me Mister. They started looking at me like I was important. When I would lose my temper, the teachers would sit me down and make me think about what I had said or done. I had teachers that got me to read and actually write about what I was thinking. We always talked about the I.D.E.A.L.S. in student congress. At first I just sat there, but after a while I started participating. I started to use the inquiry in my classes and was able to get more out of my classes.

Addis' softened disposition resulted in him becoming involved with the I.D.E.A.L.S. He now has taken on new democratic style leadership within the school. He is the president of the senior class, the lead peer mediator for the school, one of the organizers of the mock trial competition and is an advocate for new entries in the school. All these titles are of little significance to Addis other than his fellow students looked to

him for leadership and guidance. Addis is a facilitator. His leadership style involves everyone. He initiates collaboration with other entities in the school. He is constantly inquiring or examining the issues of the school and has a result he helps other students to discover a different way of doing things. Addis is an asset to the Teacher Advisory Committee and the Student Government. He is a constant contributor in planning the content of student assemblies. He encourages students to talk about current school issues. He often brings back good, sound, pertinent information about the way students view the school. Addis' leadership is evident as he develops and facilitates the process that engages others in inquiry, discourse, and the construction of knowledge. Addis attendance has been in the ninety percentile each semester since his enrollment. He now carries a B+ grade point average. Leadership in democratic schools is the development of shared understandings that lead to a common direction and improve the school experience for all members of the school community (Lambert, 1995).

Christopher is an eighteen year old Black male. Christopher is a sophomore and has matriculated through several alternative settings. According to Christopher's mother, Christopher was a premature birth that may have resulted from the fact that she was an alcoholic at the time. Christopher started school at six. He was retained in kindergarten due to immature socialization issues and in third grade for lack of skills. By the time he was in forth grade, he was referred to special education. Christopher could be labeled as a scholastic underachiever. Chris has high mobility needs, and is extremely tactile, kinesthetic. **Christopher:** I hated school. I was in lab classes and nobody would work with me. In the other schools I went to I was either sent to the office or put at another desk away from everybody else or just igged (ignored). Why should I have to take being

ignored? Teachers always got mad because I got out of my seat. I couldn't help it.

When I started at this school at least the teachers didn't ignore me. All of the teachers worked with me. They allowed me to participate in activities.

It is the researcher's, observation that he is more parent -disabled than learning - disabled. His mother is an older, single parent who at some point went to college. She is constantly harassing the school as to what they are not doing for Chris. When the alternative school adopted an elementary school down the street as a year -long service project for students, the elementary school principal agreed that she would approve any project that would help her students, who also exhibited at-risk characteristics. Chris's teacher agreed to a math mentorship project. Chris volunteered to spend several of his afternoons with a seven-year old (Corey) that was having trouble with math. With much reluctance, Chris' teacher took a risk and allowed Chris to proceed. Chris was paired with Corey, a third grader. Chris has seen how Corey looks up to him and values his assistance, and he knows that he is helping Corey do well in school. This has made Chris feel pretty good about himself. Now, when Chris gets home, his own homework seems more important than it used to. Chris is finding school a much more pleasant place to be because his own math skills have improved from his tutoring experience.

This study provided an opportunity to examine student perspectives of the practices of high achieving schools that embody the I.D.E.A.L.S. Qualitative data were gathered in an effort to layer levels of understanding about the participant. Stake (1995) supports the overlapping of data collection as a method practiced by ethnographers and grounded theory researchers. These interviews were valuable to this study because they



provide depth to the participants. Cusick (1973) purports that this type of interview is useful in focusing on sociability of students.

### Rubric for High Achieving Schools

Each one of the participants were asked to meet in the media center to respond to the Rubric for High Achieving Schools that embraced the nine democratic school practices that have been identified in facilitating the democratic movement in schools.

The practices and their definitions are as follows:

#### Practice 1: Core learning Principle

A shared set of goals, commitments, and practices enacted throughout the school. (i.e., "How does that decision fit with what we believe in?") (Allen, Rogers, Hensley, Glanton, & Livingston, 1999; Glickman, 1993; 1998)

Core learning principles in a school serve as a basis for decision making (i.e., "How does that decision fit with what we believe in?") and give individuals an enhanced sense of purpose. They make individuals part of a bigger cause – a cause beyond one's self.

#### Practice 2: Authentic Learning and Assessment

Authentic pedagogy as practiced in the school. Students learn best when they 1) are required to personally construct knowledge about the topics being addressed; 2) engage in discipline inquiry to gather more information and data about the topic, and 3) work on tasks that have some value beyond the lesson and assignment (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Newmann, 1996).

### Practice 3: Shared Decision-Making

Shared decision-making structures are designed to involve students in making critical decisions that impact their learning. Decision-making structures emphasize the importance of hearing all voices in the school community and emphasizing decision-making based on critical study and data (Darling-Hammond, 1997; O'Hair, McLaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000).

### Practice 4: Students Collaborate and Learn Together

Students form study groups to examine learning. They work to make connections between their life experiences and the curriculum. They learn to examine each other's work in an effort to guide one another.

### Practice 5: Critical Study

Critical study is the study of practice by considering relevant perspectives, data, and knowledge. It involves asking questions such as: On what basis are we doing what we are doing? What evidence or support do we have to justify our practice? How do we know whether what we are doing is effective?; What information, data, knowledge, and perspectives can we gather to assist us in studying our practice?; How does what we are doing fit with our values and beliefs as students in this school?; How does what we are doing serve the needs of the diverse individuals and groups who make up our community? Whose interests do our practices serve? Whose interests do they not serve? (Glickman, 1993; Allen, Rogers, Hensley, Glanton, & Livingston, 1999)

The purpose of critical study is the improvement of learning and school practice in the classrooms and schools that engage in it.

#### Practice 6: Supportive principal leadership

Principal leadership is described as having three characteristics.

Principal resistance places obstacles in the way of teachers attempting to become more democratic (e.g., withholding financial or material support or simply refusing to engage in certain practices; (withholding financial or material support or simply refusing to engage in certain practices (e.g., sharing decisions) engaged in school renewal work, nor proactively supporting or becoming personally involved in such efforts.)

Passive forms of principal support consist of neither blocking the efforts of teachers engaged in school renewal work, nor proactively supporting or becoming personally involved in such efforts.

Active principal support includes regularly in public and private communicating support for democratic efforts, personally participating in such efforts and providing time for discussing the school's movement toward democratic schooling (O'Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug. 2000; Reitzug. 1994).

#### Practice 7: Caring and Collective Responsibility for Students

In schools where collective responsibility for students exists, students feel cared about and important (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). In the democratic school, teachers believe they are responsible for all students in the school all of the time. In a democratic environment, students are made to feel cared about. In schools that are not democratic, students exist in isolation and feel disconnected from their teachers.

#### Practice 8: Connection to Home and Community

Schools are concerned with issues of equity and justice not only with the school, but also in the local and global communities (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Delpit,

1995; Epstein, 1995). A democratic school must connect families and communities in the efforts of the school. In a democratic community, the school must also involve itself with the students' family and the community.

Practice 9: Concern for Equity

Schools are concerned with issues of equity and justice in the school and the local and global community. Equity issues may include: disparity between races in achievement in schools, providing less affluent students with equitable access to technology, asking where instructional practices legitimate the background and culture of some students at the expense of others, determining whether grouping affect different groups of students, determining whether classroom and school discipline policies and practices affect students from non-dominant cultural groups, and determining where shared decision making procedures ensure that the voices of all teachers, parents, and students are heard (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1996).

The Rubric was administered to students in September of 2000 to gain insight into how students viewed the I.D.E.A.L.S. and to compare their perceptions of this style to the traditional school experience. After the respondents completed their perception of each practice, the Rubric form was turned in to the researcher for analysis. The analysis of the Rubric revealed the following pertinent information.

Table 5

| <p>Practice 1: Core Learning Principles are defined as a shared set of goals, commitments, and practices enacted throughout the school. Core learning principles in a school serve as a basis for decision making (i.e., "how does that decision fit with what we believe in?") and give individuals an enhanced sense of purpose. They make individuals part of a bigger cause -- of a cause beyond one's self.</p> |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Supporting Evidence  | Obstacles   | Action Plan   |
| <p>Student # 1 Student Council is a place where I can give input on the way I feel about what goes on in the school.</p>   | <p>I can't take part when I'm absent due to my responsibilities at home</p> | <p>Student # 1 Our school needed to decide upon a dress code. We worked through student council and got input from every class. We came up with a practice that everybody could live with. We felt good that we heard the voices of all the students.</p> |
| <p>Student #2 The students at this school have a good relationships with the teachers and the principal. We all have been taught the meaning of the I.D.E.A.L.S.</p>   | <p>Taking in negative opinions</p>  | <p>Student # 2 Learning and understanding the meaning of the I.D.E.A.L.S. has taught us to get everyone's point of view. For the first time I understand the meaning of a school mission and what that school mission means to the students.</p>          |
| <p>Student #3 I have never been to a school where we talked about the mission. Each time we meet we discussed ways to act out the meaning of the words. We can talk to our teachers about anything. I have learned to talk through my differences.</p>   | <p>Last minute projects and mandatory rules</p>                             | <p>Student # 3 The students in this school understand that when decisions are made they reflect everyone's voices.</p>  |
| <p>Students #4 At this school we are encouraged to make suggestions and to find solutions. We talk about the I.D.E.A.L.S. and how each one of them will make us better students.</p>   | <p>obstacles. Too much responsibility at home</p>                           | <p>Student # 4 In our classroom, all students plan activities that will contribute to the school's mission.</p>   |

Table 5 (cont.)

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Students #5 I feel a part of making decisions in my school such as being in student council. I have never been at a school where my concerns meant anything.  | Some people are afraid that their ideas may be "disseminated" without real consideration or that they may not be taken seriously. They worry about whether they will be made to look stupid. | Student # 5 In Student Council we help to discuss the decisions made in the school. I have never been to a school where the students actually had a voice in the running of the school. When we participate in other school activities, we always keep the school governance in our discussions. Student # 4 In our classroom, all students plan activities that will contribute to the school's mission. |
| Student # 6 Core learning principles are evident in the sense that students have a part in decision making. The student council gives the privilege of making or regulating rules of the school. The teachers and the principal push all of us to the point of self-determination by encouraging us and expecting more than we expect of ourselves. The goal of academic boasting is also present because of our training and teaching. | Peer pressure when students laugh and make fun of your questions or thoughts   | Student # 6 Our Student Council encourages all students to practice being democratic by getting everyone's opinion and letting everyone have a voice.   |

Six students responded to the item on Core Learning Principles

Evidence: Four students disclosed that student council was a place where students participate in the common goals of the school.

Obstacles: All six respondents disclose that personal problems and low self esteem stand in the way of their participation in school decision making and core learning strategies.

Action Plan: The respondents agree that they have a voice in the school and that they will use student council as the place to set goals for the school and discuss decision. They agreed that the continued use of the I.D.E.A.L.S. will help them to understand the way they learn.

Table 6

| <b>Practice 2: Authentic Learning and Assessment</b><br>Authentic pedagogy is practiced in the school. Students learn best when they; 1) are required to personally construct knowledge about the topics being addressed; 2) engage in disciplined inquiry to gather more information and data about the topic, and 3) work on tasks that have some value beyond the lesson and assignment. |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Supporting Evidence</b>  | <b>Obstacles</b>  | <b>Action Plan</b>  |
| Student #1 You do work at your own pace. The work seems easier when you relate it to what we do in our lives. Not many students in some classes. Tutors and assistants help with a question.  | Student #1 It is hard for me to think about how I want to learn when I have so many personal problems. Sometimes I am very depressed. | Student # 1 I will always find classes where I can work with a teacher one-on-one. Individualized instruction allows me to breeze through those lessons that I know and spend more time on the ones that are more difficult. Working one-on-one with a teacher makes me feel important. |
| Student #2 Teachers use life experiences to teach. I learn best when teachers teach instead of letting me learn at my own.  | I can't focus when there is so much going on in my life. My mother was arrested last night..  | Student # 2 From now on I will let teachers know that I understand better when I can use my own experiences in my learning process. As I learn more about the I.D.E.A.L.S., I learn more about myself. I plan to be more open so that the teachers can help me.                         |

Table 6 (cont.)

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Student #3 I am one-on-one with my teachers. The teachers turn everything into a question to make me think. I can ask for help when I need it. My teachers have discovered that I need to be away from other students so that I can concentrate. I am constantly reminded that I am important.</p> | <p>I don't fit in with other students. I would rather be by myself because I think people make fun of me. In some on my classes I am so tired that I fall asleep.</p>  | <p>Student # 3 I told my teacher that I was going to drop geometry because it was just too hard. She asked me if I played pool. I told her that I was a pool shark. She brought a play pool table to class and started asking <i>me</i> about angles. She then gave me terms for my angles. I got a 92 on the next test. I learned geometry from what I already knew. I will always tell teachers that I can learn better when it relates to something I already know.</p> |
| <p>Student #4 A lot of my learning revolves around budgeting and applying that type of math to my everyday life. My computer skills will apply for the workplace.</p>   | <p>I am frustrated with not having money like most kids my age. I want to learn to budget but the money doesn't go far. I like computers but I don't seem to progress enough on them. I can't type fast.</p> | <p>Student # 4 Our teachers talk to us. They constantly ask me if I understand or how do they want me to explain the lesson in another way. The lessons are structured in a way that lets us know that we can use our experiences in life in our daily lessons. I plan to be more open to teachers to let them know that I really need assistance.</p>   |



Table 6(cont.)

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Student #5 I can choose projects that are meaningful to me. My lessons are made to teach skills which will be helpful when I get out of school. I am challenged to work at my grade level. I have the freedom to choose my readings and sometimes I even question the answer. I learn different. I have to see what I learn. | Some work is required even though it has nothing to do with my interest.         | Student # 5 Teachers makes me answer my own questions. It is hard but I am learning to ask the right question to get the right answer. My teacher says that there are no wrong answers. She makes us work to find better answers. I am learning to use my mind. |
| Student #6 Teachers work hard to help you select work that connects to your life experiences.  | When I work on my own I am sometimes afraid that I am not doing the right thing. | Student # 6 I will continue to respond to the way the teacher connects what I learn in school to the way I live.  |

Six students responded to the item on Authentic Learning and Assessment:

Evidence: Four students disclosed they learn by connecting lessons to real life situations.

Two respond that they learn by the questioning techniques.

Obstacles: All students responded that their learning is affected by personal problems.

Action Plan: All respondents responded that their academic performance was enhanced when they could contribute to the way they learned. Life experiences were a major contributor to their learning. Once they experienced some success in their learning they felt more confident in asking teachers for assistance. The plan is to make teachers aware of their knowledge of authentic teaching and learning and use this approach as they travel through life.

Table 7

| <p><b>Practice 3: Shared Decision Making</b><br/> Shared decision making structures are designed to involve teachers, administrators, parents and students in making critical decisions that impact teaching and learning. Decision-making structures emphasized the importance of hearing all voices in the school community and emphasizing decision-making based on critical study and data.</p> |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Supporting Evidence</b>  | <b>Obstacles</b>  | <b>Action Plan</b>   |
| <p>Student #1 We have a lot of parent-teacher meetings. We have cool advisors to talk to. We have learned that we can function better when all of us have a part in making the decision.</p>  | <p>I am shy and sometimes it is hard for me to make my voice heard. I don't feel free enough to speak up.</p> | <p>Student # 1 School conferences are now team conferences which include a parent or significant other, the teacher(s) the principal and me. Instead of people making decisions for me, I am a part of making the decisions for my studies.</p>  |
| <p>Student #2 I believe that I am learning to make decisions involving my teachers, my principal and my mother. I can better myself in life if I involve everyone in the decisions I make.</p>  | <p>I am sixteen and I am just now learning how to make a decision.</p>  | <p>Student # 2 I never knew how valuable conferences were. Since the counselor includes everyone that has anything to do with my learning in conferences, I am much more accepting of what people have to say about me. By learning skills of listening and discussing what I learned in student council, I am having a better relationship with my mother as well as my teachers.</p> |

Table 7 (cont.)

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Student #3 Our student council allows everyone to be heard. In order to make sure everyone has a voice, we often answer surveys.  | I have a fear of not being heard when I answer a survey.   | Student # 3 Student Council is the right place to hear everyone's voice. I will try to always involve myself in the place that makes decisions. In Student Council we are taught to be sensitive to each other. |
| Student #4 This school has choices. Teachers are aware that not everyone can do or has interest in the same thing.  | Sometimes I need someone to make decisions for me. I don't know a lot about my curriculum.   | Student # 4 We have choices in this school because everyone is different and the teachers understand that we are different. The teachers support us in the decisions we make.                                   |
| Student #5 Student Council is a good place to talk about issues that happen in the school. In this school we can talk. We are heard in this school. We have input and we can make decisions | Sometimes I am afraid to speak up. My opinion has never been worth anything. I am afraid I will be embarrassed.                                    | Student # 5 Everyone in this school has an equal voice in making decision. The principal and teachers make sure that one group does not take over a discussion and or issue. The decision making is shared.     |
| Student #6 Parent teacher conference, student council meetings and club meetings are good places for me.  | I am not a part of the student council. I miss a lot of school. I always feel that I don't know enough about what is going on to be of much value. | Student # 6 Parent/teacher conferences is a good place for me in the school to make shared decisions about what happens to me in this school.   |

Six students responded to the item on Shared Decision Making.

Evidence: All six students responded that this school has taught them how to involve others in their decision making. They cite student council as being a place that facilitates shared decision making.

Obstacles: All students responded that their learning is affected by personal problems.

Some feel uncomfortable in sharing their opinions in public.

Action Plan: Students agree that their participation in student council has taught them that they are a valued member of decision making. They responded that they will continue to participate in decision-making. Practicing shared decision-making has made them more confident in the communication process. They respond that their decisions are valued.

Table 8

| Practice 4. Students Collaborate and Learn Together<br>Students form study groups to examine research on successful teaching and learning. They set collective standards based on core learning principles, work to connect the curriculum both internally and externally examine student work together, and supervise and guide one another. (The word "students" was substituted for teachers.) |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Supporting Evidence   | Obstacles  | Action Plan   |
| Student #1 Learning together for the mock trial the decathlon and college club events have been fun. Learning in a group helps us to learn each others point of view.   | Sometimes some students don't prepare. Most of us are serious about our learning. It hurts when some of the students don't pull their load. I find it hard to work in a group. I feel like everyone is looking at me if I say something wrong. | Student # 1 Scheduled study groups will continue to be held. It's a good thing. We have learned that when we study together we learn from each other. The school has promised that Mentors will continue to work with us in study groups. |
| Student #2 Teachers at this school allow us to study together. We often have book studies together or we learn from films. My teacher showed us the Odyssey and we talked about it in everyday terms. I learn a lot when my work is presented in a way I can understand.  | It is hard for me to work in a group. Sometimes I get mad when I have to work in a group. If I have had a bad day or even a bad night before, I don't want to be bothered.   | Student # 2 Teachers at this school encourage us to study together. We plan to stay involved in study groups.   |

Table 8 (cont.)

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Student #3 We have learned to help each other. If the teacher or the tutor is busy, we depend on each other for help.  | We sometimes do not get along with each other. This causes a conflict among each other.   | Student # 3 Peer tutoring has been an asset to this school. They will be continued. The students that score the highest on tests lead the peer tutoring sessions during the last 30 minutes of class.  |
| Student #4 We do a lot of team building to exchange ideas. A group activity sometimes means we share answers to a question and then defends that answer using reasoning skills.            | We come from such different backgrounds. Sometimes it is hard to trust. I am afraid of being laughed at.  | Student # 4 I have learned the meaning of team. Every class has 15 minutes of focus topic time. We use that time to discuss issues about learning and about issues that deal with the operation of the school.   |
| Student #5 We are all in this school for some of the same reasons. This school provides us with time and guidance to work on school work together. Sometimes we even do research together. | Not enough time to talk with each other. Sometimes these rules are too strict. Too little time between classes. We live too far from each other so that does not allow us time to talk. | Student # 5 Teachers have designed lessons dealing with some of the themes that deal with our life. Sometimes we compare stories and pick out themes for study from those studies. For instance we have studied budgeting and also use home products to analyze in science. Keeping this in mind themes are more relevant. |
| Student #6 My teachers encourage us to talk and work together.   | When talking it is difficult to keep negative comments out and positive comments in.  | Student # 6 We share the topics we discuss with other classes and students. I headed a debate that gave viewpoints on should Elion be sent back to Cuba. The discussion caught on. Students brought in all kinds of news articles.   |

Six students responded to the item on collaborated learning.

Evidence: All six students responded that they learn better when they study as a team.

**Obstacles:** All students responded that differences in life experiences make it hard for them to come together as one unit. Lack of time, focus on negative comments, conflict and not contributing to group were listed as obstacles.

**Action Plan:** The students agreed that learning is valuable when using the collaborative approach. They will include the learning community in their instructional needs.

Table 9

| <p><b>Practice 5: Critical Study (Inquiry)</b><br/> Critical Study is the study of practice by considering relevant perspectives data and knowledge. It involves asking questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On what basis are we doing what we are doing? What evidence or support do we have to justify our practice? How do we know whether what we are doing is effective?</li> <li>• What information data, knowledge, and perspectives can we gather to assist us in studying our practice?</li> <li>• How does what we are doing fit with our values and believes as a school?</li> <li>• How does what we are doing serve the needs of the diverse individuals and groups who make up our community? Whose interests do our practices serve? Whose interests do they not serve:</li> </ul> <p>The primary purpose of critical study is the improvement of teaching, learning and school practice in the classrooms and schools that engage in it.</p> |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Supporting Evidence  | Obstacles  | Action Plan  |
| Student #1 I have learned to ask questions and seek out information that suits the way I live.   | Sometimes I just get tired of school.  | Student # 1 I have learned to ask questions about classes and issues that I'm involved in. I learned that there is nothing wrong in questioning why we do the things we do. Through Student Council, I have learned that there is a way to question the teacher. |
| Student #2 My teacher requires us to practice questioning like Is what we're learning help us in the way we live?  | Sometimes I don't pick up on the questioning. Plus, I don't know if anyone knows how badly I live. | Student # 2 Student are encourage to ask the questions how does what we do in school effect the rest of our life.  |

Table 9 (cont.)

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Student #3 Going to school conferences such as FBLA and FHA helps me to better understand the issues we discuss in class   | Not many people join student organizations and sometimes there aren't enough people to discuss issues.        | Student # 3 We are all different in this school. We have learned to be sensitive of each other. Our clubs and activities teach us we should include every student from every group to fit into the values in this school.   |
| Student #4 My teachers involve me in all types of learning. We read from written materials, work on the computer, and work on projects with our hands. I learn a lot of different ways.          | Sometimes all students don't participate.   | Student # 4 My teachers make sure that what we do is right for all the students at this school. She even says that there is so much that we can learn from each other. We have students that are peer tutors. These tutors work with students that have missed a lot of school. Sometimes they even bring in people from the community to help us if we need it. Students in this school really look out for the welfare of others. |
| Student #5 My teachers require us to keep track of our grades and our own absences. All work is done on computer. I am responsible for my own progress.  | I like being in charge of my own progress but I am afraid I will fail.  | Student # 5 This school practices student responsibility. We must learn that our progress depends on our attitude. The staff teaches us to look at our behaviors that sometimes get in the way of our success. I must learn that I am the only one that can improve myself.   |
| Student #6 What I learned in my classes, I can use in the community. We filled out a survey on how we learn will affect the community. This type of study will help me best throughout the year. | How will I fit in the community if I can't work out my struggles? I want to fit in but will people except me? | Student # 6 Leadership classes are held once a week to help us become more responsible.   |

Six students responded to the item on critical study.

Evidence: Three students responded that questioning added a positive dimension to their studies.

Obstacles: Low self-esteem and fear is a factor that keeps students from participating in class activities.

Action Plan: Inquiry is important in student learning, however, low self confidence often prohibits students from taking risks. Students will continue to seek ways to make their learning relevant to their individual needs.

Table 10

| <p><b>Practice 6: Supportive Principal Leadership</b><br/> <b>Principal involvement</b> in a school's efforts to become more democratic can range from being actively resistant to actively supportive of democratic efforts.<br/> <b>Principal resistance</b> involves placing obstacles in the way of teachers attempting to become more democratic (e.g., withholding financial or material support) or simply refusing to engage in certain practices (e.g., sharing decisions).<br/> <b>Passive forms</b> of principal support consist of neither blocking the efforts of teachers engaged in school renewal work, nor proactively supporting or becoming personally involved in such efforts.<br/> <b>Active principal</b> support includes regular publicly and privately communicating support for democratic efforts personally participating in such efforts, and providing time for discussing the school's movement toward democratic schooling.</p> |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Supporting Evidence  | Obstacles   | Action Plan   |
| Student #1 Our principal is an active principal. She supports the democratic effort.   | Sometimes we want her to make us do things. She makes us work it out ourselves. | Student # 1 The principal looks out for everybody. She is an advocate for us. Every possible activity of competition that comes up, she gets us involved. I don't think I'm smart but she tells me that I am. We look at her energy and do what she tells us to do because we don't want to let her down. |



Table 10 (cont.)

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Student #2. The principal is an active principal because she talks about democracy every day. She makes us make good decisions. She tells us that we must be democratic when we deal with each other.</p>                                 | <p>Some of the teachers don't make us live by the I.D.E.A.L.S. like the principal and we get away with things.</p>  | <p>Student # 2 The principals talks a lot about the school being democratic. She constantly talks about using the I.D.E.A.L.S. I think she means that we need to make sure that everyone has a voice in what we do. She holds meetings so that we all have an opportunity to say what we think. She catches us in the halls or in our classes and asks for examples of how we used one of the I.D.E.A.L.S.</p>   |
| <p>Student #3 I like to see the principal work with the other kids. She smiles and gives lots of handshakes and hugs. She lets us work out our problems by making sure everyone has a voice.</p>   | <p>She can't be everywhere. If a principal is to do this she must be able to be everywhere.</p>   | <p>Student # 3 The principal works with the teachers. She makes sure we have everything we need to learn. We have had so many community people to come in to help teachers help us. We are lucky to be in this school.</p>   |
| <p>Student #4. At this school the principal is the person that keeps it all together. She is involved with the teachers. She brings lots of programs to the school. She is proud of this school and gets other people to be proud of it.</p> | <p>The principal sometimes can't be with every student. Sometimes I don't want to be with the teacher because the principal always has something interesting to do with us or talk about.</p> | <p>Student # 4 Our principal holds this school together. She works with community organizations to get computers and other equipment in the school. She works with the teachers to teach us the skills to get good jobs. The business department gets us jobs in banks and doctors offices and law offices. We do more than work at McDonald's. She does a lot of talking about our attitude. Attitude will get you altitude. She says we have to have a good job to keep us off the street.</p> |

Table 10 (cont.)

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Student #5 Our principal seems to support different projects that the teachers do with us. One time we told her that we needed computers to do our work and she got 3 donated computers for us to take home to do our work.                         | Sometimes the principal puts a time limit to what we do. Or sometimes she comes into the class and makes demands on us like making us tell what we are doing and I don't like to be pushed. | Student # 5 The principal gets us involved in all kinds of activities that we would not ever do on our own, like the mock trial, going on school visits with O.N.E., academic decathalon, debate, (FBLA) Future Business Leaders of America. |
| Student#6. This school runs good because the principal sees that the students and the teachers know the rules. She takes the time to explain the entire program to the parents. This is the only school where I know all the rules when I enrolled. | I can't get away with too much because the principal talks to parents and gets them to come to the school all the time.   | Student # 6 The principal works hard with our parents. She works with the PTSA to build in parenting skills. Some parents have a hard time dealing with us. She helps our parents to understand us.  |

Six students responded to the item on supportive principal leadership.

Evidence: Two of the students used the words "active" and "democratic" in their description of her. Four participants view the principal as supportive.

Obstacles: All students responded that they were disappointed that there was not more of her.

Action Plan: The principal of the school is extremely supportive. The principal of the school is a democratic leader and provides opportunities to the school. The principal is valued. The principal incorporates a strategic plan that address teaching and learning.

Table 11

| <b>Practice7: Caring and Collective Responsibility for Students</b><br>Unlike conventional schools where teachers feel responsible for their students only while the students are in their classrooms, in democratic schools teachers believe they are responsible for all students in the school all the time.<br>In schools where collective responsibility for students exist, students feel cared about and important.<br><br>In schools where collective responsibility for students does not exist, students often feel disconnected from teachers and uncared for. |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Supporting Evidence   | Obstacles   | Action Plan   |
| Student #1 I feel that all the teachers in this school care about my progress. I have a teacher that asked me to bring in all my grades as I get them. I'm glad someone cares.  | I am so afraid to open up with the people that say they care about me.  | Student # 1 The students at this school look forward to student recognition programs. This is the only school where I feel teachers care about me. All the adults are here for me.  |
| Student #2. This school promotes me. The teachers push me to participate in a lot of programs and encourage me when I have problems. Students can work on an individualized basis.  | I get angry sometimes when my teachers volunteer me. I feel left out when the teacher doesn't push me.              | Student # 2 This school pushes me to get involved in activities that I never would on my own.   |
| Student #3 When you miss one day and come back, everyone asks if you are OK. That makes me feel secure.   | Some people have bad attitudes, which cause others not to care and makes them feel insecure which causes conflicts. | Student # 3 School discipline is tough at this school. We have a peaceful school because there is no tolerance for fighting, hanging out of class, or not coming to school. I come to school because I know when I'm not at school, someone knows. When we started this school, the principal and teachers told us that they were going to see to it that we were successful. We just had to show a desire to learn. They have proved to us that they will help us. |

Table 11 (cont.)

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Student #4. I feel important because of the student teacher involvement. I was shocked when I told my teacher I couldn't come to school because I missed the bus. She volunteered to pick me up. | I've never had anyone care this much about what I did. Sometimes I don't give them the respect I should. | Student # 4 Students are important to this school. I feel so important at this school. We are responsible for assemblies and other functions of the school. All the grown-ups make you feel like you are their own children. That is why I like this school. |
| Student #5 Teachers listen and take action when I am involved.   | When teachers have big classes they don't have time for me.  | Student # 5 When I have a problem the principals and teachers are the first ones to know. They make me go to a session called Temper Tamers to help me get my head on straight. Those counselors always make me take a look at myself.                       |
| Student #6. Teachers work to understand students.  | I am forced to take my problems out. I find that difficult.  | Student # 6 Recognition programs mean a lot to me. Every day an adult tells me that they are glad that I am in school. The adults at this school care.   |

Evidence: All six students responded that this school cared about them.

Obstacles: All students responded that their learning is affected by personal problems.

Action Plan: Students in this school are heard in this school. They are learning that they must be responsible for their own success but the teachers and principal are there for them. The staff will continue to support them.

Table 12

| <p><b>Practice 8: Connection to Home and Community</b><br/> In order to be democratic school, students must connect themselves with communities in various ways.<br/> On one level it should involve families and communities in the work of the school, which is educating students for democratic citizenship.<br/> On a second level the school should involve itself in the work of the family and community.</p> |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Supporting Evidence</b>  | <b>Obstacles</b>  | <b>Action Plan</b>  |
| <p>Student #1 This school has been good to my family. The principal tells us how we must learn to pay the community back by doing good things. After doing many projects, I know how important it is to work with the community.</p>  | <p>Since I've been in high school I never involved my parents. This school won't let me get away with this. I must involve my family in community activities.</p> | <p>Student # 1 The school holds a recognition day for the tutors and volunteers in the school. These people feel good about what they do for the school. When I see these people in the school, I feel a sense of community.</p>  |
| <p>Student #2. Community service makes us aware of our connection with the community.</p>   | <p>The community is not aware of the good things we do. We need to advertise.</p>   | <p>Student # 2 My mother knows that so many people in the community help the school. Now she comes to help in our activities. I know that I must give back something too. Our parents and guardians like coming to this school because they are made to feel special.</p> |
| <p>Student #3 So many community people contribute to our school. They make it possible for us to have a lot of opportunities and make it possible for those of us that have children.</p>   | <p>Those students that don't have good attendance can't participate.</p>  | <p>Student # 3 We had Job Shadowing Day, we had more businesses than students. So many people care about this school.</p>   |

Table 12 (cont.)

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Student #4. Many businesses come to the school. When business people see how hard the school tries, they help us in big ways like giving us clothes for us and the girls who have babies.  | It is difficult for my parent to participate. And besides my mother does not like to come to this school. She went to this school when she was pregnant with me and said the teachers were never fair. | Student # 4 Businesses think we are doing a good job. An attorney is going to get me a job. My guardian is so impressed that she wants to send the attorney a thank you. The principal is planning to have the businesses and our parents meet to talk about job possibilities. |
| Student #5 Every class has community awareness components.   | I don't like a lot of people coming in looking at us like we are in a zoo.   | Student # 5 I know a lot about community awareness because we study about the city in our classes. We learn more about the community when we visit other schools with O.N.E.  |
| Student #6. The school gets us involved in a lot of community activities. We also work with other schools like having programs for the elementary schools and visiting other schools with the alternative education group and the O.N.E. site visits. I like to see what other kids are doing. | We don't mix enough with the other students our age in the city schools. I wish we could do more.  | Student # 6 Site visits help us to contribute to our school mates and to our family.  |

Six students responded to the item on Home and Community

Evidence: Five of the six students responded that they knew the importance of community in their school.

Obstacles: Students responded the community was not aware of the good they did.

Students thought they were not appreciated.

Action Plan: Community service is a great component for the students. Community service made the students feel like they were contributing. Business, industries and community based organizations will be solicited to fulfill the school's mission.

Table 13

| <p><b>Practice 9: Concern for Equity</b><br/>         Schools are concerned with issues of equity and justice not only within the school, but also in the local and global communities.<br/>         Some equity issues that a school might examine include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is there a disparity between races in achievement in our school?</li> <li>• How can we provide less affluent students with equitable access to technology?</li> <li>• Do our instructional practices legitimate the background and culture of some students at the expense of others?</li> <li>• How do we group students and how does this affect different groups of students?</li> <li>• How do our classrooms (and school) discipline policies and practices affect students from non-dominate cultural groups?</li> <li>• Do our classroom interactions and language subtly and subconsciously promote socially constructed gender roles and expectations of students?</li> </ul> <p>Do our shared decision making procedure ensure that the voices of all students get heard?</p> |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Supporting Evidence</b>  | <b>Obstacles</b>   | <b>Action Plan</b>  |
| Student #1 This school works with every race. We have assemblies each month we celebrate a group. I enjoy learning about others. In my classroom, we respect each other.  | Sometimes I feel strange when a student of another race talks about students who are different from them . | Student # 1 Classes are designed to be sensitive to all students. We feel so special in this school because everybody is treated in the same way. |
| Student #2. Every race has the opportunity to have a say in the decisions that are made in this school.   | I hate it when the other Black kids don't say what is on their mind.                                       | Student # 2 When decisions are made, the student council makes sure every ethic group and student activity has a voice. Every race has a say-so.  |
| Student #3 I always feel that I learn about other races. In my classes we have something from every race.   | I don't always want to learn about other groups. I guess it is a good thing that we do.                    | Student # 3 In class, we listen to the experiences of students of other races. We can even bring things to class that come from the way we live.  |

Table 13 (cont.)

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Student #4 I like it when I walk in the principal's office or the library or places in the halls and I see pictures of all races. | I don't learn good when the teacher talks about one race.                             | Student # 4 This school is respectful of all the students in the school. When you look around the school, pictures and posters are of all the races. This school cares about all of us. We have textbooks and magazines for all races. There is an organization for all students. |
| Student #5 The teachers in this school do not make a difference with the students.  | I know that some teachers have favorites.   | Student # 5 Teachers treat all the students the same.   |
| Student #6. The rules in this school apply to everyone. All the students are treated fairly.                                      | I hate when the Black kids get mad with the Mexican kids because we are all the same. | Student # 6 The rules in this school apply to everyone. All students have a voice in the decision making, therefore, everyone is treated fairly.  |

Six students responded to the item on Equity.

Evidence: All six students responded that this showed balance for all students.

Obstacles: All students responded that their learning is affected by personal problems.

Action Plan: Students in this school are heard in this school. Every race is given a voice. Input from all grades, gender, races and ages will be included in all decision making.

#### Rubric Rating

Responses from the rubric were recorded and tabulated. Each participated rated each practice. The researcher did not discuss any responses with any other participants. No corrections were made to their original responses. Response rates included: 100% of the respondents responded to the practices; 85% gave supporting evidence to the ten



practices; 96% responded that low self-esteem was the major obstacles to the ten practices; and 100% reported positive results of the democratic model.

### Focus Groups

Interviewing focus groups gave the researcher the opportunity to analyze how students as they interacted with each other and to the research topic in a group setting. Student Council became the catalyst for the focus group the democratic process began to emerge within this group. In the first meeting of the group in September 2000, the group was introduced to the I.D.E.A.L.S. concept. The researcher not only gave examples of how students could practice the I.D.E.A.L.S. in daily life but she made the practice of the I.D.E.A.L.S. an ongoing competition for the students. Students were given funny money when they could come back to the group with concrete evidence that one or more of the I.D.E.A.L.S. were being used. In two weeks the students were anxious to come to student council to discuss the importance of the I.D.E.A.L.S. in their daily practice. The impact that the participants had on other students in the school was profound. Their spirit energized the entire student body. Because the six students in the study were also involved in other activities, there was ample opportunity to observe the dynamics of organizational communication within their subgroups. The Latino Club and Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) are examples of organizations where the participants of the study were afforded the opportunity to voice their perception of the practices of high achieving schools and model their use of the I.D.E.A.L.S.

### Student Council

All six participants of the study were active in the student council. The group was racially and gender mixed. Each session of student council was opened by the principal.

She set the tone for the meeting. Once a week the researcher asked, "Give me an example of how you are practicing one or more of the I.D.E.A.L.S. in school." One of the males responded by saying. "I am learning to focus. Now that I know that I can have a voice in how I learn, I don't feel pressured. Yesterday, I taught the teacher a rap song and told her it was poetry. After class we actually sat down and discussed the phrases of the song. Today I feel like the teacher learned something from me." This was the group that also learned from reaching out to the community. The six respondents were all members of the clown club. This was a group that taught character qualities, though clowning. The alternative school partnered with the grade school down the street and these students took great pride in being able to give something back to the elementary children.

The at-risk student is not a new phenomenon. While these students freely gave their opinions on the practices, they relied heavily on the school personnel to provide them with structure. The factors that create their at-riskness are varied, but the possibility of a failed education is the responsibility of the school community. The fact of threats to the successful completion of education has shaped the agenda of focus groups and this school. Do students learn more in democratic school communities than in conventional schools? The evidence provided in this study suggests that student academic performance is improved when students engage in the practices of high achieving schools and the I.D.E.A.L.S. The focus groups are grounded in practices of high achieving schools and democratic ideals.

### Observations

Once the decision was made that the principal would be the researcher, informal observations began wherever students congregated. During my observation, it was imperative for me to create a level of comfort and trust so that the participants would talk to me with ease and without hesitation.

Observations began as early as the fall of 2000 and went throughout the remainder of the school year. This type of data collection added to the triangulation process. Students were involved in various school related activities such as student council, leadership classes, FBLA, FHA, Mock Trial Competition and any other activity that occurred in the school. Students were observed in interactions with their peers, the way they interacted with the staff, in their decision making and most of all, the way they performed and progressed academically.

My first formal observation was conducted in the fall of 2000 and other frequent observations occurred in the duration of the study. The rationale for this observation was to establish a transference role, i.e. from principal to researcher. The researcher explained to the participants that she would be observing them in various settings that would provide information as to how they applied the I.D.E.A.L.S. and practices of high achieving schools to their academic performance. The researcher constantly reiterated her role as researcher so students would feel free to talk. Patton (1990) proports that first hand observation and participation enables the researcher to gather data through direct experience and thus be able to understand and interpret the setting and participants being studies and evaluated. The participants were observed in all of the practices of high achieving schools.

Subsequent observations followed throughout the year. Students were observed in formal and informal settings. Formal settings included their participation in organized activities i.e., the Mock Trial Competition, Academic Decathlon. Informal settings included observing students as they interact with other students in the hallways and in classes or observing their communication skills with students and adults.

Core Learning Principle: All the participants became very active in the school's core learning principles. They met with the principal weekly to discuss school, student, and staff issues. Three major initiatives were carved out of this exercise. These students were responsible for carving out the democratic school governance. They also were major contributors to the mission statement of the school.

Authentic Learning and Assessment: All of the participants were active in working with their teachers in building their portfolios. They stayed after school and often passed up the opportunities to attend school functions so that they could find ways to build a stronger portfolio.

Shared Decision Making: Students were observed allowing even exchange when trying to reach a consensus on a decision. They soon became leaders when soliciting an opinion from all the school members. One example was when the school discovered that the security system had to be increased. There were too many doors for students to enter. The president of the student council (a participant) developed a survey in an effort to get everyone's voice on where to move the scanner. The staff was amazed at the maturity of the student and a decision was made that the entire school felt good about.

Students Collaborate and Learn Together: The most exciting example of students collaborating was when a core group of students, many of them participants in the study,

competed in the State Bar Association's Mock Trial Competition. Students had to create their own study groups to be able understand the concepts of the competition. As a result of their hard work, the students beat out the major schools in the state, even though they were an alternative school.

### Discussion

Students indicated that collaborative learning gave them support and builds their self esteem. Students at-risk tend to learn in isolation since they have so many circumstances that impact the sequential patterns that students not at risk learn. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) assert that an effective approach for teaching the at-risk student is to link what makes sense to the student to the subject matter. Students in the study provided evidence that they learned more when they studied with others and are able to share like issues and experiences. Students made comments like “. . . at the other school we have to memorize stuff.” Here we work in groups and are encouraged to think outside the school.”

Critical Study: The participants in the study were observed in classes as they pursued their learning. A new excitement was observed as they engaged in problem solving and found the courage to ask questions that were meaningful to them. I also observed them finding new ways to learn. Students learned math from pool and science from the foods class. Students felt so good about themselves. They monitored each others homework assignment.

Supportive Principal Leadership: The principal was supportive of an open door policy. Students were observed coming to the principal to obtain consent to take the

leadership role in school activities. The principal found ways to support their projects as well as boost their self esteem.

Caring and Collective Responsibility: Students were concern for one another. When a student came forward to say that she had been living in the back of a moving van, the students immediately went to work to support the student. The student council divided into teams. A group of students met with one of the counselors to find supports services for shelter for the student. A group of students brought in clothing. Another group of students provided peer tutoring, all in an effort to support one of their own. A caring and collective community reaches out so that everyone is involved in the democratic process.

Connection to Home and Community: The participants were observed throughout the year practicing the connection from school to home and the community. One of the observable occasions was during the Thanksgiving holiday. Many of the students had never set down to a Thanksgiving meal. The students found several community-based organizations to come into the school and provide a turkey dinner. The students were responsible for planning and executing a program. They then used this opportunity to invite parents. Once the family members were at the school they invited them into classes to participate in their homeroom lesson.

Concern for Equity: Students were observed being sensitive of the voices of all students. When students organized an assembly, they were aware that the program had to reflect the student body i.e., gender and race.

### Documents

The following documents were used to supply antidotal data related to the students' personal history, cumulative records, intake forms from the alternative education department, school test scores and discipline referrals. Lincoln and Guba (1985) expressed documentation as “. . . any written or recorded material other than a record that was not prepared specifically in response to a request from the investigator.” They further assert records as “. . . any written or recorded statement prepared by or for an individual.”

Core Learning Principle: All the participants were major contributors to the mission statement of the school. Mission Statements and Democratic School Governance can be found posted in the office, in every classroom and in the hallways. These same documents are listed in the Parent/Student Handbook. Student Council and Staff meeting agendas that demonstrate a clear vision and communication can be found in the principals office. Activity calendar is distributed to every class and to the support staff in the building to demonstrate the school's structure.

Authentic Learning and Assessment: All of the participants were active in building their portfolios. Portfolios of students can be found in the media center. Teachers in each individual class have copies of student work. ” Intake records as well as information from each participant's cumulative file were reviewed to obtain a broader perspective of the student. These documents supply historical data related to academics and other issues that might impede academic progress. TABE diagnostic test or State scores were reviewed from 1999 to make a comparison to the way ten practices would make a significant difference in their academic performance. Other information included

in the intake information proved informative because it provided socio-economic information that revealed data that validated their at-risk category.

Achievement records are found in each students cumulative file kept in the counselors' office.

Shared Decision Making: Student Council and Staff meeting agendas are excellent examples of shared decision-making.

Students Collaborate and Learn Together: Lesson plans of collaborative study groups are kept with each students' teacher. These lessons are also given to the mentor or peer mentor.

Critical Study: All units used in the critical study specialized subject process can be found in the teacher's classroom and with the participating student.

Supportive Principal Leadership: The principal keeps documentation of every project that she approves in the school.

Caring and Collective Responsibility: A listing of every community volunteer and their contribution is listed in the guest handbook that is kept in the office. Copies of the volunteer recognition program is kept in the office. The counselors, as well as each teacher, has a copy of community resources for students that need human resource assistance.

Connection to Home and Community: Copies of monthly Student Newspapers focusing on staff and students are sent to the parents and community, business and industry, and community based organizations. Invitational flyers indicate focus group meetings on topics of parenting, counseling, careers and neighborhood support groups held at the school.



Concern for Equity: Monthly student driven assemblies focused on student recognition and multi-cultural events. Each month an ethnic group was spotlighted.

### Summary

This chapter presents a profile of participant responses to the data sources. There were six individual interviews, six responses to a rubric and observations in a formal and informal setting. Information rendered pertained to student perception and application of the use of the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a method to impact academic improvement in students categorized as being at-risk. Site observations were conducted during the school day. Interviews were recorded and records reviewed and analyzed. The data analysis process involved transcribing the data, aggregating the data and condensing the data into significant statements that link theory building themes and patterns.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Emerging Themes and Patterns

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe emerging themes and patterns in an effort to examine and isolate the issues of this analysis. This qualitative naturalistic inquiry was guided by student responses to the Rubric of High Achieving Schools, individual and focus group interviews, observations, and documents. The study focused heavily on contextual interpretation. Merriam (1988) purports that qualitative research allows for thick data to be collected that demonstrates an interrelationship with content. To begin contextualizing, research questions were asked. Responses to these research questions were correlated to the responses to the Rubric, documents, interviews, and observations. Collectively, the data sources provided depth and meaning to practices of high achieving schools and how they are linked to improved achievement as they relate to students characterized as at-risk. Data from each source were compared and contrasted to crosscheck the accuracy of descriptive information for discovery of emerging and recurring themes or categories (Strauss, 1997). Using the collection of responses and viewpoints built theory. This study provided the opportunity for students to give their responses in a layered format that may be used as a body of knowledge for students who exhibit at-risk behaviors.

#### Response to Research Questions

The following are emerging themes and patterns as related to the research questions. Each theme or pattern described is a finding in two or more data sources. The

responses that are given are a compilation of all six participants and represent multiple data sources.

How do at-risk students perceive the process of developing a shared school vision? We had a hard time at first working in a group. The teachers were always asking us about our opinion to the issues that were going on in the school. They would constantly say that they wanted our input. None of us had ever been in a school where the students shared in the way this school operated. Trust was a hard thing for us to have. But once we discovered they were serious, it was easy for us to openly share our thoughts about the school mission, the school governance and any other decision that was made in behalf of the school.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles encountered when developing a shared vision? The biggest obstacle for us to overcome in developing a shared purpose was to overcome our feeling of uselessness. It is very hard to have a shared purpose if you have never had a purpose. In order to develop a shared vision, you have to be at school and you have to feel like you're a part of something. Most of the students in this school have too much responsibility at home to have a shared vision about anything. Teachers have really wanted to get us into the school mission but most of the time we feel like we are not good enough to be a part of the decision making. Just the idea of having a say so in what goes on in a school is real different. The teachers even ask us to write our opinions about issues in the school, like dress code or deciding how much time we need to pass in the halls. We feel like we are in charge of the way we run the school. We had a group of kids that was writing graffiti on the walls in the boy's bathroom. Me and my friend

found out who they were and turned them in. We did not want this for our school. We will not have kids mess up what we are trying to improve.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles in developing a shared purpose for students learning? The teachers in this school have one focus. They make sure that each student has a voice. Surveys and ballots are common in this school. When an issue is up for conversation the principal and student council send around a survey in an effort to get every student's opinion. When a decision must be made, a ballot is used for decision making. When ballots are tabulated, the results are read over the intercom so that everyone knows how and why the decision was made. We have also learned how to use a "chat room" process. Teachers allow students fifteen minutes at 9 o'clock to debate issues coming up for vote. The recorder in the class takes the findings to the office to be read at student council. No one in this school can say they don't have a chance to be a part of any decision. The principal and teachers say "that's the democratic process."

### Discussion

In conventional schools, where most students at-risk are unsuccessful, a shared set of goals, commitments, and practices are made by one individual or by that individual's select inter-sanctum within the school. Common principles of teaching and learning are essential to a democratic environment whereby all stakeholders must internalize a buy-in. The success of this environment is determined by a set of core beliefs that cite direction and continuity. Evidence in the success of the practice of developing a shared vision was provided in the responses to the Rubric when the practice of the respondents and other students used student council and other organized forms of communication as the vehicle

to drive communication of the shared vision and activities as a contributor to the welfare of the school, and the governance throughout the school. Further evidence was provided while observing the behavior of the respondents as they became active in carving out the democratic school governance and using the vernacular to further carry out the theme in individual classrooms. They were also major contributors to the mission statement of the school. What makes a school democratic is the ability to include the entire school community in establishing and implementing the school's vision, mission, goals, objectives and strategies.

Statements made in student interviews support the fact that students started to gain confidence in the school when they began meeting weekly with the principal to support their comments in the communication process. This core learning principle is necessary in establishing the confidence of at-risk students in the realization that they (students) have a voice in their schooling and their future. By using a process whereby all voices were encouraged and heard, changes in the delivery of school practices (rules and structure) and instruction were improved. Evidence of the shared school vision was supported by a functional mission statement and democratic school governance.

How do at-risk students perceive authentic teaching, learning and assessment?

Authentic teaching, learning, and assessment allows us to use what we learn in class and connect it to our experiences to make new learning that can be used beyond school. Most of us have had to live as adults, so we have so many different experiences that the average kids our age don't have and it is sometimes hard to focus. When the teachers know how to use experiences as a way to get to the "hard stuff," the subjects seem to make more sense.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to authentic teaching, learning and assessment? Sometimes we just need old fashion structure. It is confusing to give input into learning when you can't focus because of what happened to you the night before. Our life is not like everyone else's.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to authentic teaching, learning and assessment? At-risk students must have ways to connect our experiences with the learning. A strategy that the school used was to train all teachers in the learning styles of the students. If you walk in the classrooms you see teachers using a variety of methods to teach one lesson. When we finally see the light go on, it makes us feel like we have some success in school.

### Discussion

Developing authentic teaching, learning and assessment is a critical practice when working with the at-risk. The responses to the interview and evidence of documents indicate that at-risk students make meaningful academic gains when their learning is connected to their life experiences. Attitudes toward themselves and their school are evident by the drop in the absenteeism of the respondents. Identifying student learning styles is also essential to their academic growth and development. Evidence of this practice is supported in the responses to the rubric. Learning activities that correspond to the student's learning style cause learners to gain access to their experiences, knowledge and beliefs. Newman and Wehlage (1995) has linked high student achievement to democratic school focuses when students engage in the personal construction of new knowledge, can conduct disciplined inquiry about a topic at hand and have some value beyond the school. The manner in which things are taught in constructivist learning

approach prompt students to call forth what they know in order that they can connect new information and experiences to their existing world.

Many researchers identify poor cognitive ability as a major predictor of low student achievement and lack of persistence with the educational system. In Barbara Smey-Richman's (1988) study on the involvement in learning for low-achieving students an insightful account of the way in which the "at-risk" student learns and thinks was described. Much of her research used a process-product approach in which relationships are established between measures of teacher behavior (e.g., instructional and classroom management strategies) and student outcomes (e.g., achievement gains, attitudes toward self and school). In such an approach authentic performance is viewed as a way whereby acquisition of knowledge can be transferred into practice in real work contexts making authentic performance critical to development of competency. Authentic performance suggests that meaningful scholarship in real-world contexts needs to become the driving force of the curriculum and the focus on assessments focused on authentic achievement would provide a better fit between the world of the learner and content found in the curriculum in many schools.

Studies show that at-risk low-achieving students often lack a concern for accuracy and an active approach to problem solving. These students also demonstrate a penchant for guessing and have difficulty breaking complex problems into a number of simpler ones. In order for the at-risk student to survive, schools must strive to develop an environment, which maximizes learning and minimizes conditions, which interfere with learning. Thus, any programs to help ensure student well being must first take the necessary steps to plan an environment that maximizes the potential for learning. This

phenomenon is important since a strong relationship exists between poor academic achievement in early grades, increased student dissatisfaction with school, disengagement within the classroom, increased high school dropout rates, and a variety of high-risk behaviors. The learning style is so idiosyncratic in the at-risk adolescent that attempts to educate through traditional methods have been unsuccessful.

It is taken for granted; apparently, that in time students will see for themselves how things fit together. Unfortunately, the reality of the situation is that they tend to learn what we teach. If we teach connectedness and integration they learn that. If we teach separation and discontinuity, that is what they learn. To suppose otherwise would be incongruous. (Humphreys, 1981, p.xi.)

Because of the numerous oppressive life experiences that at-risk learner's encounter, they make little use of facts, lack of attention to detail and fewer use for rote learning. Sherrill (1995) asserts that real learning occurs when our brains make connections between things we already know and things we are being taught: connecting the new with the known enable students to process material in meaningful ways. The brain changes physiologically as a result of experience. The environment in which a brain operates determines to a large degree the functioning ability of the brain. One sure way for the at-risk student to make connections between learning and life experiences is through portfolios. When the at-risk learner uses portfolios across the curriculum, the process encourage students to view themselves as complete learners, not compartmentalized cogs in the separate subject wheel (Sherrill, et.al). At-risk students need curriculum that will enable them to recognize patterns in their learning. Another connection portfolio assessment encourages is that of commonalties of various disciplines and their relationships to each other. The most important contribution portfolios make to student learning is that of requiring student meta-cognition and reflection. Questioning



becomes connected to critical thinking. Questions such as "What were the steps I took to produce this work?" or "What piece of work reflects my best efforts?" These kinds of question develop lifelong habits of critical thinking that enable them to make connections and become problem solvers. Meta-cognition and reflection is viewed as a direct correlation to the inquiry method that need be present in order to make learning meaningful. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) and Newmann and Associates (1996) found that when teachers teach authentically, their students learn more.

Learning activities should cause learners to gain access to their experiences, knowledge and beliefs. The manner in which things are taught in constructivist teaching approach should prompt students to call forth what they know in order that they can connect new information and experiences to their existence.

How do at-risk students perceive shared decision making? The students at this school see shared decision making as allowing teachers, parents and the administrative staff to share in the making of critical decisions. When you hear people say decisions are made by the school, we now know that all decision making is shared by teachers and students (all of us). That was hard to believe since decisions were always being made for us.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to shared decision making? Many of us struggle with ways to overcome our inability to participate in the shared decision making process. Most of us do not have the confidence to take a position. Because no one has ever valued decisions made by at-risk students, it is hard for us to have enough confidence to make a decision. Because we have had so many obstacles in

our life, we do not always handle our anger well when we can't get others to understand what we are trying say.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students describe as ways to overcome obstacles to shared decision making? The principal and teachers have come up with ways to get us to participate. The one activity that stands out is the time when we wanted to have a basketball game and the teachers were afraid that there would be a fight. The principal asked us to come up with a plan. She upheld the plan and we had the game. A lot of the students talked about the fact that we had actually won a major war because we had been asking to do this forever. From then on, the students started being more active in the decision making. Some strategies that might help in the future are using student council or other organized activities to use as a shared decision making forum. Students circulate surveys to all classes to gather ideas for all students to have input. Students are authorized to use some part of class time to discuss an issue and then take that input to the student council.

### Discussion

Shared decision making is a phenomenon that students at-risk must learn to a trust. Students are taught that they can enlarge their circle of caring by including others to be a part of their decision making process. Shared decision making incorporates a concept whereby all voices are heard, all opinions valued, and all perspectives articulated. Shared decision making creates a forum for every member of the school community to act collectively and to make decisions that affect teaching and learning (Connections, 1998). When the students at-risk realizes that their voice will and can be heard, they begin to gain confidence in the adults that hold roles of responsibility in the

school. Evidence provided by the Rubric states that students perceived themselves as being a part of a team that makes critical decisions relative to their future. Students related in the interview that character building classes helped them build confidence. One of the students stated, "This is where we learn to listen to others' opinion. Some of us have to go to temper tamers so we can be taught to cope with our emotions." Evidence provided through observation in student council and advisory committee indicates that students feel comfortable with the classrooms as well as the school. Documents indicate that student council and staff meeting agendas are proven activities that exercise shared decision making.

How do at-risk students perceive the critical study process, often referred to as action research and reflective practice? We see the critical study process as being a way we can look at how we are learning and how we are being taught. We are learning that to get the right answers we must ask the right questions. For the first time I can voice my opinion and people will listen. I was always so afraid to speak up in the other schools because I wasn't as smart as the other students. This school has a comfort about it. Teachers stress that everyone is valuable. I never had that in any other school. I am learning to inquire. To me that means that I have to take the responsibility of what I learn upon myself. I can ask the questions that will make what I learn mean something to me in my everyday life. I can make sense out of knowing that what I am being asked to learn fits into my values and beliefs as a student. I was always the one who got frustrated. The I.D.E.A.L.S. has given me a way to take control of my decisions. I finally figured out that I have a voice in what goes on at the school and what happens to me and my education.

### How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to the critical study process?

Most of us at this school have been on our own most of our lives. Some of us are very passive because we have been victimized by the system while others of us tend to be aggressive because we have had to fight not to become victims. Sometimes, we find ourselves getting into trouble when we cross the line when asking questions. Sometimes some of the stuff we are asked to learn does not make sense to us. Why are we being asked to learn medieval history when everyone in my family has gone to prison? Taking street law makes more sense. I am frustrated because where I came from we didn't have a choice on what was important to me. It is hard to gain perspectives of everyone because we try not to talk to anyone. We just want to become invisible.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to critical study? The students in this school often talk about ways to make important decision about our studies. Does what we learn here meet the needs of all the students. We decided to ask the principal and three teachers in to talk about the critical study issues that we had.

### Discussion

*No one is without knowledge except the one who asks no questions.* West African proverb

Critical study provides a systematic way of collecting and analyzing data in order to set learning priorities (Glickman, 1993; O'Hair & Reitzug, 1996). Critical study is the improvement of teaching, learning and school practice in classrooms and the school. In the critical study process, students at-risk learn to utilize the inquiry process to order to set learning priorities.

Due to the fragmented social, environmental and educational circumstances of at-risk students, many have not discovered the excitement and pleasure that can be derived from learning and discovery. The myriad of personal life issues that the at-risk students bring to the table retard their expectation of becoming enthusiastic about normal school work. Intrinsic motivation in most at-risk adolescents is almost non-existent. Therefore, it becomes the awesome task of the teachers of the at-risk students to find learning opportunities to build on the student's meaningful experience. As a rule, students at-risk, have not had the foundational block or spiral learning that is necessary to build foundation skills. Therefore, one-on-one and group discussions draw connections on students' understanding and prior experience with the topic being studied. Students have to put lesson concepts into their own words drawing on their familiar vocabulary, adding new vocabulary, and calling on their prior experiences with a given topic. The discourse allows them to "hook up" (link) new information with prior knowledge essential to learning for retention over time. It is the opinion of teachers that at-risk students experience little learning without this step.

Evidence provided by the Rubric, interviews and documents support that students discover that the learning experience can be instrumental in enhancing the motivation for further learning. Teachers in the alternative school have stated that using the connection process is important to emphasize that the student's experience is important to him/her and constitutes a legitimate relevant starting point for further learning and inquiry. Teachers use questions to assess the current knowledge attainment of the at-risk learner and assist the learner in performing a particular cognitive operation. Therefore, teachers involved in the democratic learning community should be compelled to design classroom

assignments to encourage students to pose questions for further research or experimentation. Teachers stimulate with questions, which stimulates student thinking, thus requiring students to access related information in their memory that can give evidence, examples or metaphor. For example, students can figure out how a character in a novel can deal with a dilemma; they can assume the role of Thomas Jefferson and analyze whether or not to purchase the Louisiana Territory; they can generate hypotheses to determine why a particular scientific experiment did not work; and they can plan, monitor, and evaluate strategies to solve complex mathematical problems.

Students can do these things and reflect upon their own thinking by posing such questions as: What was the problem?; How did we solve it? (at-risk students focus upon their intellectual processes and emotion supports); Did we solve it well? (at-risk students focus on the learning process); and What would we do differently and why?

How do at-risk students perceive supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents? The principal and the teachers promote this school. One of the things they do well is believe in the students. They keep us focused on continuing our education and not dropping out. They provide all types of opportunities for us.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents? We sometimes find it difficult to accept the support that the principal provides for us. Almost everyone in this school has been in some kind of trouble with the principal and at first it was hard to trust the principal. All they ever want to do is kick you out of school. At first, we don't feel good about talking to the principal. I choke up when I have to talk to a principal.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents? The teachers and the principal hold a lot of meetings for students and parents. These meetings allow us to talk and feel comfortable with the principal. Parents and teachers have engaged in activities with community members to form mentor and tutoring pools. Teachers also invite parents into computer classes so that they feel a part of the school community.

### Discussion

The principal is recognized as a key element in determining academic achievement for the at-risk student (Lehr & Harris, 1995). This analysis supports the theory that the principal is a chief factor in promoting an effective teaching and learning environment. Lehr & Harris (1995) suggest that a principal can have an impact on at-risk student success. Placier, (1988) states that principals can influence operational definitions used to identify at-risk students within a school. Firestone and Wilson (1984) asserts that the primary role in the work for the school principal is that of a change agent. The participants expressed great respect for the principal's leadership. Because she had such high expectations for the participants, they were reluctant to let her down. These were the students that had such low self esteem because people told them they were never going to amount to anything. Newsletters and memos are supporting documents that the principal was a good communicator. She worked to bring the community, parents, teachers, students and the university together to develop and support valuable learning experiences for students. Evidence provided in the interview was consistent with response provided in the Rubric. These responses were that the principal was a promoter of the school. "Most of us in this school think our principal is the same all the time. She

gives us good advice, she cheers us on to do different things and she has the same punishment when we mess up. She's the same all the time." Students at-risk have a need for consistency in communication. This quality is critical to the success of any student in a democratic environment. That environment leads to the emergence of a sense of tradition and culture, and provides reliability and predictability for the at-risk as they relate to the actions that are based upon a central set of core values. Lambert (1995) assert that leadership is the development of shared understanding that leads to a common direction and improves the school experience for all members of the school community. Evidence of academic performance can be seen in observation as students and teachers are engaged in the actions of teaching and learning.

How do at-risk students perceive a climate of caring and collective responsibility for all students in the school? We feel that the climate of caring and collective responsibility for students in this school is in the fact that the students in this school are made to feel cared about. The feeling of caring and collective responsibility is why we are successful at this school. Students are allowed to work on an individualized basis. We define the climate here as being warm and caring. It really is different. It is easier to make your grades in this school. When you transfer, the council puts you in the same class that you came from. You can finish classes as soon as you want or you can ask for lots of extra help. If you have a personal problem, there is always someone there to help you. Sometimes they may have to call in someone from an agency but at least you get help. I never got this kind of help at my other school. I spent most of my time in the assistant principal's office being sent home. It has taken us a long time to realize that we can trust that principal and the teachers. Sometimes in student council, we



talk about the things they do for us and the way they care for us. First of all, they are at school every day. Sometimes that is more than we get at home. The teachers and the principal give us good advice.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school? We have had to overcome the obstacle of not-trusting. We had to get past the fact that we thought adults were out to get us. It takes a long time for us to warm up to people that really care for us. But once we realized that the staff at this school genuinely cared for us it became our responsibility to make them proud of us.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school. One of the strategies we came up with was the use of the "Trust Bank." In student council, we discuss elements of trust. We are taught that in order to gain trust we must be trustworthy. So, every Monday, we are given a "T"- - trust bill. On the back of the "T" bill is a command. "Be on time for your second hour class every for a week." The teacher must sign off on the "T" bill every time you are on time. At the end of the week, a bill signed by the teacher five times is given to the principal who 1) makes over us because we shown good character qualities, have been good citizens and have been a trustworthy person and 2) we get a prize like a CD or something. This may not seem like much by the students but the act of caring and collective responsibility going both ways. The adults care for us and want to see us being responsible. We begin to care about ourselves.

How do at-risk students perceive a close connection among the school, home and community? The close connection among the school, home and the community is the element that makes the difference for us. The school is a better place when there is a close connection to our homes and the community. This connection is important because our parents did not do good in school or did not have a good experience with the people at the school and do not really want to be involved in the school. As a student body we have planned activities to use the school and the support of the community to bring our home into focus.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to a close connection among the school, home and community? Because our parents have not had a good experience in school, it is hard to get our parents involved in PTSA. Another obstacle is that our parents do not have technology like computers. Some of us don't even have telephones.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to developing a close connection among the school, home and community?

The techniques used to connect school, home, and community are those that are positive for parents. Parents are asked to come to the school for parenting seminars. Seminars are based on issues that the students have surveyed in the school. Those same surveys go home to the parents. Seminars on Tough Love, Parent Relief for Students involved with Drugs and Alcohol, Dealing with Children with ADHD and other Brain Related Issues, have been well attended and keep the parents coming back to school. Computer classes are also offered to parents. Community based organizations and business and industry are invited into the school to mentor and tutor. Business people serve as wonderful role models for the student at-risk.

## Discussion

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) concur that if schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff. As evident by the responses provided in the Rubric, students felt that adults in this school setting cared about their success. This circle or community of caring is what builds success in alternative schools. Successful programs incorporate a significant balance of community involvement that solicits parents in school planning and governance and provides for parent education, volunteers, and the coordination of social services.

How do at-risk students perceive a concern for equity? We see equity and justice as having the same rights and privileges in school and school related activities as other students. The issue of equity concerns us at this school because we are looked down on because we attend an alternative school. When we tell people what school we go to they laugh and make comments like that's the school where the "bad" kids go or the school where the "gang" members go. We want people to recognize us as having the same abilities as students in regular schools.

How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to their concern for equity? There are so many equity issues in this school. We are of different races, different cultures, different values and experiences. With so many different issues to overcome, it is hard for us to see each other as equal. The one thing that we have in common is that at some time we had a problem with school. Our obstacles are ourselves. This school works to

overcome differences in the way classes are structured. The individualized instruction makes us think independently.

What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome concerns of equity? We will continue to rely on the teachers and the principal to keep us involved in the mainstream of activities of regular students.

### Discussion

Goethe and Banks (1993) challenged diverse groups of students to think independently; to create, invent, and understand academic subjects through research, writing, and inquiry; to experience ideas firsthand; and to make decisions democratically. As evident in student responses to the Rubric, the school has offered ways to approach student learning in a way that matches their individual learning styles.

Educators must make efforts to provide an equitable education for all. Increased graduation requirements, increasing class sizes, decreasing budgets, declining test scores, teacher shortages, and higher dropout rates will continue to confront educators in the next decade. The number of students at-risk who will require assistance in succeeding in school will continue to escalate. To add to this gloom, Sarkees and Feichtner (1997) point out that of the 3.6 million children who enter school for the first time, the following scenario is predicted;

- One of four will be from poverty homes;
- 14 percent will be from single-parent households;
- 15 percent will be handicapped;
- 15 percent will be limited English-proficient;
- 14 percent of their mothers will be unmarried;

- 40 percent will come from broken homes;
- 10 percent will have illiterate parent;
- 25 to 33 percent will be "latch key" children; and
- 25 to 34 percent will never finish school (p. 22).

Based on these statistics educators must find ways to provide equity for the at-risk. The same equality and care must be given to the at-risk that is given to the privilege. Students must be given real opportunities to enrich themselves, to be in control of their lives, and to become productive participating members of society.

When I ask a former graduate student and colleague his definition of equity, of the at-risk, he told me in an extremely militant tone that at-risk students refer to "those students who have been historically excluded from meaningful participation in the industrial/capitalistic social order and, unless fundamental restructuring occurs, will continue to be excluded from the information/capitalistic social order of the twenty-first century" i.e., the have-nots, without fundamental change, will always be the have-nots.

Equity is complex and is always a concern when the issue is education and the at-risk. As laws and policies have been implemented to educate the disabled child, the bilingual child, the gifted child, etc. so it can be argued that the disadvantaged students, the majority of whom have normal intelligence, require specialized programs to truly benefit from their educational experience. The literature states that our society can avoid more costly problems in the future by investing in the development of *all* its youth. As can be identified when working with the at-risk, a poorly educated person is more likely to require social welfare and institutional services and is increasingly more likely to be involved in the legal system as a result of criminal activities. In these very human terms,

the cost of poor schooling may be significantly higher than the costs associated with good schooling. Carl Glickman (1993) asserted that a democratic learning community is one where students would learn to speak and listen, read and write and understand mathematics, science, art in order to gain the power to make a better life for themselves and their communities (p. 9-10). However, working with the at-risk, an equitable situation is when all students are supported, based on their level of disenfranchisement to an understanding of a concept in spite of their level of academic attainment, learning style, resistance to learning social condition, etc.

Conclusions to the research questions can be drawn from the data obtained through the Rubric as well as individual and group interviews, observations, and documents. Both the interview process and the use of the Rubric were critical to understand the knowledge that emerged from the findings. These findings were based on at-risk student's particular circumstances, values and experiences. All participants were asked the same main question. After reviewing the answers it appeared that the following patterns and themes recurred throughout the interviews, the rubric and observations. A mandate of the protocol of the study requires that attention is paid to similarities and differences in responses to all data sources. The inclusions of all responses greatly develop the meaningfulness of the outcomes of the responses. It is essential to this study that the knowledge that emerged from this study is based on students' personal and school experience. A summary of emerging themes completes chapter five.

### At Risk Connection to the I.D.E.A.L.S.

Solutions to problems such as dropping out of school, unemployment, and teen pregnancy need to incorporate a full range of strategies that improve life options of youth. Giving youth opportunities to engage in organized inquiry activities plays a part in such strategies, building self-esteem and giving young people a meaningful role in their communities. Many at-risk students fail to make this transition because they are more vulnerable to the adverse conditions of our society. Typically these students come from low income or single parent households; have parents who practice high-risk behaviors; have a history of academic failure; and exhibit low self-esteem (Dryfoos, 1994). The literature states that researchers have determined that successful programs for at-risk youth should incorporate course work which emphasizes practical, real-world problem solving; experimental, hands-on learning; and experiences with responsible and mature adults (Peck, Law & Mills, 1989).

It is through the I.D.E.A.L.S. framework support the values and beliefs of the at-risk. The nine practices that are woven throughout this study are common links that have helped to move a school from cold and isolated to one of collaboration and authentic democratic school practices. The democratic ideals promote inquiry, discourse, equity, authentic achievement, shared leadership, and service, all of which support the at-risk learner. For the at-risk student, service learning is a potentially powerful dropout prevention tool. Several of these practices - - especially mentoring and tutoring, flexible schedules and alternative programs, school-based management community and business collaboration, and workforce readiness and career counseling - - are strong components of a well-designed school based service learning program.

The service component incorporate all aspects of the IDEALS. For example inquiry is used once students enter the work place and ask themselves, what can I draw from what I already know in the world (my own experiences) to perform this job or job task in a better way. Discourse - Learning to discuss, and facilitate meaning of pertinent issues in order to shape a clear understanding of what is needed to do the work. Equity-learning is to seek out or know the difference in being fair. Authenticity-having the ability to know that they are functioning in their work environment. They are carving out new knowledge based on their own life experiences. Leadership-making sure that on the job he/she becomes a facilitator of shared decision making. Utilizing service provides developmental opportunities that promote personal, social and intellectual growth, as well as civic responsibility and career exploration. When impacting the lives of the at-risk, it must be clearly emphasized in the treatment of the at-risk that students must be engaged in significant, well-planned and genuine service. What more significant way to summarize the at-risk than to apply all the IDEALS to service? Then the at-risk student must reflect on their experiences of serving others to ensure a complete learning experience.

The decision to undertake change more often than not is accompanied by a kind of optimism and rosy view of the future that, temporarily at least, obscures the predictable turmoil. (Fullan, 1993)

#### I.D.E.A.L.S. Connections to Student Achievement

The I.D.E.A.L.S., an acronym for the six core ideals of inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, leadership, and service is a democratic framework that is linked directly to improved student learning through empirical research and practices (Conversation, 1999, 2000). Lee and Smith(1994) and Newmann and Wehlage (1995) have validated through



studies of over 2,000 schools that students learn more in schools that function as professional (democratic) communities. Professional communities are characterized by practices that are grounded in democratic I.D.E.A.L.S. The I.D.E.A.L.S are woven throughout the practices and became visible in the rubric rating. The researcher developed a table providing evidence that the application of the I.D.E.A.L.S. and the practices of high achieving schools were responsible for improved academic performance in the participants who were characterized as at risk.

Table 14

| Student       | # of Schools attended since 8 <sup>th</sup> grade | Reading Score before research | Number of referrals the semester prior to research | Number of absences the semester prior to research |
|---------------|---|-------------------------------|--|---|
| #1Amber       | 3   | 6.7                           | 7  | 10  |
| #2Shaquita    | 2   | 5.2                           | 3  | 8   |
| #3`Willie     | 3   | 4.9                           | 10   | 10  |
| #4Renardo     | 1   | 11.8                          | 5  | 5   |
| #5Addis       | 7   | 8.8                           | 6  | 7   |
| #6Christopher | 3   | 4.2                           | 5  | 6   |

Table 15

| Student       | Reading Score before research | Reading Score at the conclusion of the research | Number of referrals the accumulated during research | Number of absences accumulated during research |
|---------------|-------------------------------|---|---|--|
| #1Amber       | 6.7                           | 11.2  | 2   | 3  |
| #2Shaquita    | 5.2                           | 9.2   | 0   | 1  |
| #3`Willie     | 4.9                           | 6.2   | 2   | 3  |
| #4Renardo     | 11.8                          | 12.9  | 2   | 0  |
| #5Addis       | 8.8                           | 11.2  | 2   | 2  |
| #6Christopher | 4.2                           | 5.3   | 1   | 4  |

Variances in reading scores and the reduction in both referrals and absences can be linked to these students responding to their experiences in a democratic school environment. Student reading scores were obtained by using the Test of Adult Basic Education (T.A.B.E.). This diagnostic survey is given upon intake to determine the growth of each student. Student records were perused to provide evidence that there was a reduction in the number of absenteeism and discipline referrals. When students were asked why this reduction occurred, all six responded that they liked school, wanted to be in school and had been encouraged that they could succeed.

The table below indicates that student performance can be linked to the democratic community when it focuses on the characters of engaging students in the personal construction of new knowledge, result in conducting disciplined inquiry about the topic at hand, have some value beyond the school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Listed below is evidence of activities utilized by students at-risk to validate the importance of the I.D.E.A.L.S.

Table 16

| <b>Practices</b>                   | <b>Activities</b>  | <b>IDEALS Met</b>   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| #1 Core Learning Principle         | Student Council<br>School Improvement<br>Committee   | Discourse, Equity,<br>Leadership                                |
| #2 Authentic Teaching and Learning | Portfolio Assessment,<br>Individualized instruction,<br>cooperative learning,<br>interdisciplinary , cross-<br>discipline projects, research<br>projects, school-to-work<br>projects, Virtual Learning<br>Projects | Inquiry, Authentic Teaching<br>Discourse, Equity,<br>Leadership |
| #3 Shared Decision Making          | Student Council, School<br>Improvement Committee,<br>Extra Curricular meetings   | Discourse, Equity,<br>Leadership                                |

Table 16 (cont.)

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| #4 Students Collaborate and Learn Together           | Peer led study groups, interdisciplinary activities  | Inquiry, Authentic Teaching Discourse, Equity, Leadership                   |
| #5 Critical Study                                    | Individualized instruction, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary , cross-discipline projects, research projects, school-to-work projects, Virtual Learning Projects   | Inquiry, Authentic Teaching Discourse, Equity, Leadership                   |
| #6 Supportive Principal Leadership                   | Moderate Student Council School Improvement Committee<br>Involves entire school community in decisions, is supportive, stimulating, encouraging, nurturing, hears all voices, and is a visionary.  | Inquiry, Discourse, Equity, Leadership                                      |
| #7 Caring and Collective Responsibility for Students | Student Council, School Improvement Committee, Extra Curricular meetings<br>Individualized instruction, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary , cross-discipline projects, research projects, school-to-work projects, Virtual Learning Projects | Inquiry, Authentic Teaching Discourse, Equity, Leadership, Service Learning |
| #8 Connection to Home and Community                  | Newsletters, Parent-Teacher Conference, Tutors, Mentors, Career Fair, Job Shadowing Fair, Open House   | Inquiry, Discourse, Equity, Leadership, Service Learning                    |
| Concern for Equity                                   | Student Council, School Improvement Committee, Extra Curricular meetings<br>Individualized instruction, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary , cross-discipline projects, multicultural activities  | Inquiry, Authentic Teaching Discourse, Equity, Leadership, Service Learning |

### Student Data

Although the alternative school is categorized as a dropout prevention setting, the alternative school has one of the highest dropout rates in the state. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. They include: Many at-risk students are emancipated and live on their own, pregnant and parenting teens must drop out to care for themselves or their young, many at-risk students must work to sustain their livelihood, and many at-risk students are resistant to authority figures.

### Discussion of Emerging Themes

Throughout the interview process, other themes emerged. Adding other qualitative data adds depth to the beliefs and practices of the participants. This layering process supports the overlapping of data collection. It was apparent that the answers given to specific questions provided evidence that the respondents were engaged in the practices of the I.D.E.A.L.S.

Alternative School: A recurring theme for all the students was the structure of the benefit of the alternative school. Zepeda and Langenbach (1999) purport that alternative schools for the at-risk can provide students who have traditionally met with failure a sense of success through an individualized curriculum delivered by teachers who are sensitive to the particular needs of students dealing with issues that have put them at-risk in traditional learning environments. Knutson (1996) viewed alternative schools and those that reflect "an understanding of programming for at-risk youth. "The success of alternative schools promotes the democratic school community philosophy mirroring that democratic school communities have a positive effect on the success of all students.

Supportive Teachers: A recurring theme in all interviews as well as the responses to the Rubric was that supportive teachers were responsible to their success. Students viewed the teachers as agents that connected teaching and learning to the academic tasks students saw as having value beyond the classroom. Newmann and Wehlage, (1995) and Newmann (1996) support the theory that students learn more when teachers teach authentically; pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students' learning; engage in collaborative activities to achieve that purpose and take collective responsibility for student learning.

Supportive Principal: The thread that binds through the study is the support from the principal. It is evident that principal leadership is critical to the success of at-risk students. The principal must prove to be the catalyst to the circle of caring that is transmitted throughout the democratic community.

Application of the I.D.E.A.L.S.: Students reported that learning the definitions of the I.D.E.A.L.S. was useful in the way they viewed their learning process. They practiced asking and answering questions to justify their class work; they practiced initiating conversations and debates that focused on their learning issues and how school practices fit into their purpose for learning; they reported their conscienceness in seeking fair practices for the school and beyond.

Fear and Low Self-Esteem: For students at risk who are disconnected, the first problem is not merely, or even primary, lack of education. Rather, it is the total isolation they experience from the traditional culture; stable family systems, schools, social and health care agencies; and a process that allows them to succeed in a structured environment. Because many at-risk students experience repeated failures in social,

educational, and economic systems, their fears of failure are magnified. Restoring self-esteem in these students can only occur when there is a realization that their voices are heard and respected. Utilizing the I.D.E.A.L.S. model relaxes the fear factor and restores self-esteem.

### Summary

The study provides documentation of practices of high achieving schools and the I.D.E.A.L.S. that are embodied within. By layering the format of student's responses, findings were drawn from responses to the Rubric, individual and focus group interviews, documents and observations. Themes are validated and evidence was provided that the democratic practices worked to improve academic performance. Chapter six will provide a summary, conclusions, implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Summary, Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

#### Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the study and a summary of the major findings from the analysis of the data. Conclusions derived from the study are followed by implications and recommendations for further research.

#### Review of the Study

The study described the perceptions of students at an urban alternative school in regards to the usefulness of the application of the IDEALS of “democratic schooling” in an effort to help at-risk learners improved their academic performance. This was achieved by examining the responses to the Rubric of High Achieving Schools (O’Hair, 1999) which connects I.D.E.A.L.S. to specific school practices, and by personal interviews with and observations of at-risk students. Six participants who exhibit at-risk characteristics responded to nine practices, obstacles and corresponding action plans. A discussion was presented on the use of the practices of high achieving schools. To add further depth to this study, five sections of related literature were reviewed. Section one included an overview of school reform and democratic school community. Section two included school renewal and democratic practices in high achieving schools. Section three presented the I.D.E.A.L.S. framework. Section four offers the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a way to promote academic performance and section five connects the I.D.E.A.L.S. and students at-risk.

Further data was qualitatively obtained utilizing triangulation in the form of responses to interviews, observations, research questions and documents as well as the

Rubric. A discussion of the data sources summarized and synthesized the research findings. Conclusions, implications and recommendations in this chapter are a result of a synthesis and evaluation of both theory and data sources that can be used to stimulate the academic performance in students at-risk. Although only six students were selected for the study, their perceptions reflect those of the larger body of at-risk adolescents.

### Specific Research Questions

The study attempts to answer a critical question: What are student perceptions of the practices of high achieving schools which embody the I.D.E.A.L.S of democratic schools as examined through evidence, obstacles and action plans and what impact do these practices have on the academic performance of adolescent students characterized as at-risk? In an attempt to collect useful data, the following research questions were developed to guide the study.

The research questions were designed around the Rubric for High Achieving Schools (O'Hair, 1999) which consists of democratic school practices linked to student achievement. Major themes were provided with research questions that focus on perceptions of at-risk students to the practices, obstacles, and actions plans for each identified democratic practice.

### Shared School Vision

- 1a: How do at-risk students perceive the process of developing a shared school vision?
- 1b: How do at-risk students perceive obstacles encountered when developing a shared school vision?



- 1c: What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles in developing a shared purpose for student learning?

#### Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

- 2a: How do at-risk students perceive authentic teaching, learning and assessment?
- 2b: How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to authentic teaching, learning and assessment?
- 2c: What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to authentic teaching, learning and assessment?

#### Shared Decision-Making

- 3a: How do at-risk students perceive shared decision making?
- 3b: How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to shared decision making?
- 3c: What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to shared decision making?

#### Critical Study Process

- 4a. How do at-risk students perceive the critical study process, often referred to as action research and reflective practice?
- 4b. How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to the critical study process?
- 4c. What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to critical study?

#### Supportive Leadership

- 5a. How do at-risk students perceive supportive leadership from the principal?
- 5b. How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents?

- 5c. What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to supportive leadership from the principal, teachers and parents?

Climate of Caring and Collective Responsibility

- 6a. How do at-risk students perceive a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school?
- 6b. How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school?
- 6c. What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to a climate of caring and collective responsibility for *all* students in the school?

School, Home, and Community Connections

- 7a. How do at-risk students perceive a close connection among the school, home and community?
- 7b. How do at-risk students perceive obstacles to a close connection among the school, home and community?
- 7c. What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive as ways to overcome obstacles to developing a close connection among the school, home and community?

Collaborate and Learn Together

- 8a. How do at-risk students perceive the way they collaborate and learn together?
- 8b. How do at-risk students perceive obstacles that stand in the way as they collaborate and learn together?

- 8c. What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive to overcome obstacles to collaborate and learn together?

### Equity

- 9a. How do at-risk students perceive the equity?
- 9b. How do at-risk students perceive obstacles in dealing with equity?
- 9c. What strategies and techniques do at-risk students perceive to overcome equity issues?

That the answers to the research questions will provide educators with teaching methods that will increase their success with at-risk students. Further, this research may also reveal elements that are significantly related to the proclaimed success of practices of a democratic learning community, its existence and persistence. In short this research highlights the effectiveness of the program related to educational, organizational or sociological theory.

### Methodology

A qualitative naturalistic inquiry was used and was perspective seeking in an effort to address the study's questions. This case study used six students that exhibit at-risk characteristics who attend an urban alternative school. Triangulation of data from a Rubric, interviews, observations, and documents combined with information from the literature was used to increase the probability of objective conclusions as they emerged from the named sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants in this study consisted of six students that attend an urban alternative school in Oklahoma. The students were selected based on their improved attendance in the school for a one year period of duration. The study's instrument

contained interview questions that were generated from an instrument piloted through the Center for Educational and Community Renewal at the University of Oklahoma. The instrument was entitled, "Rubric of High Achieving Schools: Practices, Obstacles, and Action Plans."

Data collected from the study was analyzed by applying the recommended dynamic and fluid coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Utilizing the open, axial, and selective coding procedure, the researcher process the data from authentic statements to developed theories. Listed below are the participants statements that were aggregated into concepts.

### Summary of Findings

The qualitative data gathered, revealed the following conclusions that summarized the findings. The study provided evidence that consistent application of the practices of high achieving schools and the I.D.E.A.L.S. as a model will improve academic performance with students that exhibit at-risk characteristics. The following is a list of evidence in the form of conclusions: at-risk students learn best when they can contribute, at-risk students experience failure in school due to fear, lack of motivation and low self-esteem, and the high level of support in a democratic environment minimizes academic barriers for the at-risk student.

### Recommendations

The recommendations listed in this section are supported by the findings.

Recommendations are suggested for:

- Educators
- Universities

- Future research and theory building

### Educators

1. In the school organization principal and teachers meet regularly to discuss the teaching and learning issues of their environment.
2. School organization must be structured to encourage teachers to use their knowledge to work toward positive change in the school .
3. Regular professional development activities that concentrate on the learning styles of the at-risk.
4. Involve students making class rules on the first day of school.
5. Afford students the opportunity to make decisions about instructional strategies.
6. Encourage teachers to infuse critical thinking into their teaching.
7. Set goals and analyze goal-setting progress weekly.
8. Empower students to become self-directed by respecting their thinking and strategies.

The obstacles and actions plans that were flushed out of the practices are the responses of the students. The responses stated that the principal is the catalyst that promotes the democratic school community and students trust, respect and support the democratic school community.

### Recommendations for Practices – In Schools

The Principal and Teachers partner with the university and their networks for the purpose of defining research-based frameworks as the basis for organized inquiry and discourse and the critical study process in the schools. Schools progress toward

including parents in conversing about organized inquiry, focus on learning, home/school collaboration.

#### Recommendation for Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

Examine the characteristics of democratic education and the at-risk student.

Examine teacher preparation programs as it relates to each one of the I.D.E.A.L.S.

The results of this study suggest other research which could be conducted to increase understanding of the democratic practices and the at-risk learner.

#### Recommendation for Further Research and Theory Building

A study of at-risk students and the democratic programs. Examine the at-risk student and each on of the acronym of the I.D.E.A.L.S. The university should do further research on issues of the at-risk.

The results of this study suggest other research which could be conducted to increase understanding of the democratic practices and the at-risk learner. The difference in today's family structure and differences in learning styles are indicators that rising number of students exhibiting at-risk are more visible and will need increased educational focus.

This chapter presented a review of the study, specific research questions, and the methodology of the study. A further discussion of I.D.E.A.L.S. as a connection to student achievement, a summary of the findings, and recommendations conclude the sub-sections of the chapter. All sub-sections of this chapter were used to flush out significant conclusions, implications, and recommendations. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help educators and policy makers in providing more improved educational opportunities for students at-risk.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Consent Forms

#### **STUDENTS CONSENT FORM**

**For Research being conducted under the auspices of the  
University of Oklahoma**

As a student at Emerson Secondary School, I am being asked to participate in a study concerning factors related to academic achievement my relationship in a democratic school, which will eventually assist you in graduating from high school. Ann Allen, doctoral student in the Department of Administration and Curriculum Studies at the University of Oklahoma, is conducting this study.

As a participant, I will be asked to answer questions related to academic achievement and retention such as identification with academics, self-reflection, academic goals, cognitive engagement, and locus of control. I may also be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview as a part of this study. The interviews will last approximately one hour. The interview will cover topics such as motivation, achievement, self-concept, friendship, decision-making, conflict resolution trust, control and future goals. The information will be gathered on one or more occasions at school during the regular school day. The researcher, Ann Allen will also gather demographic information, academic grades, school placement and other school records. This information will be critical to help us see what factors are related to encouraging students to achieve academic success and remain enrolled in school.

Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no negative consequences if I do not participate. I may stop participating at any time, or refuse to answer any particular questions. There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study. All information gathered in this study would be kept confidential. My name will be removed from all data so no one will know what answers gave. Questionnaires and interview tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the investigation. This information will greatly help educators continue to develop effective programs to help other students achieve in school, and eventually graduate.

Please indicated your permission by returning the form below to your teacher. If you do not return a form, you will not be allowed participating. If I have any questions about this project, I may contact me at 232-5273. If I have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Oklahoma's Office of Research Administration at (405) 325-4757. Thank you for supporting research to improve education in Oklahoma.

Sincerely, Ann Allen

\_\_\_ Yes, I will participate in the Academic Achievement and Retention project.  
I understand that there will no penalty if I choose not to participate.

Print Name of Participating

Student \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participating Student \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_

## PARENT CONSENT FORM

For Research being conducted under the auspices of the  
**University of Oklahoma**

Students at Emerson Secondary School, including your son or daughters are being asked to participate in a study concerning factors related to academic achievement, their relationship in a democratic school, which will eventually assist them in graduating from high school. Ann Allen, doctoral student in the Department of Administration and Curriculum Studies at the University of Oklahoma is conducting this study.

Participants will answer questions related to academic achievement and retention such as identification with academics, self-reflecting, academic goals, cognitive engagement and locus of control. Students may also be asked to participate in an audiotaped interview as a part of this study. The interviews will last approximately one hour. The interviews will cover topics such as motivation, achievement, self-concept, friendship, decision-making, conflict resolution, trust, control, and future goals. The information will be gathered on one or more occasions at school during the regular school day. Only those students who wish to fill out the questionnaires and/or be interviewed will be asked to do so. The researcher will gather their demographic information; academic grades and their school placement and enrollment history. She will also utilize your child's school records. This information will be critical to help us see what factors are related to encouraging students to achieve academic success and remain enrolled in school.

Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no negative consequences for students who do not participate. Your child may stop participating at any time, or refuse to answer any particular questions. There are no foreseeable risks for your child in participating in this study. All information gathered in this study would be kept confidential. Your child's name will be removed from all data so no one will know what answers they gave. Questionnaires and interview tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the investigation. This information will greatly help educators continue to develop effective programs to help students achieve in school, and eventually graduate from high school.

Please indicate your permission by having your child return the form below to his/her teacher. If you do not return a form, your child will not be allowed to participate. If you have any questions about this project, you may contact me at 232-5273. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Oklahoma's Office of Research Administration at (405) 325-4757

Thank you for supporting research to improve education in Oklahoma  
Sincerely, Ann M. Allen

☐ Yes, my child may participate in the Democratic School Project  
I understand that there will no penalty if I choose not to participate.

Print name of student \_\_\_\_\_  
Print your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Request Letter

May 10, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

Please accept this as a formal letter of request to conduct research at the City Alternative School in your school district. I am currently completing a doctoral program with the University of Oklahoma in the field of Education Administration, Curriculum and Supervision. Under the sponsorship of Dr. Mary John O'Hair, I will exercise the upmost in professionalism in questioning teens who are characterized as at-risk on their perceptions of the practices of high achieving schools

. Using the University protocol, I must have written approval from the Research Department of your School District. I see no foreseeable risks for your district to participate in this study. Participation will only enhance your knowledge of the most current educational practices in use today.

Thanking you in advance

Ann M. Allen, Doctoral Candidate

xc. Dr. Mary John O'Hair, Doctoral Committee Chairperson

Appendix C

IRB Approval



April 21, 2000

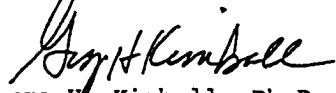
Ms. Ann Allen  
Emerson Alternative Center  
715 N Walker  
Oklahoma City, OK 73102

Dear Ms. Allen,

Your proposal to conduct research in the Oklahoma City Public Schools entitled Utilizing Democratic Ideals as an Instructional Intervention has been approved by the OKCPS review committee. Please feel free now to proceed with your interviews and surveys. As always, interviews and/or survey administration should be conducted in whatever manner causes the least disruption to the school environment.

Best of luck in your data collection and analyses. We look forward to seeing the results of your efforts when the study is complete.

Sincerely,

  
George H. Kimball, Ph.D.  
Planning, Research, & Evaluation  
Oklahoma City Public Schools



*The University of Oklahoma*

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

July 31, 2000

Ms. Ann M. Allen  
715 North Walker Avenue  
Oklahoma City OK 73102

Dear Ms. Allen:

The Institutional Review Board-Norman Campus has reviewed your proposal, "Perceptions of At-Risk Adolescents of Utilizing Democratic Ideals to Increase Student Achievement," under the University's expedited review procedures. The Board found that this research would not constitute a risk to participants beyond those of normal, everyday life, except in the area of privacy, which is adequately protected by the confidentiality procedures. Therefore, the Board has approved the use of human subjects in this research.

This approval is for a period of twelve months from this date, provided that the research procedures are not changed significantly from those described in your "Application for Approval of the Use of Humans Subjects" and attachments. Should you wish to deviate significantly from the described subject procedures, you must notify me and obtain prior approval from the Board for the changes.

At the end of the research, you must submit a short report describing your use of human subjects in the research and the results obtained. Should the research extend beyond 12 months, a progress report must be submitted with the request for re-approval, and a final report must be submitted at the end of the research.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan Wyatt Sedwick".

Susan Wyatt Sedwick, Ph.D.  
Administrative Officer  
Institutional Review Board-Norman Campus

SWS:pw  
FY00-280

Appendix D  
Mission Statement

THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

is a "Democratic School"

where staff, students, parents, and community

share responsibility and participate

in the decision making process

We, The Staff of the Alternative School, Pledge to model and provide opportunities, encouragement, and motivation that will prepare all students to become academically and technologically literate adults. Our goals are:

- To empower students to take responsibility for their actions, their lives, and their education,
- To provide guidance and direction,
- To enhance students self respect,
- To enhance individual and cooperative learning through critical thinking and decision-making skills,
- To provide a safe and secure environment conducive to learning,
- To encourage students to stay in school and graduate, and
- To model the Emerson mission.