

AT-RISK STUDENTS IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF  
THE U.S.:  
A QUALITATIVE META-ANALYSIS OF EXISTING  
RESEARCH

By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	6
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Purpose of the Research.....	7
Research Questions.....	7
Background; The Concepts of Being At Risk.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	10
Researcher and Study Limitations.....	12
Summary.....	13
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	
At-Risk Characteristics.....	15
Family Background.....	16
Structure of the Family.....	18
School Environment.....	21
Challenges Schools face.....	30
Community Environment.....	34
Criminal Statistics.....	34
Substance Abuse.....	36
Teen Birth Rate.....	37
Legislation.....	41
Intervention Strategies.....	43
Summary.....	45
III. METHODOLOGY	
Procedures.....	49
Sources and search procedures.....	49
Selection of the source studies.....	51
Coding of the Studies.....	51
IV. FINDINGS.....	53
Overview of the Studies Used.....	54
Summary.....	64

V. CONCLUSION.....	65
Discussion and conclusion.....	65
Federal Legislation.....	65
Technology in Education .....	67
Educational Directives .....	68
Student Retention.....	70
Conclusions.....	75
Recommendations.....	78
REFERENCES .....	81
APPENDIX.....	88

## LIST OF TABLES

Tables		Page
Table 1	Children in Single Parent Families	20
Table 2	Children Living in Poverty	21
Table 3	Student Graduation Rates	31
Table 4	Juvenile Detention Rates	36
Table 5	Teen Death Rate	37
Table 6	Teen Birth Rate	39
Table 7	Effects of Characteristics describing At-Risk Students	54

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges facing educators today is that of students who are at-risk of failure. In the researcher's experience, the at-risk student poses serious challenges in the postsecondary educational arena. In fact, the institution in which the researcher works has recognized the challenges and is taking steps to address the problem. Recognition of the fact that every child in the American educational system does not fair well should challenge us to provide more equitable solutions for all. Those most at risk in the current educational system are children that are poor, Black or Hispanic. Those with limited English proficiency are even more at risk. Complicating the problem are those students who come from single parent homes where the mother or father does not have a high school education. Family as well as school characteristics are two of the most relevant factors used in determining the at-risk status of children. These two factors promote both social as well as economic mobility and are viewed as important in leading a rewarding, meaningful and self sufficient life (Chaplin and Hannaway, 1996). Community characteristics may expose children to inadequate economic conditions as well as educational experiences and environments which can influence decisions about school. These decisions can cause stress, inappropriate adolescent behavior and higher risk levels (Okou, 2004).

#### Statement of the Problem

Many case studies have examined at-risk students and educational attainment, however, it is difficult to find any that focus on the situation of students in the central plains states. The complexity of the problem, the characteristics which have made these

states different from those in larger populated areas and the lack of emphasis placed on these students because of it being the heartland or quintessential ideal place to grow up has lead to an ever increasing problem in student persistence through to completion. It is possible that these problems are not unique to the heartland. The same problems may exist in other parts of the country. An analysis of research specifically targeted to this part of the country may yield valuable information which would be helpful for individuals who have the desire and resources to address the issue of at-risk students.

### Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to describe the magnitude of the problem of at-risk students in the U.S. Compare the situation in the Central Plains states with the nationwide situation and explore possible intervention strategies to deal with at-risk students. The central plains states are those centered between the Missouri River on the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west. While parts of the region may be identified with the Midwest, most of the land mass in the lower 48 states centered between the east and west coast of the United States is known as the central plains states (Peirce, 1981). According to the US Geological Survey and for the purposes of this study, the researcher will view the central most region of the United States as follows: Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and North Dakota (U. S. Geological survey, 2007). This region was compared in relation to the overall at-risk situation nationwide. The purpose was to determine what factors are associated with being at risk in rural school systems.

### Research Questions

As a result of this study the following research questions were posed to examine the magnitude of risk in rural, urban, and suburban settings.

1. What are the factors which contribute to at-risk students nationally?
2. Do the factors in the Central Plains states vary from national situations?
3. What intervention strategies have been successful particularly in rural areas?

Terms used within this paper have been defined in the Appendix section at the end of the thesis. There really is no standard definition of “rural,” “urban,” or similar geographical terms that has been adopted in professional educational studies. Many times these terms are used without any clear definition or explanation. For that reason a detailed definition and discussion of these terms can be found in the Appendix of this thesis. This thesis seeks to utilize current research and these terms will be utilized in a broad sense unless specified otherwise.

#### Background: The Concept of Being At Risk

The term “at-risk” was coined by the insurance industry which it used in relation to mathematical determinations of liabilities and insurance premium costs (Baizerman, 1991). The medical field adopted it from the insurance industry specifically as a term used in the field of epidemiology (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989). This branch of science deals with the incidence, distribution, and control of disease in a population (Webster, 2006). From both fields, risk is identified by defining and measuring probabilistic outcomes, and it is defined in relation to a specific event. Medical use of the term further carries an added implication of treatment or prevention required to as a remedy. (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989)

The concept of “at-risk” holds both promises and problems for education. It is promising in that the problem of “at-risk” has been identified and that it indicates a sense of urgency and need. It is however, difficult to manage because of the enormous numbers of those displaying specific characteristics, of “at-risk” behavior, situational issues,



background or home life to be helped in our society. Sherman (1992) reports that rural youths are at least as likely as metro children to drop out of high school and, if they manage to finish high school, are as likely as metro children to drop out of high school and, if they manage to finish high school, are less likely to finish college.

In the 1960's Chapter 1 legislation also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was developed to help students be successful. Risk of educational failure at that time was considered. However this situation is not simple and involves a complex interaction of poverty situations, minority status, and/or personal characteristics that affect a child's chances of success. It was based on the assumption that if the children's basic needs were met then they would more likely have the opportunity to be successful. The thought at the time followed Abraham Maslow's 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". The principles of Maslow's Hierarchy contends that as humans meet basic needs they seek to satisfy successively "higher needs" which occupy a set of hierarchy. Maslow's hierarchical principles are portrayed in graphic form as a pyramid consisting of five succeeding levels. Beginning with the basic physiological level of food, shelter and clothing, the four deficiency needs must be met before the upper three levels; friendship, self esteem, creativity and problem solving (Maslow, 1954).

Educational problems, much like medical problems, if left untreated can become serious. Educational problems involve a very complex interaction of personal, social and educational variables. Knowing what these variables are and how they work in relation to one another is critical to the success or failure of students. If at-risk students are viewed as deficient because they do not fit the system rather than looking at the situation from a

greater perspective, then we relegate the diagnosis of the problem to a one solution fits all mentality.

Another problem is the use of the term “at-risk”. This is particularly true without specifying in what respect the student is at-risk. The term has been used in a number of vague ways (Rozycki, 2004). In the educational setting use of the term at-risk refers to dropping out of school and defining the word “dropout” has been inconsistent. However, once a definition is given, dropout rates can be measured. Information on students can then be documented and a clear understanding of the characteristics that makeup risk can be evaluated. In addition, the risk of dropping out may also be determined.

The terms dropout and at-risk are nearly inseparable and most researchers use the “at risk” label in a broader sense than just dropping out. According to Natriello (2002), at-risk students can be defined as those that have a greater than average chance of not being successful in school and not graduating. Many definitions have different connotations attached and it is difficult to find one that does not infer specific related reasons for being at risk. These reasons, although many and varied, are important because together they create a complex problem that is not easily corrected.

### Significance of the Study

School provides many defining moments in the life of a child. Providing an equitable education for all has been the focus of school reform efforts for years. Extensive research has been conducted on poverty, family, schools, access to learning and achievement. It has been suggested that as many as half of today’s young people run a moderate to high risk of experiencing school failure due to a number of challenges that place them at risk (Burt, Resnick, & Matheson, 1992). Many students bear the burden of

multiple risk factors including having difficulty in conceptualizing surrounding experiences, lacking decision making abilities, and having poor self-concepts (Feichtner, 1989). These traits are all detrimental to the transition into adulthood and in combination increase risk exponentially. In 1996, Frank stated that half of all teenagers were at-risk at greater than the normal levels. Children who face multiple challenges usually run a higher risk than those with less challenges. This study contributes to a better understanding of how family background, school, and community experiences contribute to those at-risk, particularly students in rural areas. It does not seek to focus on all problems of rural at-risk youth but rather to discuss some of the most important ones in an effort to help find ways of addressing these issues.

The growing emphasis placed on federal legislation, academic achievement and occupational outcomes are reflective of the need to narrow the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged (Vaughn, Boethel, Hoover, Lawson, & Torres, 1989). This thesis focuses on three main problems of at-risk youth and suggests a broader understanding of these areas. With the changing economy and demographics of today's society it is important to examine student experiences to help provide a better tomorrow for all citizens.

This study provides a look at rural youth, education and communities and the current tendency to focus more on urban or suburban youth. Much of the data is concerned with the general student population. It should be noted however, as much specialized information as possible has been provided on rural at-risk youth. A study of this type may help policy makers, school leaders, educators and parents shape the future of rural children at risk. It is important for school leaders to understand the diversity and

complexity of the at-risk problem. The impact leaders have on those at-risk may help them transition to a more productive, useful citizen within society. It is significant in contributing to the knowledge and better understanding of the at-risk problem and to those who care about the future of our culture.

#### Researcher and Study Limitations

Research is only as good as the information available and accessed. An attempt was made to use the most current and meaningful information on at-risk youth concerning family background, school and community characteristics available. Information on rural students was used as much as possible because of the regional focus of the study. This study did not generalize its findings as a part of the research. Urban as well as suburban characteristics are characterized within the study results. In addition, the data for this study were gathered from a relatively small and uniform number of samples, also somewhat limiting the generalizability of the findings. A study with a larger cross-section of schools and participants would provide more representative results. The study was undertaken in the central region of the U.S. and may not apply to other regions because of unique social, school, and community characteristics pertaining to this region.

In addition the background and association of the researcher with the educational system as a whole is somewhat limited. Having only been employed in the Career and Technology education portion of the educational system may have led to some personal biases or perceptual limitations. Looking at education as a whole and with a first hand account of experiences both as a student and teacher it has been clear to the researcher that something still needs to be done about the at-risk situation. The researcher's educational background coupled with industry experience followed by teaching

experience has allowed for a unique perspective of the education system. In addition the researcher also dealt with negative feelings of school leadership concerning the educational system, policy, procedures and best practices. These led to a belief that much has been overlooked, ignored and somewhat brushed aside in connecting with and working with this population. It is apparent to the researcher that school administrators, teachers and staff will have to work with this population in one way or another in the future.

### Summary

This research was based on a perceived need to understand the at-risk situation in the central region of the United States. Those who are labeled at-risk while growing up can become at-risk adults (Hepburn & White, 1990). The study sought to answer research questions concerning factors contributing to at-risk students nationally, factors in the Central Plains states and how they vary from the national situation, and the intervention strategies that have been successful in rural areas. The researcher attempted to assimilate specific as well as general information about the concept of risk. Research specific to rural, urban and suburban at-risk students has also been presented to investigate whether or not differences among rural, urban and suburban at-risk students exist.

Sociodemographic risk factors include a concentration of students living in poverty, school environment, school location and also community structure. Academic failure is most often experienced by students in high poverty locations. Large class sizes and school size appear to have a negative impact on academic achievement. Expectations and school violence are two sources of negative impact on academic achievement. Urbanicity seems to be associated with a number of risk factors including school-level poverty,

racial and ethnic minority makeup, and school size which are related to academic failure as well. Evidence supports the idea that every child can learn (Slavin, Karweit & Madden, 1989). Too many school age children do not realize their full educational potential. This has become a large problem in our ever changing complex society. The seriousness of the problem has led researchers to study academic achievement and how the failure to complete high school has significant economic and social costs (Stringfield & Land, 2002). These conditions warrant careful examination of the factors associated with risk and the low academic achievement and school dropout rate.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### At-Risk Characteristics

There has been a considerable number of works which define at-risk. According to Herr (1989), there is no categorical or concise definition. The definition changes “as legislation purposes change and knowledge about psychological definitions expands” (p. 191). Multiple factors and characteristics of the at-risk situation exist and are not easily divided into neat categories. For example, the poverty level of a family is part of the family background but has a profound impact on school experience and community environment. For the purposes of organization and clarity, the researcher has selected the most logical categorization of risk factors. The bulleted list below designates some of the more notable traits which are characteristic of those displaying behaviors of being at risk of failure.

- Poverty
- Single Parent or no Parent home
- Family Background
- Cohabitation
- Homelessness
- Adverse Circumstances
- Poor health or nutrition
- Substance abuse
- Teen pregnancy
- Teen parenthood
- Low Self Esteem
- Loss of hope
- Race
- Limited English proficiency
- School experiences
- Work or Employment
- Community environment

This study will focus on three important factors which influence decisions youth make as they grow: family background, school experiences, and community environment. Youth are at-risk if they have been exposed to poor economic conditions, unsupportive family, inappropriate or inadequate educational conditions, or inadequate social conditions within the community, and these characteristics may be present in differing degrees. Children and youth can have one or multiple items that put them at a higher risk level or perhaps have only one. These three factors help shape youth through their years of transition into adulthood. Increasing agreement among researchers indicates that children's transition into adulthood needs to be understood in order to help students reach their full potential. Much is unknown about this transition into adulthood and many still view it as a single point in time. They argue that transition occurs somewhere between the four years of high school and college. Ages 14 – 18 are critical years in transitioning into adulthood and consequently they do involve student background, school and community (Barr & Parrett, 2001). By developing a better understanding of background characteristics that place students at-risk, education leaders are able to better develop policies and procedures that reduce the numbers of those being at-risk in the future. Personal as well as school and societal factors tend to overlap and cause multiple reasons for being at-risk.

### Family Background

Family background includes characteristics of students related to being disadvantaged either economically or academically and level of family income. These items have been identified as the most relevant source of information in determining the status of at-risk students (Chaplin & Hannaway, 1996). They are characteristics attributed



to youth who live in economically inadequate situations or are exposed to inappropriate educational experiences and are at greater levels of risk. These warning signs signal educators of potential problems and that these students need extra attention. It is agreed by most educators that the school's mission is to provide educational support that is equal for all students. Social elements outside schools influence their ability to complete their mission (Cromwell, 1997). Research shows that youth who are at risk are more likely to drop out of school than their advantaged peers. They are also more likely to be involved in activities that are destructive to their health and safety. Children from economically disadvantaged families have a greater risk of poor health, behavioral problems, and academic achievement well into adulthood (Land & Legters, 2002). The recognition that poverty places youth at a greater risk of poor performance in school is not new. Family makeup, household income, and the educational level of parents are all factors in the prediction of student success. Of all the family traits which predict success or failure of a student, encouragement and support from home are the most important. The extent to which families provide environments which encourage education and resources to help students develop is also very important. The support family members show can make a huge difference in the success or failure of a child (Hepburn & White, 1990).

Poverty is the most consistently noted indicator of poor academic performance (Land & Legters, 2002). It causes an inability of families to provide basic necessities essential to themselves and their children. In the past the tendency has been to place the blame on schools for poor academic performance. This tendency to blame the schools is now being tempered with a more critical eye on the family. Children who are poor are also more likely to be poorly prepared for grade level work, to fail to be retained, and to

be suspended from school (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Concentration on school subjects is much more difficult when a child is hungry, ill or is worried about situations at home. Other issues which can be detrimental to children's well being and self concept may be perceptions of others concerning their dress, possessions or study tools.

### Structure of the Family

In 1955, 60% of all U.S. households consisted of a working father, a mother who stayed at home, and two or more school-age children. By 1985, that number was down to only 7%. Today with over one-half of all new marriages ending in divorce, there are approximately 21 million children living in single parent homes. In over 90% of cases it is the mother (U. S. Census Bureau, 2005). These children are the result of divorce or births out-of-wedlock. There is a significant correlation which exists between divorced or births out-of-wedlock households and poverty. Children who live in families where the female is the head of the family have a greater than 50% chance of being poor (Ascher & Barnett, 1993). From this research it appears that students from single-parent households tend to drop out of school at a much higher rate than those who come from a more traditional two-parent family. According to the 2002 Census bureau the average income of single-mother families is about 65-70% of that of single-father families. It is estimated that only 35% receive any child support (Kids Count Data Book, 2002).

As part of this qualitative meta-analysis, several years of the Kids Count Data Book were reviewed in order to allow a comparison over a period of time. The Kids Count Data Book provides statistical information about at-risk students in one location and in a format that is easy to read and understand. In relation to rural areas, the number of one-parent households doesn't even begin to compare with those in urban areas. In

1990 the rate of rural female-headed households was 20% (Lichter & Eggbean, 1992). In 2004 the rate was up slightly to 26% Kids Count Data Book (2005). According to the general Accounting Office the rate of children living in poor female-headed families increased faster than children in homes similarly situated with two parents. The number of children who live in single-parent homes varies widely among the six states used in this study. All of these states have seen an increase in single parent households from 1990 to 2004 Kids Count Data Book. Limited information relative to families of single parent homes living in rural areas of the six states in this study has been found. The following information provided is from the Kids Count Data Book (2005).

Table 1. Children in Single Parent Families

State	Percentage		2004 Rank (50 states + Washington, DC)
	1990	2004	
Texas	23	32	33rd
Oklahoma	23	34	37th
Kansas	20	24	*4th
Nebraska	19	23	2nd
South Dakota	21	27	12th
North Dakota	20	24	*4 <sup>th</sup>

*\*Note: The tied ranking for Kansas and North Dakota is due to these two states having the same percentage rate. Kids Count Data Book, 2005*

In 2004 more than 21 million children lived in single parent families. Nationwide there was no change in the percentage of children living in single-parent homes. The overall percentage remained 31% through 2004. Children living in poverty is the most widely used predictor of child well-being. That is due to the fact that it is linked to areas such as health, education, emotional well being and delinquency. Of the poor in America 18% are children living in poverty (Kids Count Data Book, 2006) or approximately 7.7 million

school age children. Students from low income families are three times more likely to drop out of school as those from more prominent advantaged homes. Female students from families with the lowest socioeconomic status drop out of school five times as often as those within the highest quartile. Male students in the lowest quartile drop out at two and a half times the rate of those in the highest quartile (Earle & Roach, 1989). Poverty rates for the six states in the central region for this study are as follows:

Table 2. Children Living in Poverty

State	Percentage		2004 Rank (50 states + Washington, DC)
	1990	2004	
Texas	19	23	42nd
Oklahoma	15	21	36th
Kansas	9	12	6th
Nebraska	10	13	10th
South Dakota	8	15	18th
North Dakota	9	16	21st

*Statistical information provided is from the Kids Count Data Book, 2005.*

Despite the enormous wealth of the United States, the child poverty rate is among the highest of any of the developed countries of the world. The 2004 poverty line as established by the U. S. office of Management and Budget and reported in the Kids Count Data Book was based on \$19,157 a year for a family of four, two adults and two children. Of the six states used in this study the average poverty rate was 17 percent in 2004 throughout the region.

Although the highest poverty rates still exist in city populations, the largest number of poor people live in rural and small metropolitan areas. Nearly one in three urban children and one in four rural children live in homes with incomes that are below the poverty level. From this information the numbers of poor people are growing. There

is also people who are chronically poor. Underclass is the term used to describe those that are entrenched in poverty; poverty that has existed from one generation to the next and which is concentrated. In 2004 more than 24 million children had no parent in the home that worked full time, year round (Kids Count Data Book, 2006). This measure was referred to as “lack of secure parental employment”. In homes where parents do not have secure employment children were also 15 percent less likely to not have access to health benefits compared to 9 percent of other families. The national average of children living in families with no parent working was 32 percent as compared to the six states for this study which was 29 percent (Kids Count Data Book, 2006). Clearly a child’s environment at home has a profound impact on the overall well being and transition into adulthood.

#### School Environment

School characteristics identified as those which place students at higher risk levels are school culture and climate, school level poverty, class and school size. Also included were policies on retention, suspension and expulsions (Land & Legters, 2002). Students which attend schools in high poverty areas tend to have lower grades than those in more less poverty stricken schools. They are more likely to be retained than those in lower poverty schools. These students are less likely to graduate on time, more likely to live in poverty and more likely to be unemployed later on after school (Harris & Lehr, 1998).

A student’s background is not the only characteristic that puts them at-risk of failure. Student behavior is also a contributing factor to the at-risk situation. “Behavioral risk factors are a set of behaviors that, if pursued by a youngster, reduce the likelihood that successful school outcomes will be realized” (Finn, 1993, p. 1). According to Finn

behavioral risk factors such as participation or educational engagement can be observed. It is indicated by a student's effort to demonstrate attention to, and involvement in schoolwork.

Finn proposed four levels of participation that foster success in school. In the first level from the earliest years of school, participation requires students to be present, attentive, and prepared. In that way when directions are given or questions are asked students are ready to engage. In the second level which builds upon the first level, students are more than passive responders. They take the initiative to ask questions and interact with the teacher and with other students. Students may also become involved in clubs and or extracurricular activities. In level three, initiative is taken by the student that involves seeking out help when academic difficulties are encountered. These behaviors are observed because of the student's awareness of the need for help. Level four advocates student involvement in school government particularly where a direct impact on students themselves are involved (Finn, 1993).

The classroom environment is in large part responsible for developing and encouraging student engagement. Content must be perceived as relevant and challenging without being too difficult. It must allow the learner to grasp the relationship the curriculum has to their lives and experiences. The more a student becomes involved in their school and engaged in classroom activities, the more they reduce the risk of dropping out. Disengagement may exist because of the preoccupation or struggles of daily life outside the classroom, daydreaming, disinterest in the subject matter, or boredom to name a few (Wehlage, 1989). Holding the interest of children has been a key topic of conversation over the years. How best to do that has been the subject of many

educators over the years. Experimenting with work related experiences have caught the attention of main stream educators in the recent past and may be an encouraging resource for the future (Harris & Lehr, 1988).

Combining school with work has been found promising in the transition to employment and responsibilities of adult life. It has also raised interest levels of educators as well as students and provided a more active role on the part of the learner (Roderick, 1993, Wehlage, 1989). Of the original six National Goals for Education, fostered by the U.S. Department of Education, two are concerned with preparing students for employment and competitiveness in the new global economy: Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and vocational education. Through the Job Training Partnership Act funds are channeled to schools across the nation in an attempt to help them develop job-related skills and knowledge. In the vocational educational system school and business/industry partnerships also emphasize the preparation of students for the working world. A characteristic of many dropout prevention programs is vocational preparation utilizing on-the-job training. Either because of a need to work or for other reasons, a predominant reason given for dropping out of school is employment (Roderick, 1993, Wehlage, 1989).

Finn (1993) identified paying attention as foundational to successful participation in school. Inattentiveness, short attention spans, and being easily distracted are all characteristics associated with some at-risk youth. These students typically daydream or tune-out what is going on around them. Some students are disengaged through nonattendance, truancy, chronic tardiness, and absenteeism. One of the strongest predictors of dropping out has been found to be absenteeism (Finn, 1993). These types of

behavior are referred to as passive disengagement. Students who disrupt class through various kinds of misbehavior are said to be actively disengaged (Finn, 1993). It is estimated that 45 percent of all students that dropout fall into the category of active disengagement. Characteristics of active disengagement are misbehavior, delinquency, and criminal behavior.

The cost of dropping out of school and becoming even more disadvantaged has never been so high. With the economic stakes skyrocketing, the risk of failure has also increased dramatically. In the late 1940s and early 1950s over half of all jobs were classified as “unskilled” requiring a high school education or less. During the 1970s 30-40% of all jobs were considered “unskilled”. High school dropouts could still find jobs that would pay living wages. During the 1980s and 1990s this percentage fell significantly due to business closings, downsizing, manufacturing operations moving to other countries and outsourcing. Today, however, only one fifth or about 20 percent of paid employment is considered “unskilled”, and individuals who have completed high school will obtain these jobs (National Commission on High School Senior Year, 2001). Nearly three fifths of all jobs require high school and some college or secondary training of some sort. In the 1970’s high school drop outs could find jobs that would produce living wages. With increasing inflation, a population explosion, and the lack of jobs for unskilled individuals, opportunities are decreasing rapidly. It is imperative that further training take place in order to be able to compete in the global job market. “In addition to these employment costs, the failure to obtain at least a high school education has been associated with increased need for physical and mental health services along with a greater rate of incarceration” (Barr & Parrett, 2001, p. 18). “In the 1940s and 50s high



school diplomas were considered an asset, it is now a virtual necessity in order to be successful in the labor market” (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000, p. 4).

For a number of students, dropping out of school can sometimes be an economic necessity. Still yet others see it as simply a preference of work over school (Roderick, 1993). Although working while in high school does not appear to influence students to drop out, about a third of all 16-17 year old teens are employed (National Center of Educational Statistics). The time spent at work, however, can have an influence on the decision to dropout (Roderick, 1993). From the High School and Beyond data it is noted that students who work more than 10 hours per week are at a higher risk of poorer academic performance and of leaving school prior to graduation than those who worked fewer hours per week. This drop out rate is particularly significant when the work hours exceed 15-20 hours per week (Catterall, 1986).

Dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative statistics. For example, the median income of high school dropouts age 18 and over was \$12,184 in 2003 according to the U.S. Census Bureau 2005. By contrast that to the median income of those age 18 and over who completed their education with a high school credential including a General Educational Development certificate was \$20,431. Those who dropout of school are also less likely to be in the labor force than those with a high school credential or higher, and are more likely to be unemployed if they are in the labor force (U.S. Department of Labor 2005). Also, those over the age of 24 who dropout reported being in worse health than adults who are not dropouts, regardless of income (U.S. Department of Education 2004). Those who dropout makeup disproportionately higher percentages of the nation’s prison and death row inmates.

Dropout rates are divided into two categories: event dropout rate and status dropout rate. Event dropout rate estimates the percentage of both private and public high school students who left school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next school year. Status dropout rate refers to the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when they dropped out (U.S. Department of Education 2004). According to the Department of Education, the national event dropout rate of students enrolled in high school for the 2003/2004 school year was about 5 out of every 100 students or approximately 5%. These students left school before October 2004 without completing a high school program. Since 1972 this rate has trended downward, from 6.1% in 1972 to 4.7% in 2004. This decline occurred primarily from 1972 through 1990. Despite year-to-year fluctuations, there has been no overall pattern of increase or decrease in event dropout rates since 1990.

At the state level the event dropout rate is calculated using data from 1993 thru 2002 from the Common Core Data (CCD). Rates reported here reflect public school students who were enrolled in grades 9-12 at some point during the 2001-02 school year. These students were not enrolled in school in October 2002, and had not earned a high school diploma or completed a state-or district-approved education program. The states studied had event dropout rates for the 2002 school year as follows: Texas 3.8%, Oklahoma 4.4 percent, Kansas 3.1%, Nebraska 4.2%, South Dakota 2.8%, and North Dakota with 2.0%. These rates are reflective of those dropping out of public secondary school systems within a given year. They do not include information about individuals outside who may have dropped out during a preceding school year (U.S. Department of

Education 2004). The decision to drop out of school may be influenced by the degree to which the related risk factor(s) impact the life of a student. Schools that keep good records begin to recognize patterns in student's lives which are characteristic of at-risk behavior. Records allow schools to be able to identify those who are potentially at-risk and hopefully intervene before they drop out. Good record keeping should begin early, be well documented and organized. Research suggests that a school can intervene to help overcome the effects of poverty and even to some extent the effects of family environment.

Controversy has erupted over extending the at-risk label to a greater number of students. The fear is that by labeling a broader number of the school population at-risk, it will direct funds away from programs that are helping the neediest students. Growing concern is that these policies could discourage disadvantaged students from persisting in school, and those districts serving higher proportions of poor and minority students will not have the resources to prepare students for success on the new assessments (Stringfield & Land, 2002). Raising standards as well as extending funding to help a greater number of students without increasing already unacceptable levels of educational inequity continues to be a difficult problem to solve.

Some argue that all students are at risk. Others believe that by virtue of their circumstances in life at any given moment in time constitutes an at-risk situation. While some of these factors are interrelated, they are increasing. Primarily these are environmental risk factors which are the first category of issues for school systems. Situational issues such as students who have changed schools frequently have higher failure rates, students with poor academic history and those with poor behavior have a

lower risk of graduation, along with teachers who perceive students as uninterested and poorly motivated (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Students who have not been recognized as being at-risk because of lack of interest, have additional issues at home, or could not learn the way they have been taught. These are trends that continue to increase despite different types of treatment. Lessening course rigor has failed; separation of these students has failed; restricting learning opportunities has failed. All of these decrease interest, motivation and achievement. (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) According to Costello, (1996) all students, regardless of background, should be held to the same standards, academically and all students need to be taught that they can succeed. If you look at the statistics the programs listed above had some positive effects on students. In 1998, 82.8% of Americans ages 25 and older had their high school diploma. This left 17.2% of adults without a diploma. That equates to a 7.6% increase over the beginning of the decade when only 75.2% had their diploma (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006).

Most problems in education on the surface seem manageable at first glance. In reality many times they are a tangled web of problems which contain sets of problems affecting another. Gaining a better understanding of the reasons for school failure will lead to better strategies to keep children in school.

No school program has the power to change a child's economic status, family structure, or the color of his or her skin. What educators can do is work to create learning environments that provide all students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy and society. (Stringfield & Land, 2002, p. 4)

If the trends of the recent past continue, the number of economically disadvantaged people in the United States and elsewhere is expected to increase (Poulos, & Nightingale, 1997). This risk of educational failure threatens both the ideals and economic base of our country. Those with little or no education are less likely to be productive members of a democratic society than their educated counterparts. They are less likely to vote and be able to take leadership roles in our society. They are more likely to end up on welfare or serve time in prison. Economically, the failure of students to succeed is particularly unsettling due to the fact that we are entering a global economy. As we compete in this new technological age a more educated, better trained, better skilled workforce will be needed. The annual income of those without a high school diploma has dropped dramatically over the last 25 years. The push toward greater standardization and accountability has led to a much greater need for an educated workforce.

Low achievement is a term most widely used to identify at-risk students. It is typically a measure of classroom performance as indicated by grades that are below average, failing, and/or low performance on standardized tests. “One-half of those maintaining D averages or lower typically drop out” (Catterall, 1986, p. 9 ). The result of low performance is that it delays completion. According to the Kids Count Data Book only 74 percent of all students graduated from high school on time in the 2003 school year (within 4 years of entering high school in the ninth grade). Which is down from 69% in 1990. Data from students who graduated on time from high school in the central states for this study were as follows:

Table 3. Student Graduation Rates

State	Percentage		2004 Rank (50 states + Washington, DC)
	1990	2004	
Texas	65	91	37th
Oklahoma	73	87	13th
Kansas	75	93	20th
Nebraska	80	87	13th
South Dakota	78	97	1st
North Dakota	81	98	1st

*Statistical information provided is from the Kids Count Data Book, 2005.*

With the need for advanced skills in today's job market it is essential for students to have the knowledge required for good paying jobs. Overall in 2004 there were 1.1 million teen's ages 16-19 that were not in school or had not graduated from school. The overall dropout rate in 2004 was 8% and was 3% lower than the dropout rate of 11% in 2000. A study completed in 1991 by the Texas Education Agency concluded that the most frequently used at-risk identification criteria was related to performance and that a large percentage of dropouts had not been identified previously as being at risk.

#### Challenges Schools Face

In today's ever changing world, schools face many challenges. There is an onslaught of academic as well as social problems, an ever increasing transient society, single parent households, lack of stable home life, and students without hope who often lack a reason to want to succeed. Over the years the graduation rate has increased yet a growing part of the school population is failing. It is not a problem which is confined to any specific area. Students are dropping out and failing in most of the communities in the U.S. With demands on students increasing and pressures of a technologically based society escalating, schools are required to handle an ever increasing variety of social problems that bleed over into academic issues (Stringfield, & Land, 2002). Teachers are

faced with the decision of having to deal with these social issues rather than doing what they were trained and hired to do which is to teach the subject matter students were enrolled in. Much of the time schools are forced to solve the social issues before they can ever get to the real academic issues for which they were originally designed and staffed. The enormous amount of time, effort and resources needed to solve these issues complicates matters and takes away from valuable school time. The real losers in this type of environment are the students. Many times students do not understand or comprehend the importance of a solid educational foundation and are content with the sense of “just getting by” not having to do the work or not caring about their future. This is however, not just a responsibility issue, academic issue, or even a discipline issue but rather a social issue. These issues can be carried with them into adult life (Stringfield, & Land, 2002). Also issues such as these are interrelated and lead to other behaviors that are less desirable. Lack of workers without basic skills provides industry with the motivation to look elsewhere for employees. Without a stable employment base, unemployment, poverty, and crime all increase.

Issues such as poverty, neglect, substance abuse, unemployment, separation, violence, and even the threat of terrorism have crept into our society. Working among these and other issues they seek to discourage students from persisting in school and hinder them from achieving the goal of completion. Due to the pressures of an ever changing society students encounter a plethora of problems to keep them from achieving their goal. National disasters, lack of resources, and overcrowding in some areas deplete resources, cause tempers to flare and create hazards which prey on the minds of those placed in increasingly vulnerable positions (Vaughn, Boethel, Hoover, Lawson, &

Torres, 1989). These positions in which the poor and the weak are placed render them with no voice in what happens (Hepburn & White, 1990). As a result the only thing they can do is to disconnect from the world. Many are just going through the motions, though they have given up long ago. Their heart is just not in it even though they get up every morning and go on. Many are discouraged with a failing system and lack of any hope for the future.

It is believed by some experts that some 30% of youth in school now will drop out prior to graduating. There does not seem to be a clear description of who these youth are. Yet based on past data there is every indication that their numbers will increase in the coming years. If something is not done to stem the tide of the drop out prone it is evident that society will need to bear the brunt of the economic burden for neglecting to educate these young people. (Levin, 1986) According to the census bureau there were 12.1 million children living in poverty in the United States in 2002, as a result the at-risk rates for students are just as high. The risk factors for failure in school are all closely related and all contribute to the 35-40% of students in the United States who are at-risk (Natriello, 2002). Students who are at risk are often difficult for teachers to handle. Over time educators have developed different strategies for teaching these students. One large problem is that at-risk youth become at-risk adults and eventually totally dependent upon society. People who are frustrated and overwhelmed by societal issues generally tend to go along, take the path of least resistance and sometimes give up all-together. At-Risk individuals can begin being at-risk by virtue of the position in which they come into this world, long before they ever get to school age. Researchers have associated a variety of conditions with being at risk. "These characteristics correlated with a high likelihood of



dropping out mention demographic, socioeconomic and institutional characteristics”

(Druian, & Butler, 2001, p. 4) as well as those listed below:

- Living in high-growth states
- Living in unstable school districts
- Family background
- Having low academic skills (though not necessarily low intelligence)
- Speaking English as a second language
- Having negative self-perceptions
- being bored or alienated
- having low self-esteem
- Pursuing alternatives
- Males tend to seek paid work as an alternative
- Females may leave to have children or get married

School environment plays an important role in the development of children.

Programs have been designed to intervene in the lives of those disadvantaged students before it is too late. The decision to extend the at-risk label to a larger number of students has been met with great criticism. More students with this label mean less funds going to those who need it the most. Much funding has been wasted as those with the most need are caught in a downward spiral. Those caught in a tangled web of bureaucracy become lost in the shuffle and disinterested in a failing system. Many discouraged, retreat and find other ways to cope with the problem. These social problems are often left in the hands of schools to solve. With a society changing so quickly it will be up to school systems to address and solve these issues. Schools will have to develop better plans and implement those plans more efficiently and effectively in the future. Plans must be developed based on facts and figures obtained through research. Schools must work in ways that enable them to consider the consequences of their actions at multiple levels of the system (Stringfield & Land, 2002). “We must keep in mind that nonlinear nature of change, the multiple perspectives we hold on the reform process, and the political realities of our situations (Stringfield & Land, 2002, p. 284).”

## Community Environment

Communities of students placed at-risk are many times characterized by social degradation. Unemployment, soaring crime rates and a society that does not look after the young are all characteristics of an uncaring and preoccupied world (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). A community that is united with common goals and that emphasize strong academic achievement in a structured environment seems most beneficial for students in higher poverty areas. Youth that have trouble with the law appear to be a greater problem in urban areas than rural communities (Kids Count Data Book, 2005).

*National Center of Educational Statistics Estimates that 30 percent of federal inmates, 40 percent of state prison inmates, and 50 percent of America's prisoners on death row are high school dropouts.*

## Criminal Statistics

According to Finn (1993) students who are not passively disengaged in the classroom and are disruptive are actively disengaged. These students pose a higher risk because of a range of discipline problems which add to social and academic problems. Juvenile delinquency and criminal behavior are problems that appear to be greater in urban areas than in suburban or rural communities (U. S. Department of Agriculture, 2001). From the resources given here, the overall crime rate at this time in the U. S. seems to be dropping. Although not reflective of the information presented below, most states juvenile crime rate is down (U. S. Department of Justice, 2000). Incarceration of juvenile offenders is reflective of the overall crime picture of each state represented in this study. Information on juvenile detention rates for the central states can be found in the *Kids Count Data Book* (2005). In addition Juvenile offenders in detention centers get relatively little or no treatment or rehabilitative programs or services. Of those juveniles

in detention facilities 33% are there for violent offenses such as assault, rape, murder or robbery and 75% are in overcrowded facilities (Hubner & Wolfson, 1999).

Table 4. Juvenile Detention and Correctional Facilities  
(rates per 100,000 teens ages 15-19)

State	Count		2003 Rank (50 states + Washington, DC)
	1997	2003	
Texas	315	318	17th
Oklahoma	193	265	30th
Kansas	380	336	14th
Nebraska	351	331	15th
South Dakota	553	564	2nd
North Dakota	335	347	11th

*Statistical information provided is from the Kids Count Data Book, 2005*

Violent deaths per state for teens between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age are provided in the Kids Count Data Book as well. The compiled data accounts for accidental deaths as well as homicide and suicide. The trend from the mid 80's to present is that the death rate among this age group is increasing. The states studied had death rates as follows:

Table 5. Teen Death Rate (deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19)

State	Count		2003 Rank (50 states + Washington, DC)
	1990	2003	
Texas	80	72	27th
Oklahoma	79	80	35th
Kansas	77	71	26th
Nebraska	55	61	15th
South Dakota	79	82	38th
North Dakota	80	85	41st

*Statistical information provided is from the Kids Count Data Book, 2005*

As teenagers move into late teen years, many new risks begin to develop. The most current data from the information presented is from 2003. Accidents account for at least three times as many teen deaths as from anything else. Most of these accidents are from automobile-related crashes. In 2003 13,595 American teenagers died, which amounts to an average of 37 teen deaths per day. The good news is that since the year 2000 the teen death rate has dropped from 67 deaths per day. It is important to note that from the information given, deaths from accidents, homicides and suicides accounted for 75% of all deaths in this age group.

### Substance Abuse

Substance abuse such as drug, alcohol, and/or controlled substances are all factors that increase the risk of academic failure (Whelage, 1989). These traits appear to be common among students who are prone to misbehavior. Early antisocial behavior is a precursor to substance abuse (Bempechat & Ginsburg, 1989). Substance abuse is ranked among the greatest risk factors in determining whether or not a student will complete high school by school leaders (Bempechat & Ginsburg, 1989). The popularity of drug and alcohol use over the years has been inconsistent. At some times it has been more prevalent than at others. A 2004 study by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests that 80% of adolescents have consumed alcohol by the time they get to the 12<sup>th</sup> graders, and that about 12% of 8<sup>th</sup>- graders have consumed more than five or more drinks on a single occasion. Studies suggest that, although both alcohol and other drugs are available to anyone who wants them, in rural communities teens prefer alcohol. Teens in larger communities have higher rates of drug use over alcohol. Children exhibiting the signs of drug dependency and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome at birth will one

day be entering the public school system. Because of the impact these substances had on their prenatal development, these children have significant learning deficiencies. The potential for these children becoming fully functioning, independent and productive adults is greatly diminished as a result of the substance abuse of their mothers during pregnancy term.

### Teen Birth Rate

Activity related to sexual behavior is also a cause of students not completing school. Issues relating to pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and abortions are all prominent examples. Schools provide educational opportunities for students to help them make informed decisions about these behaviors. It is reported that about 44% of all young women who dropout do so because of pregnancy or marriage. Data on the percent of births to single teenagers from the Kids Count Data Book are shown in table 6.

Table 6. Teen Birth Rate (births per 1,000 females ages 15-19)

State	Count		2003 Rank (50 states + Washington, DC)
	1990	2003	
Texas	68	63	48th
Oklahoma	62	56	44th
Kansas	47	41	29th
Nebraska	42	36	21st
South Dakota	41	35	18th
North Dakota	33	27	7th

*Statistical information provided is from the Kids Count Data Book, 2005*

According to the literature in the *Kids Count Data Book (2006)* summary and findings “Teenage childbearing is problematic because it often diminishes the opportunities of both the child and the young mother” (2006, p. 40). The poverty rate of children born to teenage mothers that do not marry and have not graduated from high

school was 78 percent in 2003. This statistic is in stark contrast to 9 percent for children born to women over age 20, married and that graduated from high school. Decisions relating to marriage, abortion, and adoption along with questions and feelings of doubt, fear and anxiety tend to strain relationships. Resources are often stretched or unavailable and the worry sometimes preoccupies those involved. In addition, it is estimated that 2.5 million teens annually are exposed to and infected with sexually transmitted diseases. No data have been reported on the association of sexually transmitted diseases and the increased risk of poor school performance. The psychological impact of contracting and carrying such diseases may hinder a student's ability to focus on schoolwork. Associated with lack of concentration and focus grades could suffer and increase the risk of dropping out. Additional research is needed in this area.

Rural America has been described as the quintessential idyllic place to grow up. It is far from the noisy traffic, crime, overcrowding and social problems of the big cities. Romantic in thought are the memories many people have of growing up in the country. Memories, often spring from a time when those fortunate enough to have grown up in an era which is different than that of today. To many people, a life in the country means those long carefree, lazy days, which were good and wholesome (Reynolds, 1994). The reality of rural America is, however, a different story. Many families are struggling just to keep food on the table. With many communities not having stable employment most families do what they can to survive. Generally driving to work in the city has become common. Crime rates are steadily increasing, single parent homes are on the rise and unstable homes are more becoming the rule rather than the exception. Although much was written about the at-risk student population in the late 1980s and into the 90s this

percentage has been overlooked in light of so many other social problems within these communities. In spite of many efforts this population is growing. The gap between the haves and the have-nots' is increasingly widening, crime is getting worse and unemployment is ever increasing (Reynolds, 1994).

Characteristics of rural communities vary from one to another. Unlike urban locations, rural areas have an economy based primarily upon a single business or a commercial/industrial source. Economic bases found in rural areas are:

*Statistical information provided by U. S. Department of Agriculture, 2001.*

- Agriculture (29 percent of the U.S. non-metropolitan counties)
- Manufacturing (28 percent)
- Vacation/retirement/resort (11 percent)
- Mining (8 percent)

Of those non-metropolitan counties that remain they are either federal land or specialized government (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2001). These communities are more vulnerable to economic instability due to the specialized nature of their economies. Hardships are more difficult because of the high and low cycles of their economies. The demographics of rural communities are changing as well. Populations are decreasing due to the migration to larger cities. With many of the regions being quite remote, many of the opportunities, services, and conveniences afforded by those in the big cities are not available. Health as well as social services are limited or totally lacking in rural communities. The Goals 2000: *Educate America Act of 1994* specifically identified geographic locations as leading indicator for identifying students who are at risk.

In addition to demographic characteristics, rural communities play an important role in the social development of students for readiness to learn and for success in

adulthood. Students who have limited community support are at a higher risk of not succeeding than those that do. The term community used in this paper means more than residential dwellings. According to Coleman and Hoffer, (1987) a functional community is one that involves social interaction, networks and other sources that go beyond the level of the family and school. In a functional community adults feel a sense of responsibility for all children, because they know them and their families. Today, most children are isolated from those types of community influences. There are many reasons for that, however in those types of communities, students are given the notion that they can be successful and even develop the belief that they can rise above the socioeconomic level of their parents. These students grow up in this nurturing atmosphere. Without a strong set of social resources, it is limiting to draw upon only what ever individual resources they have (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). In small communities most people know one another. Building on this foundation, it is possible to develop a more caring, supportive and mutually more mature commitment to each other. It should be noted, however, that the kind of involvement described above in many cases may not happen naturally. Many times it is just the opposite with cliques, attitudes, and mindsets that develop and persist over time especially in smaller communities. According to rural sociologists the causes of some rural areas to not be functional communities are the lack of human capital. Human capital was a concept developed by Coleman (1988), and is the “sum total of norms, social networks, and interactions that facilitate educational attainment” (p. 120). According to Coleman factors of social capital can be identified in families and communities and are those which facilitate the development of human capital.



## Legislation

Numerous pieces of legislation have been implemented in order to help schools keep pace in a changing world. Beginning in the 1960's with Chapter 1 legislation it was thought that schools were agents of upward mobility in the American life. Educational planners believed that poverty must be defeated. President Lyndon B. Johnson, a former school teacher from Texas witnessed first hand effects of poverty. Looking for a way to provide equal access to education, he signed Chapter 1 into effect in 1965. Much of the legislation was derived from President Kennedy's term in office when he developed proposals that would ensure Americans a good education. Johnson reviewed and revised this legislation which became the foundation for his vision the "Great Society". In it was his policy on national reform. It included the war on poverty, legislation on education, care of the elderly, legal protection for African Americans and human rights for all Americans. The educational part of this legislation was designed to provide funding for programs that were developed to help students acquire academic success. This legislation was based on the idea that the lack of educational success was largely due to poverty, parents with limited education or family characteristics. These programs focused on students who were termed disadvantaged in order to help them overcome financial, social, and other cultural disadvantages.

In 1983 during the Reagan administration *A Nation at Risk* was published. It outlined the causes of academic failure. This was a more in depth look at reasons for being at-risk than previous proposals and legislation. The issues of poverty and need were being addressed, however the specific focus began to shift from poverty and student personal traits toward the low academic expectations schools required of students. School

systems began to concentrate more on curriculum, poor teaching conditions, inferior teachers, administrators, class size and organizational structure. This shift in thought was driven by the belief that we needed to look more in depth at making schools better and that all of the issues of school reform had not been addressed.

In 1988 legislation was passed that allowed Chapter 1 funds to be expanded to include programs for school wide reform. In 1997 the *Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration* was initiated. This legislation “encouraged the development and implementation of whole school reform programs in districts throughout the country”. (Stringfield & Land, 2002 p. 2) It is critical for the success of at-risk students that reform programs include a family involvement component (Stringfield & Land, 2002). Monies from Title I which are re-evaluated and directed and which are scrutinized should be utilized in areas which will do the most with what we have. With the transition from Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS) to the new assessments, though, consistent nationwide data on Title I students’ achievements have been notably absent (Stringfield & Land, 2002). Lack of specific guidelines and an accountability system that has proven to be weak should be regarded as warning signs that shoring up in some areas is needed (Borman & D’Agostino, 1996). With budgets shrinking and the school population growing, schools face difficult challenges in the coming years. Intervention programs such as the free lunch and breakfast programs have helped tremendously. Many before school and after school programs that help families with child care have also been effective along with tutorial programs for academic purposes. Since 1981 the federal government has given schools money for restructuring purposes. These monies provide supplementary services for low achieving students. In the past these students were pulled

out of the classroom for remedial instruction. Today it is believed that the pull-out programs are largely ineffective. Efforts are now underway to improve instruction for these students, the act provides for and encourages high-poverty schools to use Title I money for school wide programs (Stringfield & Land, 2002). Professional development, teacher support, newer contextual teaching, authentic and just-in-time learning environments have proven to be very popular. These monies help Instructional staff upgrade skills and knowledge to be able to teach using the latest techniques. The purchase of technology is somewhat expensive and schools use the funds to help upgrade and or purchase technology. These techniques seek to simulate business and industry models and allow students to be able to gain valuable knowledge and life lessons in a safe learning environment within the school setting.

#### Intervention Strategies

Class size and the use of more effective programs for at-risk students are important in all school settings. Programs that address the issues of professional development and continuing training for teachers continues to be extremely important. Accountability for all teachers and school leadership has also been addressed. The research indicates that pullout programs are not as effective as these students working in the classroom and being held to the same accountability levels as their peers. Computer Based Training along with Web Based Training has been used to help self learners become more interested and motivated to learn. Instructional multimedia materials in combination with electronic teaching tools and self paced study seem promising. Technology has for now proven itself attractive for the learner (Stringfield & Land, 2002). The most exciting part of advancing technology is that it encourages interest and

motivates students desire to learn. Students who are at-risk need to be motivated and the self directed, independent, nonjudgmental nature of much of the instruction seems to be very inspirational for both students and educators alike. Technology also provides immediate feedback to users while remaining nonjudgmental. For the time being the seemingly simple things a computer provides can make all the difference in a student's education. At-risk students need stimulation for a variety of senses at one time. They "need to be actively involved" (Stringfield & Land, 2002, p. 34) in their education in order for them to succeed. Specific instructions, requirements and high expectations along with quick feedback are essential in helping students learn independently. They are helpful "because the more immediate the feedback the more likely the low achiever will be motivated to continue the task" (Lehr & Harris, 1988). From the research reviewed a highly structured environment with specific goals and objectives are critical to the success of many students. An educational atmosphere that is nonjudgmental, encouraging and focused is essential to the development of students placed at-risk. Cost will no doubt play a large role in bringing at-risk students up to speed in educational settings. Equipment is expensive, adding education for teachers and networking services plus space on servers to store the electronic teaching tools is staggering. Support staff to keep the equipment in good working condition and update software as needed is an additional costs that can be accumulated. Eventually, these things will have to be done because of an advancing technological society. If we are to be a mobile society we will have to be able to meet the demands of the anytime, anywhere, anyplace learning environments of the 21st century. These environments are sure to change and the educational establishment will have to keep pace. Students learning while using technology in an

authentic setting are more direct and detailed than is possible in studies of a purely theoretical nature (Stringfield & Land, 2002).

### Summary

All of the circumstances and factors discussed in this literature review present large challenges for today's schools. Communities have created more opportunities for schools than existed a few short years ago. A variety of circumstances have brought about a change in the way schools work. Goals of each school system may be different, but what they have in common is the understanding that they alone cannot provide children with the resources and supports they need to become successful in life (Stringfield & Land, 2002). The involvement of family and the support of community as a whole are particularly important to the disadvantaged students who need additional help in school. Using extracurricular activities schools have the opportunity to not only reach out to students but to entire families. Schools have a unique network of resources within the community to help them encourage and support families and to create learning environments with rich and rewarding experiences to those they serve. School systems must begin to reach out to those who may be in need before problems take root and at-risk situations develop. By identifying these problems early school systems have the chance to address issues before they become larger and much more difficult to solve.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

A total of 12 studies were examined with 4 studies being eliminated. This qualitative meta-analysis was based on existing literature. Three of the studies excluded were because the effects dealt with at risk characteristics as related to instructional methods, which was not a focus of this study. One study was excluded because the effects of at-riskness could not be separated from the effects of the larger part of the study that included at-risk students. The remaining eight studies employed quantitative methods to examine effects of at-risk youth against a backdrop of both rural and suburban settings. The eight studies provided enough background data on intervention methods used, making it possible to conduct a qualitative meta-analysis.

Studies of at-risk students in rural and suburban areas are somewhat limited. For that reason this study collected general information on the concept of risk. As many data on the overall states and comparisons were collected as possible to complete the study. Those factors commonly associated with risk have been discussed in chapter 2. Research containing specific information about students in rural and suburban schools has been presented to examine whether differences in rural and suburban at-risk students exist. Finally, implications of educational policy has been discussed.

A qualitative meta-analysis is a collection of systematic techniques for resolving apparent contradictions in research findings. It is a research technique that examines results of a number of studies in order to determine the average effect size of a given intervention and identify moderating (Glass, McGraw, and Smith, 1981). Qualitative Meta-analysts translate results.

Data for the studies were collected based on at-risk students in the Plains states as well as information on whether they were students from Urban, Suburban or Rural locations. Finally student, school and community characteristics were examined. First availability of the data was checked to make sure a sufficient quantity could be obtained in order to conduct a meta-analysis. Information on at-risk students was checked to make sure it was reported accurately and correctly. Typically in a meta-analysis as much information as possible is obtained in order to support the findings of the study. Due to the large body of information about findings of the study, only the most relevant research was used. Studies were described, classified and coded. Data were analyzed using relevant demographic and statistical techniques. Results were presented in table form.

This study was a conventional or Glassian meta-analysis as characterized by Glass (Glass, McGraw, & Smith, 1981). Research was quantitative and used numerical indices and statistical methods for organizing and extracting information from a quantity of data. The research used existing (ex post facto) measurements contained within the source studies. Simple methods of presenting meta results were used to identify intervention used in the source studies. These statistics were presented in table format to facilitate interpretation (Bangert & Rudner, 1991).

## Procedures

The findings of the source studies were not negated by imposing what could have been judged as arbitrary or non-empirical criteria, research quality, or standard. Different studies were used so that comparisons could be made and so that general conclusions could be drawn. The research did not prejudge findings in terms of research quality. The qualitative meta-analysis was a comprehensive review of the research topic; summarization of results were coded while identifying consistencies and inconsistencies in selected research (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). In order to attempt to identify studies that used common outcome measures, common interventions, and similar designs and instruments. This was an attempt to avoid analysis of dissimilar research. The researcher also attempted to determine if the original researcher used appropriate quantitative analysis methods, and that reported results were approximate. The unit of analysis used was the study finding or intervention method. Reported results were coded and placed in table form to be easily interpreted. Variables may have included, but not been limited to: (1) characteristics of at-risk students, (2) environment, (3) Background, (4) “setting”, and (5) personality traits.

The first research question asked, What are the factors which contribute to at-risk students nationally? To answer the question, extraction of research information data concluded that dropout rates over the past 14 years show a slight decrease in those leaving school overall. This however is misleading due to the fact that there are more students in the pipeline now than ever before, the number or reasons for which students dropout, and also that each state has its own criteria for determining success or failure of



students. These things in combination with lack of recognition of the problem early on has lead to at-risk or dropout situations. Overall it was found that there was not one problem but several that contributed to the overall at-risk or dropout situations of students.

The second research question asked, do the factors in the Central Plains states vary from national situation? The research presented a wealth of information to answer this question. First of all a child's background and socioeconomic level often determine whether he or she will be at-risk before school age. A number of factors including poverty, environment, and early development, social and parenting skills play a pivotal role in the child's self perception as well as how he or she views the world. In addition the school atmosphere and environment have an important part in the perceptions children receive as part of the public education experience.

Question number three asked, what are some possible intervention strategies to deal with at-risk students? do the characteristics of students suggest about student success?" In order to answer this question the researcher looked at research on student characteristics or behaviors that place students at risk. These characteristics included disinterest, substance abuse, absence, teen pregnancy, personnel perceptions and teen death rate.

#### Sources and search procedures

Research selected for inclusion in this qualitative meta-analysis included experimental and non-experimental studies from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Clearinghouse, Digital Dissertations, ProQuest, Ebsco Host, books, and various peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed journals. In addition current information

from governmental agencies and organizations which work with disadvantaged as well as at-risk students were used. These databases included Academic Index, (indexes education journals designed for research practitioners). Reference sections of studies selected gave additional information on studies not listed in any of the above databases. The source studies were from throughout the United States, irrespective of date of publication. However, the most current information available on the research topic procured. The researcher also reviewed other meta-analyses which have been conducted by other researchers. The descriptors for the various computer searches were as follows: (1) "At-Risk student," (2) "Dropouts," (3) "High-risk student," (4) "Persistence," (5) "Under prepared," (6) "Educationally Disadvantaged."

These searches yielded more than 2,000 pieces of educational literature on the subject of at-risk students. Most were disqualified quickly because of age, topic relevance, kind of study, or source. A reading of many of the abstracts and extended searching techniques using operators designed to limit the search criteria reduced the number down to 300. Studies were then screened by title and if they appeared promising were accessed and abstracts were read. If an abstract showed promise then an electronic or hard copy was obtained. Of these, many were dealt with an aspect of at-risk students that was not the focus of this research.

The hardcopy studies were read and sorted according to their potential use in the research synthesis either as a background article about at-risk students or specific research directly related to the topics being studied. Empirical studies study of at-risk students, characteristics, how parents and educators perceive the problem, and intervention methods relevant to the research were categorized and logged into an

electronic database. Studies that had information useful in part to this study were retained and used within the paper. No predictive or correlational studies with control groups were found.

#### Selection of the source studies

The studies were described, classified, and coded. The criteria for selecting the studies were: Only studies (n = 8) that met all four criteria were included in the meta-analysis. First of all, do they meet with the requirements of the problem, purpose and objectives of this paper? Second, do they help answer or attempt to answer the research questions? Third, do they bring to light a better understanding of this research? Fourth, do the findings of the study indicate a direction for facilitating solution of any problems of at-risk students?

#### Coding the Studies

Studies were measured, coded, and the specific characteristics were used to substantiate the findings. These items are known as studies properties. Since the goals of the study were broad, the coding needed to be comprehensive. Study outcomes were not only recorded, but coding also involved recording the “mediating effects” like conditions or surroundings that place students at-risk of failure.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

Chapter IV describes the findings obtained from the meta-analysis as described in Chapter III. These techniques were used to describe some of the main at-risk student characteristics in urban, suburban and rural settings, to bring to light an emphasis on family background characteristics, schools and communities and to determine what this information suggests about the at-risk situation and what can be done to help these students complete school and be successful productive members of society.

Table 7 describes the characteristics of the eight studies selected for the meta-analysis.

The publication year ranged from 1992 to 2006. There were only a few recent studies that met all of the selection criteria. The table shows that all the studies examined at-risk students, though these students were defined differently across the studies. The grade level of students involved in the studies ranged from pre-k through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Comparisons were made and averaged. Outcome measures were dropout rates, personal and family characteristics and community characteristics. The last column in the table indicates the direction of the study results. Due to the low number of studies examined frequency, mean and effect sizes were not calculated.

Table 7. Data from the Studies Examining the Effects of Characteristics describing At- Risk Students.

Study Number	Author(s) & Year	States	Participants	Grade	Intervention	Source Type
1	Okou, J. E. (2004)	Texas, Kansas, Nebraska (Among others)	837 Participants	9-12	Policy Improvement	Dissertation Research Descriptive & Multivariate analyses
2	Rush, Shela (1992)	National Survey (all states were involved)	5,270 Students	K-5	Academic Achievement Retention	Dissertation Research Descriptive Research
3	Khattari, N., Riley, K. W., Kane, M., B. (1997)	All States in Study (Rural, Urban & Suburban areas)	Rural Education NCES	K-12	None	Review of Literature Research Descriptive
4	Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004)	All States Included in Study	35 High Schools, US Largest Metro. Areas	K-12	School Reform	Grant Research Rural At-Risk Students
5	Mikolashek, D., L. (2004)	Included States in Study	28 Studies	K-12	Positive Psychology	Dissertation Research
6	Beshara, G., E. (2005)	Single School (Not in any of the Study States)	36 Girls & 39 boys	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Social Support	Thesis Research differences according to gender
7	Zvoch, K. (2006)	Sowthwestern Region States	90,000 Students	K-12	Student Support	Journal Article
8	Stringfield, S., & Land, D. (2002)	United States National Statistics	Statistical Studies	K-12	Varied	Book

### Overview of the Studies Used

Studies used in this meta-analysis were selected for the way in which they related to the subject. Not all studies were for every state involved in this study. Some studies contained urban as well as suburban and rural components. All dealt with family background, school and community risk factors. An overview of each of the studies is given below. An Intervention category was created for each study which described the policy, practice or procedure for redirecting the course of students who would otherwise

be lost. From this category treatments could be developed that would allow for addressing the issues.

Research primarily came from studies on at-risk students over the past 15 years. Background for the paper goes back over the last 42 years and is based on empirical research studies which support those used in this meta-analysis. These studies are from governmental as well as peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed journals and reports. Each of the studies presented in Table 7 is described below and has significant information relating to one or more of the following concerns of this study: region involved, subject, student, background, family, school and/or community. Also, each study has been numbered above and listed in order from 1 thru 8. A brief synopsis of each of these studies has been presented below.

Study #1:

*Transitional Experiences of High School At-Risk Youth* by Jane Okou (2004) was dissertation research on transitional experiences of youth and how they vary among race, gender, and residence. Data from the study were taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The sub sample of participants contained information on at-risk youth from three of the six states used in the research including Texas, Kansas and Nebraska. Descriptive multivariate statistics were used to analyze data. Findings of the study revealed that among at-risk youth there are no variations in high school graduation, dropout and transition to postsecondary education. The study found that proportionally no one racial group is any more likely than any other to experience the negative effects of poverty when faced with equal levels of economic hardships. Their patterns of enrollment vary slightly, but at-risk students typically follow a specific curriculum. The study

brought out the importance of recognizing that among at-risk youth whites are as prominent as any other group and that they are also proportionately experiencing similar academic and transitional difficulties that characterize minorities. One major exception was that in rural America was that blacks are significantly less likely to be employed than their white counterparts even when poverty levels are controlled. Recommendation is to continue support of disproportionately disadvantaged minorities. The central issue of addressing problems of at-risk youth should be poverty and not race.

Study #2:

Shelia Rush (1992) examined empirical research of dropout factors at the national level. She compared findings from the national level to an empirical study at the local level. This was to determine the extent to which geographic regions, population areas, grade level, and race have an influence on risk levels between these two profiles. All states within the study focus for this thesis were included. National profile development consisted of 100 empirical studies. Method used to develop the local profile consisted of a factor analysis of 5,270 elementary students. Risk factors for the study included academic as well as family and community research. The population areas investigated in the study were urban, suburban, suburban/rural and rural. As with many studies, rural information was limited. Study found that there were no significant differences between at-risk students K-6 and students in grades 7-8. There were significant differences between students in grades K-6 and dropout students in grades 9-12 in terms of IQ, student attendance, parental education, mobility, educational aspirations and self concept. The Urban populations for this study had variables that were significantly different from rural and other regions within the study. The study suggests being at-risk and dropping

out is not entirely proportionate for all student populations in geographic regions. The study also revealed that helping young children in the early years develop characteristics such as self esteem, coping skills and internal locus of control can deter risk factors in the life of a child.

### Study #3:

Nidhi Khattri, Kevin Riley and Michael Kane studied at-risk students in poor rural areas. This research, published in 1997, attempted to define rural as best it could and began to discuss issues related to at-risk students in rural schools. This review not only encompassed the states presented in this paper, but also many others within rural areas across the US. The primary focus of poverty, family, and community background as well as academic characteristics were examined. Preliminary conclusions were drawn about students in these communities and included the following:

- Academic achievement in poor rural schools is better than that of urban counterparts but is quite low.
- Overall, the size of the problem of low academic achievement is smaller in poor rural areas than it is in poor, urban areas. This is due to in large part to the fact that a smaller proportion of rural students are poor and attend schools with other poor students.
- The communities of rural America are diverse and the economic, social and demographic characteristics vary across the country.
- The overall characteristics of rural students is that in general they vary widely from students in urban schools. Rural students tend to be white, live in two-parent families, and are seen as presenting fewer problems in schools. Minorities do comprise a large population of rural poor and is likely to be similar to that of many in poor urban areas.

These characteristics were compared with students in poor urban areas and cross sectional data compiled. The study revealed that information on rural students, communities, and schools is sketchy and difficult to compare across studies. This is due in part to the wide difference in economic makeup, school, and community support from



one location to another. Primarily the study was on at-risk students and poverty; however it contained information on communities and family background needed for the present. With poverty being the number one cause of the dropout problem across the nation, it is important to note that family characteristics are second followed by school and community characteristics.

Technology was also mentioned as being a significant factor in helping break the isolation barrier in some locations; however it is not viewed as necessarily being the answer to the curriculum problem by some researchers. Community involvement was spoken of as being helpful to students outside the classroom. It was seen as providing students with the opportunity to be able to have extended learning opportunities that do not exist within the walls of a classroom. The research also identified parental involvement in a student's education as being an important factor of success.

Involvement can take a number of forms including volunteering, parent teacher, helping student with homework, or just talking with children. Social capital was also debated as being a factor in sustaining poor and rural communities in light of little financial and human capital. "Poor rural communities may be prospering through their strong relationships and tight community bonds", (Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997, p. 23). Many researchers who for example (Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997) believe that social capital helps explain why many rural school systems are much stronger when they are compared to urban schools.

Study #4:

Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters in "Locating the Dropout Crisis published in 2004", concentrated on which schools in the United States produced the nations'

dropouts. The report which was published by Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk. All states were included in this study. National statistics as well as state dropout levels were presented. The study primarily focused on high school students as a result of Brown vs. Board of Education equal opportunity of a high quality education for all. The research did discuss some of the states that had lower graduation rates. Also a major theme of the research was completion of high school being considered one of the only real lasting ways out of poverty in today's society. About 2000 high schools in the United States have graduation rates of 60 percent or less. High schools with that are weak in these graduation rates are typically attended by minority students. Suggestions such as concentrating on high schools with weak promoting power and focusing on those who are not gainfully employed and not attending high school. In addition, the authors suggested helping them stay in school and fulfill their roles of keeping students out of poverty. The study was on high school reform and transforming these targeted high schools from drop out factories into preparatory success centers (Belfanz & Legters, 2004).

#### Study #5:

David Mikolashek (2004) studied resilience and suggested ways educators might improve academic resilience for at-risk students. No states were specifically listed in this study. Information on at-risk students as well as background characteristics such as family, socioeconomic and school information was presented. The study used quantitative methods and empirical data to report findings. Findings concluded that the primary source of family influence played the strongest role in the success of elementary school, followed by individual factors of the student (Mikolashek, 2004). Furthermore

school played a role in contributing to the overall success of students. The study shows how students can be taught to accentuate positive experiences as they learn to enjoy rewarding experiences of learning. Research on developing unique strengths or talents of self and even in special areas of curriculum are the focus of this study (Benard, 1997). The study also analyzed research from physical, psychological and behavioral domains at the proximal, transitional, and distal levels of the resilience model. Positive reinforcement was key part of the study and tied directly to the subject of resilience.

#### Study #6:

Gloria Beshara (2005) investigated the relationship between social support and risk of dropping out of school. This was a study of 36 middle school girls and 39 boys. Students were designated at-risk or not at risk based on stringent criteria of academic risk including test scores, reading level, and school records. Background of the student including socioeconomic as well as attendance records were compiled. This information was compared to not at risk students indicates an at risk student perceives lower trust in teachers, fathers, and mothers and has a greater sense of alienation. They also felt a lower overall support level from this group as well. Significant group differences were found in perceptions of relative support from mothers, fathers, peers and teachers. The not at risk group peer support was associated with fewer risk factors. Items associated with the likelihood of risk were teacher trust, communication and alienation. Results from the research concluded that perceptions of less responsive and accessible support were perceived by students. Furthermore these children experienced feelings of insecurity and perceived lower parental and teacher support and involvement than secure students. Students coming from homes with single parents were less secure than those of two

parent homes. Those from homes with a father and a mother perceived mothers as taking the lead and being more involved and supportive than the fathers.

Adolescents in this study who perceived low support from mothers were 96 percent more likely to be at risk for school dropout than those who viewed teachers as being not as trustworthy. Those who perceived mothers as low sources of communicative support were 44% more likely to be at risk. (Beshara, 2005, pg. 75)

In addition the study also notes that “teachers who were perceived as trustworthy were half as likely to be at risk for school dropout.” (Beshara, 2005, pg. 75) Building healthy relationships of mutual trust and support are extremely important to the development of children in the early years of life and school. Building these positive relationships between family members, schools and community is important in constructing positive perceptions of one’s self and others. Research brought out that interventions for children exhibiting antisocial behaviors are more effective when directed at relationship-building (Beshara, 2005).

Study #7:

Keith Zvoch (2006) in an article on Freshman Year Dropouts examined data from a large school district in the southwestern region of the United States. Concern over the characteristics associated with students who fail to complete a high school education is presented in this article. The focus of this research is on student and school characteristics. The state in which the research took place is not mentioned. Results of the study concluded that female students have lower predicted odds of dropping out relative to male students (Zvoch, 2006). Latino as well as American Indian students have higher

odds of dropping out compared to non-Latino Whites. Achievement, test performance, poverty, and being overage for grade level were strong predictors of a student's decision to drop out. Results of the study were largely consistent with research literature on individual dropout factors. Findings revealed that school organization and school's social context were statistically significant factors in supporting at-risk students in social environments. Student characteristics including ethnicity, economic disadvantages and student factors such as socioeconomic level and background were indicated as being barriers to educational success. Learning communities were described as a way to support at-risk students through school organizations. The article noted that small learning environments may have a positive effect on the student dropout rate by increasing student attachment to the school. Schools that serve disadvantaged students may benefit from establishing learning communities. Evidence from this study revealed that student characteristics as well as social environments must be considered to prevent students from dropping out.

#### Study #8:

Sam Stringfield and Deborah Land (2002) in their book took a look at the at-risk problem in the United States. The book explains where the educational system has come from in helping to support families, students, and communities. Chapters on the Conditions of risk and Resiliency are presented as well as racial issues. The second section of the book deals with education students at-risk from Preschool through High School. Research from each of these areas is presented at the end of each chapter. Section three is about looking at non-traditional practices for at-risk students. The first part is on involving families and communities in the educational process. According to Henderson

& Berla, (1995) parents and other significant adults that are actively involved in students learning are more likely to be successful in school. The move toward universal literacy is also discussed. National attention on ensuring that all children learn to read, particularly those at risk for failure. The push for all those in geographically isolated and poor instructional environments to master basic communication is particularly important. Finally the last chapter in this section is on Technology, Education and At-Risk Students. The use of Technology at this point is a promising tool that piques interest, provides students a non-threatening learning environment and is non-judgmental in the learning process. It also allows students more flexibility in not only the way they learn but also how and where they learn.

Finally the last section is on Supports systems for Improving At-Risk Schools. An overview of Title I its history and the effectiveness of compensatory education is presented, how the role of Technical Education is changing and new ways of using these techniques to teach different subject matter to at-risk students. The last chapter describes systemic support systems for schools serving students placed at-risk. The book calls for “meta-reform” or overarching logic of reform guiding any specific school or classroom-level reform and heightening the reliability of any school-based reform (Stringfield & Land, 2002). Lastly the complexity of school reform and review of studies indicating multilevel challenges are discussed. Within the structure of any school participants at “various levels all have meaningful input processes, agreed-upon structures, and outcomes” (Stringfield & Land p. 269, 2002).

## Summary

Each piece of source research data gave credibility to the research questions presented in the first chapter of this thesis. Information presented above paragraphs are highlights of the research, and findings of each of these studies are presented in Table 7 above. In summary, this qualitative meta-analysis study focused on the dropout rates and what they suggest for at-risk students in rural, urban and suburban school districts. Other variables such as family background, school and community can either help or hinder the situation. Findings of the study show that while dropout rates may be decreasing or holding steady, with more students in the pipeline and with a changing society and economy structure more will become at-risk.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the implications of federal legislation on this issue, technology in education, educational directives, student retention, conclusions and recommendations.

#### Federal Legislation

Chapter 1 of this paper began with some of the history surrounding programs to help disadvantaged individuals have an equal chance to become successful productive members of society. Title I was implemented in the early 1990's. It is the largest federally funded program for the nation's public school system in history. Borman and D'Agostino reviewed the implementation of Title I in 1996. Their main purpose was to find out if monies were being spent on Targeted students for the intended purpose of providing supplemental educational help. Research to answer this question was conducted by several groups and individuals. Martin & McClure, 1969 reported violations in the operation of the program and again in 1972 Wargo, Tallmadge, Michaels, Lipe, and Morris found regulations had been disregarded, program criteria had not been followed and guidelines ignored. They concluded that Title I had not been implemented the way Congress had intended. In the beginning of Title I poor practice and misunderstanding can be linked to political and practical problems. Once the federal policy makers had passed the bill needed to implement these funds they believed that public education would reform and reach out to the impoverished that were in need. Just the opposite was true as many school districts used these funds as general aid. These funds were spread over a large area and did not target disadvantaged children. At the



local level policy reflected that of being economically productive in direct contrast to federal policy which was concerned about equality. “Unfortunate populations, are not easily implemented by local governments because they negatively affect local economies and conflict with the economic self-interests of communities (Stringfield & Land, 2002, pg. 233).

The main goal of Title I was to narrow the gap between the educationally disadvantaged children their more advantaged peers. Researchers have attempted to by trying to answer two questions. The first Does participation in Title I narrow the achievement gap between program participants and the nations more advantaged children? And, will this gap widen without Title I funding? Researchers in an effort to understand these questions decided to compare Title I students to students not participating in the program. Fearing little or no accountability at the local level Congress decided to mandate assessments at the national level. Evaluations of Title I have been based on pre test-post test change scores from norm-referenced achievement tests. These tests are administered from fall to spring or annually (Stringfield & Land, 2002).

Borman and D’Agostino’s research indicated that statistically the program effect was random. The outcome was not meaningful because the effectiveness is dependent upon ways in which services have been evaluated and implemented for years.

Congress and the U.S. Department of Education have worked to develop tougher standards of accountability for the implementation of Title I. As a result Title I has become a more effective intervention over the past several years. Evaluation of the research indicates that Title I has not fulfilled its original intent which was to close the gap between the at-risk students and their advantaged peers. Research does suggest

however, that if not for Title I at-risk children would be further behind than they are now (Stringfield & Land, 2002). The way in which Title I has actually been implemented in schools is not as a single treatment. Title I is a way in which to fund programs within school systems. Funds from Title I are distributed in many different ways according to the interpretation by localities as to need. Congress left enough leeway for those implementing the program to not be encumbered by political red tape. Interpretation of the policy however, has been subject to the discretion of each school system receiving the funds. Given many leaders training and background most are not properly trained in Business and have not had the experience at proper management of such large sums of money. Add to that the lack of accountability and those in the school system who become so overwhelmed by the problem, poor decisions and misappropriation often follow. The evaluation of data suggests that unspecific guidelines and low accountability measures coupled with current implementation strategies should be seen as warning signs of problems to come. “Without strong accountability mechanisms, it is likely that the implementation and effectiveness of future Title I programs will remain modest and variable (Stringfield & Land, pg. 244, 2002).

### Technology in Education

Technology in recent years has been seen as a way to support the educational process and improve instruction. Educational leaders have used it as a way of improving outcomes of at-risk students. For the first time in a number of years technology has made the process of education new and exciting for many at-risk students. Study results show however, that at-risk students are less likely to have access to technology. Indications are that access to computing technology is increasing for many disadvantaged students.

“Digital divide” was a term given to those who have limited access to computers especially those with low socioeconomic backgrounds. Much has been written about the great digital divide but even with hardware and software the issue is more complex. Learning opportunities can be improved but without training to use the equipment, meaningful learning activities, and an awareness of the potential that exists, technology is useless. Technology is a tool and skills with this tool must be developed in order for students to be successful using it. What is known of technology is that it increases interest and motivation to learn. It also has the ability to break down the barriers of isolation and mobility in more rural areas. Additionally technology has the ability to be non-judgmental in the learning opportunities it presents and therefore is less threatening. Research in the field of technology education is ongoing. For now technology seems promising however, the impact on our culture is not yet known (Sivin & Bialo, 2000)

#### Educational Directives

In the last century vocational education was seen as a way to address the educational as well as social issues of that period in time. Technical education was considered by many as a way to train those who were not considered the academic elite. Over time vocational education moved into the background of public education. Rethinking the situation in recent years has led to the belief that vocational education can strengthen secondary education by “contextualizing academic subjects and bringing career content into the mainstream of public education” (Stringfield & Land, pg. 248, 2002). In the 1980s and 90s vocational education enrollments declined as many businesses were outsourcing or sending manufacturing efforts overseas. School to Work and Tech Prep programs were driven by federal legislation efforts designed to simulate

growth in this population sector. Many efforts were led by organizations without the aid of federal legislation. Initiatives such as High Schools That Work (HSTW), and New American High Schools (NAHS), career academies and magnet schools were designed to aid in school reform.

With the new emphasis in career education the terms used to describe vocational education have changed as well. Career and technical education (CTE) is the new term given those careers that fall into the vocational realm of job categories. Education reform has brought about new standards for career and technical education. Accountability efforts from legislation listed above have incorporated high standards for all those working in this field (Stone, 2000). One of the main reasons for so many changes is the understanding that the U.S. economy has changed. It can no longer sustain a large number of high-school dropouts or even those of the general secondary curriculum. Although high school diplomas are necessary they are insufficient for moving into the mainstream working class. In the last 20 years education reform has centered around a number of components of the Newman and Wehlage framework (1995). Emerging and converging technologies have been the buzz words in career and technical education for the past year or so. In order to meet the needs of these new technological fields schools will have to become much more highly organized from the top down beginning with the following:

- Ongoing Professional development opportunities
- Creating learning communities that are smaller to end student Alienation and anonymity. To give students a sense of identity.
- Set higher academic standards.
- Give support to meet those standards.
- Give opportunities to accomplish goals outside of school.
- Utilize curriculum that involves students in real-world applications that emphasize careers.

- Utilize authentic assessment.
- Utilize just-in-time learning opportunities.
- Utilize alternative scheduling techniques.
- Begin career exploration earlier in middle school years.
- Build partnerships with business, industry and postsecondary institutions.

These pieces of the educational reform puzzle and others require a logical process of implementation in order to achieve the effects of change so desperately needed. In effect we are playing catch up to a misunderstood ever changing world economy. In today's world career and technical education has more potential than ever for providing authentic learning opportunities that didn't exist until now. Career and technical education is poised to step into the center of school reform and have a lasting effect on the lives of at-risk students. Finding ways to keep students interested and help encourage them to persist will be paramount to the advancement of our society.

In order to encourage students to finish high school it is imperative that public school systems not only partner with colleges and universities, but also research work done at the collegiate level on student retention. Asking questions about what students need for tomorrow's world to be successful and what type of culture is the school projecting are things that are very important to the overall success or failure of the school system.

### Student Retention

Dr. Vincent Tinto is noted for his work in sociology and student retention in higher education. He has written extensively about the subject and carried out research on student retention at the collegiate level. In 1975 he developed a model of student retention to better help colleges better understand how and why students persist. The

basic premise of Tinto's model describes students who come to college from many different backgrounds. They have specific characteristics, ties and commitments that influence how well they will fit into the academic culture of a higher learning institution. A good fit between the student and the college has been credited with retaining those students who do persist. It is also what Tinto theorizes gives the college its unique characteristics. The opposite is true if the student and college do not have a good fit. These unique characteristics are seen as driving students away.

Tinto's research on the theory of student retention, integration and departure concentrated on the role the institution played in influencing academic and social systems. Concern over the process of interaction between a student's personality, skill, attitude and a student's departure was considered the "fit". (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto and his college fit model, noted that the more equal these values, goals and attitudes are between the student and college the more likely the student will persist. Tinto went on to say that the more similar the student's capabilities are with college demands the more likely the student can persist.

Alexander Astin researched Tinto's model much more thoroughly. One factor addressed was over the dropout problem noticed by administrators and faculty alike. Beginning in the early 1970's the concern over the decline in enrollment and persistence was increasing. To address these issues Astin conducted research data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). Longitudinal data is data that has been collected over a period of time. This allowed Astin to identify a category of student he labeled as "stop out". He defined these undergraduate students as ones who interrupted their education for a relatively brief period of time and later return to complete their

degrees. Generally Astin's findings supported that of Tinto particularly in the area of persistence predictors such as student commitment to the goal of a college degree.

Astin also discovered that in times of low enrollment institutions often tried to make access easier for postsecondary education. Consequently increased access led to a decrease in student involvement in the educational process. Most notably in the social area of education. He believed that this fact held more consequence for the traditional college student than the nontraditional student. With declining enrollment and so many students beginning school every year and then leaving this is an area of great concern for colleges and universities. In today's world it is less expensive to retain existing students than to recruit, and enroll new ones. Researchers are still studying these problems of drop out and stop out students. No clear patterns of student behavior have been identified to explain retention and attrition rates. At the collegiate level it is likely that until characteristics influencing student persistence are better understood retention efforts will remain where they are (Astin, 1993). Administrators and school leaders in all grade levels should be aware of the issues presented above. Even though the information presented is on the collegiate level focus on these items for possible future research at all levels needs to be addressed.

In addition to the above new ways of structuring learning environments such as Learning Communities; Authentic Learning Environments; Just-In-Time Learning and contextual learning are sensible learning techniques (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Teachers as leaders and coaches can help perpetuate the learning process by working with students in the class as mentors rather than by simply lecturing. The effectiveness of school systems have been widely documented. The relationship between school processes

and student achievement have been studied for years. The focus has predominately on school climate, professional development, data-driven decision making and principals as instructional leaders in schools with high poverty levels.

In order to develop school policies and procedures it is important to understand all aspects of the at-risk situation for the population being studied. This paper attempted to shed light on the at-risk situation in rural schools by presenting information found in all settings including urban and suburban settings as well. From the above questions posed the findings from this study suggest that the problem of at-risk youth in rural America is significant. These factors are common in cities and suburban areas as well. The difference between suburban areas at-risk students and those in rural areas varies in several ways.

- 1). Isolated communities tend to insulate those within the community from exposure to programs and services such as human services, career options, and health services to name a few.
- 2). Rural students not having the opportunities of vocational training Programs and employment opportunities that those in larger Metropolitan areas would have are at a higher risk of being unsuccessful.
- 3). The high school dropout rate is lower in rural schools than in suburban areas, however the rate of continuation in school after high school is lower.

These findings are somewhat temporary in light of the small number of studies used in this meta-analysis. The information given however does provide a starting place to examine the problem. Using policies and programs aimed at urban America may prove inappropriate for rural settings. These policies and procedure should be closely examined due mainly to the fact that the settings, peoples, and needs are different.



The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of the at-risk student especially pertaining to the central region of the United States. To determine what factors are associated with being at risk. So the focus has been on the background of these in urban, suburban and rural communities. The results have produced information about approaches being taken by school systems to address the problem of the at-risk situation. These include the following:

- Developing and implementing programs specifically designed for at-risk students or dropouts.
- Identifying at-risk students as early as possible.
- Providing access services or help to at-risk students.
- Counseling services to develop a positive self image.
- Pursue school-work linkages.

The degree of success for each of the above characteristics have been somewhat limited. We tend to want to believe that all people want to be successful, which in all reality may not be the case! The usual approach of providing “pull out” remedial programs has generally not shown itself to be very successful (Clark, 1991). Remedial programs can tend to lower expectations and achievement. School counseling programs do not provide everything needed to sustain students through support over long periods of time. Time needed for counseling is minimal because school counselors frequently perform other tasks. Vocational programs are limited and may not be as relevant to all students. With times changing and the world economy taking shape there is recognition that the improvement of schools cannot be mandated by federal or state government any longer. Change must come from a concerted effort of those involved at the local level.

Stake holders which includes the local community and corporate America. A current belief is that technology is a great way to engage students. More involvement in the infrastructure of telecommunications into school curriculum is needed. The advancement of computer related technologies and distance learning have the potential to reduce the effects of isolation and allow for education in a different way.

### Conclusions

This study sought to answer three basic questions about students at-risk. The following is a list of some overarching conclusions which can be made:

- Studies suggest that while rural and suburban schools can have some similarities, they are different.
- Location makes them different and therefore economics, people, and conditions make them dissimilar.
- Geographic areas are similar in that at-risk factors such as poverty, background, and school setting are not a choice of the child.
- Children do not have control over many aspects of their lives, they are subject to adults who are in control. If the choices were theirs things would be different.
- Many children have several strikes against them before we as educators see them for the first time in a school setting. So often what we do or don't do is the final determination in whether or not a student succeeds or fails.
- Much of the time it takes all a student has just to make it to school. Although the number of children determined to be at-risk continues to increase the response to this issue seems to have been largely guided by "expert" opinion rather than by empirical research.
- We have become a nation where everybody wins and nobody loses. Free handouts are encouraged and individuals looking for more are dissatisfied because they have not been given enough.
- All or nothing programs and misappropriation of funds intended for the most needy have been given equally to all, depriving those who are most in need. In light of this many at-risk students and families viewing the situation become skeptical and disinterested eventually dropping out.

The at-risk issue is not entirely a poverty issue even though poverty is the number one at-risk factor. It is not just a student issue, family issue, school issue or even a community issue. It is a social issue that involves those factors above and many others. We have the means to address these issues but not in a way that alienates and disenfranchises those at risk. These issues will need to be addressed intelligently and in a way that makes those less fortunate feel valued, wanted, and accepted. It is an issue that helps children know they fit and are needed in society.

Rural families have many similar characteristics. In addition being isolated, having different opportunities sometimes not as many as those in urban or suburban areas to choose from. Different characteristics define how families live, work and go to school. There are variables which impact students at-risk and students who drop out. These factors or characteristics in combination with one another allow educators to identify at-risk youth and those potential dropouts. Educational leadership must be dependent upon practices and programs that identify children who are potentially at-risk. In order to do so school leadership must be trained to identify, diagnose, develop and implement programs to help those students in need. Many children develop characteristics before they begin school and can be identified in pre-school years, kindergarten or elementary school. Early identification and intervention would allow educators to deal with the problem more effectively. Helping children in the early grades develop self esteem, coping skills, and self control. In addition academic skills could be taught much easier before the problem of academic failure becomes rooted and a permanent part of the child's lifestyle.

Profiles for identifying students at-risk have emerged at the national and local levels. Comparing the national level and local levels gives similarities between

significant characteristics of these two levels. These characteristics vary widely within geographic regions of the United States. States have adopted definitions of the at-risk student population as well. Even so some of the states seem to have adopted the latest terminology for their at-risk student populations to help draw attention to the problems at hand. The commission on Education in North Dakota defines at-risk students as those who need free or reduced meals, and those who are neglected and/or delinquent (North Dakota Commission on Education, 2006). South Dakota defines its at-risk student population similarly under Title I. Both states are considering widening the definition to include academically challenged students. Nebraska defines its at-risk population as those who are educationally disadvantaged, migrant, neglected and/or delinquent (Nebraska Department of Education, 2006).” Kansas uses the definition: a student who is eligible for free lunches, not meeting the necessary requirements for promotion to the next grade level, not working on grade level in one or more of a number of academic, social, or personal levels (Kansas State Department of Education, 2006).” The levels are then defined and categorized. Oklahoma uses the term “high challenge” to describe the at-risk student population of its state. “The Oklahoma Department of Education (1992), in a statewide “High Challenge Grant Application,” described “high challenge children and youth as individuals whose present or predictable status (economic, social-cultural, academic, and/or health) indicate they could fail to successfully complete their secondary education and/or acquire basic life skills, including skills necessary for higher education and/or employment...(p.6).” According to the Texas Education Agency, (1991) that state defines at-risk by using specific criteria such as retention information, unsatisfactory performance on various standardized tests, limited English proficiency, victim of child

abuse, delinquent conduct, course failure and/or homelessness as a way to define these students (Texas Education Agency, 2003).

The results of this meta-analysis identified significant variables which can be used as a basis for further research within the area of at-risk students. Insight into the problems children face on a daily basis are many times not of their own making or choosing. Student background, schools and community involvement warrant further research on this subject. Finally the results of this meta-analysis produced information on the way the central region of the US is affected by these three characteristics.

### Recommendations

1. Leadership from all levels within each state should provide direction in helping school systems conduct longitudinal studies of at-risk students and programs designed to meet their needs in order to establish uniform standards for intervention strategies.
2. The student at-risk committee of OSU-Okmulgee should review findings of this study and find or develop applicable intervention strategies.
3. With an eye on societal, academic and local needs, local school systems should develop assessment programs that allows for identification of potential at-risk children. Specific criteria should be followed with the idea that it is a living document to be continuously re-evaluated and upgraded.

4. An emphasis should be placed on research at the national, state and local levels relating to school programs and practices. These should address the social, emotional, health and academic needs of children.
5. Teacher Professional Education programs in colleges and universities should address issues in working with at-risk student populations. New teachers should be taught to identify at-risk students and have a plan in place to deal with the problem.
6. Professional development programs should be developed for pre-school, Kindergarten and elementary school teachers so at-risk students can be identified and then prevention and intervention programs developed to effectively deal with the problem.
7. Preparation for school administrators should include mandatory courses in law, business, and psychology that are significant portions of the program in order to interpret legislation intended for specific purposes. In addition in service programs aimed at interpretation with help from skilled lawyers from the department of education and accounting should be on hand to help administrators with these issues. Much more strict accountability measure for programs should be monitored by the department of education with accountability to the federal government.
8. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to validate specific patterns over time. It should be used to ensure that the at-risk profile remains relevant

over time. It should also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs.

9. School districts should develop collaborative concentrated partnerships with parents, higher education, communities, governmental agencies, business and industry.

Recognition by schools and teachers that a concerted effort should be made by all parties.

10. Accountability measures in place that require school leadership to provide facts and figures that detail whether or not programs are working. Provide records that detail where funding has gone and why in addition to measures of success or failure of implemented programs.

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## APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A  
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS



At-risk student can be defined as one who, “has a greater than average chance of not succeeding in school and graduating”, according to Gary Natriello in the Encyclopedia of Education and Society (2002).

Drop-out: A student who leaves a school or college before completing a course of study or before completing a course of study or before the end of a term.  
(The World Book Dictionary, 1991)

Resilience characterizes individuals who rebound from or adapt to adversities  
Despite hardships.

Scores any results and information obtained from a survey or instrument. A mark used for keeping account.

#### Defining Geographic Terms

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a division of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), uses U.S. Census terms to categorize communities into seven classifications:

Large Central City Central city of a metropolitan area [a metropolitan area generally is any county in the U.S. that has a city or urbanized area of a least 50,000 and a total county population of at least 100, 000] with (a) a population of more than 400,000 or more, or (b) a population density of 6,000 or more persons per square mile.

Mid-size Central City Central city of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) with (a) less than 400,000 population or (b) density of less than 6,000 per square mile.

Urban Fringe of a Large City Place within the SMSA of a large central city that is defined as urban by the Census.

Urban Fringe of a Mid-size City Place within the SMSA of a mid-size central city that is defined as urban by the Census.

Large Town not within an SMSA but with a population of 25,000 or more.

Small Town not within an SMSA with a population between 2,500 and 25,000.

Rural Place with a population under 2,500 and not within an SMSA (Vaughn, Boethel, Hoover, Lawson & Torres, 1989, pp.20-21)

## VITA

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Master of Science

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Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: AT RISK STUDENTS IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF THE U. S.:  
A QUALITATIVE META-ANALYSIS OF EXISTING RESEARCH

Pages in Study: 90

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science

Major Field: Teaching Learning and Leadership

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to gather existing information surrounding some of the leading characteristics that identify at-risk youth. It also determined locations in the central region of the United States they can be found. Research questions included a discussion on families, school districts, and communities as well as specific characteristics that place students at-risk of not successfully completing school. The paper was also used to offer some suggestions discovered through the research that could be implemented to combat the problem.

Findings and Conclusions: Poverty is still the number one reason for the at-risk situation in the U.S. followed closely by family background, student characteristics, school related background, culture and communities. Social as well as academic development in a child's life is critical. These support structures are extremely important to the overall success or failure a child. Information presented here was only a small portion of at-risk puzzle. The paper did not seek to look at all of the at-risk indicators or seek to solve all of the problems of at-risk students. Recommendations include school systems which should develop assessment programs that allow for identification of potential at-risk children, leadership at all levels to provide direction and support in helping school systems conduct longitudinal studies of at-risk students, programs which are designed to develop strategies that help meet the needs of at-risk students, teacher and administration education programs in colleges and universities which address issues in working with at-risk student populations, and school systems should begin to develop collaborative partnerships with parents, higher education, communities, government, business and industry. A concerted effort on the part of the school system to establish and maintain relationships with these entities will be an essential part of developing better educational opportunities of the future. Accountability measures must be in place to assess the effectiveness of all work with at-risk students. In the years ahead the challenges will become greater. This research was however, designed as a starting point to not only shed light on some of the main problems of at-risk students in the central region of the U. S. but to also establish some directional indicators for the future.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: \_\_\_\_\_