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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE EFFORTS AND RELATED ELEMENTS OF
TWO MIDDLE SCHOOLS HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL IN ASSISTING
AT-RISK YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

by

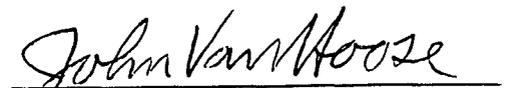
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the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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1995

Approved by


Dissertation Advisor

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee
of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North
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COLAVITO, JAMES W., Ed.D. A Descriptive Study of the Efforts and Related Elements of Two Middle Schools Highly Successful in Assisting At-Risk Young Adolescents. (1995)
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This study describes efforts to assist at-risk students in two North Carolina middle schools and describes aspects of the schools that add to the understanding of those efforts. Using case study methodology, the study includes detailed accounts of meetings, classes, and interviews with teachers. A survey of teacher opinions about their schools is also included. The Carnegie Recommendations found in Turning Points (1989) were used to organize the data. Most of the data fell under the following recommendations: (a) Create a small learning community where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships are fundamental; (b) Ensure success for all students; (c) Empower staff members to make decisions about the experiences of students; and (d) Re-engage the family in the education of its students. Implications from the study include: (a) People and the settings they create are critical to successful efforts to assist at-risk students; (b) Relationships within these settings are the key to successful interventions; and (c) Institutional values manifested in practices and policies influence the chances for at-risk students to experience school success.

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Dr. Nancy Hall was a dear friend who cherished idealism in education. Nancy lived idealism throughout her teaching career until her untimely death last year. Nancy embodied all the sacred and wonderful qualities that describe Teacher. The document herein is in many ways a celebration of teachers. It describes their dedication; selfless giving; and love of their students, learning, and life. So it is to Nancy that I dedicate this dissertation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The institution of American Education is harshly criticized for not preparing America's youth to succeed in the modern world. There are three major reasons why American education is perceived as failing in its mission, and all three have to do with change. First, schools serve a changed clientele with different characteristics and needs than students of previous generations. Second, changing economics from agricultural and industrial to information and technology bases no longer offer the school dropout an employment future that will support a family at anything but a poverty level. Third, the organizational and operational foundations of schools have not changed with the changing world around them (Schlechty, 1991).

"Every time I cross the bridge I feel that I am getting off a plane within another country". These words of Safir Ahmed, a newspaper reporter who covers East St. Louis, are found in Jonathan Kozol's book Savage Inequalities. Safir, a native of Calcutta, India, has observed third world nations around the world; the poverty, disease, hunger, and

hopelessness the children of East St. Louis grow up with rivals any third world country he has seen. "I keep thinking to myself," Safir says, "My God, this is the United States!" (Kozol, 1991, p. 17). East St. Louis is not unique. Throughout America a subculture of poverty is growing at an alarming rate.

A growing proportion of our young population is poor. Accompanying that poverty is the deprivation of adequate nutrition, health care, and experiences that develop readiness skills necessary to succeed when first entering school. The following statistics from the Children's Defense Fund highlight the tragedy of the young people who live in the richest nation in the world, but within the culture of the poor.

Every day 27 American children die from the effects of poverty.

Every day 12,000,000 American children wake up poor.

Every day 100,000 American children are homeless.

Every school day 2,478 students drop out of school.

Every day 105 American babies die before their first birthday.

Every day in 3,400,000 families of poverty at least one parent goes to work.

(Outside The Dream: Child Poverty In America,
Children's Defense Fund, 1991)

Children of poverty often attend schools that receive far less financial and political support than their counterparts in more affluent areas, and are unable to meet the needs specific to the growing population of children from poverty. Instead, they demand conformity with century-old traditions of schooling that are dysfunctional in today's society and that alienate large numbers of students who react by terminating their education prematurely: "dropping out".

School dropouts are not a new phenomenon. What is new is the fact that unskilled and under-educated workers will not find many jobs today that will give them a livable wage. The effects of the dropout phenomenon contribute to the deteriorating economic and social fiber of our society, as evidenced by the following:

- o More than half of the nation's dropouts are unemployed.
- o Over 70 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts.
- o About 75 percent of teenage parents drop out of school.
- o The cumulative financial effect of dropouts to the nation in terms of social services provided and potential productivity and taxes lost reaches into the tens of billions of dollars annually (Speas, 1989).

In 1989, the Carnegie Corporation's Council On Adolescent Development published Turning Points, a major report that has had significant impact on policy-makers and service-providers in many human services areas nation-wide. The report describes the condition of young adolescents in America as alarming and proposes eight recommendations that will help schools improve the chances for all students, but especially those at risk of failing, to lead productive, fulfilling lives.

The dropout phenomenon and its accompanying effects are major concerns to the people of North Carolina, where the problem is very real and destructive, but often hidden from view in rural, sparsely populated areas. In response to the Carnegie report, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction created The Middle Grades Task Force and invited 42 of the state's most knowledgeable middle grades educators to study the problem of middle grades students who are at risk of dropping out of school. The Task Force published its findings and recommendations in a report entitled Last Best Chance (1991). The report gives a statistical profile of North Carolina youth who are at risk of school failure, and the terrible statistics surrounding the state's dropouts. In 1980, 25,000 children in North Carolina had parents who divorced, a 58% increase in ten years. In single parent families, 77% of the mothers are working outside the home, which is higher than in any other state.

This phenomenon contributes to the high number of "latchkey" children and negatively affects the stress and structure of these families.

Poverty is the most powerful predictor of students being at risk of school failure. Approximately 22% of North Carolina's school-age children live in families whose fall incomes below the national poverty level. More than half of our counties exceed the national average in percentage of population living below the poverty line, yet these counties receive disproportionately less funding than more wealthy counties. Those students who are educationally deprived due to environmental conditions resulting from poverty have fewer dollars supporting their education than any other students in the state.

Health issues are important to study when looking at young adolescents who are at risk, and Last Best Chance highlights several health-related reasons for great concern about this population. Almost one fourth of the state's seventh and eighth graders surveyed indicated that they used alcohol, marijuana or cocaine. The rate of reported pregnancies for girls ages 10 to 14 is reaching 1000 annually, while 459 induced abortions were reported in 1988 for this group. And sexually transmitted diseases threaten the lives of the ever-rising numbers of sexually active young adolescents to an extent that has not been seen before. Health problems and poverty strike the same

population; yet, as in education, fewer resources are committed to solving the problems of the poor than are committed to other populations in North Carolina. Poverty, family structure and education, and health problems negatively influence the lives of many students in North Carolina. In 1989, it was estimated that 23,000 young people drop out of North Carolina schools annually. When the costs of various public assistance programs are combined with lost productivity and lost tax revenues of the under-and-unemployed school dropouts, North Carolina loses an estimated 3 billion dollars annually (Speas, 1989). This information illustrates North Carolina's urgent need to join the rest of the nation in exploring ways to remedy the problem of school dropouts and rid itself of the destruction and waste that it produces.

Over the past several years, many school districts across the nation have implemented alternative programs for high risk students that seem effective. In a study of 571 high schools across the nation that were recognized for their successes with at-risk students, nine themes were found to be at work consistently in most of the schools:

1. A shared purpose among the faculty.
2. Leadership with vision and energy.
3. Control of the environment and curriculum by the principal and teachers.

4. Recruitment and retention of talented teachers and administrators.
5. Rewards for teacher accomplishments.
6. Positive student-teacher relationships
7. Strong conviction that all students can be motivated to learn.
8. Creative responses to problems.
9. High degree of involvement by parents and community.

All the schools studied had well over 90% attendance rates. Their students were 3.5 times less likely to drop out of high school than students in an average American high school, and the at-risk students were more likely to go on to higher education after high school (Kershner & Connolly, 1991). As the above implies, much of the attention and most of the programs for at-risk students have been aimed at the high school.

Interventions at the high school may be effective and there is evidence all over the nation that many at-risk students can be helped at the high school level. However, there is also strong evidence that intervention at the high school has no effect on many at-risk students. Much of the recent literature on at-risk students, such as Before It's Too Late (1988), Turning Points (1989), and Last Best Chance (1991) recommends initiating a more intense focus on the needs of at-risk students at the middle level, before they

reach high school. Three reasons support this shift in focus. First, many at-risk students begin the process toward dropping out of school when they are in middle school. This process involves academic failure, poor attendance, and disruptive or alienating behavior. Second, interventions that occur after this period often prove insufficient to overcome the momentum already established toward dropping out of school. Third, students can quit school at 16 years old, when they are normally in ninth grade; and many at-risk students have been retained at least one year. Thus many drop out before they reach high school or before intervention strategies can have an effect. With this information in hand, middle schools have begun the process of discovering ways to successfully intervene with at-risk young adolescents.

North Carolina's public school districts and universities have provided leadership to the nation regarding exemplary middle school practices; and many school districts, with the support of area universities, are promoting the concept of moving the focus on at-risk students from the high school to the middle school. Effective interventions for at-risk middle school students have already been implemented in many middle schools throughout the state (Arnold, 1992). Students who experience these interventions have improved in three critical areas: academic performance, attendance, and

diminished discipline referrals. Arnold and Parker (1992) studied several successful middle school programs for at-risk students in North Carolina and were able to identify many aspects the programs had in common:

1. Positive attitudes about students are developed among the faculty.
2. High expectations are held for students.
3. A supportive climate exists
4. Content and instruction are designed to meet individual needs.
5. Students' backgrounds are respected.
6. Organizational skills are emphasized.
7. Positive self-esteem is built through academic success.
8. Social skills are taught.
9. Parents are engaged productively.

These aspects reflect many Carnegie Council On Adolescent Development recommendations and should be considered in program development.

Background of the Study

Research and experience point to the need for intervention at the middle grades if schools are to effectively change the course of young adolescents who are at risk of school failure and guide them to productive behavior patterns that are more likely to result in

completing a high school education. In response, middle school educators across the nation are developing educational interventions and alternatives for at-risk students in their schools. More information is needed about middle schools that effectively assist at-risk students and about the programs and strategies they employ to help this population. This need leads us to the purpose of the study.

Purpose of the Study

Kershner and Connolly (1991) found that effective programs for at-risk students at the high school level see at-risk students "...as a population of persons who must be thought about as persons if they are going to be helped" (p. 131). As the nation's schools refocus their efforts with at-risk students from the high school to the middle school level, it seems important that a similar point of view should be taken by middle school educators. The Carnegie report, Turning Points (1989), exhibits that point of view. The report represents a synthesis of the literature on adolescent development, at-risk students, and school intervention efforts, and puts forth eight recommendations for addressing the dropout problem. One relates directly to academics, but the rest relate to self-esteem, decision-making, relationships, health, family, and community, and the empowerment of educators. These recommendations form an effective framework for describing

middle schools and their efforts to assist at-risk students, for they are recommendations that truly look at at-risk students as people first, young people with needs.

The purpose of this study is to describe, through the framework of the Carnegie Recommendations from Turning Points (1989), the efforts to assist at-risk students in two middle schools experiencing success in this area, and to describe aspects of the schools that add to the understanding of those efforts.

Statement of the Problem

The problem shaping this study was to describe, using the Carnegie Recommendations as a framework, the efforts to assist at-risk students in two middle schools experiencing success in this area, and to describe aspects of the schools that add to the understanding of those efforts.

Orienting Questions

A set of orienting questions, drawn from the Carnegie Council Recommendations found in Turning Points (1989), created the framework for collecting, organizing, and analyzing the data in the study. The orienting questions are as follows.

How does the school and/or program under study:

1. Create a small learning community where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental?
2. Teach a core academic program that results in students who can think critically and behave responsibly?
3. Ensure success for all students?
4. Empower staff members to make decisions about the experiences of students?
5. Select staff who are expert at teaching young adolescents?
6. Foster health and physical fitness among students?
7. Reengage the family in the education of its students?
8. Connect the program and students with the community?

Significance of the Study

The last several years have seen a shift in focus for the application of dropout prevention strategies from the high school to the middle school. Several public middle schools in North Carolina have shown success in dealing with the needs of at-risk students. Knowing how these schools reflect recommendations in literature and research provides a framework for action that will help administrators and teachers create effective programs for their own middle school at-risk populations. Educators can build into their

efforts the processes, strategies, and dynamics that have been part of schools with proven records of success with at-risk students, while still reflecting the unique characteristics of their own schools and communities. This study describes two such schools and their efforts with at-risk students through the organizational framework of the Carnegie Council recommendations.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used in the document.

Middle School

A school generally ranging from fifth through eighth grades that serves young adolescents.

Young Adolescents

Those people in the developmental stage of emerging adolescence, generally accompanying ages ten through 14.

At-Risk Students

A large proportion of children from poor families of all races...minority and immigrant children, and children with needs that are unserved or underserved that place them at risk of school failure. These students often share similar school behaviors of poor attendance, academic performance,

and behavior to an extent that they have an increased likelihood of terminating their education before completing high school (States' Excellence In Education Commission, 1985).

Limitations of the Study

This study uses a naturalistic research paradigm and as such will not produce proofs of hypotheses or create generalizations that can be applied directly to other similar situations. Instead, the study will give the reader a rich understanding of how two schools address the Carnegie Council recommendations for assisting at-risk young adolescents.

Summary

The problem of school dropouts is a national dilemma that grows worse as economic success is linked to education. North Carolina's dropout problems are similar to the rest of the nation. Several school districts in the state have responded with interventions for at-risk students. More information is needed regarding successful interventions for at-risk students. This study looks at two schools that have experienced success with at-risk students and describes the interventions and aspects of the schools that enhance the understanding of the efforts to assist at-risk students. The study uses the Carnegie Recommendations as a framework

to organize and interpret the descriptions. This study will help educators who are devising interventions for at-risk students in their schools by giving them examples of successful efforts in two North Carolina middle schools.

Chapter II explores the literature regarding the dropout problem in more depth and provides detailed examples of successful efforts to assist at-risk students. Chapter III describes the naturalistic research methods used to conduct the study. Chapter IV contains the data collected at the two schools studied. Chapter V concludes the dissertation with a discussion of comparisons, conclusions, and implications drawn from the study.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This section traces the history of the dropout problem up to the present so that the reader will have an understanding of the historical, economic, social, and cultural conditions that helped form our present school dropout dilemma. Also included is a review of the literature regarding school dropouts and students at risk of school failure. Interventions for middle level at-risk students are described in this section, as are the developmental characteristics of young adolescents.

America's Dropout Problem

Family Life

Most school dropouts come from families of poverty, and so it is important to understand the dynamics and demographics of poverty in order to understand the pervasive and self-perpetuating damage that is brought upon the lives of school dropouts. After World War II, Americans were relatively secure financially and a growing middle class was making demands on themselves, the nation's resources, and the economy. Everyone seemed to want a home in the suburbs, with the father working and the mother staying at home to

raise the children and take care of the house. The white American middle class flourished. This profile of the American family remained the perception for two decades after the world war. But during that time, the subculture of American poverty grew, and the profile of the American family changed. The "Ozzie and Harriet" notion of the American family actually exists today in only a fraction of our population. Of all the households in the United States in 1988, only 27% were comprised of married couples with children, while 28% were comprised of children living with one adult or with unrelated adults. Of the 1.9 million children living with one parent, 90% of them lived with their mother. Fifty percent of the white children were with a mother that divorced. Fifty-four percent of the black children and 33% of the Hispanic children were with a mother who never married. In 1988, the average income for married couples with children was \$36,206, while the average income for single parent female households was \$11,299. These data help one understand why 23% of the nation's youth live in poverty, and why 40% of the nation's poor are children (Hodgkinson, 1989).

Two other concepts explain the mushrooming population of children in poverty: short-cycle families and multiple dependent families. The short-cycle family develops a new generation on average every 14 years, as a result of teenage mothers. This is predominantly a phenomenon of families in

poverty, and results in an increased birth rate for those families. In contrast, middle class families, regardless of race, are limiting their family sizes and more are choosing to have no children. Coupling the short-cycle poverty family with the shrinking middle class birth rate, one can see that America is developing a proportionately larger segment of the population that lives in poverty (Hodgkinson, 1989).

Societal Factors

In 1988, The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success For America's Youth and Young Families was published. This report, sponsored by the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, described a two-year study of the economic dilemmas of young Americans from the ages of 16 to 24. This is the age group that begins or continues a generation in poverty, and it is for this reason that I will focus on its economic plight.

The Post-World War Two Era in America was a time of growing prosperity. From 1947 to 1973 the real median income of families rose by 3% annually. Unfortunately, the American Dream of ever-increasing purchasing power ended in 1973. From 1973 to 1986, the median annual income adjusted for inflation declined by \$300 for all families, but declined 26% for families headed by someone under 25 years of age. To gain a perspective on the impact of that figure,

one must look at the fact that the median annual income during the Great Depression declined 27%. Thus, for over 20 years, young families have been experiencing economic backsliding equivalent to that of the nation's during the Great Depression.

This economic depression of young America has many causes. One of the most serious is the phenomena of the changing American economic basis from heavy industry to technology and information. After World War II, relatively high-paying jobs existed in great numbers for unskilled or semi-skilled workers who had minimal education. Unions drove factory salaries and benefits to a point where an assembly line worker could live the American Dream in his own house with a car in the garage. The past two decades have seen a disappearance of these kinds of employment opportunities, and the emergence of the need for more education and skills to qualify for entry-level jobs.

Changing world economics also contribute to the economic hardship of America's youth. Other countries have gained an equal or superior footing in the world economic market. The dollar has weakened, and we have become a debtor nation with a huge foreign trade surplus. All this results in reduced economic opportunities and resources within the nation. Added to these world and national economic changes is the infusion of women into the workforce. The occurrence of

women as the head of household with no husband and no second income is increasing, especially in the age group under 25.

The social impact of poverty among young adults is apparent. One example is the fact that between 1974 and 1986, the marriage rate of young males dropped from 39% to 21% among the total population, and from 25% to 8% among black males. The reason may be that these young men lack economic viability, and are not perceived as credible marriage partners by young women. They are under-educated, under-skilled, and thus cannot qualify for a job that pays enough to support a family above the poverty level.

Interestingly, the only group of young males in America who increased their marriage rate during this period was that comprised of black college graduates (Commission On Work, Family, and Citizenship 1988).

Economic Burdens

The plight of poor young families continues to worsen when compared to the rest of the nation. There is an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor in America. Between 1969 and 1986, the families that fell within the top 20% of America's incomes gained in the total share of all income generated in America, going from 40.6% of all income to 43.7% of all income in the country. In the same period, the bottom 20% of families lost in their share of the nation's total income, going from 5.6% to 4.6%. That is an

average loss of \$1750 for every poor family in America. The percentage of real income lost for groups under 25 during the period from 1973 to 1986 is as follows: Married couples - 11%; Females with no spouse - 32.4%; White families - 19.4%; Hispanics - 18.5%; Black families - 46.7%, due to significant rise of female head of household (Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988).

Housing for young families is closely tied to economic ability. Decent, affordable housing is a prerequisite to a healthy, vibrant family. During most of the 1970's and 1980's, a very large portion of families headed by someone over 35 years old, owned their own homes. Since then, mortgages have become more difficult to acquire, and median incomes have declined. As a result, the percentage of people under 25 who were homeowners dropped from 23.4% in 1973 to 16.1% in 1986. For single parents with young children, home ownership dropped from 13.7% to 6.3% in the same period. Renting houses and apartments became the option for young families. Rents, though, have risen 14% higher than the cost of living over the last 20 years. In 1986, the median rent for a family was \$364. The rent burden, or proportion of income going to rent, rose from 46% to 81% from 1974 to 1987 for single parents under 25. If more money goes to pay the rent then less is available for clothing, food, and health needs.

The incidents of costly health care needs occurs most frequently in young families and the elderly. Both groups are burdened with poverty and inadequate to no health care. In 1985, 21% (7.4 million young people) of all 16 to 24 year-olds had no health insurance. Those that were insured found that only 55% of their medical expenses were covered by their insurance (as opposed to 75% for all middle-aged people). Haggerty refers to this as the "New Morbidity" which is compounded in recent years by increases in drug abuse, physical neglect and abuse, mental health problems, homelessness, illiteracy, crime, and violence (Thompson, 1992).

Most of America's pre-school population lives in families that are headed by young adults. That young adult population, as described above, has the highest concentration of poverty of any group in the country, and has increased obstacles to acquiring decent jobs that would allow them to support a family above the poverty level. As a result, these young people and their families may have inadequate housing, and if not, they are paying a large portion of their income for housing. They have a constant struggle to feed and cloth themselves, and suffer inordinately high incidents of medical problems, because they have little or no money left for medical care, and little or no health insurance.

The Poor and Education

The most devastating element of poverty that affects children at school is the lack of early medical intervention of diseases. In 1989, 40,000,000 Americans had no health insurance, and in 1988, 25% of mothers who gave birth received no pre- or post-natal care (Conrath, 1991).

"Students who are educationally disadvantaged have been exposed to insufficient educational experiences in at least one of three domains: School, Family, Community."

(Natriello, McDill, Pallas 1990). According to the authors, poverty is the greatest single indicator of a child being educationally disadvantaged. Children of poverty are more than twice as likely to be retained, achieve significantly lower reading levels, and are more likely to drop out of school than any other group of children.

Elements of Traditional Schooling That Contribute to the Problem

Natriello (et. al., 1990) projected the trends of school-aged populations in America through 2020; and, if their assumptions are correct, the total number and proportion of disadvantaged children from minority groups will increase significantly. An illustration of this phenomenon can be seen in the following predictions. In 1988, white children constituted 88% of school-aged children. By the year 2020, they are predicted to comprise

only 45% of the school-aged population while Hispanic children are predicted to experience a 17% increase in their portion of the population. The traditional minorities have also been traditionally disadvantaged; and there is little evidence to suspect that they will not continue to be disadvantaged, primarily because they will continue to live in poverty. Social factors associated with dropping out of school relate to how the students see themselves in school and out of school. Many studies indicate that dropouts felt alienated and unwanted in school. They received few messages of success and many of rejection. They were retained in grade, locked into remedial groups, and tracked into a general curriculum (generally uninteresting and irrelevant). They accounted for most of the corporal punishment administered, most of the suspensions, and few if any of their school's rewards or recognitions. As they became more alienated and disillusioned with school, their attendance dropped off markedly. Missing days of school caused them to become more alienated and behind academically, making it more difficult to return to school. While they were out, they often engaged in activities that were more rewarding to their self-esteem and less threatening than what they faced in school. At the point that being out of school became more valuable than the reasons to return to school and face an unpleasant, unrewarding and threatening environment, the students

dropped out of school (Research and Evaluation Associates, 1988).

Wheeler and Dorman (1988) assess the reasons students leave school and describes the more pervasive and destructive ones as retention in grade, tracking, misuse of test results, standard curriculum, narrow view of instruction, punitive practices that compound academic failure, alienation, school organization, and school climate. The authors focus on the middle grades as the critical and perhaps last period of schooling to effect a change in the achievement and success of students at risk of school failure. The authors argue that, because of the vulnerable age and stage of the students and the unique characteristics of middle school organization, the middle school represents the last best chance to reach potential dropouts.

The concept of "marginal students" is a useful metaphor, as so many at-risk students are on the periphery of school and community society. Marginal students are those who are at the margins of the attention of teachers. Little attention is given to these students' needs or their assets. A large portion of these students come from homes where parents have little education and the families are considered to be socio-economically deprived. These students became a problem for schools after the compulsory

attendance laws were passed. Prior to that, these young people simply left school.

Systems Look At Childhood Poverty

The discussion above described the social systems of economics, family, and school as in relation to childhood poverty. The chart below helps show the linear relationship between all three, and the difficulty in breaking the chain of events.

Figure 1. Systems Impact On Children In Poverty

<u>Conception</u>	<u>Birth</u>	<u>School Age</u>
ECONOMIC SYSTEM		
Medical care		
Nutrition		
Mother's education		
	Family Income	
	Resources in home	
		Clothing
		Supplies
		Sense of hope
FAMILY SYSTEM		
Mother's life style		
Parental medical history		
	Father's life style	
	Parental values	
	Parenting skills	
	Parent education	
		Sense of competency
		Value of education
		Sense of belonging
SCHOOL SYSTEM		
		Class size
		School climate
		Teacher values
		Promotion policy
		Grading policy

(From Our Other Youth, Conrath, p. 6, 1991)

Historical Responses to Assist At-Risk Students

The problem of school dropouts is not new. In 1900, only 17% of students graduated from high school; in 1935 35% graduated. In 1965, 66% graduated, and in 1980, 75% of the students graduated (Hester, 1990).

An historical overview of attempts to deal with at-risk students is described by Sinclair and Ghory (1987) and outlined below.

1. Settlement Houses - Early 1900's - for immigrants
2. Ability Grouping - Ineffectiveness pointed out in research of the 1920's, yet it persists and contributes to developing marginal students.
3. Smith-Hughes Act - 1917 - Established Vocational Education - Review in 1940's reveals that marginal students do not enroll in vocational programs.
4. General Curriculum - Alternative to academic and vocational programs - Studies show they lack the planning and attention needed to create a relevant, interesting program for marginal students.
5. Head Start Program - Early education for the poor - 1960's.
6. Title I ESEA - 1965- Continued assistance to poor children.

Recent Successes In Assisting At-Risk Students

There have been more recent successes in assisting at-risk students, and many of these involve perceiving at-risk students from a social and personal point of view. Sinclair and Ghory (1989) suggest that we look at at-risk students through the metaphor of "marginality", which helps explain and yield a poignant profile of how students become at risk and on the margins socially and academically. Their families are often on the margins economically and educationally. The authors describe how aspects of the school setting: rules, routines, procedures, grades, the entire school climate - all create more barriers to success for the marginal student.

The authors created a vivid picture of the making of a marginal student and of the counterproductive factors existing in the fabric of school organization. A strong argument was made that the burden of responsibility for the at risk-student lies with those who control the learning environment. The authors offer the following suggestions to those groups:

1. Parents and educators must collaborate, respect each other, support each other, and work together to create a better educational process for their children.
2. Marginality is not the result of the learner's abilities, but his interaction with the learning environment.

3. Marginal students are a great resource for ideas concerning school reform.
4. Hardened patterns of marginal behavior do not readily dissolve.
5. The traditional routines, patterns and organization schools influence the relationship teachers establish with marginal students and the way marginal students relate to teachers and the learning environment.
6. Home and school can join together to create a powerful tool to break the cycle of marginality.
7. Significant school improvement takes about seven years.

Guthrie and Long (1989) discuss practical strategies for school districts to consider in battling the dropout problem. Strategies are divided into five categories:

1. Strategies involving businesses, community, and parents.
2. Alternative schedules and sites.
3. Reduced program size.
4. Targeting special populations.
5. Providing services for potential dropouts.

In Quincy, Massachusetts questionnaires and interviews were used to develop two profiles, one of the student at-risk and one of the family at-risk. Four problems were identified regarding the at-risk student and solutions to each problem were developed based in part on the information

gained from the profiles. The four problems identified were:

1. Management of student behavior.
2. Attitudes toward school.
3. Lack of response to school curriculum.
4. Coordinating outside resources (Anderson and Limoncelli, 1982).

This interesting account of the collaborative efforts of a school guidance counselor and a central office administrator in the Quincy Public Schools serves as a model for organizing a problem-solving process within a school district. The people involved took the time to carefully identify the problem they wanted to address, and then took the time to design a process that would result in a solution to the problem. Anderson and Limoncelli (1982) introduce two important concepts. First, people hold positions within an organization that are task-defined. Every position interacts with every other position; thus every set of tasks is interrelated to every other set of tasks. When the organization functions as an interrelated set of tasks, it is functioning efficiently and maximizing the human energy, imagination and thinking power that it possesses.

The fact that one person doing the Quincy study was a central office administrator and the other was an elementary school counselor did not affect their work other than lending a rich diversity of task sets and experiences to the

process. The opposite phenomenon occurs in many districts. The vertical nature of the organization with its accompanying positional power often blocks individuals from working together as partners on a problem or in a process. The perception of the organization's power distribution often determines how well people from various levels within the organization can work together and ultimately determines the overall effectiveness of the organization.

The second important concept in the article is that, no matter how critical a situation, time must be spent planning a course of action. If an individual or an organization panics and acts without a plan, they are in danger of wasting even more time floundering ("If a man knows not his direction, then no wind is favorable." Adicus). More tragic, they will have wasted the opportunity to uncover and use the imagination and good thinking that comes with planning.

A synthesis of research of efforts to assist at-risk students describes several widely-used practices that do not seem to be effective. They include:

1. Failing students and retaining them in grade.
2. Compensatory programs such as Chapter I.
3. Pull-out programs in special education.

The same synthesis of research identifies several promising strategies that do seem to be effective in assisting at-risk students. They include:

1. Pre-School Intervention
2. Kindergarten Attendance
3. First Grade Reading Intervention
4. Remedial Tutoring
5. Computer-Assisted Instruction (Slavin and Gladden, 1989). Slavin and Gladden also recommend restructuring the school organization so it can be truly effective for all students, including those who are at risk of failing.

James Beane (1990) argues that restructuring of the middle school must begin with the student. He suggests that the current middle school movement has stagnated because it functions in the old structure of school organization. Instead, schools should design the curriculum around the characteristics and needs of the learner and then organize the school to support the curriculum and the learner.

Turning Points (1989), the report by the Carnegie Council On Adolescent Development, also makes a case for restructuring education, specifically aimed at the middle level, where it states: "A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grades schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents" (p.9). The recommendations in the report "will vastly improve the educational experiences of all middle grades students, but will most benefit those that are at risk of being left behind" (p.9). The recommendations of the Carnegie Council are as follows.

1. Create small communities of learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relations with adults and peers are considered essential for intellectual development and personal growth.

2. Teach a core academic program that results in students who are literate, including in the sciences, and who know how to think critically, lead a healthy life, behave ethically, and assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society.

3. Ensure success for all students through elimination of tracking by achievement level and promotion of cooperative learning, flexibility in arranging instructional time, and adequate resources (time space, equipment, and materials,) for teachers.

4. Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students through creating control by teachers of the instructional program linked to greater responsibilities for students performance, governance committees that assist the principal in designing and coordinating school-wide programs, and autonomy and leadership within sub-schools or houses to create environments tailored to enhance the intellectual and emotional development of all youth.

5. Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents and who have been specially prepared for assignment to the middle grades.

6. Improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents, by providing a health coordinator in every middle grade school, access to health care and counseling services, and a health-promoting school environment.

7. Reengage families in the education of young adolescents by giving families meaningful roles in school governance, communicating with families about the school program and student's progress, and offering families opportunities to support the learning process at home and at the school.

8. Connect schools with the communities, which together share responsibility for each middle grade student's success, through identifying service opportunities in the community, establishing partnerships and collaborations to ensure students access to health and social services, and opportunities for constructive after-school activities.

(Turning Points, 1989, p.9)

Each year almost one third of our high school students terminates formal education. The loss of productivity, the drain on societal resources to support these people, and their absence of contribution to the general societal needs are all possible consequences of the action of dropping out of school. These pale in comparison to risking the loss of the potential intellectual, social and emotional fulfillment

that exists within the minds and hearts of each young person who drops out of school. The drop-out problem is a national dilemma that is being addressed across the nation by focusing on middle grades students who possess characteristics that are common to many students who have dropped out of school. These middle level students have been termed "At-Risk Students", because they have a profile that makes them at high risk for dropping out of school. That profile includes the following characteristics: retained in a grade one or more years, poor attendance, failing grades, behavior difficulties, low self-esteem, feeling of alienation, and low motivation (Before It's Too Late, 1988; Turning Points, 1989).

Many middle grades schools operate programs to assist at-risk students. Several program developers took learning styles of students into consideration when developing the classroom environment, the curriculum materials, and the methods of instruction. Individual learning styles were determined through the use of the Learning Styles Inventory (Dunn and Dunn, 1978). Madison Prep, for example, is an alternative school in New York City that has designed classrooms, materials, and presentations to respond to their students' learning style profiles as obtained from the Learning Style Inventory administered to each student. Since Madison Prep has relied on learning style profiles for their program organization, they report that behavior problems

have decreased and overall positive attitude toward school has increased(Dunn, 1981).

Several factors are felt to be critical to the successful use of learning styles as key program determiners. These factors include administrative support, thorough pre-service teacher training, and involvement of students, teachers and parents in the plans from the very beginning (Hilgerson-Volk, 1987). Research on alternative programs for at-risk students indicates that counseling, whether it consists of individual, small group or peer techniques is a valuable factor in changing student attitudes about school and in increasing self-esteem (Nenortas, 1987). Counseling often occurs informally as a relationship between a teacher and student develops and should not be underestimated in its value. However, to assure that every student has the opportunity to experience the benefits of counseling, the counseling component should be structured and planned. Most students who are at a high risk for dropping out of school have not mastered the basic skills of math, reading, and writing as have their more academically-oriented classmates. While there may be a long list of reasons why this occurs, it is imperative that an alternative program for high risk students have as a high priority the acquisition of these skills by its students.

Although alternative programs work to keep youngsters in school, the reality is that a significant percentage of

students will end up dropping out despite the best interventions. Thus, the alternative program may be many students' last chance to gain the utilitarian skills of reading, writing and arithmetic needed to function successfully in our society. In addition, obtaining a healthy command of basic skills allows the high risk student to participate in and enjoy a wider variety of school activities, thus improving his chances of developing a more positive attitude toward school and learning (Silvestri, 1986). As can be seen, there are several important reasons to focus considerable curriculum attention on basic skills acquisition for the high risk student.

Another curriculum area that should be highlighted through both increased time and substance from that of the normal program is vocational education. Vocational programs are usually available in middle and junior high schools and serve the general population by giving most students a cursory experience in such areas as Home Economics, Industrial Arts, and Career Explorations. The student in an alternative program can benefit significantly from a more intense exploration of a few selected topics in Vocational Education. An increase in the time devoted to vocational studies and depth of activities requiring greater skills and knowledge of the vocational area can positively influence self confidence, self esteem, and motivation to learn (Weber, 1987).

One key element of many successful alternative programs relates to self-determination and autonomy. Most students want to exert more influence on their own lives and make more of their own decisions. But they sublimate this desire and allow various institutions and individuals to make many of the decisions that dictate their behavior and direction. They find the benefits more rewarding than the risks involved with asserting one's independence. This is not the case for many students in the high risk category, because the traditional rewards associated with school, family, and community are often not perceived as valuable to them and thus, they have no overriding reason to contain their desire for autonomy. Alternative programs that allow students a high degree of decision-making regarding program environment, materials and activities, and programs that give students a greater degree of personal autonomy than students in traditional school programs, seem to experience a greater degree of academic and attitudinal improvements than programs that do not extend decision-making and autonomy to students (Gaston, 1987).

North Carolina's Dropout Problem

Effective approaches to educate the at-risk student are sought after by school districts all over the nation. Fortunately, there are courageous and committed school board members, administrators, teachers, and university faculty

who have supported, developed and implemented alternative programs throughout North Carolina. The importance of generating research regarding what seems to be effective in successfully educating students at risk of school failure cannot be overstated. As new information is available concerning effective dynamics, practitioners can design their programs to offer at-risk students the best possible educational chances for success.

The state of North Carolina , concerned about its rising dropout rate and poverty level, commissioned a research study that is divided into three sections: a review of the dropout dilemma, a comparison of eight schools with high dropout rates and eight with low rates, and a discussion of policy issues (Kibel, 1988). The literature review was selective, concise and of good quality. Volume Two described the comparative study of eight high schools in North Carolina. When designing the study, the researchers spent considerable time establishing factors that could be used as equability measures between schools. The study describes schools that enjoy a low dropout rate and those that have a high dropout rate. The unique qualities of the schools with low dropout rate revolve around the relationship between the teacher and the student. Low dropout rate schools have teachers and administrators who believe it is their responsibility to see that every child succeeds. These schools all have individuals on staff who

are totally committed to "saving" each and every young person with whom they work. These schools have staffs that value the needs of the child over the needs of the organization or any staff member in it. They will bend and amend the rules, the schedule, the environment, anything to keep a student succeeding. The literature concerning the at-risk student strongly suggests that substantial improvements in the school experience for at-risk students must be preceded by the restructuring schools.

The indicators in North Carolina associated with dropping out of school seem to fall into three categories: cultural, behavioral, and social. Cultural factors present themselves in the demographic analysis of the dropout. North Carolina experiences a dropout rate of from 23 to 25 percent for each class, which means that 23 to 25 percent of all ninth graders will not be in school when their class graduates four years later. Data collected by the state indicate that 68 percent of the dropouts are white, and about 28 percent are black. About 58 percent are male and 42 percent are female. North Carolina differs from the nation as a whole, in that there is no great difference in the state between blacks and whites or males and females regarding the probability of the group members dropping out. Approximately 23 percent of all North Carolina white students drop out, compared to 22 percent of black students. About 23 percent of the state's female students drop out

compared to 22 percent of all males. Those students who are most likely to drop out are in special or tutorial programs, such as migrant education, Chapter 1, and special education programs. Most of the students in these programs come from families where incomes are below the poverty level and parents are not high school graduates (Speas, 1989).

Behavioral factors are strong indicators of potential for dropping out of school. Behavior and performance at school may be related to cultural factors, but are more readily observed and perhaps play a more direct role in dropping out. In the 1987-88 school year, 70 percent of North Carolina's dropouts had repeated at least one grade. Seventy percent of the dropouts in 1987-88 were enrolled in the "general" high school curriculum, which tends to present boring material and require only the lowest level of intellectual activity. Students with reported discipline problems were more than twice as likely to drop out of school than those with no reported problems. Attendance is a tremendously accurate predictor, with dropouts having more than twice the absences as non-dropouts (Speas, 1989). It is not surprising that students who do not fit the narrow band of expectations that schools hold as acceptable and are who placed in the least stimulating learning environments have behavior and attendance problems, and eventually drop out of school.

Summary

America's public schools have a long history of not meeting the needs of a significant portion of the nation's young people. However, today's economic structure does not give the young person who drops out of high school many options to create a financially successful life. The acknowledgment that schools and the nation must address the dropout problem is encouraging, and many successful efforts have occurred that deserve further attention. The focus on middle level education as the place to concentrate intervention efforts with at-risk students recognizes the fact that high school efforts to combat the dropout problem are often too late to be effective. Several recent successes by middle schools to help at-risk students have been documented in the literature and synthesized in the Carnegie Council's report, Turning Points (1989). Studying schools with proven success in assisting at-risk students and studying the programs and strategies they employ to assist this population will give educators valuable information to use as they endeavor to assist the at-risk students in their schools. In this study, the Carnegie Recommendations structure the descriptions of the middle schools' efforts to assist at-risk students, thus providing a helpful framework that is firmly grounded in the research and literature in the field.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe the efforts to assist at-risk students in two middle schools experiencing success in this area, and to describe aspects of the schools that enhance the understanding of those efforts. These descriptions, organized around the framework of the Carnegie Council Recommendations, found in its report Turning Points (1989), are useful to other educators who endeavor to create effective assistance for at-risk middle school students in their own schools by providing them with a Gestalt of schools and programs that have succeeded in assisting at-risk students.

The study was limited to two public middle schools in North Carolina. Several schools in the state have successfully improved the educational process of students who are judged to be at risk of school failure as evidenced by improvements in easily measured areas that are common to many at-risk students: higher grades, better attendance, and fewer discipline referrals. The researcher used these areas as criteria for success, and identified two schools whose at-risk students met these criteria. Each school was

treated as a case study, using naturalistic research methods to describe the school and how it addressed the needs of its at-risk population. The descriptions were framed around the recommendations of the Carnegie Council.

Research Problem

The research problem that guided this study was to describe the efforts to assist at-risk students in two middle schools experiencing success in this area, and to describe aspects of the school that enhance the understanding of those efforts, using the Carnegie Recommendations as a framework for the descriptions.

Orienting Questions

Orienting questions helped guide the investigation, data collection, and analysis of the study. These questions are based on the recommendations found in the Carnegie Corporation's report, Turning Points (1989). The orienting questions are as follows.

How does the program under study:

1. Create a small community for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental?
2. Teach a core academic program that results in students who can think critically and behave responsibly?

3. Ensure success for all students?.
4. Empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of the students?
5. Employ teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents?
6. Foster the mental and physical health of students?
7. Reengage the family in the education of students?
8. Connect students in the program with the community?

Naturalistic Inquiry

Naturalistic research is also called qualitative or descriptive research and "...focuses on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied...and offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (Merriam, 1988, p. 9). Naturalistic inquiry as a research paradigm is ideal for providing "thick" description of the phenomenon being observed and as a vehicle for communicating to the reader a vicarious experience of the phenomenon (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Naturalistic inquiry tries to understand how all the parts work together to form the whole.

It is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what will happen in

the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of the setting...and in the analysis to be able to communicate faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. The analysis strives for depth of understanding (Patton, 1985).

There are several elements of naturalistic research that help define it. First, it is concerned with process rather than product. The researcher observes the natural history and process of the phenomenon as it is occurring. Second, naturalistic research is interested in meaning as it is embedded in the participants experiencing the phenomenon. Third, the researcher is the primary research instrument. Fourth, naturalistic research involves fieldwork, where the researcher is physically observing the phenomenon in the environment (Merriam, 1988).

There are four essential characteristics of naturalistic research. Naturalistic research is:

Focused on one particular issue, event or phenomenon.

Descriptive, meaning the product is a rich, "thick" description of the phenomenon under study.

Heuristic, in that the study illuminates the reader's understanding of the phenomenon.

Inductive, in that generalizations, concepts, and hypotheses emerge from an examination of the data (Merriam, p. 46, 1988).

This research paradigm is particularly important in studying education, for it can give a fresh look at something that is familiar to us all. It can help us achieve an understanding of the phenomena occurring in schools by looking objectively at specific activities and interpreting them as part of the whole. Naturalistic research also makes us aware of the real people that are involved in the education process, and puts that process in perspective with the broader environment (Merriam, 1988).

Naturalistic Evaluation

There are three paradigms of naturalistic inquiry: research, evaluation, and policy analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study will be evaluative in nature.

Naturalistic evaluation is an appropriate paradigm of inquiry if a study:

- * orients more directly to program activities than intents

- * responds to demands for new information

- * includes value perspectives in its reporting

(Hamilton, 1977). Evaluative studies involve description, explanation, and judgment (Merriam, 1988). The point of a naturalistic evaluation is to use qualitative research methods that provide "thick" holistic, lifelike description to form judgments, which is the ultimate result of evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). This study fits the

evaluation paradigm well in that it consists of a description of two middle school that are judged to be effective in assisting at-risk students. . One method of naturalistic evaluation is the Case Study.

The Case Study

The case study is an important narrative mode of constructing knowledge. Narrative modes, such as case studies, give the reader a personal and engaging experience that puts him or her within the context of the phenomenon (Shulman, 1992). In this way, the case study captures at once the essence and the richness of the phenomenon like no other method of research.

The case study is a common strategy to accomplish qualitative research and a particularly good means for accomplishing naturalistic evaluation. Yin provides several reasons for this. The case study describes the real-life context in which an intervention has occurred. An evaluation can benefit from an illustrative case study of the intervention itself. The case study can be used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 1984).

This investigation involved case studies of two selected middle schools that have show success in assisting at-risk students. The rich and diverse data collected yielded thick

descriptions that were organized around the Carnegie report recommendations.

Role of the Researcher

There are many roles for researchers to assume as they engage in data collection through observation. All have to do with the relationship between the observer and the observed. For example, the "participant as observer" is first a member of the group - a participant - and only secondarily is he an observer or researcher. Conversely, the "observer as participant" is known to all as an observer gathering research data who is by virtue of his presence and involvement a participant (Junker, 1960). The researcher is cautioned not to become actively involved in the setting being studied. The researcher should not lose the objectivity needed as an observer, or overtly influence the setting. William Foote-White, who in the 1940's immersed himself in the blue-collar Italian neighborhood of South Boston, spent the better part of a decade with the group of men he was observing and went from observer-participant to participant-observer. He had no intention of becoming so enmeshed in the setting he was observing, and the result was a wonderful account of an urban immigrant neighborhood chronicled in his book, Street Corner Society (1955). However, Foote-White influenced the direction of the neighborhood, and in so doing, ceased being a researcher.

The study being outlined here will involve the researcher as a "research participant", one who participates in the setting only enough to allow effective observation while functioning as a researcher (Gans, 1982).

Design of the Study

Case Selection

Two public schools in North Carolina were selected as sites for case studies by meeting criteria for successfully dealing with at-risk students. Selecting cases to be studied establishes the boundaries of the study (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). The researcher must determine what the limits of his study are, what should be included, what should be excluded. A "case" may have many sites to visit, people to interview, and activities to observe; the researcher must select from what is available to best meet the needs of his study. This is called sampling (Merriam, 1988). The sampling strategy used in this study was criterion-based, in that the schools selected for study were those whose at-risk students showed improvements in academic performance, attendance, and discipline.

First a pool of schools on which to apply these three criteria were developed. To develop this initial group, a reputational-case selection sampling strategy was used. This involved asking experts in the field to identify schools they believe are successful in dealing with at-risk

students (Merriam, 1988, p. 50). The experts asked to identify schools for this study are listed below.

Dr. John Van Hoose

Professor of Education, University of North Carolina,
Greensboro

Board of Directors, National Middle School Association

Author of several monographs and articles focusing on
at-risk middle school students

Consultant to school districts for middle school at-risk
programs

Dr. John Arnold

Professor of Education, North Carolina State University

Author of several books and articles concerning middle
schools

Author of the monograph Best Bets (1992), a description
of effective programs in North Carolina for middle school
at-risk students

Consultant to school districts for alternative middle
school programs

Dr. Frances Reeves

Middle Grades Consultant for the State of North Carolina
Department of Public Instruction

Middle school principal

Mrs. Evie Cox

Middle School Coordinator for the Durham Public Schools
Masters degrees in Reading and Special Education
Board of Directors, North Carolina Middle School Assoc.
Director of Elementary Education, Durham Public Schools
Executive Director of K-12 Curriculum, Durham Public
Schools.

Establishing A Pool

A letter and a survey form (Appendix A) was sent to the above experts. They were asked to list North Carolina public middle schools they believed were successful in assisting at-risk students. All four experts responded, and the researcher compiled the information that was returned. The experts identified 11 schools and two school districts as having significant success with at-risk students. The responses by the panel of experts were as follows.

Neal Middle School, Durham Public Schools

Brogden Middle School, Durham Public Schools

Guilford Middle School, Guilford County Schools

Douglas Byrd Junior High School, Cumberland County
Schools

Eanes Middle School, Lexington City Schools

Ferndale Middle School, Guilford County Schools

Catawba Schools, Catawba County

Allen Middle School, Guilford County Schools

Gold Sand Middle School, Franklin County Schools

Jamestown Middle School, Guilford County Schools

Martin Middle School, Roxboro City Schools

Burke County Schools, Burke County

Kennedy Middle School, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County

Three schools were named twice by different experts on the panel. These schools were Neal Middle School, Guilford Middle School, and Douglas Byrd Junior High School.

Site Selection

A letter was sent in September, 1993, to the principals of all schools listed by the panel of experts. The letter described the study and contained a survey (Appendix B) that asks them to self-report on whether their at-risk students have shown improvements in academics, attendance, and discipline. The letters also assured that the students and staff would remain anonymous in any written document that is part of or resulting from the study. All 11 principals returned their surveys. All indicated their schools had specific programs designed to assist at-risk students and that there were school-wide strategies in place focused on

at-risk students. Eight of the principals reported improved attendance, and nine reported improved academic performance and behavior on the part of at-risk students who had experienced the interventions at their schools. Seven of the respondents stated their school met all three criteria for the study.

Of this group, three were recommended twice by the panel of experts: Neal Middle School, Guilford Middle School, and Douglas Byrd Junior High School. The three schools met all three criteria and were the only schools named more than once by the panel of experts. Douglas Byrd Junior High School experienced radical changes in its personnel, including the principal, and its programs and school climate changed dramatically prior to the initiation of this study. Upon recommendation by one panel member who named the school originally, the researcher eliminated Douglas Byrd Junior High School from the study. Since only the three schools were named by the panel more than once, it was decided to conduct the study with the two schools who had the same strength of recommendation by the panel of experts, Guilford Middle School and Neal Middle School.

Data Collection

By applying the following data collection strategies to each of the orienting questions, a rich set of data was collected for each school and program studied. Although the

orienting questions formed a framework for data collection, the researcher was not limited to recording only data that referred to the orienting questions. Data were collected that did not necessarily relate to any orienting question, but that added to the researchers understanding of the school setting and/or the programs being studied. Significant amounts of data were collected around certain orienting questions, while very little data were discovered that related to other orienting questions.

Data Collection Strategies

The researcher visited each school a number of times between December, 1993 and May, 1994 on the following dates.

Figure 2 School Visits

<u>Guilford Middle School</u>	<u>Neal Middle School</u>
14 Visits	12 Visits
December 8	January 31
January 11	February 4
February 3	February 14
March 2	February 24
March 9	March 10
March 16	March 17
March 23	March 24
March 30	March 31
April 13	April 7
April 20	April 21
April 25	April 28
April 27	May 5
May 4	May 19
May 18	

These visits were planned in advance and agreed upon by the principals. The visits were organized so that the following data collection could be accomplished in as efficient and unobtrusive a manner as possible.

1. Collecting Records, Documents, and Artifacts

The researcher studied documents such as school newsletters, handbooks, and program descriptions, to collect information about the schools and the at-risk efforts in relation to the orienting questions.

2. Surveying

A survey was given to teachers at both schools. The survey reflected the study's orienting questions and gave the researcher a sense of how the teachers felt about their schools. Although surveys are considered data collection tools more in the realm of quantitative than qualitative research, it is not uncommon for them to be used as enhancing and complementing methods within a qualitative study. There is value in using a survey as part of a naturalistic research study. Siebert (1982) contends that "survey results can cast new light on field observations, or more precisely, the serendipitous nature of some survey findings can illuminate a field observation that was hitherto inexplicable or misinterpreted" (p. 187).

3. Interviewing

Interviews were structured around the Carnegie recommendations to assure a degree of continuity in interview questions from one interview and site to another. The interviews were not limited to these questions and were

conducted in a manner that encouraged open-ended conversation about the school and programs being studied. Follow-up interviews took place as needed during subsequent visits to each school.

4. Observing

There are many advantages to observation as a form of data collection. The observer, unfamiliar with the setting, will notice actions and nuances that are commonplace and thus ignored by the participants. The observer obtains first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon on which to base interpretations and judgments. The researcher gains insight and information about the dynamics at work in the setting and the relationships between the people involved through observation that would not be exposed in interviews or found in documents. The observation allows the researcher to record reality as it is happening (Merriam, 1985).

Structure and focus were given to observations through elements described by Merriam.

1. The setting

What is the physical environment like?

What is the context?

What behavior does the setting encourage, permit, discourage or prevent?

2. The participants

Who is present?

What are their roles?

How many people are there?

What brings them here?

Who is allowed here?

3. Activities and interactions

Is there a sequence of activities?

How do people interact with the activities and with each other?

4. Frequency and duration of specific activities

When did the situation begin?

How long does it last?

Is it a recurring activity?

How typical is this situation?

5. Subtle factors

Informal and unplanned activities

Symbolic, applied, and connotative meanings of words

Nonverbal communication such as dress, and physical space

Unobtrusive measures such as physical clues and "body language"

What does not happen, especially if it should have (Merriam, p. 90, 1985).

Each visit to the schools included extensive observation of the school's organization, climate, procedures and culture. Observations uncovered information that would not

be found through other research strategies, and helped shape the focus of data collection on the relationships and processes staff members developed in their efforts to assist at-risk students.

The Focus of Data Collection

Most of the information gathered at both schools revolved around the relationships and processes both school staffs developed as they attempted to solve the issues and problems of their at-risk students. As this became apparent to the researcher, he began focusing data collection on these processes. Interviewing and observing became the dominant forms of data collection, as they revealed the most information about these relationships and processes. Artifacts, documents, and interviews with parents and students played a less important role in data collection.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of sorting out the data collected from all the various sources and, in an inductive process, developing some reasonable conclusions and generalizations across the three schools (Taylor and Brogdan, 1984). The process involves sorting, compacting, consolidating, and interpreting the data. The first phase of data analysis was to organize and categorize the data around the orienting questions. At this phase, Lincoln and

Guba (1985) suggest dividing the data into "units of information".

A unit of information meets two criteria. First, it is relevant to the study and has implication beyond its basic content. Second, it is the smallest amount of information that can stand by itself for interpretation. The units of information were placed into categories. This action brings the analysis from the concrete information level to an abstract level that involves interpretation and judgment. The categories developed around the orienting questions, but were not necessarily limited to them. The researcher allowed the natural evolution of categories to arise from the data. Tight control of the categories would deny the free collection of the data as it became available. The above process is a form of content analysis, in that the data are analyzed and placed into categories on the basis of content.

Trustworthiness and the Language of Naturalistic Research

Testing a hypothesis or developing empirical generalizations are the goals of quantitative researchers. These are not the motives of naturalistic researchers. They seek to describe a phenomenon in order to develop understanding and to develop explanatory concepts that may be used to develop hypotheses or help people understand

similar phenomena. Different as the two research paradigms are, researchers in both have an ethical responsibility to produce valid and reliable knowledge. Because its goals and assumptions of reality are different than those in experimental research design, naturalistic inquiry looks at reliability and validity differently. Lincoln and Guba (1985) use qualitative research terms that parallel quantitative terms: "truth value" to internal validity, "transferability" to external validity, "consistency" to reliability, and "neutrality" to objectivity. Shulman (1992) contends validity in case methods of qualitative research can be judged by whether the narrative "rings true". "A good piece of physics demonstrates its validity through meeting standards of prediction and control. A good work of tragedy demonstrates its verisimilitude by evoking in its audience feelings of pity and fear." (Shulman, p. 22). In the end, the purpose is the same: to build a level of trust in the research for the reader and for future researchers.

Triangulation

Triangulation was used in this study to insure Truth Value. Triangulation involves comparing different sources of data to see if the same general findings occur. The data from the various sources need not be completely congruent, but rather should provide plausibly similar explanations.

To accomplish this, the researcher collected data from several sources at each site, using document artifacts, surveys, observation notes, and interviews. The data were compared within each site and between sites to see if the resulting general findings were compatible (Merriam, 1988).

Peer Examination

Peer Examination involves sharing data and interpretations with colleagues who are familiar with the area being researched. Based on their knowledge and experience, they can judge the validity of the data and the subsequent analysis. The researcher involved Doctor John Van Hoose in examining the data and implications periodically throughout the study (Merriam, 1988).

Many researchers feel that developing generalizations from data in naturalistic research is incongruent with this research paradigm. However, most of the objection to generalizations is based on the obvious difficulty with creating generalizations from a single, isolated study. Multiple-site studies can be designed with standardized data collection and analysis methods in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Generalizability can also be accomplished by providing rich, thick description, comparing the program to others using the same criteria

throughout, and conducting a cross-site analysis (Merriam, 1988).

Summary

This study describes the efforts to assist at-risk students in two middle schools that have been selected for their success in serving the at-risk population and describes aspects of the schools that enhance the understanding of these efforts. The data were collected at both schools through a framework of orienting questions based on the Carnegie Recommendations found in Turning Points (1989). The researcher categorized the data so that concepts and connections were seen from the information gathered using qualitative research techniques. Chapter IV contains the detailed portrayals of the schools and their efforts to assist at-risk students using the methodology described above.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter portrays two North Carolina middle schools' efforts to assist at-risk students and portrays aspects of the schools that lend additional insight to the understanding of these efforts. Described are the schools' communities, the school buildings and climates within them, data related to attendance and performance, policies and practices, the faculty and administration in each school, and significant programs aimed at assisting the at-risk student. These portraits are organized through the research problem that frames this study, which is to describe, using the Carnegie Council Recommendations as a framework, two middle schools' efforts to assist at-risk students and to describe aspects of the schools that enhance the understanding of these efforts. The data collected are organized by using orienting questions derived from the Carnegie Council's Recommendations found in its report, Turning Points (1989). The study describes the larger communities of both schools, the schools themselves, and the programs the schools employ to assist their at-risk population. In this way, the reader gains a rich

understanding of each school's significant at-risk efforts in the context of the whole community and school, with orienting questions firmly based in the literature and research used as a framework of the information.

Observations, interviews and other data were collected weekly during the 1993-94 school year at Guilford Middle School in Guilford County and John W. Neal Middle School in Durham County. The charts below indicate the dates and activities the researcher engaged in for each visit.

Figure 3

Neal Middle School Visitation History

Visits to Neal	General School Observations	Teacher Team Observ.	Mental Health Team Meeting Observations	History Interviews
1/31	X			X
2/4	X			X
2/14	X			
2/24	X	X		X
3/10	X		X	X
3/17	X		X	X
3/24	X		X	
3/31	X		X	
4/7	X		X	
4/21	X		X	
4/28	X		X	
5/5	X			
5/19	X			

Figure 4

Guilford Middle School (GMS) Visitation History

Visits to GMS	General School Observations	TOPS Class Observ.	TOPS Meeting Observations	History Interviews
12/8	X		X	X
1/11	X	X		X
2/3	X	X		X
3/2	X			
3/9	X	X	X	X
3/16	X	X	X	X
3/22	X		X	
3/30	X	X		X
4/13	X	X		X
4/20	X	X		X
4/25	X	X		X
4/27	X	X		
5/4	X	X		
5/18	X	X		

Narratives of committee meetings, observations, and interviews are placed in the text where they can best assist the reader in gaining a better understanding of the issues being discussed and a clear sense of the total picture of each school. Names of individuals used in the study are not the actual names of the people in the schools.

A Brief Overview of the Schools

The schools are similar in many ways. They serve between 700 and 800 students in grades six through eight and have maintained a fairly constant enrollment over the past few years. Both schools were designed as junior high schools and have since made the organizational transition to

middle schools, but continue to be impeded by the buildings that were designed to meet the needs of a different instructional philosophy and organization. Both schools are part of districts that have merged with nearby city school districts. These mergers are recent and student assignments and attendance boundaries were not finalized during this study and thus the mergers did not affect the student population or the staff of either school during the study. Both faculties think highly of their school and share a great deal of camaraderie. There is little turnover among the staff and most teachers at both schools have been with their schools for more than four years.

The schools differ in the demographics of the students they serve. Guilford Middle draws suburban students from middle class families and students from two federally-subsidized housing areas. Neal Middle draws students from a more rural setting who are less affluent than those of Guilford Middle. In addition, Neal Middle draws students from four federally-subsidized housing areas. Guilford Middle has a minority enrollment of 23%, the largest group being African-Americans, most of who live in federally-subsidized housing areas. The second largest minority group is Asia and the third is Hispanic. Approximately 25% of the Guilford Middle population comes from families in poverty. Neal Middle has a minority population of 52%, the majority of who are African-American, with the second largest group

being Hispanic. Over 50% of Neal's students come from families in poverty. This may be the most important difference between the two schools, in that a larger portion of Neal's students are considered at-risk and in need of assistance than at Guilford Middle School.

Profile of Guilford Middle School

The Community.

A general description of the community surrounding Guilford Middle School and a description of the school itself will provide background to the school's learning community and the learning environment it creates for at-risk students. Guilford Middle School lies in the New Garden Community of western Guilford County. This community has had a schoolhouse since 1816, and the present site had its first school building erected in 1924 (SACS Report, 1986). The New Garden Community is primarily a middle class suburb of Greensboro. The area is rich in cultural and educational opportunities including the Natural Science Center, Guilford College, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro Historical Museum, Guilford Battleground, and Greenhill and Weatherspoon Art Galleries. Guilford College YMCA, the City Recreation Department, Guilford College Athletic Association, and local churches

provide a wide range of sports and recreation activities for area youth.

Light industry, an international airport, several colleges, a state university, retail businesses, and the insurance industry comprise the foundation of economic wealth for Guilford County. Unemployment is relatively low, but many of the jobs for the unskilled or semi-skilled pay wages that do not bring the worker above the state's poverty level.

Guilford Middle School has within its attendance area two federally- subsidized housing areas where tenants pay rent but at a reduced rate. The families in these areas are below the state's poverty level. Approximately 23% of the community comprising the school's attendance zone is minority and this is reflected in the school's enrollment. Most minority students are African-American. Hispanics comprise the second largest minority group at the school.

The School.

The Guilford School was built in 1929 on a 45-acre site and served the public educational needs, grades one through 12, of western part of Guilford County. Several additional schools have been built in the area, and since 1972, the Guilford School has served grades three through eight.

The main building contains the middle school. In it are classrooms for grades five through eight, typing and

computer labs, administrative offices, guidance offices, a health room, teachers' lounge, and a library. A new wing was built in 1981 giving grades five and six new classroom space and expanding the library and office areas. The classrooms are minimal in size (about 850 square feet) and sparsely furnished. The science classrooms have very little lab equipment and were not originally designed to be science lab rooms. The campus is shared with Guilford Elementary School, which serves students in grades three through five. Both schools share two gymnasiums, a cafeteria with two separate dining areas, and several mobile classrooms. The campus is spacious and has several areas designed for a variety of athletic and recreational purposes.

The architectural design of Guilford Middle is typical of consolidated high schools built throughout the U.S. in the mid-1900's to keep up with the growing but geographically dispersed population of students attending a comprehensive high school from small towns and rural areas that could not afford such schools. It consists of several long corridors lined with lockers and classrooms on both sides. The building design met the needs of a six or seven-period high school organization where students changed every hour to attend classes in subject-specific rooms. Such a design does not adapt well to the organizational characteristics of most middle schools. The staff is organized into two to four teachers in teams whose

instructional spaces are in close proximity and who are responsible for the academic programs of a large group of students. Large block scheduling that is controlled by the teams, and close relationships between teachers and students are also characteristics of middle schools made possible because of the team organization. The school's architectural design with long classroom corridors is a problematic factor in efforts to create small learning communities within the school.

Guilford Middle's policies and practices are stated in the School Handbook and further describe the expectations the school has for students. Described below are policies and practices that relate to the Carnegie recommendations and this study's orienting questions.

The grading system is perhaps the greatest single factor that states tangible expectations of students and then judges them on the same tangible basis. Guilford Middle's grading system is as follows.

Grading Scale

Superior	(94-100)	A
Above Average	(86-93)	B
Average	(77-85)	C
Below Average	(70-76)	D
Unsatisfactory	(0-69)	F

Conduct Code

Satisfactory	S
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Needs Attention N

Unsatisfactory U

The school's Honor Roll is divided into the Principal's Honor Roll for students with grade averages of 4.0, and School Honor Roll for students with averages better than 3.0. Students must have at least Satisfactory conduct grades in all areas as a prerequisite to the Honor Roll.

Homework is assigned to all students and it is the school's policy that teachers will check all homework the day it is due. Suggested time to be spent on homework each night is one hour for fifth graders, 90 minutes for sixth graders, and two hours for students in grades seven and eight.

Expectations regarding appearance and personal habits are also clearly stated. Students are to wear appropriate dress, which is defined as that which is suitable and comfortable for the work atmosphere. Dress may not be disruptive to the academic environment. Hats or outdoor coats cannot be worn in school, nor can clothing advertising alcoholic beverages, or containing obscene language. Clothing that is excessively tight and reveals body contours or cleavage is not permitted. Halter tops, tank tops, see-through clothing, and bare midriffs are also not allowed. Smoking, drinking, or the use of drugs is not permitted, nor is chewing gum or eating food outside of the cafeteria. The following is a list of acts that are not permitted at

Guilford Middle School and which will result in disciplinary action: obscene language or gestures, inappropriate touching, gambling, unexcused tardies or absences from class or school, running, pushing, and congregating in the halls, possession of a weapon in any form, disrespect or insubordination toward any staff member, selling any item, verbal or threatening language toward other students or teachers, or fighting (defined as intentionally striking a person with the intention of causing harm or injury).

Students are not to bring the following items to school: weapons, radios, tape decks, playing cards, cameras, large amounts of money, toys, games, expensive jewelry, or any item that could cause disruption to the educational process.

Clear messages to students regarding expectations are also worth knowing, as they represent the priorities and formula for success the school has for students. Guilford Middle School has several clearly-state messages in the Handbook that communicate to students what is expected of them. One such statement reads as follows.

"How To Succeed At Guilford Middle School"

A successful student is one who:

1. Will do no harm to one's self, to others, or to property;
2. Will be at the correct place at the correct time and with all materials;

3. Will do what he or she is told to do when told to do it by all adults at school.

Reading the mission statements and written policies about the school gives a sense of the intent the formers of the school had when the documents were written. Observing the school gives the researcher an opportunity to compare the intent with the reality.

Observation of the school, December 8, 1993

The researcher visited the school for the first time on December 8, 1993 and arrived at 7:15 A.M. Although school does not begin until 8:25, there were at least 12 middle school teachers at work in their classrooms upon the researcher's arrival. All entrances to the building were unlocked and students entered freely upon arrival. Several students were sitting in the halls outside classrooms at 7:15. The school secretary, one of two assistant principals, and the principal were in the office when I arrived. I walked throughout the single-story building and found it clean, bright, and well-maintained. The classrooms contained a teacher's desk and student desks with attached chairs. Very little storage was available in the classrooms. Each room had a color television set installed on a wall bracket. The school has a closed-circuit television system, and students produce and broadcast news, dramatic presentations, and morning announcements over the

system. Bulletin boards in the classrooms and hallways displayed student work, from essays to artwork. Generally, the school appeared clean, well-maintained, and furnished with necessities. Throughout the day, students and teachers interacted in a friendly, informal manner in the halls and classrooms. At class change, when several hundred young adolescents were in the halls at one time, there was a safe, calm, friendly, and informal climate. Teachers were in the halls a great deal during class changes, and spent several minutes before each class talking to individual students about a variety of personal or school-related issues pertaining to the individual student.

Classes were organized in a traditional manner, with students seated facing the teacher. Teaching methods were also traditional. Teachers generally checked homework at the beginning of a class, lectured on a topic, engaged students in some questioning, and ended the class with an assignment that was usually due the next day. Students were generally quiet and well-behaved during classes. There were very few observations of students actively engaged in their work in the classrooms. The general climate of the school was orderly, safe, and supportive.

The Staff.

The Guilford Middle School staff consists of three administrators, three secretaries, two guidance counselors, one media specialist, two full-time Exceptional Children Program teachers, several itinerant Exceptional Children Program specialists (such as a speech therapist) who serve small segments of the student population for short periods of time each week, an in-school suspension teacher, three Physical Education teachers, a Spanish teacher, an Art teacher, a part-time Band teacher, a Chorus teacher, and three Vocational Education teachers. There are nine classroom teachers in the sixth grade, nine in the seventh grade, and nine in the eighth grade. There are three assistant teachers in the school. The middle and elementary schools share seven custodians and 12 cafeteria staff, most of whom work part time. In total, there are 75 staff members at Guilford Middle School. There are 46 certified staff members at the middle school, and all are working within their certification areas.

The faculty is generally happy with Guilford Middle School and proud to be a part of the staff, according to teacher comments and the questionnaire responses. Many have

worked in other schools, and find Guilford Middle a more enjoyable school in which to work. There is very little staff turnover. Five factors were reported by teachers to contribute to the staff's satisfaction with the school: parental support; administrative support; support from colleagues; a supportive and safe teaching and learning environment; and the students, who are generally achievement-oriented and well-behaved.

Teacher Questionnaire.

A questionnaire was administered to 32 full-time classroom teachers in April, 1994. Twenty-eight teachers responded, giving an 87.5% return rate. The survey had 15 response statements that fell into three categories: The School, The Family, and Efforts To Assist At-Risk Students. Below are the questionnaire and the responses expressed in percentages of respondents for each statement.

Figure 5

Guilford Middle School Teacher Questionnaire Results

(87.5% Return Rate)

(n = 28)

My Middle School:	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1. Has a supportive environment for all students.	70	30	0	0
2. Creates many special opportunities for at-risk students.	86	14	0	0
3. Meets the needs of at-risk students.	56	41	4	0
4. Rewards all students for good work and behavior.	43	57	0	0
5. Creates special rewards for at-risk students.	74	26	0	0
6. Assures that all students master fundamental academic skills.	43	54	3	0
7. Develops positive self-esteem in students.	57	43	0	0
8. Is a safe and secure place in which to learn.	82	18	0	0
9. Develops the health and physical fitness of students.	50	46	4	0
10. Encourages family participation in the educational process.	64	36	0	0
11. Has a caring staff committed to young adolescents.	64	36	0	0
12. Has good support from most families.	48	48	4	0
13. Has good support from families of at-risk students.	11	74	15	0
14. Has supportive administrators.	79	21	0	0
15. Meets the needs of students.	63	37	0	0

The staff showed strong support for their school as reflected in questions 1, 6, 8, 11, 14, and 15 for which respondents indicated they strongly agreed or agreed as follows.

1. 100%: Has a supportive environment for students.
6. 97%: Assures that all students master fundamental academic skills.
8. 100%: Is a safe and secure place in which to learn.
9. 96%: Develops the health and physical fitness of students.
11. 100%: Has a caring staff committed to young adolescents.
14. 100%: Has supportive administrators.
15. 100%: Meets the needs of students.

The fact that 100% of the teachers responding felt their school was a safe, secure, and supportive environment that met the needs of students is a very strong endorsement of Guilford Middle School, and helps explain the lack of staff turnover, the camaraderie among the staff, and the good reputation and support the school enjoys in the community.

The Family statements (10, 12, and 13) showed that all respondents felt the school engages families in the

educational process and that the school gets good support from most families. The sense of family support drop to 85% agreeing or strongly agreeing and 15% disagreeing when considering families of at-risk students. This supports the comments from teachers expressing frustration at the lack of family support from some families whose students are in the TOPS program and is consistent with teachers' opinions that the school should drop students from the TOPS program if their families do not support it.

According to the responses to questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, and 13, Guilford Middle School teachers feel very good about and proud of their efforts to assist at-risk students. They all felt the school provides special opportunities and rewards for at-risk students that help develop their self-esteem. Most teachers felt the school meets the needs of at-risk students, and that they have reasonable support from the parents of these students.

Six TOPS teachers' responses, which are part of the Guilford Middle School Staff Questionnaire Results, are reported separately below.

Figure 6

TOPS Teachers Questionnaire Results

(21.43% Total Staff)

(n = 6)

My Middle School:	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1. Has a supportive environment for all students.	83	17	0	0
2. Creates many special opportunities for at-risk students.	100	0	0	0
3. Meets the needs of at-risk students.	83	17	0	0
4. Rewards all students for good work and behavior.	83	17	0	0
5. Creates special rewards for at-risk students.	83	17	0	0
6. Assures that all students master fundamental academic skills.	67	33	0	0
7. Develops positive self-esteem in students.	100	0	0	0
8. Is a safe and secure place in which to learn.	100	0	0	0
9. Develops the health and physical fitness of students.	33	67	0	0
10. Encourages family participation in the educational process.	67	33	0	0
11. Has a caring staff committed to young adolescents.	83	17	0	0
12. Has good support from most families.	80	20	0	0
13. Has good support from families of at-risk students.	17	50	33	0
14. Has supportive administrators.	83	17	0	0
15. Meets the needs of students.	80	20	0	0

The TOPS teachers' positive opinions about the school, the families, and the at-risk efforts were much stronger than those of the whole staff, as indicated by the much higher percentages in the "Strongly Agree" column in every statement but one.

The Administration.

Guilford Middle School has a principal and two assistant principals. Each administrator has a Masters Degree in School Administration and one assistant principal has a doctorate. They divide the administrative tasks between them. For example, one assistant is responsible for transportation and one for the majority of disciplinary action. Other administrative functions are accomplished by the three guidance counselors who, in addition to their traditional counseling roles, coordinate all testing, and develop the student class schedules for the elementary and middle schools.

The principal of a school is a key factor in the climate and morale of a school. The Guilford Middle School principal, who also serves as Guilford Elementary's principal, has been a public school administrator for over two decades. A middle-aged white native of North Carolina, he has been Guilford's principal for eight years. Many awards are displayed in his office, including the state's Principal of the Year Award, and Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award. His overall appearance is conservative, from his business suit to his hair cut. His office and desk are large and the perimeter of his office is lined with chairs that are used for various committee meetings, particularly the weekly Teaching Our Pupils Success (TOPS) team meetings.

The western Guilford County community has a long history as a stable middle class area whose citizens value education. Guilford Middle School is historically and culturally linked with the community. The architecture of the school makes it difficult to create a small community for learning, but the camaraderie of the staff and the caring that is exhibited toward students overcomes the physical barriers.

Data Framed In Orienting Questions

Orienting Question Number One:

How does the school create a small community for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental?

Many factors influence the creation of a learning community. A great many of them lie outside the school, such as the demographics of the area, state mandates for schools, the political, cultural and social climate of the school district, and the school board and superintendent. Artifacts that suggest the influence of the community, school board and superintendent are mission statements and district-wide goals that impact on the school and influence it as a learning community. All Guilford County schools developed their own school's missions statements, as did the district. These clearly stated priorities and expectations

of school and the district focus on developing a positive and student-centered learning environment.

Guilford Middle School Mission Statement

Guilford Middle School's mission is to provide a positive teaching and learning environment including high expectations and encouragement of the community involving leading to a high level of achievement, wellness, and self-esteem for all students.

Guilford County Public Schools Mission Statement

To create inspired student-centered learning that affirms diversity and ensures growth in a challenging and nurturing environment.

(Guilford Middle School Handbook, 1993)

Mission statements can indicate the nature or at least the intent of the learning environment. It can also influence the teachers and parents in their developing of the learning environment. More influential in creating the setting of a school is the principal. The interview below with Guilford Middle School's principal gives a great deal of insight about how he influences the school's climate and the expectations to which his staff feels accountable.

Interview with Principal Oakley Mabe, December 8, 1993.

After the TOPS meeting on December 8, 1993, the researcher interviewed the principal in his office. He began by telling how the TOPS program started. Six years ago, he and the seventh/eighth grade guidance counselor were becoming increasingly concerned about the decline in the achievement of certain students. They met for breakfast at a local restaurant to discuss their concerns with Dr. John Van Hoose from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Their discussion began focusing on the need for students to develop a sense of responsibility for their own behavior and academic performance. The three agreed to explore two strategies. "First", he said, "They would develop a 'token economy' for the school." This would consist of a clearly communicated set of rewards and consequences directly tied to academic achievement. "Second", he said, "They agreed to develop a mechanism for students to have an active role in creating curriculum activities that will help the school meet its Improvement Plan objectives that's required by the state in the Basic Education Program." From that discussion was born the TOPS program, which has developed into a model program of school-wide support for students at risk of school failure. He recounted the birth of the TOPS program with the ease and animation of a storyteller. It was obvious that he had told

this story many times before, yet he appeared eager to tell it and proud of the program and the people who made it work.

He talked about the school in general. "Because the attendance lines have not changed in many years and because students attend the school from third grade through eighth grade, we enjoy a great deal of community and parental support." One tangible evidence of that support is the fact that the PTA's fundraising efforts for the school raised \$104,000 in 1992-93 and \$93,000 in 1993-94. "The teachers", he says, "Are like an extended family. They support each other at school and socialize outside of school." And they feel supported by their principal. In a survey of the teaching staff, 100% of the respondents (n=28) said they feel they have supportive administrators (Appendix D).

He believes the teachers are very committed to seeing that each young adolescent succeeds, and attributes this faculty-wide commitment to the TOPS program. All teachers, he feels, are more sensitive to and aware of the needs and problems of at-risk students because of TOPS and this has generalized to their feelings about every student, not just the ones identified as being at-risk.

He says that the biggest part he plays in the success of TOPS is to devise strategies to get around local, state, and federal rules and regulations that would impede or completely block the program if they were followed.

For example, in order to find time for TOPS students to meet with TOPS teachers, they have to be taken out of some class during the day. They are taken out of Social Studies or Science which are required subjects. They are often exempt from state-mandated testing in these subjects. What makes this school work so well for at-risk kids? If you can identify the elements, the chemistry, that would be a real help". (Interview December 8, 1993)

Interview with Lisa and Doris, Exceptional Children Program Teachers, March 16, 1994.

An interview on March 16, 1994, with Lisa and Doris, Exceptional Children(EC) Program Teachers, adds to the portrayal of the school and the attitude of its staff. The interview took place in the Teachers' Lounge. They talked about the new way they serve educationally handicapped students. The "pull-out" model of special classes for the handicapped has been the dominant service delivery model for special education for the past two decades. These programs "pull" students out of their regular classes and send them to a separate room for a period of time during each day in order to receive special educational services and instruction. This model and classes organized in this fashion became know as "pull-out" programs. Lisa and Doris initiated the "Inclusion Model" to Guilford Middle School.

This model "includes" the EC teachers in the regular classroom to provide services to students in their regular classes instead of in a separate room. One of the benefits, they say, is the ability for them to act as consultants to regular teachers, giving them strategies and information that allows them to understand and serve educationally handicapped students more effectively. In addition, they feel the program allows them to observe the students in their regular educational setting, thus gaining a better grasp of their real educational needs. Lisa and Doris also express the belief that the Inclusion Model is responsible for boosting the self-esteem of educationally handicapped students. They also say that, because the lack of space at Guilford Middle for EC programs was discovered during the summer, the decision to change to the inclusion model was made hastily, and they were informed of it in August, only two weeks before school started.

They talk about the student population at Guilford Middle School. They report that it is a very diverse population, with students from university and business-oriented families interacting with students from abject poverty. There are two housing projects within the school's attendance zone, and both Lisa and Doris feel that a great deal of drug activity occurs in these projects. The two teachers feel that there is a tremendous number of students with needs that interfere with their schooling. For

example, they say there are 87 students who receive medication, mostly Ritalin, every day at school for disorders that negatively affect their learning, such as Attention Deficit Disorder. When the conversation moves to discipline, the two teachers agree that fighting has been almost eliminated at Guilford Middle. They recall that several years ago, that was not the case, and that the improvements in discipline could be attributed primarily to an assistant principal that was transferred from the school last year. "He made this school non-violent," says Lisa.

The TOPS program, both feel, makes a significant difference in the lives of many students who would not have the support they need without TOPS. Lisa states that some teachers think too many students are kept in the TOPS program who are not responsive to the efforts that are made on their behalf. She feels there are many students who would be more responsive, but there is no room for them in the program. Doris contends that the principal will not allow students to be dropped from the program just because they are not responsive or because their families do not support the program. Both teachers feel strongly that Guilford Middle School's staff enjoys the best morale in the school system. They say everyone would like to teach here. Doris ends the interview by saying, "This school has a good climate, a supportive community, and a staff and administration that support each other."

Summary.

Guilford Middle has a school-wide learning environment where stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships are developed. Three factors seem to account for this. First, the students are generally in harmony with the school's expectations of them and they seem to enjoy and appreciate their school. Second, teachers have developed close friendships with each other and model close professional relationships. Third, the principal is very supportive of the teachers and creates a safe environment where these relationships can flourish.

Orienting Question Number Two:

How does the school teach a core academic program that results in students who can think critically and behave responsibly?

Guilford Middle School offers a traditional academic program in compliance with the state's required Basic Education Program, and is accredited by the State of North Carolina and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Students are involved in a great many learning activities outside the classroom. They include a Math Club, Science Club, Student Council, Spirit Club, Yearbook Staff, and a student service organization. Guilford Middle School had an average enrollment of 675 students in grades six through eight during the 1993-94 school year. Attendance

rates rose from 94.96% in 1988-1989 to 97.6% in 1991-92. The school has maintained attendance rates that are above the state average for the past three years. The school's standardized test scores improved over the past four years. Writing scores rose from the 47th percentile in sixth grade and the 54th percentile in the eighth grade in 1988-89 to the 54.2 percentile in sixth grade and the 68.6 percentile in the eighth grade in 1991-92. Similar increases were realized in all standardized test areas, most notably, eighth grade Algebra rising from the 58th percentile in 1988-89 to the 86.3 percentile in 1989-90 (School Improvement Plans, 1992-93, 1993-94, 1994-95).

Summary.

The school provides the same core academic program, prescribed by the State of North Carolina, to all students, with the exception of exempting TOPS students from one core class so they can participate in the TOPS program. Through a steady increase in achievement test scores in the past several years, Guilford Middle shows evidence that more students are attaining competence in core academic skills. The TOPS program focuses on assisting at-risk students to succeed academically and socially. The program has influenced the entire school, according to much of the staff, and reportedly has raised the awareness level of all

teachers regarding the learning and social needs of at-risk students.

Orientation Question Number Three:

How does the school assure success for all students?

Guilford Middle offers all students a variety of incentives and rewards for scholastic and behavioral excellence, but the TOPS program provides at-risk students with a comprehensive blend of personal advocacy by the TOPS teachers and institutionally designed support through the policies and behaviors of the school faculty and administration.

The TOPS program (Teaching Our Student Success).

The TOPS program assists at-risk students cope successfully with the required curriculum and helps them develop ethical and responsible behavior. The developmental history and organization of TOPS provides further understanding of the program and its influence on the school.

The principal and other staff members were getting increasingly concerned during the 1987-88 school year at the number of students who seemed disassociated and unmotivated regarding their responsibilities as students. The principal invited the guidance counselor and a professor from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, who was involved

in research regarding middle school students who were at risk of school failure, discuss the problem and identify actions that might make a difference. The first idea they developed was creating a token economy system at the school. This system would provide students with tangible short-term rewards for their positive accomplishments. The second was creating ways for student to have input to their school experience and be re-engaged in their own education. One of the most important ideas that drives the TOPS program is that in order to change the behavior of at-risk students, school must first change the attitudes that contribute to the destructive behavior. The success of TOPS is also contingent on the support of the principal, who was the program's originator. (Van Hoose, 1989).

Planning with the staff occurred for the next several months, and program elements were developed. The TOPS students would continue in regular academic classes, Advisor-Advisee, and electives. They would, however, be taken out of one class a day, either Science or Social Studies, and during that time they would meet with their TOPS group. There would be two TOPS groups for each grade level, and no more than ten students assigned to each group. During this daily period, their TOPS teachers would focus on those academic and social areas that caused individual students the most problems. The TOPS teachers would be in close contact with their students' academic teachers and

assist the students with organizing their work, getting assignments in on time, and studying for exams. Discussion would be a large part of the TOPS class so that the students could express their problems and frustrations with school in a supportive environment. In addition, motivating and rewarding activities would be planned specifically for TOPS students who meet their short-range goals. Parents would be engaged as much as possible and be kept informed of their children's progress in school. The TOPS teachers would be like surrogate parents to their TOPS students by monitoring their attendance, communicating with their families, seeking out medical and educational evaluations and assistance from outside agencies when needed, listening to and guiding them through problems, and helping them make effective decisions. Teachers would volunteer to be TOPS teachers and would assigned one less academic class per day in order to allow them time to deal with their TOPS students. In the spring of 1988, 28 rising seventh and eighth students who scored below the 25th percentile on their latest California Achievement Test were identified to participate in the TOPS program, 22 males, 6 females, 11 black, and 17 white students. By the end of the 1987-88 school year, these students as a group had repeated 22 grades, amassed 146 failed subjects, and had not once been on the Honor Roll. By the end of the 1988-89 school year, they reduced their failures to 45, their names appeared on the school's Honor

Roll 30 times, and all were promoted to the next grade. By its second year, 61 students were involved in TOPS in grades six through eight. Similar improvements occurred in the second year, and a comparison of 45 available California Achievement Test scores indicated that 34 students increased their scores, with 20 scoring above the 25th percentile and one scoring at the 42nd percentile ("Teaching Our Pupils Success", Guilford Middle School, 1989).

The program continues to serve at-risk students, and the academic performance, attendance, and school behavior improve for many of them after they enter the TOPS program. As the program planners intended, TOPS teachers interact with their TOPS students' academic teachers to monitor their progress and discover effective methods to help the students succeed. TOPS teachers engage in tutoring in academic areas, and help their students maintain a degree of organization that is necessary for academic success. Jenny, a sixth grade TOPS teacher said in an interview, "Their biggest problem is disorganization - remembering what they're supposed to do and where their materials are to do it" (Interview with Jenny, April 25, 1994). She gives all her TOPS students three-ring notebooks with paper, dividers, and pouches in which to keep supplies. She then helps them organize each subject and checks their notebooks each day. This is typical of the care and attention TOPS teachers give to their students to assure that they succeed in reaching an

acceptable level of competence in academic skills and knowledge.

Ideas of responsible and ethical behavior are nurtured and developed in TOPS class discussions. Some classes begin their daily meetings with a self-report of the academic and social behavior of each student in the group. One eighth grade TOPS discussion explored the subjects of fighting and failing. Students felt there was no need to fight and that fighting had declined dramatically at school in the last two years. The discussion ended with students imagining what school would be like if there were no grades. Most agreed that grades do not tell what you know or what you can do, but that school would be hard to imagine without them (Observation, April 25, 1994).

The TOPS program helps its students reach competence in critical academic skill areas, problem-solving, and decision-making, while assisting them in their development of socially responsible behaviors. Several teachers and administrators report that the program has affected the entire school by making the faculty, whether or not they are TOPS teachers, more knowledgeable about and sensitive to the needs of at-risk students and of the characteristics and needs of all young adolescents.

The following interviews add to the reader's understanding of TOPS. Both people interviewed were instrumental in the formation of the program.

Interview with Nancy, School Guidance Counselor,
December 8, 1993.

Nancy's office is small and filled with testing materials, piles of papers, books, posters, and a variety of sample teaching kits. Nancy recounts how the TOPS program began. The principal, a university professor, and she met for breakfast at Shoney's six years ago and discussed the problem of motivation and responsibility among many of their at-risk students. And thus began the TOPS program.

She shares some of the highlights of how the program operates today. She identifies students who are failing their grade and who scored below the 25th percentile on the California Achievement Test, and who have attendance and/or behavior problems. Parents are made aware of the program and must sign permission for their children to participate in it. These students meet with specially selected teachers in a group with a student-teacher ratio of not more than ten to one. They meet daily during their Social Studies class. Since Nancy schedules the entire student body by hand (no computer assistance), she organizes the schedules of these students so that they could meet as a group. This is a very complicated factor to add to the scheduling formula of a school. No additional teacher allocations are needed for the TOPS program. Instead, TOPS teachers are given one less academic period per day than they would have normally. Every teacher participates in the TOPS program one way or

another, since the non-TOPS teachers are scheduled to teach a class for a TOPS group one period a week. Nancy shares her opinions about the effect the TOPS program has on the school.

The sensitivity to the needs of at-risk students is spread throughout the faculty because of the TOPS program. TOPS teachers often become surrogate parents to their students. TOPS teachers are required to make at least two contacts with the family each month, usually by telephone. The program teaches students coping skills, life skills, problem-solving, decision-making, and helps them increase their basic academic skills. Most importantly, the support and advocacy students feel from the program helps them see themselves more positively and helps them have more success in school. TOPS has changed the whole school culture. Teachers have generalized their attitude toward the TOPS kids to the whole school. The principal is the key to the program through his support and example. If he left, the TOPS program would probably run OK for awhile. But eventually it would fall apart, especially if a new principal did not understand and support the program (December 8, 1993).

Interview with Dr. John Van Hoose, University Professor
and TOPS Consultant, December 8, 1993.

Dr. Van Hoose speaks highly of the effectiveness of the TOPS program and the support given to it by the principal. He also stresses the importance of the weekly TOPS Team meetings. "The strength of the program is these Wednesday meetings." He also says community involvement has been an important factor in the TOPS program.

The teachers and kids get lots of services from the community. For example, my physician is a Ai-Kido instructor. He gives free athletic physicals to TOPS kids in exchange for the use of the gym for his classes one night a week. We also have made arrangements with dentists to provide support.

One issue that is controversial among the staff is whether to continue serving TOPS students who are not responsive to or whose families are not supportive of the TOPS program. Oakley won't drop them. He keeps them in. Because TOPS does serve them, the school has no violence, has a safe and peaceful climate. If we didn't serve them, that would change (December 8, 1993).

The description of the TOPS program above is the program design. Below are accounts of interviews with TOPS teachers followed by accounts of observations in their TOPS classes. These accounts give the reader a rich description of the

behaviors and interactions of the people implementing the design. Talking to the people most directly involved with TOPS, the teachers, gives one a much more complete understanding of the TOPS program and how it helps assure success for all students than would be gained by simply reading the design and the program's statistical history.

Interview With Hillary, In-School Suspension Teacher,
March 16, 1994.

Eleven years ago Hillary and the principal discussed a new model for dealing with students who misbehaved at school. The model was simple. Instead of sending them home, send them to a room at school where they quietly do their work alone and receive counseling about their behavior. It seemed a much better alternative to out-of-school suspension, and Hillary volunteered to leave her Language Arts teaching position to develop this new In-School Suspension (ISS) program. She has been with the program ever since. She believes her role is to be supportive and understanding but tough and consistent with students who come to ISS.

Students are assigned to ISS through the school office and the amount of time varies depending on the student and the severity of the behavior. Some spend only a portion of the day as a "cooling off" period; others may spend the better part of a school week in ISS. When students are

assigned to ISS, their classroom teachers send class assignments to Hillary so the students can keep up with class work. Many times, Hillary serves as a tutor, assisting students in understanding assignments or helping them organize their work. During the day, she talks to each student individually about their behavior, school work, and attitude. She tries to get them to feel positive about themselves in school. Many students need to talk through a problem with her and sometimes these intense discussions are emotionally draining for her and the student. "Many tears have been shed in ISS", she says. Some students seem to need to talk with her for a short period of time daily just to touch base with someone they trust. In that way, she becomes a very important factor in keeping several at-risk youngsters in school. She enjoys their contact and getting to know them and their families. Unlike some teachers, Hillary enjoys seeing and talking to her students and their families when they meet outside of school, such as by chance at a grocery store or the mall. She likes the feeling of connectedness between her school and her community. Hillary reports feeling strongly about her school and colleagues.

People have changed by being here. This is a strong, caring faculty. People are motivated and feel responsible for each other. The limits are blurred between social and professional relationships. The

main morale-buster is the amount of work teachers have that doesn't have a thing to do with students (Interview, March 16, 1994).

The idea of camaraderie on the staff is important to Hillary. In her position as ISS teacher, she expresses concern that, in her position as ISS teacher, she will become disconnected from the regular academic teachers or that she will be seen as too strong an advocate for students with behavior problems. She works at keeping herself in the mainstream of school activities by volunteering for committees and being active in the social affairs of the faculty. She feels she is very popular with the staff and students, and that makes her feel good about the job she is doing in ISS.

"TOPS crystallizes the middle school philosophy", says Hillary. She believes the TOPS program embodies the essential aspects of the middle school philosophy, which for her is that, in order to be effective in developing the intellectual and social potentials of middle school students, schools should be aware of and respond to the characteristics and needs of the young adolescents they serve. She says that TOPS is designed around that premise, but it focuses on a specific segment of the student body, the at-risk student. Over the past six years, the TOPS program has become more important and recognized as a model,

and more of Guilford Middle School teachers have been TOPS teachers (most serve for only two years at a time). "The result is," Hillary says, "The whole school has changed because of TOPS." She says that TOPS' philosophy has permeated the entire school so that now all teachers are more aware of and sensitive to the needs and characteristics of at-risk youngsters and generalize that attitude to include the entire student body.

Observation of In-School Suspension, February 3, 1994.

It is 10:00 in the morning and there are four students in ISS, one girl, three boys. The group is racially mixed and representative of ISS groups on most days. Of note is the much higher incidence of boys than girls in ISS. Students are seated in individual study cubicles, which have a desk and a chair in each. Students face the wall. They are doing assignments given to them by their academic subject teachers. A seventh grade girl assists Hillary in collecting assignments from classes and organizing student materials. She is a student who has recently had some very difficult family problems, and Hillary has helped her cope with them. One way of helping the student is by appointing her the Student Assistant for ISS.

Hillary's desk is in the middle of the small room, where she can observe each study cubicle. She walks to each cubicle and quietly talks to students individually about

their assignments and whether they understand them. Usually her hand is on their shoulders. She tells them what she expects completed in the next hour. Two teachers and an assistant principal come to ISS to speak with Hillary individually during her visits with students. Getting around to talk with each student took 45 minutes.

After talking with each student, Hillary sits at her desk and begins completing a report that is due in the school office by the end of the morning. A minute into this activity, and a student, Alex, comes to ISS with an assistant principal. It is obvious that Alex and the assistant principal had a difficult and emotional journey from his classroom to ISS. They both looked angry. "Alex was thrown out of English again," the assistant said. "Tell her what you did." Hillary suggests that she get Alex settled in a cubical and let him tell her later when he has better control of himself. The assistant agrees and leaves ISS. Alex is a very tall, handsome and mature-looking boy with a long ponytail and dark clothing. Hillary asks him to sit with her at her desk and tell her what he did to get thrown out of class. He complies, and says that he refused to do an assignment so the teacher threw him out. Hillary reminds him of their last conversation about this same behavior and that he promised he would not refuse to do assignments even if he thought they were stupid. He begins

to shed tears and his lips quiver; he does not speak. He goes to a cubical and puts his head down on the desk.

Hillary says that Alex is a really smart young boy, but he has a history of noncompliance and has become physically violent when challenged or confronted by teachers or administrators. She and Alex have a good relationship and he has never threatened her, even when he enters ISS in an angry state of mind. Because he refuses to do assignments and is rude to teachers, he is failing several subjects. Hillary expresses great concern about his future in school.

Hillary returns to her desk, where the paperwork for the office is lying unfinished. As she sits, another teacher comes in to speak to her about one of her students.

Interview with Kay, an eighth grade TOPS teacher,
February 3, 1994.

During the interview, Kay was energetic, animated, and intense in her feelings about the school. She shares with me her professional background. After many years of teaching regular and Academically Gifted (AG) classes at Guilford Middle, she volunteered for the TOPS program, and has been involved with it for three years. "I can do so much more with my other classes." She explains that the TOPS students are so involved with personal and family problems that it is difficult to plan and conduct productive

sessions with them. "These kids have such low self-esteem," Kay explains. This factor, she feels, causes a great deal of their problems. "They do not support themselves or each other." Another problem area for TOPS students, Kay says, is deficiency in normal conversational skills. It is difficult to have an effective discussion with them as a group, because verbal skills used to express their real feelings are deficient. She often organizes her TOPS classes around a simple activity or discussion topic. Often, they just sit in a circle and she asks each to tell a little about how their day is going. She says, "The TOPS program is very important to the students involved and to the school, because it makes everyone more aware of the needs of at-risk kids." Kay observes that some teachers do not understand this population and make situations worse for them. Strong support from the principal has been the key to the program's success, according to Kay.

Observation of Kay's eighth grade TOPS class,

February 3, 1994.

Kay is finishing a lesson on the mass media's influence on our thinking with a class of AG students. Each student made a drawing of a fictitious advertisement that promoted in a logical and convincing way an illogical or false assumption. Students share their drawings and talk easily and articulately about them with the class. Kay, sitting at

a student desk, acts as facilitator of the discussion. It is obvious that the class and Kay are having fun with the activity, and that the students understand the concept of deception in advertising. The class is dismissed and Kay talked casually to individual students as they leave the room. The next class period is her planning time, followed by her TOPS group.

After her planning period, the TOPS students come in individually within a five minute period. One boy comes into the class and hides behind a storage box. Six more students enter and they move chairs into a small circle at Kay's suggestion. When everyone is settled, the boy hiding behind the box comes out to surprise his classmates. They tell him he is stupid for hiding on them. "What a fool!" says one girl. There are seven students present. Two are girls, five are boys, and five of the students are Black. Kay asks how their day was going. One student says, "I flunked a Science test." In checking with the group, it seems they all have the same Science teacher and they all failed the same test. It was a 32-word vocabulary test. Each student admits that he or she had not studied for it. There is also a general feeling that the test was not fair, because it was too hard. Kay says she would like to talk to the Science teacher and find out more about the test and why all the TOPS students failed. After the discussion about the test, there is general informal talk about various

social and athletic events that had occurred that day or the day before.

It is time for lunch. The group walks together to the cafeteria, gets lunches and sits as a group in the cafeteria. Seated at the tables next to theirs are students from the other eighth grade TOPS group. They ask each other about the Science test. All the other group members also failed the test. Kay sits with her students and engages them in discussion by asking questions about their school work, their health, their friends, and their families. Most of the responses are in partial sentences. The students do not seem to be withholding responses from Kay. They seem to like her and appreciate her concern for them. Their short responses seem to be more a factor of being self-conscious responding in a group. The cafeteria is relatively quiet, very orderly and clean, and a pleasant environment in which to eat lunch.

After eating, the group returns to the class and discusses as a group what the students thought about grades. They can not imagine a school without grades, but do not think grades represent what they know. One boy said, "If I could make something, that would show that I know about it." Before the period is over, Kay asks each student to tell her what they have for homework. Most are unsure or describe a very brief assignment. The period was over and Kay pulls one of the girls aside before she leave the class and talks

to her privately about a problem she had yesterday. The discussion lasts less than a minute and the girl leave. Kay expresses concern about the girl and says that this was a fairly typical TOPS meeting for her group.

Interview with John, eighth grade TOPS teacher,
April 25, 1994.

This is John's second year as a TOPS teacher. He teaches Social Studies and has been with the school for six years. He discusses each of his TOPS students, their academic records, social problems, family influences, and the dynamics of the group. One girl has emerged as the leader in his TOPS class. She is the most articulate and outspoken of the group. She is sometimes supportive of her classmates and sometimes denigrates and intimidates them. Two boys in the group are very fine athletes and get a great deal of positive self-esteem from athletics. However, both have been suspended from teams for their behavior, so the one area that gives them a positive boost can be taken from them rather quickly. John feels that the TOPS program is important to the students.

TOPS is the only thing that keeps several of the students on a productive path at school. Many of them have little or no structure or support at home and live in neighborhoods that are rough with no positive role models. School is the one place where they have

structure and reinforcement to do good (Interview, February 3, 1994).

John talks about a concern of his that he believes is a major contributor to student problems: the grading system. Much of the effort the school puts into helping at-risk students is negated by the grading system. The TOPS students are usually not good at organizing their work, getting things in on time, and do not have good study skills. Students that are good at these things usually have good grades. When the at-risk students get bad grades, it destroys their motivation to want to do any school work or even learn. We need a different kind of evaluation system for students that will still make them accountable but not be based on things they can't do very well (February 3, 1994).

Observation of John's eighth grade TOPS class,
April 25, 1994.

John stands outside his classroom door during class change and greets his students as they enter the room. His TOPS group today 56 consists of two girls and four boys; four of the students are Black. John begins the session by asking each student to tell him and the group what the status of their grades is in each subject. The students focus their comments on the

subjects in which they had the lowest grades. Comments like "I'm flunking Math", "I'm flunking English and Science" or "I'm almost flunking Social Studies" are common. Not one student talks about a subject in which he or she is doing well. The students did not talk to their teachers about having difficulties in the subject area, and John reminds them that they should talk to their teachers about the work and let them know if they are having trouble or do not understand something. At times, it is difficult for John to keep the conversation focused. Several times, students tell each other in one way or another that they were stupid.

John asks them to think about how school could be run without grades. Students immediately react with comments about how they would like it a great deal more with no grades, but they have trouble conceptualizing school without grades. "What would it be like?" "How would you know if you flunked." "How would you know if you passed your grade?" In these comments and other similar ones, the students deal first with how not having grades would affect them personally. They then move to the consideration of how school would be without grades and find it almost impossible to imagine.

The topic of conversation switches to fighting at school. Two boys talk about a big fight that occurred yesterday after school. John asks them to explain why the fight happened and what consequences the students involved

were given. The two who were fighting were reportedly suspended for 10 days. There are many animated comments describing the fight itself and how the two boys involved were going to get each other again. John asks the group to talk about fighting this year as compared to previous years at Guilford Middle. They all agree that there are hardly any fights anymore. This was the first real fight they knew of this year. One boy says, "Two years ago, there were fights like that every day." When asked why the change, the students do not offer a reason. John ends the meeting with a plea to the students to do their homework and talk to their teachers if they have a problem with the work, rather than just letting it go until they fail.

Interview with Lois, sixth grade TOPS teacher,
March 16, 1994.

The interview takes place in her classroom during a planning period. She teaches sixth grade Social Studies and Language Arts. This is Lois' fifth year as a TOPS teacher. She is eager to tell me about the activities her classes are involved in concerning Social Studies units. She is obviously an enthusiastic teacher who is fully involved in her job. She speaks about TOPS and expresses how important the program is for the students involved and the teachers.

TOPS teachers are surrogate parents. They belong to you. Kids and parents know there is someone at school

advocating for the student. The TOPS program and Guilford Middle in general are very successful. I don't know how Mr. Mabe does some of the things he does, like exempting students from testing, but the program wouldn't work if he didn't. This school has clout in the community because of its successes. The whole school has high expectations for teachers and students, and that attitude begins with the principal (Interview, March 16, 1994)..

She reports that there are 70 students in TOPS this year and many of them benefit from other programs and strategies at Guilford Middle. For example, she explains that many of the TOPS students are diagnosed as having learning disabilities or other conditions that handicap their learning at school. The entire Exceptional Children (EC) Program, which serves students with educational handicaps, is totally "inclusionary". This means that the EC teachers come right into the regular classrooms and assist identified students while they are in class. In the past and still in most schools, these students are segregated for portions of the school day for special instruction. The inclusion model interferes with students normal day less than the pull-out program and does not have the stigma of being separated from one's peers because of some deficiency. Lois talks about the In-School Suspension (ISS) program and the staff.

ISS is also very successful and important to the school mostly because the ISS teacher is a great counselor and really cares about the students. The atmosphere in ISS is supportive and caring, not punitive. Teachers at Guilford Middle work hard for students and care a great deal about their success. The staff members are very supportive of each other and some are really great friends outside of school. I love this school and would never want to work anywhere else (March 16, 1994).

Observation of Lois' TOPS sixth grade TOPS class,
April 13, 1994.

The TOPS class meets in a small room used for tutorial services. There are six students, three boys and three girls. Four of the students are black. They enter the room talking in a friendly manner to each other and sit around a kidney-shaped table. Lois has a student teacher who is in charge of the TOPS class. She knows the students very well and they are cooperative and respectful. The class begins with students telling her how their math class is going, as several of them are having trouble understanding a concept presently being taught in the class. She discovers that several of the students have difficulty with the same step in a process, so she uses the chalkboard to illustrate the process in an effort to help them understand it better. She

follows that up by working with each student individually on the math problems they were given for homework. While she does this, the other students are writing business letters and addressing envelopes. The student teacher gave the group a book called Freebies, that lists several hundred companies and organizations that give free material and products. Students are writing letters to the organizations of their choice and asking for free materials. They are very motivated and share with each other the places they are writing to and what free material they will get. The group remains relatively quiet, focused, and cooperative with each other and the teacher throughout the period, which is unlike the seventh and eighth grade TOPS classes.

Interview with Rose, a seventh grade TOPS teacher,
April 25, 1994.

The interview takes place in the chorus room during a planning period after her TOPS class. She talks about the importance of the TOPS program to the students it serves and the hard work that goes into it by the TOPS teachers. They work constantly during TOPS classes on remediation, behavior management, problem-solving, and decision-making. TOPS teachers constantly monitor their students' grades, keep in contact with their parents, and stay in close contact with other teachers to insure that they know how each student is doing in each class. This allows them to make sure that

each student can experience more success. She explains that TOPS teachers and their students develop very close relationships and strong bonds within the group. Teachers nurture every aspect of development for TOPS students and become their strongest advocates. She says that sixth grade TOPS students are pulled out of their Science class in order to meet as a TOPS class. The seventh and eighth grade TOPS groups are taken out of Language Arts or Social Studies. To help make up the deficiency in Science, a Science teacher comes to the TOPS class once a week and gives a lesson and demonstration that is active and engages the students. Rose feels that the TOPS program would not be successful if the principal was not supportive of the program.

Observation of Rose's seventh grade TOPS class,
April 25, 1994.

There are six boys and one girl in this TOPS group. All are White. Three of the students are studying for a test together and three others are talking together and occasionally attending to the homework in front of them. Rose is at her desk with one student helping her with a difficult math assignment. Although she is a Music teacher, she explains math concepts very clearly and it appears that the student has a much better understanding of the assignment than before Rose worked with her. The girl goes back to a student desk in another part of the room and

continues working on the math assignment. Rose asks another student to come to her desk. He comes slowly with very little enthusiasm for conversing with the teacher. She begins the conversation about math, asking him how he is doing in math class and whether he is having the same problems the other student are with the day's homework. He answers noncommittally and Rose moves the conversation to his overall attitude at school. She is very positive with him and gives him a great many compliments. At one point she says, "Why just this week I had three different teachers just singing your praises." Although the three boys who were supposed to be doing their homework are not very productive, they seem to have a good conversation about sports. Their conversation allows Rose to spend some important time with the other two students individually. When the period is over, the students casually leave with little conversation.

Interview With Sue, Seventh Grade TOPS Teacher,

March 9, 1994.

Sue's classroom is in a trailer that has been in use for several years. Two classroom trailers are side-by-side with substantial and fairly permanent-looking ramps leading to their doors. There is landscaping around the trailers. It appears that they are no longer considered temporary classrooms, but have become established parts of the

school's instructional space. Sue talks with me after her TOPS group.

They're usually pretty good. Sometimes they don't get along all that well. The boy in the white shirt is usually very belligerent and the kid in the sweatshirt is usually showing off. But they're usually pretty good.

Sue describes the weekly routine for the TOPS class.

On Monday, they get ready for the week by checking that they have all the materials they need for each class. I go over the assignments, both long and short range, for each student to check on their progress. I help them organize their papers and notebooks, organize their planning for time use, and organize their study and work strategies. On Tuesday through Thursday, I assist students with academic skills, monitoring their assignments, counseling them about behavior, and generally keeping up with them (Interview, March 9, 1994).

In addition, subject area teachers come in during the week and give lessons or help students understand a concept they are working on in class. On Friday, they get their Science and Social Studies notebooks caught up and organized and catch up on any assignments that are overdue. Every two

weeks the subject area teachers send her a report describing the academic performance and behavior of each TOPS student. Included in this report is a list of any assignments overdue and due dates for assignments in progress.

This is Sue's first year as a TOPS teacher. She says that it has done a great deal to make her more aware of some of the problems some students carry with them that affect their school work. She says that the teachers at this school really support each other. The school, in general, may give students too many chances and that is not necessarily teaching them a very good lesson. She sometimes gets frustrated with things involving the students.

For example, she had been helping Leonardo, a Hispanic student with very limited English proficiency, all last week with a math project. The assignment had been given a month ago, and consisted of a series of graphs that depict various math concepts they had been studying. The assignment represented a major portion of the math grade for that grading period. With Sue's help, Leonardo developed a better understanding of the concepts involved and completed all the required graphs. Her other TOPS students had the same assignment and they spent the last TOPS class "polishing" their graph projects. She explains what happened.

Leonardo's was complete and looked very presentable. I asked him today if he handed in his math project. He

said he could not find it. He got a zero as a grade until he submits it, and his grade for the project will decrease by one letter grade for each day it is late (Interview, March 9, 1994).

Sue says she believes the TOPS program is helpful, but that it could be better and easier on teachers if the school insisted on more support from the students' families. She feels the lack of support is a major drain on the energy and morale of the TOPS teachers. She feels very close to her TOPS kids and wants to continue as a TOPS teacher next year.

Observation of Sue's seventh grade TOPS class,
March 9, 1994.

The students enter the trailer class over a five minute period. They talk and kid with each other while waiting for all the group to arrive. When they are all there, students sit at desks and take out assignments they were given in other classes. There are seven boys and two girls. Two students are black, one is Hispanic, and six are white. They are waiting for a Science teacher to arrive who is scheduled to give the class a lesson and demonstration. He never arrives. Sue says, "Well, you're in luck. It looks like Mr. Hilton is not coming. So, you can continue working on your assignments."

Two girls complain that a Math teacher they had last period did not explain the homework assignment properly and

they do not know how to do it. Two other students disagreed and said the two girls were not listening and don't want to do their homework. The girls continue to explain the problem by telling Sue that they do want to do their homework but that it requires some data they had taken the day before and they did not keep it. Sue said to them, "How can you handle this problem? How can you approach this? How can you explain to him you didn't know you had to keep your data?" The girls decide they should talk to him when they see him in the cafeteria during lunch. "Good," Sue responds. She is pleased that they decide to talk to the teacher and assert their point of view rather than merely accepting their plight and getting a failing grade on the assignment.

Sue checks a long-term math project all the students had been given. The project involves making a series of graphs depicting various math concepts. Leonardo is the only student who works diligently the whole period on the math project. The other students spend a few minutes on it or another assignment and then lose concentration and begin talking or fooling around with other classmates. At one point, six of the nine students are walking around the room, talking, or "dueling" with rulers. They settle down to work in about two minutes with no scolding or direction from Sue. They seem to need the physical and verbal activity and recognize when they reach the limits of Sue's expectations.

Sue spends about half of the period with Leonardo, the Hispanic student, helping him finish the math project. He works very hard and seems appreciative of her help. Leonardo, who was discussed at a recent TOPS meeting, is about 15 years old, but appears older. He is tall, physically well-developed, handsome, with long black hair and a full mustache, polite, but socially awkward. The awkwardness seems to disappear when he interacts one-on-one with students or with Sue. Leonardo seems to be an intelligent, engaging young man whose language and cultural background are huge barriers to his academic and social success. When the period is over, Sue reminds students to keep their math projects in good shape and hand them in to the math teacher in the morning. The students leave the room talking and kidding around with each other.

Interview with Jenny, sixth grade TOPS teacher,

April 25, 1994.

Jenny is the school's Spanish teacher in addition to being a TOPS teacher. She describes middle school students and their needs.

Middle school students are like pieces of popcorn, popping off all the time. At this age, they behave erratically, with highs and lows in behavior and academic work. Because of this, their biggest problem is disorganization - remembering what they're supposed

to do and where their materials are to do it

(Interview, April 25, 1994).

She addresses this problem by giving her TOPS students specific strategies to help them get and stay organized. At the beginning of the year, she gave all her TOPS students three-ring notebooks with paper, dividers, and pouches to hold supplies. She then helped them organize the notebooks for each subject, so that everything they needed in the way of supplies or information for all their classes would be in one place, their notebook. Soon after she did this, two of her students lost their notebooks. Another strategy she and many other TOPS teachers use to help TOPS students stay organized are homework assignment forms. Students are given the forms weekly and are to write all their assignments on them. The TOPS teachers check them each week.

Unlike several other TOPS teachers, Jenny says her TOPS students come from supportive families. The parents are supportive of her and the school. There is a lack of tension and animosity that is present in the relationships between some parents and their children's teachers as she has observed. She attributes the good relationships, to some extent, on the frequent communications she has with her TOPS students' parents. The assignment form goes home daily with the teacher's initials on it. The form is returned the next day with the parent's signature. If there are issues over homework, Jenny deals with them at school, instead of

putting the responsibility on the parents. She comments further.

Families don't have hostility over homework because I keep on them (the students) all the time at school. I'm like a mother hen. I keep up with the kids, the parents, and the other teachers. Transitions are difficult for these students. Those are the times when their organization falls apart (Interview, April 25, 1994).

Jenny talks about the Wednesday morning meetings of the TOPS Team. She says they give the TOPS teachers a much-needed support group. Large issues involving TOPS policies and procedures have been resolved during these meetings, according to Jenny. In addition, teachers can get things done much more quickly when there is a logistical problem such as a temporary scheduling change that may be needed for one student. All the people involved with the needed changes are sitting together at the meeting, so it is often only a matter of telling the group that something is needed and it is arranged immediately. She mentions the incident in a recent TOPS meeting where she criticized a teacher by name and then lost her composure and cried in the meeting.

No one is supposed to use the names of other teachers on the staff when we talk about a problem involving other teachers. We're just not supposed to do that and I really shouldn't have. And when I realized what I

did, I just lost it. But it happens and I felt supported (Interview, April 25, 1994).

Observation of Jenny's sixth grade TOPS class,
April 25, 1994.

The group meets in an eighth grade classroom that is available that period. Jenny moves some chairs into a circle for the group, and five students enter during the class change, four boys and one girl. All are White. Three students are absent. Jenny asks each student to tell her the status of their homework assignments. While the one student is telling about his, a girl asks, "If teachers want to sleep in, they just call and somebody gets them a substitute. When we're out, we don't get a substitute and we still have to do all the work." Jenny responds, "Teachers don't just decide to 'sleep in'! And when they are out, they have to make up the work just like students." The students agree that substitute teachers do not operate classes the same nor do they accomplish the same amount of work in a class session. Jenny makes the point that they can see why teachers are not out unless they cannot help it.

After that unanticipated exploration of the relative nature of students' and teachers' rights and responsibilities, Jenny addresses the group.

On Friday, I mailed a letter home to your parents telling them about assignments you have in each class.

The letter talked about the current events booklet you have to do for Social Studies. I gave you time to do the booklet in class last week, but none of you brought in a newspaper, so I asked your parents to help with it(Observation, April 25, 1994).

The students are not pleased that the letter went home, but seem resigned to the fact that they have to start reading current events at home for the booklet.

Jenny tells the group that they are going to spend the rest of the TOPS meeting in the media center to find a book to read that is on a list she gave them earlier in the week. The list is entitled "Accelerated Reading List". The students pack their belongings and go to the media center, which is around the corner from their TOPS classroom. The students seem eager to find a book they like and do not complain about having to choose a book from the list. Several come to Jenny and share with her the book they found. She is familiar with all of the selections and is able to comment on the books to each student. The period is soon over, and the students leave the media center for their next class.

Summary.

The interviews and observations depicted above portray the TOPS program as an important factor in the academic and social success of its students. The teachers seem intensely

engaged in and committed to their students to a degree not normally observed in schools. Three issues frequently arise in TOPS classes and when interviewing TOPS teachers.

1. Self-esteem is low among the students, as evidenced by the fact that they denigrated each other and themselves.
2. Organizational skills and planning are lacking among TOPS students and these deficits seem to negatively affect their academic performance.
3. The grading system seems to be a major obstacle to success for TOPS students.

The TOPS program seems to have created or at least heightened and expanded several important characteristics that positively influence the assistance to at-risk students and positively influence the attitude of the teachers and students throughout the school and the general climate of the school. These characteristics are as follows.

1. Teachers have a heightened awareness of the needs of at-risk students and of young adolescents in general.
2. Teachers have become strong advocates for students, supporting them in their interactions with other teachers, coaches, and their families.
3. Relationships among teachers and students have become more important to both.

Orienting Question Number Four:

How does the school empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of the students?

The TOPS teachers are responsible for and empowered to make decisions about the educational welfare of their students. This is most evident in the weekly TOPS team meetings. An important routine associated with the TOPS program, the Wednesday morning meetings of the TOPS Team are held in the principal's office and are attended by the TOPS teachers, a school social worker, assistant principals, a guidance counselor, Exceptional Children Program teachers, the In-School Suspension teacher, a school nurse, and the university professor who helped form the program, which completed its sixth year at the end of the 1993-94 school year. The team meetings are held to keep all the participants informed about progress of TOPS students, to expedite needed assistance to students, and to give the TOPS teachers a much-needed support group.

During the spring semester of 1994, the TOPS team met every Wednesday morning at 7:30. The principal usually chaired the meetings, but in his absence, the counselor took over. The meetings were never canceled. They proceeded in a similar fashion each week, beginning with the principal calling the meeting to order and then each TOPS teacher reporting about significant issues, student concerns, or activities of their TOPS students. The discussions were

informal and very open. One rule for the group to observe during meetings was that they never criticize other staff members in the school by name. The potential for frustrations among TOPS teachers is high regarding how their TOPS students are treated by the rest of the staff.

Although the meetings are times for TOPS teachers to vent their frustrations, they wisely realize that they and the program need to interact successfully with the rest of the school and not become isolated from or polarize the school staff. As a result they agreed that no names would be used when relaying problems with other staff members' treatment of TOPS students. Attendance at the meetings varied, but the TOPS teachers, counselors, Exceptional Children Program teachers, and the principal always attended if they were present for work that day. Visitors often sat in on the meetings to observe how the TOPS program operates. Some of the visitors were university students and others were educators from other schools who were assessing TOPS as a model for use with their own students.

The following descriptions are of a series of TOPS meetings that occurred between December, 1993 and March 1994. The meeting discussions centered around particular students or issues of general concern to TOPS teachers and students. Each staff member had an opportunity to initiate a discussion or report on the status of a student. The descriptions reflect the process in that they are organized

by the discussion topic. Sometimes the discussions are primarily status reports to keep the group informed about progress with a student or issue and thus may not result in decision-making. Most discussions become problem-solving sessions and do result in decision-making. As such, they are excellent examples of the empowerment of the staff to make decisions about the experiences of students.

TOPS Meeting December 8, 1993

Ricky.

A 20-minute discussion about a boy who will turn 16 in January, and they fear he will drop out of school. He was raised by his grandfather who is now critically ill in the hospital. Since Ricky moved in with his mother, he has deteriorated in attitude, attendance, and appearance. Five teachers know him well and some have been to his home, visited his grandfather and taken Ricky out on trips. The social worker and counselor say they will make a home visit to see if further action needs to be taken.

Josh.

His father, who raised him as a single parent, is terminally ill in the hospital. Since his father's hospitalization, Josh has moved three times from one relative or friend to another. He is not doing his school work and his Terret's Syndrome disease has gotten worse. He

has become very confrontational. Two teachers volunteer to tutor him after school. The EC teacher says that, although his paperwork was sent forward 6 weeks ago, there is no approval by the Administrative Placement Committee at the district level to classify Josh as "Other Health Impaired" (OHI). With this classification, special assistance and funds could be provided to help Josh. The principal asks who they have to talk to get approval for the OHI classification, and says he will call today and expedite the process.

Cut From Team.

A TOPS student tried out for the basketball team but was cut from the team, reports his TOPS teacher. The student took it very hard and it is affecting his behavior and attitude at school.

Sissy.

A TOPS teacher reports that Sissy has a Big Sister and the two of them went on the Walk For Aides. Teachers feel this is a strong and positive relationship developing for Sissy.

Therman.

A special needs student, the teachers discuss what strategies should be engaged to prepare him for the transfer

to another school where there is a more appropriate program for him.

Kendrick.

His TOPS teacher reports that Kendrick has a new tutor who is a basketball coach. This is proving to be a real motivator for him, and they are developing a good relationship.

Mark.

His TOPS teacher says that she noticed he had vision problems and she saw to it that he got an eye exam. Mark says he is "as blind as a bat". It will take four weeks to get the glasses through Medicare.

April.

Her TOPS teacher reports that April is having trouble keeping up with school work in all her classes. Her TOPS teacher is concerned but has no solution.

Chastity.

Her TOPS teacher reports that teachers have worked all year to get her caught up on her academic levels. For the past several weeks, her attendance has been very sporadic and she is afraid Chastity will fall behind again in school. When the teacher calls home, Chastity answers and says she is sick. The social worker asks the teacher to fill out a

referral form and she will make a home visit. The principal says it may be time to require a doctor's note for absences in the future.

Leopoldo.

His TOPS teacher says that, although he looks very mature, he is emotionally still a young adolescent, and he is having serious problems in school because of language difficulties. The Spanish teacher is asked to make a home visit, and assist the family any way she can. She agrees.

Chris.

His TOPS teacher reports that Chris' behavior has worsened in the past few weeks. He spent two days in In-School Suspension for pushing a student down and then kicking him. One teacher suggests the TOPS teacher talk to Chris' father, who has always been supportive. "He'll get on him", the teacher says.

Report on former TOPS students.

The Guidance Counselor reports that she recently met Jimmy, one of the first TOPS students when the program began six years ago. Teachers recall that he had one of the worst family situations and personal behavior of any student that ever attend Guilford Middle as a TOPS student. He is now a Freshman at the University of Arkansas, majoring in

Education. He is engaged to be married. Another teacher reports that she talked recently with Yvonne, another TOPS student from six years ago. She is working two jobs and going to community college. Remembering the family situations of both students, one teacher suggests, "We need to invent a new category of special needs students: 'PI' for Parent Impaired". The group takes great pleasure in this discussion, for it reminds them that, although very difficult to see at times, their work with at-risk students does in fact have long term positive effects.

Parents' night planned.

"VIP" (Very Important Parents) Invitations were sent out to TOPS parents. The TOPS teachers are planning an evening with dinner for the parents of TOPS students. Following the dinner, there will be a talk about what TOPS is and how parents can help.

TOPS economy.

The TOPS staff has devised an economy system for students. Georgia, one of the TOPS students, is in charge of the Georgia National Bank. She issues payroll checks, called Tiger Bucks (after the school mascot), every two weeks. The school currency has the principal's picture in the center. Teachers are getting surplus deposit and withdrawal forms from local banks. Other staff are

requesting that retailers in the area honor Tiger Bucks as discount coupons in their stores.

Funding supplies.

A teacher suggests that the school identify a funding source or write a grant so that assignment notebooks and other supplies can be funded for the TOPS students. Another teacher asks who on the staff is in charge of grant-writing.

Monarchs program.

The counselor explains the arrangement the Guilford Middle School has with the professional hockey team, The Monarchs. The school set up a system of goal-setting, rewarding students who reach their goals. They receive banners, pennants, and other items. Members of the team come to the school to talk with the students.

Trip to Discovery Place.

One of the TOPS teachers reports that plans are being made to take all the TOPS kids to the children's museum in Charlotte. One girl reported she did not want to go on the trip. Her TOPS teacher called her mother and found that the family did not have enough money to give her for the field trip and that was why she did not want to go. The guidance counselor quickly suggests a source for funds and the problem is solved.

Compliments to cafeteria manager.

Several of the TOPS teachers mention that the cafeteria manager prepares really great bag lunches for students to take on field trips. She always put an extra treat in for the students she knew were needy. The counselor agrees to write a Thank You note to the cafeteria manager, letting her know that her extra efforts are appreciated.

Adjournment - 8:30am.

In one hour, ten TOPS students were discussed. Several problems associated with them were solved. In addition, the staff communicated about the logistics, needs, etc. of several incentive/motivational strategies, and helped each other by offering ideas for their colleagues who were struggling to help students at risk.

TOPS Meeting March 9, 1994

The principal is not here today, because he took his mother to the hospital. The guidance counselor chairs the meeting. There are 16 people attending the meeting: Six TOPS teachers, the In-School Suspension Teacher, Two guidance Counselors, an assistant principal, a school social worker, a school nurse, two Exceptional Children Program teachers, the university professor who consults with the TOPS staff, and a visiting teacher from Northwest Middle

School. Nancy calls the meeting to order by saying, "OK. Let's get started."

The Monarchs hockey team.

The music teacher, a seventh grade TOPS teacher says, "How are we doing for the trip next Thursday - lunch with the Monarch's Hockey Team?" Several teachers respond by saying that their TOPS students are slowly bringing in their permission slips and are excited about having lunch with a professional hockey team. Prior to the Christmas break, one of the TOPS teachers called the office of the Monarch, Greensboro's professional hockey team, and asked if they would assist in the motivation of at-risk students. The team agreed to "adopt" the TOPS program students. Their first meeting will be the lunch scheduled for next week. The team will follow that by visiting the school and giving the students complimentary tickets to hockey games.

Bob.

Hillary, In-School Suspension (ISS) Teacher says she closely monitors and assists TOPS students who are particularly problematic behaviorally or socially, and shares her account of a recent incident with Bob.

Bob acted very flippant about having to go to ISS and not going on the trip. He said he didn't care. But when he got to my room, he was very upset; he even

cried about it. But he doesn't do any work in class, doesn't dress out for P.E., so he knows he's going to get sent to ISS (Observation, March 9, 1994).

There is general discussion about Bob. Teachers are worried about his present emotional state. Five teachers share information about him. Dad deserted the family last year and now Bob is the male leader of the family. His mother is almost non-verbal, and conversation is not a part of the family's behavior. That may be why, when the staff talks to him, he does not respond.

Jake.

Kay, an eighth grade TOPS teacher discusses Jake, who "floats" between his assigned classes, his TOPS teacher's room, and ISS. He is confrontational with the TOPS teacher and verbally vague with the ISS teacher. He has been diagnosed as having an attention deficit disorder, and the staff agree that they need to help him stay organized and focused. They also discuss the fact that he is very uncomfortable socializing, and avoids doing so. During breaks, he goes off by himself and does not interact with anyone, or he goes to ISS. The group agrees that he really likes the ISS teacher and wants to stay with her more often, but that he needs to be held accountable for being in his scheduled classes. They agree that his present problems should not overshadow his responsibility as a student in

school. The ISS teacher agrees to escort him back to class if he visits her room when he should be in another class, and they agree to let him visit her during his break if he wishes.

Craig.

Kay, an eighth grade TOPS teacher, reports that Craig has been doing better in class and is having a great deal of success on the track team up. But yesterday, he was suspended from the track team for fighting, and she is afraid he will revert to his former behavior of poor attendance and incomplete school work.

A success.

John, an eighth grade TOPS teacher reports proudly. One of my kids failed a test. Got a 55. The kid told me he didn't study, so we went to the teacher. The teacher let him take the test orally the next day. He got an A! The teacher was a real pro, and I feel like I need to tell her that (Observation, March 9, 1994). The group agrees. John discusses the need to have a TOPS student visit him at an odd time to make up some work. In a matter of seconds, the guidance counselor and the student's Advisor-Advisee teacher determine how to change the student's schedule for the day to allow him to meet with

John. Arranging this would have taken John a great deal of time had they not been meeting as a team.

Anton.

Hillary, the ISS teacher, reports that Anton is in ISS for "facilitating" a fight. Hillary continues. Anton can't keep his mouth shut, and helps start problems. He's doing great in ISS, but he's off the track team. He worked hard to make this trouble happen. He cried quietly at his desk. In the past, he would have handled this by going nuts, throwing chairs, cursing, screaming. So I realize how far he's come. When he messes up, I'm happy he handles it well (Observation, March 9, 1994).

Flying Rockets.

Jenny, sixth grade TOPS teacher reports, "My TOPS kids are flying rockets today." She says they have been very excited about building and flying the rockets, which was a reward for them if they kept up with their academic work in all their classes. Two students refused to copy sentences off the board in their Science class. The counselor said several students were sent to her from the same class because they refused to copy the sentences. Jenny says, "Even when threatened with being eliminated from the rocket

launch, they still refused! What do you do?" She asks, obviously frustrated. One teacher responds.

It's a power struggle. They don't care. They don't seem to think they have a future, so they never think ahead. They're also so used to us giving them a second chance. That's the flip side of this good program. This whole school's built on second chances (Observation, March 9, 1994)."

Jenny, evidently exasperated, mentions the Science teacher's name while criticizing his teaching and the way he treats the TOPS students. She realizes she has broken a rule of the group and of the teaching profession. She loses her composure and begins to cry. She gets control and apologizes to the team for her transgression and for "losing it". The group consoles her and agrees on a course of action for the TOPS students who refused to write the sentences. They would not launch their rockets with the rest of the group, but would, instead, spend the time in ISS.

Frustration.

Robin, sixth grade TOPS teacher, expresses frustration and concern about her TOPS students.

They won't bring in their Monarchs permission slips. One of my kids is in ISS. Another can't seem to focus on anything. She's ADD but her medication was turned

down. She's supposed to have gotten glasses last month but they haven't come yet. Her mother is ugly on the phone. I didn't do anything to her. I just want her to come in (Observation, March 9, 1994).

The school social worker responds, "Let me visit her mom at home and see if I can talk to her. If we don't get anywhere, I'll send a certified letter."

Robin responds, "What do I do about these Monarch permission slips? I'm having a problem with this. It's a power play."

Several teachers respond in unison, "Don't let them go!"

The music teacher adds to the climate of frustration. My group is falling apart. They're not doing anything. Their attitudes are driving me crazy. I'm so disgusted with parents! I'm also falling apart. Sometimes I feel like I need a 'time out'! (Observation, March 9, 1994)

These comments bring on several expressions of frustration from TOPS teachers. One teacher says, "I'm glad to hear you all talking about having problems. I thought I was a failure as a first-year TOPS teacher."

Nancy advises, "Let's work at strategies to avoid these power struggles. It sounds like you're all having that problem."

Robin adds, "Let's restructure so they don't use TOPS as a study hall."

The social worker tries to keep things in perspective by saying to the teachers, "It's not your job to make them not fail. That's their responsibility."

The music teacher responds strongly.

That's not the philosophy of this school. Kids aren't taking responsibility for themselves. They know we'll support them. We're doing well by these kids while they're in school. But it all goes to waste when they go home. We practically raise some of these kids (Observation, March 9, 1994).

The social worker suggests, "We need to take a look at the family component of TOPS."

The music teacher follows, "Can't we have a contract with parents so if they don't cooperate, we drop them from TOPS? There are plenty of kids who need us whose families will support us."

Nancy responds, "But the ones with no family support are the ones who really need us."

Adjournment at 8:45am.

The expressions of frustration do not usually occur to the extent they did this morning. Perhaps this happened because the principal was not there and teachers felt more free to express themselves. Also, teacher report that this time of the school year is difficult for all teachers, as they have been through several months of school, they are

facing the state's testing program, and students seem to be more disruptive and less motivated to do school work than they were in previous months.

TOPS Meeting March 16, 1994

Nancy chairs the meeting, as the principal is not at school today. Fifteen people are in attendance: Six TOPS teachers, the ISS teacher, two counselors, an assistant principal, a social worker, two Exceptional Children Program teachers, and two undergraduate education majors at UNC-Greensboro.

Nancy leads a general discussion reviewing last week's meeting and brainstorming some strategies teachers could use for the rest of the year to help students with motivation. The discussion also explores the idea of contracts between families and the TOPS program. The comments made by various teachers are documented below.

We need to have contracts with these kids and their parents and let them know they have to do their work.

If we have a contract, it will have to be clear. Most of these kids are in control at home, so we have to make the contract very clear.

We have so many kids that want to be in TOPS.

But these contracts could cause us to lose some of these kids.

We've gotten away from the purpose of TOPS, to teach them success. We're too busy just getting them through just today. Until we get support from home, we'll never get these kids to feel responsible for their work.

Maybe we need an orientation for new TOPS kids. a more structured beginning so kids knew what was expected.

We need to get with the teams and know the kids and the teams at the very beginning of the year. We need to contact parents over the summer so we can get on with the purpose (of the program) instead of having kids just do homework in TOPS classes.

We're dealing with things and issues that should have been handled when they were three (Observation, March 16, 1994).

Nancy brings the discussion to a close. "This third nine-week period is really hard. We should get some really strong motivational speakers in." She promises to take the concerns to the principal and to work on them before the beginning of the next school year. She announces that the

Monarchs Hockey Team is scheduled to visit the TOPS classes during the spring. They continue to hear from TOPS teachers regarding program issues and their students.

Bob.

Hillary reports, "Bob chose not to go to eat with the Monarchs."

Rocket launch.

Jenny reports that the rocket launch was postponed last week because of a special assembly program. They are going to launch them today. The two boys who did not finish their work were told they could not even watch the launches and would have to stay in ISS while the rest of the class launched their rockets. They were very upset.

Jake.

Kay, eighth grade TOPS teacher in following up on Jake from last week, reports on his status.

He is still somewhere else all the time. He's not doing any work and just keeps his head on the desk in every class. This is not depression. Josh has always been like that, even before his father's death. He needs therapy. He's not taking his medication regularly (Observation, March 16, 1994).

John, an eighth grade TOPS teacher comments.

Jake has kept Kay's group split apart all year. We should drop him. We've all given him so many interventions and nothing has worked. Josh needs serious help. Kay's worried about other kids hurting him (Observation, March 16, 1994).

Nancy responds, "You need to be very consistent and stop his wandering. Send him to the office if he's late."

Leslie.

Kay discusses another one of her TOPS students, Leslie, who is having trouble. "He's going crazy. He's off the wall. We have to remove him from class most days."

Another teacher suggests, "Since his mother moved out of our attendance zone, why don't we just have him attend a new school where he lives?". Leslie has evidently been a problem for several teachers and many people in the meeting agree that the principal should withdraw him from Guilford Middle and make him go to a new school for the rest of the year. Hillary, the ISS teacher, strongly disagrees.

We've invested so much in him over the past years, and he really cares and wants to be here. Think of how many ways he's been abandoned. His father is gone. His mother moved. Mom just became a Jehovah's Witness, and spends all her time with the church. So many things have changed in his life (Observation, March 16, 1994).

Gloria, a school counselor supports Hillary.

That's right. Everything's changed on him. He has no control of his life. He needs a little time and people need to back off him. We need to take one day at a time and not back him into a corner. He doesn't need us to tell him again that something's wrong with him (Observation, March 16, 1994).

Hillary follows, "Someone needs to work with him. Some one person - a male."

The assistant principal, Leonard, volunteers to be Leslie's advocate. "I'll take him under my wing. I'll watch out for him." Leonard gives the teachers a pep talk.

As a group, you, the TOPS group, seem overloaded. We're dealing with a population that we work so hard with, but the reality is they will never reach the level we hope for them. But we cannot give up on them. You're doing such a good job (Observation, March 16, 1994).

Vandal.

The social worker reports on a court case she testified in yesterday. It involved a Guilford student who was accused of vandalizing a business in Greensboro. The teachers comment on the fact that there is seldom any vandalism at Guilford Middle, but several of their students have been in trouble with the police for vandalizing other

buildings. They feel this is a measure of the respect students have for the school.

The meeting adjourns at 8:26.

TOPS Meeting March 22, 1994

The principal chairs the meeting at which 15 people attended: Six TOPS teachers, the ISS teacher, two school counselors, an assistant principal, a social worker, two Exceptional Children Program teachers, a school nurse.

Trip to Monarch's game.

Nancy, the counselor reports on the trip the TOPS students made to the Monarch's hockey game.

The team treated them to a spaghetti dinner before the game, cooked at the stadium just for them. They were given team promotional items with the team's logo and then escorted to very good seats at the Greensboro Coliseum. Everyone had a great time and enjoyed the game. The students are looking forward to the team's visit to the school more than ever (Observation, March 22, 1994).

Rotary Club donation.

Jenny, a sixth grade TOPS teacher reports that the local Rotary Club would like to give the TOPS program a donation of \$200, but wants someone to speak about the

program at their luncheon meeting. Jenny volunteers and asks the chorus teacher to go. She accepts and the principal approves the plan.

Leslie.

Kay, an eighth grade TOPS teacher gives the group an update on Leslie. She and the principal made a home visit during the week. The principal spoke very firmly with Leslie's mother about her responsibility to Leslie and what the school expected of her.

Amy.

Kay then gives a report about how Amy had been out of school for the past six days. Yesterday was her first day back, and her mother picked her up at noon. When Kay called home, she talked to Amy and found that Amy was told to stay home and take care of her little brother, who is ill, so that her mother could go to work.

Ronny.

Kay then tells about Ronny.

He has a chip on his shoulder. Mom says she can't do anything with him and can't help the school with him. He punched another student yesterday. He hasn't done any work in several months and is failing everything. Mom agreed to fail him (Observation, March 22, 1994).

Carl.

John, an eighth grade TOPS teacher reports on Carl, who has been doing very well academically. His social interactions have improved. He is doing very well with a new Spanish elective. However, he is suspended from the bus for two weeks and probably will not be in school during that time unless the school can find alternative transportation.

Rockets away!

Jenny, a sixth grade TOPS teacher, reports that the rockets finally got launched last Thursday! The launching went very well and everyone enjoyed it a great deal. The students who could not participate acted like they did not care, but they really felt badly that they could not participate.

Token economy.

Nancy, a counselor, reports that the TOPS Token Economy is going very well. Students really respond to it. The biggest problem is that two students lost their notebook that had their "money" in it. The teachers discuss what they should do in such cases. They agree not to intervene. The token system is designed to reinforce good work habits and help motivate students. The students who lost their books, teachers believe, feel cheated and they may decline in school work and motivation. But the teachers feel it is

important to use this as a real-life lesson. One teacher says, "In the real world, if you lose your wallet, chances are you're not going to get it back. And if you do, it won't have your money in it."

This interesting interchange illustrates the struggle teachers often have between intervening and saving students from bad experiences and not intervening and using those experiences to help students grow.

Self doubt.

John, an eighth grade TOPS teacher says, "I wonder if I'm being effective at all. The TOPS kids take all of their frustrations out on me. But when I go around in their classes, they're paying attention and doing their work."

Several teachers respond by saying that the students' behavior in other classes is evidence that John is in fact being effective as a TOPS teacher. Many of the TOPS teachers have similar feelings of not knowing if their efforts make a difference.

David.

Kay, an eighth grade TOPS teacher, reports that David, one of her TOPS students, moved to another school district in the county, but came back to Guilford Middle yesterday. The principal says David can stay at Guilford if he wishes. There is a general discussion of David. Many of the

teachers worked with him and know his family. They cannot understand how, with both parents on welfare, they can afford a new truck, two Mustangs, and a new mobile home. David is not doing well in school. He failed Driver's Education and since then his behavior and appearance have deteriorated. One teacher notes, "He's dressing past 'Grunge'." They discuss strategies to deal with three boys: David,, Terry, and Joe. All three boys are marginal in their attendance, behavior and academic performance. But Terry and Joe have more stable and supportive families and are more responsive to help than David. The biggest problem is that David is very charismatic, and the other two boys are strongly influenced by him. When they are with David, they usually get into trouble. The group suggests that the school transfer David to the school within his new attendance zone. As one teacher said, "You'll lose one, but you may gain two." The principal says he will consider the transfer.

Anton.

Hillary, ISS teacher, gives an update on Anton. He is doing much better.

He's on a role and is doing his assignments, taking his medicine, and Nancy (the counselor) is seeing him. His mother has really grown up since he was in sixth grade.

She's been really responsible (Observation, March 22, 1994).

Sue, a 7th grade TOPS teacher reports on Leonardo, a Hispanic student with limited use of English.

He worked very hard on a math project, where he drew a series of graphs that showed different math concepts. We worked for four days during TOPS classes and I told him he did a fine job on it. I was sure he would pass math with this project, since it was worth a bunch for the marking period and he did such a good job. The day it's due, Leonardo can't find it! I saw it the day before, completed. And now he has no idea where it is. He got a zero for it until he turns it in and then it'll be graded down for lateness. It's not just Leonardo. They've all been really good all year, but spring has broken and they're falling apart. Several are now failing subjects they were doing fine in last period. Absences are picking up (Observation, March 22, 1994).

The principal responds, "In all these cases, it all boils down to home. Most don't have anything at home. Tanya's mom has missed four conference dates. When she does call and talk, she can be vicious. She picks a teacher a week to be angry with." Changing the subject a bit with the resulting effect of ending the meeting on a positive note,

the principal said, "Jennifer White's father and I had a conference and it was great. He should get Father of the Year."

The principal adjourned the meeting at 8:35.

Summary.

The TOPS team meetings display the empowerment of the staff to make decisions about the experiences of their students. The meetings provide a structure that enables teachers, support staff, and administrators to monitor the progress and problems of specific at-risk students, and draw on the resources and services of the school and community to quickly and efficiently assist at-risk students. The meetings also assure that communication occurs between key staff members in the school, and give all TOPS team members emotional and professional support.

Orienting Question Number Five:

Does the school employ teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents?

Guilford Middle School employs a staff of 75 people, 46 of whom comprise the full-time faculty and administration. Every one of the professional staff is certified in the area in which he or she is employed. Most of the teachers are

veterans and have been with the school for more than six years.

Although they are all certified in the subjects they teach, they were not specifically trained in middle grades education in their pre-service undergraduate or graduate programs. The teacher turnover is very low at Guilford Middle and many in-service educational opportunities have been given to the teachers in the areas of early adolescence and middle grades education. The combination of experience, continuity within the staff, and in-service training results in a faculty that is in fact expert in teaching young adolescents. As a group, the faculty has learned the importance of family involvement in a child's education and. Based on comments teachers and administrators have made in meetings and interviews, most members of the faculty are effective in their parental interactions. The TOPS program has been a significant teaching tool for the staff. It has been reported that, because of the training and the modeling of behavior by TOPS teachers, the whole faculty has become more aware of and sensitive to the characteristics and needs of all young adolescents.

Summary.

Guilford Middle School employs 46 professional staff, all of whom are certified in their areas of employment. Although their pre-service training was not specifically focused at middle grades education, the teachers at Guilford

Middle have become expert in the area through experience and in-service training. In particular, TOPS teachers received extensive staff development in areas such as young adolescent characteristics and needs, and the unique needs of at-risk students.

Orienting Question Number Six:

How does the school foster the health and physical fitness of its students?

All students are scheduled for Physical Education several times a week alternating with Health. Both programs follow the state's Standard Course of Study. TOPS teachers, through their discussions in groups and individually, counsel TOPS students in healthful living, including counseling about sexual relations and hygiene. Perhaps more importantly, TOPS teachers work with their students in developing problem-solving and decision-making skills that generalize to all aspects of their lives. Through the efforts of the TOPS teachers and staff, students often get medical attention when needed. Sports physicals are also provided for them at school. This is accomplished through an arrangement with a local physician who gives the physicals for free in exchange for the use of the school's gym in the evenings for his Tae Kwon Do class. In the TOPS team meetings, medical needs of TOPS students, such as

medication and eyeglasses, are discussed. Very often arrangements are made among team members during the meetings to see that the needed services are expedited.

Summary.

All students receive the same amount of Physical Education and Health, as prescribed by the state's Standard Course of Study. TOPS students receive additional support in health-related concerns on an individual basis as the needs arise.

Orienting Question Number Seven:

How does the school re-engage the family in the education of students?

One of the original components of the TOPS program is family involvement. The principal and TOPS team have hosted TOPS parents for dinners at the school, and have offered informational meetings in the evenings. One of the requirements of TOPS teachers is to contact the parents of their students at least once a week. Teachers telephone parents frequently, and they or other staff (social worker, counselor, assistant principal) make home visits when necessary. Most TOPS teachers send a Homework Sheet to parents each night. It is the student's responsibility to

bring the form, which lists the assignments for the night, home and return it the next day signed by a parent.

A complaint that many TOPS teachers have made, which is discussed in the account of the TOPS team meeting of March 16, 1994, is that the neediest of their TOPS students have the least responsive and involved parents. The intensity of feels around this issue - frustration, exasperation, and anger - illustrates how important family involvement is to the success of efforts to assist at-risk students. The teachers' comments indicate that they feel successful with the students whose parents are supportive and responsive, and exasperated at the lack of success with students whose parents are not supportive or responsive.

Summary.

The school staff engages a variety of strategies to re-engage families in the education of its students. These strategies fall into two categories: Those aimed at the whole parent population of the school or all the parents of TOPS program students; and those that are individual efforts by teachers to engage the parents of a particular student in need. Teachers feel good about their efforts when parents are engaged, and frustrated at the lack of effect their efforts seem to have when parents are not engaged.

Orienting Question Number Eight:

How does the school connect students with the community?

Guilford Middle School is inextricably linked to the community. An illustration of this success is the fact that the school's PTA raises about \$100,000 a year in the community for the school. The school enjoys a very active parent volunteer program, and parents are active in most aspects of school life. In addition, the school is a research and student teaching site for the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The local YMCA operates programs in cooperation with the school and various community groups use the school's facilities for meetings and activities. Many people report that the school is perceived by area residents as truly belonging to the community. In the context of a large consolidated school district that is centrally governed and managed, this is an important characteristic of Guilford Middle School that is not easy to accomplish or maintain and is not the norm in the district.

One noteworthy effort to connect the community and its students to the school is the development of the tutorial program, Expanded Horizons. With financial support from grants, several staff members established a community education and tutorial center in each of the two public housing areas in the school's attendance zone. The centers are staffed during non-school hours with volunteers who help

students in the neighborhood with their homework and assist them in developing basic academic skills. The centers are equipped with computers, television, and other electronic equipment as well as more traditional teaching material. The centers have not been vandalized or burglarized.

The Greensboro area has a professional hockey team, the Monarchs. Through the efforts of several TOPS team members, the Monarchs agreed to "adopt" the TOPS students and interacted with the school and the TOPS students on several occasions during the year. The team visited the school and gave students various team promotional items such as banners and bumper stickers. The team then hosted the TOPS students to a dinner at the Coliseum, followed by choice seats for the team's hockey game that evening.

Guilford Middle School has established itself as an important part of the community and, as one teacher said, "This school has clout in the community." That clout was developed over time through efforts to involve the community in school activities and now makes community support easier to attain.

Summary.

Guilford Middle School teachers and students are closely linked with the community. Parents and teachers raise a tremendous amount of money each year to support the school. The success of fundraising at Guilford Middle is a

measure of the community's support of the school. The TOPS program has involved its students in the community's professional hockey team, which has "adopted" the TOPS students. Community recreation and cultural opportunities abound in the Guilford Middle School area, and a large portion of the student body is connected with the community through these activities.

Profile of John W. Neal Middle School

The Community

John W. Neal Middle School, known more commonly as Neal Middle School, is one of five middle schools in the Durham Public Schools, a district of about 40,000 students that is the result of a 1993 merger of Durham City Schools and Durham County Schools. The attendance zones were not changed at the time of merger and as of August, 1994, the reassignment of students to different attendance zones was still not accomplished, primarily because of community conflict over various reassignment plans. The former Durham County School District rearranged its attendance boundaries in 1988, causing a 69% turnover in students and a 56% change in the staff of Neal Middle School. These changes are indicative of the lack of continuity that has been a part of both the Durham city and county school systems for many

years, making it difficult for individual schools to develop a loyal community following.

The area around Neal Middle School is rural, with small farms, small businesses, and a state park dominating the landscape. Northeastern Durham County's population is predominantly white with economic levels ranging from poverty to lower middle class. Neal is not a "neighborhood school", for there are no neighborhoods in the area around the school. All students are transported to school by motor vehicle, most of them by school bus. The families of Neal Middle School are not homogenous socially or economically. Of the 829 students who attend Neal, 43% of their parents are skilled workers and 10% are professional. A large portion, 47.5%, of the parents terminated their formal education before graduating high school; twelve percent of the parents did not finish seventh grade. Seventeen percent of the parents hold college degrees.

There are four large low-income federal housing areas within the attendance area of Neal Middle School. Most of the students who attend the school from them come from families of extreme poverty. Most of the school's 407 African American students live in one of the four federal housing projects (Principal's Report, 1993).

The School

Neal Middle School was built in 1968 on a 24 acre campus. The original building is 70,000 square feet and includes a two-story classroom wing, a vocational wing, cafeteria, media center, and gymnasium. A 60,000 square foot addition was constructed in 1988, giving the school an additional 15 classes, another gymnasium, a teaching theater, more cafeteria space, two teacher workrooms, and an Exceptional Children Program suite of rooms. The school is exceptionally clean, bright, and inviting. Classrooms are large (approximately 950 square feet), compared to the North Carolina state standard of 850 square feet for middle schools. Rooms are well-furnished with student and teacher desks, chairs, and tables. There is adequate storage in each classroom and many rooms are carpeted (SACS Report, 1989).

Neal Middle School served 829 students in the 1993-94 school year. Fifty-two percent of the students are minority, with a categorical breakdown as follows: 407 black, 402 white, 13 Hispanic, 6 Asian, and one American Indian. Almost 20% (158 students) of the student body was identified as having educational handicaps, including learning disabilities (88), retardation (14), and emotional/behavioral handicaps (14). Eleven percent (95 students) were identified as Academically Gifted (Forsyth, 1994).

Neal Middle School's policies and practices, which further describe the expectations the school has for students, are stated in the school's handbooks for students and teachers. Described below are school policies and practices, found in either the student or the teacher handbook, that relate to the Carnegie recommendations and this study's orienting questions.

The grading system at Neal is a traditional letter grade system with corresponding percentage equivalents for each letter grade. The grading system tangibly states the academic expectations of students and then judges them on the same tangible basis. Guilford Middle's grading system is as follows.

Grading Scale

Superior	(93-100)	A
Above Average	(85-92)	B
Average	(77-84)	C
Below Average	(70-76)	D
Unsatisfactory	(0-69)	F

The school has an Honor Roll for students who receive a report card with grades not lower than "B". Honor Roll students are treated to an Honor Roll Party at the end of each grading period. The party is held during the school day in the cafeteria. Students are given snacks, drinks, discount coupons from local merchants, and a certificate.

The school also states criteria for promotion to the next grade. A student is "promoted" who passes all subjects except for Science or Social Studies. A student who fails Language Arts or Math, or who fails both Science and Social Studies may be "placed" in the next grade without being formally promoted. This allows students to stay with their social peers in school while making up failed courses. Students who fail Language Arts or Math or both Social Studies and Science and are not placed are retained. Some students have the option of attending summer school to pass the courses they failed during the year and can, upon successful summer school performance, be promoted to the next grade. The grading system and promotion policy become complex to administer, yet are based on simple numerical formula outlined above.

The student handbook describes the Neal Middle School Honor Code. Students are strongly encouraged to write the following statement on all their papers before submitting them for grading: "On my honor, I shall never give nor receive help." The handbook lists rules that apply to tests and quizzes.

1. Do not talk until everyone is finished with the test/quiz or until the teacher has given his/her permission.
2. Do not look at another student's paper for any reason. If you must stretch, be sure to look upwards.

3. Clear your desk of all books and papers. The only things on your desk should be a pencil/pen, the test/quiz, and a cover sheet.
4. Do not use notes, books, or calculators without permission from your teacher.
5. Do not offer to help another student or receive help from another student.
6. Do your very best because that is all that is expected of you (Neal Middle School Handbook, 1993).

The Discipline Policy printed in the student handbook states that everyone is responsible to provide a quality learning environment. It then quotes a North Carolina general statute regarding the responsibility of teachers to maintain order and discipline. The following, including the bold type, are excerpts from the Discipline Policy found in the student handbook.

The following is a list of the **most serious** of the Neal Middle School and Durham Public School rules.

Violation of any of these rules will result in the **non-negotiable** consequences listed for **any** and **all** students in violation. Parents will be notified **personally**.

Students will not:

- A. Possess weapons or explosives
- B. Use verbal or physical threats on or physical attack of any school personnel.

C. Possess, sell, or use drugs, alcohol or any paraphernalia

D. Commit arson

Consequences for A,B,C, and D above: Ten day out of school suspension, parent conference, possible charges, and/or expulsion for the remainder of the year.

Consequences for the following infractions may vary depending on the individual student and the infraction.

1. Insubordination, defiance, and disrespect
2. Fighting
3. Excessive tardies
4. Stealing
5. Vandalism
8. Skipping class/leaving campus
9. Smoking or possession of cigarettes or restrooms
11. Gambling
13. Selling non-school sponsored items (Neal Middle School Handbook, 1993).

The Dress Code follows the School Rules section of the student handbook and includes the following.

Below is a list of the types of clothing that should not be worn to school because they may detract from

the student's own health and safety and/or detract from the learning environment.

1. Hats, caps, or headwraps are not to be worn.
2. Grooming accessories (combs, picks, etc.) are not to be worn.
3. Bare midriff, see-through clothing, halters, tube/tank tops, biker shorts, strapless dresses, and other suggestive clothing are not to be worn.
4. Clothing depicting any words or pictures that are obscene, provocative, or suggestive will not be worn.
5. Outer pants should be worn so that the buttocks are covered (Neal Middle School Handbook, 1993).

Neal Middle School was designated as a Comer Model Middle School in 1993, which means that the school adopted Dr. James Comer's School Development Program model of school organization and operation. The School Development Program is an outgrowth of the research conducted by Comer and his associates at the Yale Child Study Program. The Comer model utilizes parents, teachers, and administrators in teams to plan almost every aspect of the school's organization and operation, including the academic program, social activities and expectations, and staff development and training.

There are three components to the School Development Program. First is the School Management and Planning Team (SPMT), which is comprised of teachers, administrators,

parents, and professional people in the community, is charged with setting the school's direction and priorities through the development of a Comprehensive School Plan. Second is the Mental Health Team (MHT), comprised of teachers, administrators, special education specialists, counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and professionals from the community. The MHT makes decisions about interventions and strategies to assist students who are experiencing any problems that interfere with their schooling or with the climate of the school. The third component of the Comer Model is the Parent's Program. This committee organizes parent involvement in all aspects of school life, including a Parent Volunteer Program, Parent Service Organization, and a Community Advisory Council (Comer, 1989). This study of Neal Middle School's efforts to assist at-risk students focuses on the Mental Health Team because it directs and coordinates most of the school's efforts in this area.

Observation of the school, February 4, 1994.

Neal Middle School serves students in grades six, seven, and eight, with each grade level housed in a separate section of the building and divided into instructional teams within that section. Walking through the school, there is evidence of a student-centered philosophy with student writing and art work displayed throughout. There are also

posters about peer mediation and resolving conflicts peacefully throughout the school. The entire school, including hallways, classrooms, bathrooms, and the cafeteria is very clean and neat, and the housekeeping staff is constantly cleaning.

Three armed Durham County Sheriff Deputies walking the halls throughout this observation. The principal says that there is always at least one uniformed police officer in the building during the school day. The deputies volunteer to spend their day off helping at Neal Middle School. They are paid for the time through a grant initiated by the principal. The deputies are under the direction of the principal and carry out a variety of activities as needed. They spend most of their time walking in the halls as a presence that is meant to help keep violence and unruly behavior to a minimum.

The cafeteria is clean and filled with tables and chairs. During the eighth grade lunch period, almost every table is filled with students. A table in the center of the room is reserved for teachers and it too is filled. The cafeteria is noisy and students seem animated and happy.

One of the teachers complains, "There's no one here. Who's on duty?" Since there are at least ten teachers in the cafeteria, the researcher asks for an explanation to the question. "Usually there's someone here on duty, but they're not here today." The researcher asks to know who is

usually on duty. The teacher responds, "One of the principals is usually here, but no one's here ." She seemed agitated and anxious about the fact that no administrator is supervising the cafeteria. Most elementary and middle schools schedule teachers to supervise the cafeteria, but it seems the teachers at Neal are dependent on the principal and his assistants handling this duty and do not adapt to the changing situation by making decisions among themselves regarding who would supervise during this lunch period.

The media center is relatively small for a middle school with over 800 students. It is staffed with one full-time library-media specialist and one library-media assistant. The library is well-organized and maintained, but seemed to be underutilized during this observation. Students involved in research assignments from the Academically Gifted classes comprises the majority of students using the library. There is a section of the library for periodicals. Most of the magazines that are of interest to young adolescents are not readily available. Instead, a sign placed on the shelf by the magazine's name says "Please ask for this magazine at the circulation desk". Being very popular magazines, the librarian made the decision to keep them behind her desk.

Attached to the library is a large computer lab with 30 computer work stations. This also seems underutilized during this observation and in the 12 visits to the school,

this observer saw no more than three students in the lab at any one time and usually there was no one in the lab during these observations.

Observation of a deputy, February 4, 1994.

The deputy is a man in his late thirties who is of medium build and in very good physical condition. He is a Durham County Sheriff Deputy who volunteers one of his two days a week off to assist at Neal Middle. He has done this since the beginning of the school year. He begins the morning monitoring the halls near the office during Home Base and first period. He walks the hallways in a loop around the school from the main entrance to the library and then up the stairs to the eighth grade hall, then back down the stairs to the main entrance. He walks this loop four times between 8:00 and 10:30, and stops many times to talk to students and teachers, and enters the boys' bathrooms along the way. The principal calls him on the walkie-talkie and asks him to come by the office and help move some boxes. The deputy comes down from the eighth grade hall within two minutes and he and the principal move supplies for a party to the cafeteria. He then walks to the gym area and finds a young boy standing outside the gym. The boy was told to leave the gym class because of his poor behavior. The deputy and the boy talk for the entire 50-minute gym period. At 12:00, the deputy goes to the cafeteria, stands on the

lunch line with students and eats lunch at a table with eighth grade students. The interaction between the deputy and the students is relaxed and friendly.

The Staff

There are 87 staff members at Neal Middle School. Five are custodians, five are cafeteria workers, four are secretaries, and one is a library assistant. There are 72 professionally certified full or part-time employees, all of whom work within their areas of certification. Three of the professional staff are administrators 25 are support program staff, and 44 are academic teachers. The support staff positions are as follows: four counselors, four Physical Education teachers, one Dance teacher, one Drama teacher, two Spanish teachers, five Exceptional Children Program teachers, two music teachers, one band teacher, three Vocational Education teachers, one librarian, and one social worker. The 44 academic teachers are on 11 core academic teaching teams with four teachers on each team.

Teacher Questionnaire

A questionnaire meant to elicit opinions about how teachers felt about their school was distributed to 44 classroom teachers and 36 teachers responded (82% return rate). The questionnaire has three categories of statements: The School (statements 1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15),

The Family (statements 10, 12, 13), and Efforts to Assist At-risk Students (statements 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13). The results are reported in the figure below.

Figure 7

Neal Middle School Teacher Questionnaire Results

(82% Return Rate)

(n = 36)

My Middle School:	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1. Has a supportive environment for all students.	14	72	14	0
2. Creates many special opportunities for at-risk students.	38	53	9	0
3. Meets the needs of at-risk students.	3	38	59	0
4. Rewards all students for good work and behavior.	9	49	40	3
5. Creates special rewards for at-risk students.	18	64	18	0
6. Assures that all students master fundamental academic skills.	0	32	58	10
7. Develops positive self-esteem in students.	6	78	14	3
8. Is a safe and secure place in which to learn.	0	77	23	0
9. Develops the health and physical fitness of students.	9	79	12	0
10. Encourages family participation in the educational process.	39	56	5	0
11. Has a caring staff committed to young adolescents.	54	43	3	0
12. Has good support from most families.	0	49	40	11
13. Has good support from families of at-risk students.	0	11	60	29
14. Has supportive administrators.	16	66	19	
15. Meets the needs of students.	3	77	21	3

Although 97% the teachers felt the school had a caring and committed staff and 86% felt it had a supportive environment for all students, a large group, 43%, disagreed with the

statement that the school rewarded all students for good work and behavior. Almost one quarter (23%) disagreed with the statement that the school was a safe and secure place. The strongest negative response about the school was an alarming 68% of respondents disagreeing with the statement that Neal Middle assured that all students mastered academic fundamentals.

The Family Statements revealed that, although 95% of the respondents felt the school encouraged family participation, 51% disagreed that the school had good support from most families and 89% disagreed that they had good support from families of at-risk students. Such a situation would seem to instill resentment and frustration by teachers toward their students' families.

According to the responses concerning at-risk efforts, most teachers feel good about the school's work in this area. Ninety-one percent felt there were many special opportunities and 80% felt there were special rewards for at-risk students at Neal Middle. With all the efforts, 59% disagree that the school met the needs of at-risk students. This, too, must cause a great deal of frustration among the teachers.

The Administration

"Mr. F. is very encouraging and supportive, but he expects a lot. He sets the climate" (Interview with Language Arts teacher, March 10, 1994).

"Mr. F. is very supportive and very demanding" (Interview with Eighth Grade Team Leader, February 24, 1994).

Neal Middle School has a principal and two assistant principals. Each administrator has a Masters degree in school administration, and one assistant principal is enrolled in a doctoral program at Columbia University. They divide administrative tasks between them, but all three are actively involved in helping maintain student discipline. Administrative tasks are shared with the four guidance counselors who manage such administrative areas as the state's mandated testing program and state and federal mandates regarding the Exceptional Children Program.

The principal of Neal Middle is a 42 year old white male who was a Social Studies teacher at Neal before becoming a school administrator. He has been Neal's principal for three years. He is energetic, intense, intelligent, and socially engaging. He was the 1992 recipient of the Terry Sanford Award For Creativity In Education, and was the state's Principal of the Year in 1993. He is presently enrolled in the Principal's Executive program.

Interview with the principal, February 24, 1994.

The interview takes place in the principal's office, which is small and sparsely furnished and decorated. On the walls hang his diplomas, the Terry Sanford Award plaque, and the Principal of the Year certificate. Along the wall are large boxes holding the year's supply of incentive awards (Frisbees, radios, yo-yo's, etc.), and a supply of soft drinks that are used for dances and other social occasions. He talks about four topics: the school's effectiveness, the student body, strategies to assist at-risk students, and the teachers at Neal.

The School's Effectiveness

"We regress. We take two steps forward and one step back. How much real progress are we making? I don't know. We don't have many fights anymore. We used to have two or three each day. The suspension rate is down.

Adult behavior in the school as models for students and for consistent adherence to expectations is vital. The active visibility of adults is crucial. Teachers are all in the halls at class change, and if they're not, I reprimand them. I reprimanded two teachers yesterday for letting two girls argue in the halls without stopping them. The teachers said the girls weren't in their classes, and I reminded them that

every student in this school is theirs. Teachers are expected to handle everything they see in this.

The Student Body

We have about 51% minority and most of them are from poverty. We take in students from four of the poorest projects in Durham. These kids live with violence, drug-dealing, substance abuse, and open sex in the home. Most of our white kids are from middle class simple ranch-style homes - not rich. There's tensions between the two groups of students, and tensions within the minority population at the school. Neighborhood gangs are becoming more prevalent in the projects and gang activity is increasing at school (Interview, February 24, 1994).

Community Outreach

The principal describes the many efforts he and his staff make to connect with the various communities the school serves.

There are community meetings every other month in each of the four projects. We bring refreshments and about 12 teachers join me. They don't have to. It's voluntary. Sometimes we meet in a church, sometimes in a community center. Sometimes there are more of us than parents. We have a Phone Master system that calls

every home with announcements. So we get the word out about these meetings, but the turnout is low: 12 to 25 people out of 800 kids. We have Family Night at school twice a year. The staff cooks dinner, serves it, and then makes presentations to parents about the programs we have at school (Interview, February 24, 1994).

He described the teaching teams as the primary link between the school and families. Another link he described was the Student Progress Management Team (SPMT), which is part of the Comer School Development model. The SPMT is the governance committee for the school. Three parents serve on the committee, and are elected from the general parent population.

Strategies To Assist At-Risk Students

The teaching team is the most important factor in assisting at-risk students. The one critical element that allows teacher teams to carry out these strategies is the scheduling of double common planning periods.

This gives them enough time to meet with parents as a team, to share concerns and ideas about individual students, to plan jointly for the best coordination of the strategies they implement. Teams devise ways to celebrate and recognize good work. Each team has an awards program at the end of each nine-week grading period. It's held during the first part of the school day in the cafeteria. Parents are invited and everyone is served breakfast. After we eat, remarks are made by teachers and me and awards are given to students. (Interview, February 24, 1994).

The principal talks about the Comer project and the fact that one of its goals is to raise the level of academic achievement among at-risk students. The principal briefly describes each of the following programs active in the school to assist at-risk students (these will be more fully described in another section of this report): The Inclusion Model for special education, the School Alternative Class, The Prison Letter Program, the Winners' Club, Positive Alternative to School Suspension, the Travelers' Team, Save Our Males, Peer Mediation, and the Home Base Advisor.

The Teachers At Neal

The principal expresses a great deal of admiration and thanks for the teaching staff. He says that they feel a sense of ownership in the school and an intense advocacy for their students. He expresses amazement that they do so much more than what would normally be expected of teachers. He explains that the turnover is very low among the teachers, and several of them were teaching at Neal with him when he taught Social Studies at the school several years ago. "We have great people here. They support each other, and I support them. But they'd probably tell you I expect too much from them and maybe I do." (Interview with Principal, February 24, 1994)

Data Framed in Orienting Questions

Orienting Question Number One:

How does the school create a small community for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental?

The mission statements of the school system and Neal Middle School convey the intent that the larger Durham community and the individual school community have regarding the experiences they wish to provide all students.

The mission of the Durham Public Schools is to provide a safe, supportive and challenging environment where all children learn.

Neal Middle School Mission Statement

Neal will be a safe, challenging, and exciting place where students, **educators, parents, and the community purposefully come together to:

*Provide a caring environment that demonstrates a true commitment to and appreciation of middle school age students of all ethnic background

*Design teaching and learning that combines all areas of student development: psychological, social, physical, emotional, and academic

*Establish a community focus for the enthusiastic promotion and understanding of Neal's educational mission

**The word "educators" refers to the entire personnel at Neal Middle School: principals, counselors, secretaries, custodians, nurses, cafeteria workers, librarians, teachers, and bus drivers (Neal Middle School Handbook, 1994).

Teacher teams.

Neal Middle School evidences a great deal of effort in developing stable, close, and mutually respectful

relationships between teachers and students. This occurs in a variety of small clubs and interest groups. But, as the principal, an assistant principal, a counselor, and several teachers have stated, the single most important element in the school for fostering productive relationships is the team structure. Teaching teams by their nature encourage stronger relationships among teachers and between teachers and students. A team of four teachers is responsible for the education and well-being of approximately 115 students. Teams have a two-hour block of planning time during the day in which they are free plan curriculum and lessons, to discuss students, and to meet with students or their parents. The team can plan strategies and activities to address individual student needs, and the team has the decision-making power to alter the schedule to make these strategies possible. The following is an observation of an eighth grade team meeting followed by a report of an interview with the team's leader.

Eighth grade team meeting, February 24, 1994.

It is 10:30 and the team, whose members used the first part of their planning period for individual class work, meet in Ellen's classroom. She is the team leader. The four women sit in student chairs and move them so they face each other. Ellen reports what was discussed at a recent meeting of all team leaders in the school. The topics she

shares from the meeting are summer school logistics, a discipline report that was due for submission to the principal, and a new policy on suspension. She reports that there are 42 students on their team who have failures requiring their referral to summer school. They discuss the suspension policy further. The administrative staff informed the team leaders that there will be a standard number suspension days given to students who are "written up" by teachers. According to the new policy, a student will be suspended for three days when he receives the fifth write-up. Additional write-ups will result in five days of suspension, then seven, and then ten days of suspension. Ellen reports that the principal reminded the team leaders that all teachers should be in the halls during class changes, and should check hall passes for any student in the halls during class times. Ellen reports that team leaders complained there are too many special activities during the instructional day, such as assembly programs, reward parties, and special interest meetings. The team leaders felt these detracted from the continuity of the instructional day. The principal agreed and said he would act to decrease activities during the day.

The team members discuss individual students. Some of the reports are updates and others are new problems. The discussions of each student are brief and efficient.

Shawna - She was caught in the hall during class. The principal wants her sent to the office every time she is late to class or is seen wandering around the school.

Toni - Mom finally called and set up an appointment for 9:30 Tuesday to meet with the team.

Mona - Mom has avoided meeting with the teachers, but has agreed to come in tomorrow at 7:45.

Larry - He has been a behavior problem in some classes recently, but the team does not have a sense of how he behaves during the entire day. They pass around forms to document his behavior and agree to bring the forms back to their team meeting next week and compare their observations.

Bernice - She is pregnant and has little support from home. The teachers agree to buy her maternity clothes, since she is still wearing jeans and is several months pregnant. One of the teachers says she will talk to the counselor and make sure Bernice receives appropriate educational and medical attention.

Ann - She has attempted suicide four times in the past 18 months. A team member reports that she now has a

psychologist who will be the liaison between the school and the family.

It is now 11:00 and the team prepares to meet a man who is tutoring Micky, one of their students. The tutor asked for the appointment so that he could learn about Micky's academic program and get advise from the teachers regarding the areas to focus on in tutoring. The tutor arrived and Ellen directs him to a seat. After introductions, the man, Greg, explains that he is not really a tutor.

He is Micky's uncle and is concerned about Micky's behavior and failing grades. He says Micky has been sneaking out at night, coming home at one and two in the mornings on weekends and during the week. Greg reports there is a great deal of drug activity in the neighborhood and his family is afraid Micky is involved in using and selling drugs. Greg recently married Micky's sister and his wife asked him to help Micky, since Micky had no father at home. Greg agreed to counsel Micky, tutor him, and let him live with him and his wife.

The teachers report that Micky is a very likable young man who is not a behavior problem. In fact, he is very quiet in all his classes. The problem is he has not accomplished a single assignment in about a month. He is doing no work in class and never submits homework. He is failing every subject. The teachers say that he has trouble

with hand-eye coordination and never writes anything. He is also a poor reader. However, he does not qualify for any remedial or special services. His records show that he needs glasses, but has never had any. It is obvious that the teachers like Micky a great deal and that they are very concerned about him. One teacher says to Greg, "We've been so worried about Micky but we don't know what to do for him. You're like a godsend to us." The teachers agree to send Greg a weekly report on Micky's performance at school and to meet with him whenever he wishes. They also agree not to make Micky submit his past assignments, but to let him start "fresh" concerning assignments and grades. Greg agrees to buy glasses for Micky, help him with his homework, tutor him in math, and keep him home on school nights. The meeting is over at 11:30. After Greg leaves, the teachers express hope that he follows through with his help to Micky.

Interview with Ellen, February 24, 1994.

Ellen is an eighth grade team leader and reported by an assistant principal to be the most powerful leader among the faculty. She is viewed by her colleagues as humorous, assertive, masterful in the classroom, and caring for students. During this interview, she is straightforward, business-like, and brief in her responses. Ellen is in her 21st year of teaching middle grade students. She worked at Neal when the principal was a Social Studies teacher. She

regards him as a very good teacher. Although their relationship has changed since he became principal, she feels they are still close and trust each other's advise and judgment.

Ellen expresses great faith in classroom teachers. She feels the strongest unit in the school is the teacher team.

The school is really run through these teams. They are more effective for at-risk kids than all the other programs. You could do away with all the Comer committees and just use the teams and have better results. People are spread too thin with all these committees. Put the resources and responsibilities given to these committees on the teams and the school will be really effective. Teams right now have a good deal of autonomy to meet kids' needs. They do their own scheduling; they plan their own interventions with kids and families; and they are tight-knit groups that communicate together and with families, and take action to help kids.

The faculty at Neal is excellent. These teachers are risk-takers, innovators, and hard workers. They like working with this age group, but they're just overwhelmed with the problems students bring with them. One of the strengths of Neal teachers is their support of each other. The teachers here are like family. We socialize together, cry together, and support each

other, look out for each other at school. This job can drain you, and sometimes people get down. We watch out for that and pick people up. I have great respect for Mr. F (the principal). He encourages new ideas; he supports his teachers; and he is very demanding (Interview, February 24, 1994).

The Travelers, A team for at-risk students.

The faculty and administration were frustrated and concerned that each year several students were retained in grade for the second or third time in their school career, and would drop out of school rather than face the humiliation of being 16 or 17 years old in the eighth or ninth grade. The staff created the Travelers Team three years ago in response to this problem. The team has two teachers who are assigned not more than 40 students. The students must have been retained in grade at least once and possess at least average intelligence. The majority of the Traveler students have been retained more than once, and were failing their grade upon entering the team. The students are taught in small instructional groups that allow the teachers to give individual attention to each student and establish a close relationship with students. Students change classes much less frequently than the other teams, thus diminishing the number of transitions that the school day. Counseling and group discussion are significant

elements of the Travelers Team program, and many of the school's support staff assist in the Travelers program. The major challenge and incentive to students is the capability to "skip" a year in school. Many of the Traveler students are officially considered seventh graders because of failures in the previous school year. During their time in the Travelers Team, they can intensify their academic studies with tutoring and assistance from the staff. In the spring, if they have put forth a good effort to improve their academic level, they will be administered an eighth grade achievement test. If they score above the 40th percentile (which is the state's threshold for requiring summer school attendance before being promoted), they will be promoted to the ninth grade. It is the assistant principal's feeling that the Travelers Team is responsible for the drastic decline in the school's dropout rate.

Neal Middle School is a large school with a diverse population. The teaching teams seem to be the strongest element for the creation of stable, close, mutually respectful relationships between students and teachers. The teams are also a major communication link to the families of their students. Individual teachers have taken on roles as advocates for particular students.

Save Our Males, A Program For At-Risk Males At Neal Middle School

An assistant principal at Neal began meeting with parents of young boys who were experiencing problems at school. She found that the parents felt they had been instrumental in the low academic achievement of their sons. By 1990, she had developed the idea for a program that would support and sustain young at-risk males through their schooling. The program began in 1991 with a \$54,000 grant from the State Department of Public Instruction, and received an additional \$10,000 grant from the state's Drug and Alcohol Defense Fund in 1993.. The goals of the program are to decrease suspensions, increase feelings of self-worth, and improve the academic performance of identified at-risk male students. In addition, the program aims at increasing parental participation in the educational process. There are four components to the program: Summit, Community Day, and The Brotherhood Television Series.

1. Tutoring - The boys enrolled in the program have available to them staff members and parents who have volunteered to be tutors. The boys receive tutoring after school and on Saturday.
2. Summit - Every Thursday morning participants meet for breakfast in the school's cafeteria.

During breakfast, a speaker, usually a man from the community, addresses the boys. The speakers are chosen for

their ability to motivate or for the positive role model they present to the boys. The address is followed by discussions on various topics involving school, social, and family life.

3. Community Day - Two Saturdays each month are scheduled as community days. The boys meet at school and the program's sponsors involve them in a field trip to museums, concerts, or sporting events; or engage them in community service projects. These Saturdays give the boys an opportunity to enjoy each other's company and become involved in a worthwhile activity together in an informal, non threatening setting.

4. Brotherhood Television Series - A panel discussion is held on each of the community days. The panelists are selected from the boys in the program, and the discussions involve issues and concerns that are relevant to the boys. These video programs document the issues and opinions of this at-risk population of young males and gives others an opportunity to understand more about the Save Our Males program and the boys for whom it was created.

The school reports improvements in attendance, attitude, and academic performance for the boys who participate in the program that are attributed to the Save Our Males program, although no formal evaluation of the program exists to support this claim (Moore, 1993).

The following are evaluative comments from some of the participants in the program.

"I have been in Save Our Males for two years, and to me it means bringing males, black and white, together in bonding, going places, and watching out for each other. We stay together and keep each other in line."

"I like it because we get to know each other, and find out each others problems."

"It (Save Our Males) helps me keep out of trouble and control my behavior."

"I think this program is good because we do things that other people do, and it helps me be better at group work."

"This is a special group to me because we get together and have fun and act like mature young males."

"The program helps me by helping me get my bad feelings and anger out of my system."

Eagles' Nest: An Advisory Program

Students are divided into groups of 15 and meet for the first 25 minutes of school each morning with their "home base" teacher. The objective is to develop stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships between teachers and students and among students. On certain days, the time is spent discussing a variety of topics relevant to young adolescents. Other home base meetings are spent playing intramurals against another home base group, or socializing.

Each home base chooses a community service project for the year. Each teacher has received conflict resolution training, and are encouraged to share their knowledge in this area with their home base students.

Young Women In Action

Another of Neal Middle School strategies to develop close, stable, and mutually respectful relationships is the Young Women In Action program. This is a support group and service club for female students at Neal. The group meets weekly after school with its faculty sponsor, who is a bright young English teacher with a talent for group counseling. There are 35 members with about 25 girls who are consistently at each meeting and active with the group. They engage in a wide range of discussion topics at each meeting. They plan trips together and involve themselves in school improvement projects.

Summary

The majority of Neal Middle School's students fall into two categories: white middle-class and rural, or black, poor, and urban. The school does not play a large role in either segment of the community in which it serves. The building was designed to be a junior high school and its architecture does not easily lend itself to the development of small learning communities. Staff camaraderie is high

and the principal is perceived by many to be supportive and demanding. Neal Middle School operates a great many programs and clubs that create small support groups for its students. These programs and clubs, many of which serve specific segments of the at-risk population, represent the school's most effective efforts at creating small learning communities where strong, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental.

Orienting Question Number Two:

How does the school teach a core academic program that results in students who can think critically and behave responsibly?

Neal Middle School is accredited by the State of North Carolina and as such, complies to the curriculum and academic standards of the Basic Education Program. Under the state's directives, every student is taught a core academic program. Neal Middle School employs a wide range of programs and activities to develop critical thinking and responsible behavior in their students. Describing these programs and activities is the focus of this section of the research report.

Conflict Management

Neal Middle School used the services of the Durham County Dispute Settlement Center to train all home base teachers in basic conflict management skills. They were taught that there are two ground rules and five steps in negotiating a conflict.

The ground rules are :

1. Each person must agree to solve the conflict.
2. Each person must agree not to interrupt.

The negotiating steps are:

1. Use the other person's name, tell him/her what happened and how you feel about it.
2. Tell the person what you want.
3. Summarize the other person's side of the story.
4. Both come up with ideas to solve the conflict.
5. Both agree on one solution.

Materials and activities for five home base sessions were given to all home base teachers. These activities resulted in the entire student body receiving basic training in conflict management.

Peer Mediation Program

The Dispute Settlement Center of Durham County trained all home base teachers and 24 students in a program of peer mediation designed to be implemented in the middle school. Students are selected by their peers to receive mediator

training, which involves a four-day workshop off-campus, partially funded by the local Kiwanis Club. They are certified as Peer Mediators when they complete the training. Their goal is to mediate disputes between students who cannot resolve the conflict themselves. There are a total of 24 peer mediators at Neal. The school employs a coordinator for the mediation program. This illustrates the strong support the program has from the administration. Students having a dispute they wish referred to a peer mediator can access peer mediation through the following process.

1. Submit a form describing the conflict, naming the disputants, and offering several dates and times they wish the mediation to occur.
2. The program coordinator schedules a date, time, and place for the mediation and assigns a mediator to the case. She then communicates this to all concerned parties.
3. The mediator and disputants meet at the assigned place and time, and the mediator leads the parties through the process of mediation.
4. The goal is to get both disputants to reach an acceptable resolution to the conflict. When this is accomplished, the peer mediator completes a contract that includes a description of the conflict and the agreed-upon resolution. All parties sign agreement to the resolution and are given copies of the contract.

5. The student mediator meets with the program coordinator to report on the results of the session. The coordinator documents the mediation.

There were 131 such sessions mediated by students during the 1992-93 school year. Students and teachers take the process seriously. The program has resolved conflicts that normally result in violence at school. Teaching young adolescents the value of resolving conflicts peacefully, and giving them the skills to negotiate as the Peer Mediator Program does, contributes a great deal to the development of critical thinking and responsible behavior of all students involved. But it makes a particularly strong impact on the peer mediators.

Interview with peer mediator program coordinator,
February 24, 1994.

The coordinator has an office in the Guidance Office Suit. She is a certified school counselor with two distinct positions: Coordinator of the Peer Mediation Program, and Career Development Counselor.

I have been doing both jobs for two years. Last year the Dispute Settlement Center of Durham trained every teacher in the school - three days (of training)- in dispute settlement and mediation strategies. This was good training but some people didn't take it well. In

the beginning of last year, Mr. F. (Neal's principal) sent three teachers to Florida for training in a different program. The teachers came back all excited and wanted to get the program started. That was in October. In February, the superintendent said everybody would go with the Dispute Settlement Center program. The district got a \$25,000 grant for the training with the Center, so they couldn't turn it down. Well that meant that the Neal teachers who went to Florida couldn't do their program and there was a lot of resentment (Interview, February 24, 1994).

She showed the extensive collection of literature and videos about career development and described how every student proceeds through a ten-hour program in career development. The program consists of readings, seeing videos, and engaging in discussions. She showed her files and record-keeping books for the Peer Mediation Program. She has records for one complete school year, and shows 131 recorded mediation sessions. Her records show who the disputants were in each case, who the peer mediator was, and what teacher supervised the session. "Every teacher is assigned at least one mediation session. Many of the mediations involve arguments between two students over something minor." She described these minor conflicts as falling into categories: "'Somebody took something of

mine', 'Somebody said something about me', or friends who have a falling out over somebody of the opposite sex." She explains that, while these may not be major conflicts, the process of mediation is learned through them and can become a part of everyone's pattern of behavior for small or large conflicts in their lives.

Interview with Toni, March 17, 1994.

Toni is an eighth grade Social Studies teacher at Neal Middle. She initiated the interest in peer mediation at the school and shares her account with the interviewer of how the program evolved at Neal Middle School. Two years ago she became interested in peer mediation and began researching various programs around the country. She found a program that she felt met the needs of Neal Middle School and discovered that the program requires a week of training in Florida before it can be implemented. She gained permission, funding and support for the program and training from the principal, and she and two other teachers went to Florida for the training. They returned excited and motivated to implement the program at Neal. Their plan was to begin small with a model program that others could observe, and then do the training of other staff members themselves as more teachers chose to get involved in the program.

Preparations were under way to begin the pilot program when the principal told them they had to stop and could not implement their program. The school district had collaborated on a grant with the Durham County Dispute Settlement Center to implement peer mediation programs in all schools. They were successful in obtaining the grant, and now mandated that all school implement the Dispute Settlement's peer mediation program.

Toni explained her frustration with the school district in the treatment of peer mediation.

Just as we're getting our program off the ground, the central office makes a decision that everyone has to get trained by the Dispute Settlement Center and use their program. Every staff member got a half-day of training and it was mostly a waste of time. Then they told us to teach the program in Home Base. Everyone, in every Home Base. Now they've hired a coordinator for the school and it's just a big bureaucratic thing. We were going to start small, grass roots. Peer Mediation doesn't have a very good name here with a lot of teachers. Some of us still believe in it, but the way it was handled just turned people off (Interview with Toni, March 17, 1994).

The Prison Letter Program

Ellen, the eighth grade team leader described above, created this program three years ago. The objectives are to develop within students three important elements: empathy, responsibility to the community, understanding of the consequences for irresponsible behavior. Over 100 students each year correspond to convicts in a Virginia prison. The convicts write back and they exchange letters four or five times during the school year. The inmates explain the consequences of their crime and describe the turning points in their lives. Many of the letters clearly describe how critical the young adolescent years are to the path one leads for life. Ellen said, "The students are able to express their concerns and get honest responses of how important it is to value yourself."

Summary

Neal Middle School provides all students with the same core academic curriculum as prescribed by the state. There are a variety of tutorial services to assist students in reaching a competent level in basic academic skills. The school engages a wide variety of programs to foster critical and ethical thinking, and encourage socially responsible behavior. The most prevalent is the Peer Mediation Program.

Orienting Question Number Three:

How does the school ensure success for all students?

There is no one program that dominates the efforts to ensure success for all students at Neal Middle School, but rather a barrage of programs, processes, and activities are engaged to form a total school attitude that places success for all students as a high priority.

Students Assisting Students

This project has been in operation for six years at Neal. Regular education students volunteer to assist in the classes for trainable and educable mentally retarded children at Neal Middle. Last school year, 70 students tutored in basic academic skills, assisted in physical activities, and interacted socially with the special class students. The regular education students develop a sensitivity and empathy for special populations. This experience helps them define themselves in terms of others, and helps them discover skills and talents that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Teaching Teams and Planning Time

Teaching teams are described in Orienting Question Number One as the single most important element in the school for meeting student needs. Ellen, an eighth grade team leader feels the strongest unit in the school is the teacher team.

The school is really run through these teams. They are more effective for at-risk kids than all the other programs. You could do away with all the Comer committees and just use the teams and have better results. People are spread too thin with all these committees. Put the resources and responsibilities given to these committees on the teams and the school will be really effective. Teams right now have a good deal of autonomy to meet kids' needs. They do their own scheduling; they plan their own interventions with kids and families; and they are tight-knit groups that communicate together and with families, and take action to help kids (Interview with Ellen, February 24, 1994).

The process of teaching teams helping assure student success for all, and their particular efforts with at-risk students, is facilitated by a schedule that builds in adequate planning time for team members to meet together daily. This is made possible because the principal created a schedule that allows the members of each team to have the same two consecutive instructional periods free of teaching responsibilities each day. This is a significant portion of the instructional day, and of staff resources. As such it represents a strong commitment to the teaching team as the key element of Neal Middle School's efforts that represent many of the Carnegie recommendations for middle schools: to

develop strong relationships between students and teachers, to create small learning communities, to develop strong relationships between students and teachers, to involve families in the educational process, to teach a core academic program, to ensure success for all students, and to empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of their students.

Several strategies and activities employed by each team are aimed at ensuring student success. An awards program is held by each team at the end of each grading period. The awards given are for attendance, effort, and improvement, as well as for academic excellence. Through their team meetings, teachers identify students who are experiencing any number of difficulties, whether socially, physically, academically, emotionally, or problems within a student's family. The teachers plan interventions, contact families, talk to students, and assign each other responsibilities for carrying out the plan of action to assist a student.

Honor Roll Party

In addition to and in coordination with the teaching teams, the principal plays an active roll in promoting and rewarding student success. At the end of each grading period, he hosts an honor Roll Party, and invites all students who received all A's and B's on their report cards. The party is held in the cafeteria from 2:30 until dismissal. Students are given snacks and drinks, music is

played on a sound system, and students are invited to dance. Later the principal gives a short speech and distributes coupons for discounts at several retail stores in the area.

Observation of an honor roll party, February 4, 1994.

At 2:00, the principal goes to the cafeteria to set up the sound system for the party. When he arrives, the cafeteria manager, two custodians, and a Sheriff's deputy are setting up 200 individual places at the cafeteria tables. Each place contains a plate, napkin, cup, school bumper sticker ("I am the proud parent of an Honor Roll Student At Neal Middle School"), a Certificate of Appreciation For Academic Excellence, Putt-Putt golf passes, and several discount coupons to record stores, fast-food restaurants, and clothing stores.

Students begin entering the cafeteria at 2:30 and soon the room is filled with 200 students and music from the sound system. As the students socialize (no one dances), two teachers, the principal, the cafeteria manager, and the deputy fill plates with cookies and cups with soft drinks. The deputy pour refills throughout the party. When the refreshments are ready, the principal, talking on a portable public address system, welcomes the students and invites them to sit and enjoy the refreshments. When they are settled, the principal gives a five-minute talk about how proud he is of them and how important doing well in school

is to their future. He ends his portion of the program by giving special awards to two students for exemplary effort and improvement. After the formal program, students eat, talk, and listen to music. At 3:00, the principal tells everyone they may leave after they clean up their table. Students throw away the cups, napkins, and plates, and leave the cafeteria. The entire occasion is noisy, but no students misbehave. The cafeteria floor and tables are littered with scraps of food and paper, and several pools of spilled soft drink. The custodians begin cleaning as soon as the students leave.

Students Serving Other Students

This program identifies at-risk students at the middle school and involves them in tutorial activities with elementary students in an primary school near Neal Middle School. This experience is designed to help the at-risk student gain in self-esteem and develop leadership skills. The elementary students thank them by making cards and writing them letters. This year, 48 eighth grade students worked with 26 first grade students. Ten eighth graders visit the elementary school each Tuesday for an hour. Before they go, the middle school students must plan an activity that is in the area in which the student needs assistance. The students make video tapes of each other and

at the end of the year, join together for a party in the elementary school cafeteria.

School Alternative Class (SAC)

The School Alternative Class (SAC) is Neal Middle School's in-school suspension program. Students are placed in SAC for one "cooling off" period, or for one to several days as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. Upon entering SAC, students are given the following materials: a document outlining the rules for behavior in SAC; a letter to the student regarding the reason for placement in SAC; and a letter to parents that must be taken home, signed by a parent, and returned to school the next day. During their time in SAC, students receive assignments and materials from their regular classroom teachers and must keep up with the assigned work. They are also counseled about their behavior that resulted in in-school suspension.

Learning Disabilities Collaboration and Mainstream

Model

Beginning in the 1992-93 school year, seventh and eighth grade students identified as learning disabled (LD) were no longer assigned to special classes during the school day. Instead, the LD teachers began helping their students within the regular classroom. During the 1993-94 school year, 62 students were served in this manner. There are two

LD teachers in the school and they have worked hard to develop an effective program to teach LD students while in the regular class. One of the teachers describes the process.

Interview with LD Teacher, February 4, 1994.

We place seventh and eighth grade students in the mainstream for all their classes. The seventh graders (who receive LD services) are all on one team. Another teacher has the few students who only need consultation services. The LD specialist collaborates daily with the first team. She is in each core class one period a day and the kids that need the most support are assigned to those classes. Students not identified but still needing support may also be placed in there. The LD teacher meets with the team during planning time to talk about problem-solving, curriculum planning, and how to use the LD specialist. Eighth graders are on two teams and the LD specialist is assigned to one team directly and gives direct services daily like in seventh grade. The other team gets much less direct service, about twice a week for two periods. She is also available for tutoring. She meets with the team in planning meetings also (Interview, February, 1994).

Delivering services to LD students in the regular academic class environment instead of a separate "pull-out"

program is a significant change for those students. At a time in their lives when they do not want to be seen as different or "defective", providing LD services in a less obtrusive manner greatly helps the students maintain positive self-esteem and a positive self image as a learner. In addition, the regular classroom teachers from the LD teachers about effective teaching strategies for LD students. This broadens the role of the LD teacher from a direct service provider in an isolated setting to a direct service provider and consultant in the larger teaching environment of the school.

Remediation Opportunities for High Risk Students

(ROHRS)

ROHRS is a tutorial and counseling program that occurs on Saturday mornings. Conceived as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions, ROHRS provides small group instruction and counseling from 8:00 to noon each Saturday morning. Four teachers volunteer to operate the program on a rotating basis throughout the year. They are compensated for their time. They report that students use the time to receive help with class assignments and it is not uncommon for a student to come to ROHRS voluntarily just to receive assistance with class assignments, especially in Math.

Winners Club

The assistant principal who attends the Mental Health Team initiated this club, which is an effort to enhance the sense of belonging and the experiences of success for students who are alienated and feeling defeated as students in the school. The assistant principal takes students into the Winners Club on the recommendation of teacher teams. She engages the students in activities such as operating the concession stand at football games, to involve the students in roles that are truly helpful to the school. In addition, she provides these students with tutoring and counseling as needed.

Promoting Achievement for Student Success (PASS)

PASS is a tutorial program that meets from 3:00 to 5:00 Monday and Wednesday afternoons. The program maintains a student-to-teacher ratio of not greater than five to one to maximize individual attention. A student is recommended to PASS by a teacher or parent. Parents receive information about the program and must sign permission for their child to attend. Part of the parent's agreement is to provide transportation for the student at 5:00. The PASS teachers communicate weekly with academic teachers regarding the type of help that each PASS student needs most. The PASS teachers also use the tutoring time to counsel students as needed. There are two PASS teachers; one is a middle school

teacher at Neal and one is an elementary school teacher. There were 10 students assigned to PASS in February of 1994.

Summary

Neal Middle School incorporates a great many programs and strategies to help assure success for all students. The teaching team has the potential of being the most powerful structure in the school to attain this goal. The school has many celebrations of success that recognize improvement as well as excellence. The grading system seems to be a significant hindrance to ensuring success for all students.

Orienting Question Number Four:

How does the school empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of students?

"The administration encourages teachers to solve their own problems" (Interview with Social Studies teacher, March 17, 1994).

The Mental Health Team

There are two structures within Neal Middle School's organization that are designed to empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of students. They are the Teaching Teams, which have been discussed in previous sections of this report, and the Mental Health Team. This section will focus on the Mental Health Team and will

include a description of its function and operation, its context in the total school organization, and detailed descriptions of team meetings.

Neal Middle School has adopted the School Development Plan, more commonly known as the Comer Model, of school organization. The Comer Model, developed by Dr. James Comer and the Yale Child Study Program, involves parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and community members in the process of goal and direction-setting for the school. It also establishes organizational structures that ensure decision-making regarding issues that shape the school are made by people representing all the stakeholders of the school, parents, staff, and community members. The three major organizational structures are the School Planning and Management Team, The Parents' Program, and the Mental Health Team.

The Mental Health Team has five objectives:

1. To support teachers as they deal with at-risk students on their team.
2. To address global school issues as they arise.
3. To provide a link between community agencies and the school.
4. To manage the entry process of students referred for special educational services.

5. To train school staff to seek and provide appropriate child development and mental health services in the community (Forsyth, 1994).

The team provides teachers with emotional and professional support as they deal with difficult cases in their classrooms. It also provides teachers, students, and families with resources and services as they are needed. The Mental Health Team at Neal Middle School consists of the following people: two school counselors (one of whom is the committee chair), an assistant principal, a school psychologist, a Family Practice physician associated with Duke Medical Center, a school social worker, three Exceptional Children Program teachers, and the chair of the school's committee to screen students for special educational services. The team often invites representatives of social agencies in the community to join the team as consultants for specific students.

The team meets every Thursday morning from 8:30 to 10:30 in either the Guidance Suite Conference Room or the Library Reference Room throughout the 1993-94 school year. The chairperson for the meetings is Eve, a school counselor at Neal Middle. She often provides doughnuts and juice for the team members and always has candy dishes on the meeting table. The agenda for each meeting is developed by classroom teachers who make written referral to Eve,

describing a problem with a particular student and requesting that the Mental Health Team discuss the problem at its meeting and recommend strategies and interventions to help solve the problem. Often Eve is able to solve the problem herself by providing needed services, resources, or consultation to the student, the family, or the teacher, thus decreasing the team's case load and decreasing the school's response time to a teacher's request for help. She spends considerable time during the week preparing for each meeting, and provides members with an agenda of cases to be discussed, coordinates class coverage for teachers who present cases to the team, and collects student records and any other pertinent information on each student to be discussed.

Meetings of the Mental Health Team follow a standard procedure. First, the agenda is discussed, with Eve giving team members a brief description of each case. An update on previous cases is given by Eve. The records of the student whose case would be considered next are then circulated among the team members so they become familiar with the history and issues surrounding the child. The referring teacher then enters the meeting room and presents a detailed verbal description of the problem, its impact on the student and/or class, and the attempts to resolve the issue prior to referring to the Mental Health Team. The team then discusses the case, with the referring teacher present, and

agrees on a course of action. Eve assigns responsibility to various team members for accomplishing specific actions that are recommended. The following narratives describe a series of Mental Health Team meetings that occurred in March and April of 1994. The meetings were organized around student "cases" and the narratives are similarly organized.

Mental Health Team Meeting, March 10, 1994

Present: Guidance counselor (chair), LD teacher, social worker, assistant principal, School Base Committee chair, Student Services Management Team Facilitator (a central office position serving all schools in their efforts to assist at-risk students), physician (Family Practice doctor associated with Duke Medical Center, a regular member of the team).

The regularly-scheduled Thursday morning meeting begins on time at 8:30 in the Guidance Suite Conference Room, which has a large conference table for all team members to sit around. On the table are cookies and candy, copies of the meeting agenda listing five students to be discussed at 20-minute intervals,, and a stack of the school records of students on the agenda. Eve, a school counselor and chair of the team, sits at one end of the table, and Ann, the assistant principal sits at the other with a laptop computer she uses to takes minutes of the meetings. The team members begin circulating student records for review before

discussing the student. After a few minutes of general conversation and records review, Eve begins with the first case.

Tracy.

A seventh grade student who has been discussed by the team earlier in the year has evidently not responded to the planned interventions. Her Language Arts teacher reports that Tracy continues to behave very inappropriately in all her classes. "She acts repulsive, grabbing herself and others, and offers to perform a variety of sexual acts on her classmates." She was suspended yesterday for fighting and will be out of school for five days. Further discussion reveals that all team members are aware of Tracy's school and family history. There are several incidents described in her file where she was verbally and physically violent to students or teachers. Eve reviews the interventions previously implemented by the team. A behavior contract was developed by the teachers and the counselor, but the teacher reports that it is not working. Several letters of concern have been sent to her parents, but they have never responded to any of them. The school arranged for a medical assessment of Tracy by a physician, who recommended that Tracy take Ritalin to help control her hyperactivity, but she refuses to take it.

The team discusses the family history and the fact that the parents never follow through with anything they have agreed to do regarding the many recommendations to them from school staff. There is a sense of exasperation and hopelessness regarding the success of any intervention they devise. The team discusses reporting Tracy's mother to the Department of Social Services (DSS). One team member says, "If we refer her mother to DSS for abuse, they'll just write it up as a "Neglect" case so they won't have to respond to it in 48 hours." This refers to the regulation that requires a DSS social worker to investigate the home where suspected child abuse is reported within 48 hours of receiving the report. A team member says, "DSS is overworked, understaffed, and disorganized."

The team decides on the following course of action: to report Tracy's mother to Social Services as a neglectful parent.

Corey.

Her sixth grade Math teacher reports, "She's a sweet child, but just doesn't like school. Her family doesn't value education. It's so difficult when there's no parental support." The team discusses Corey's school history. She has several failing grades and excessive absences. The counselor scheduled two counseling sessions a week with Corey since the beginning of the school year, but she has

been absent so much that they seldom meet. The assistant principal calls to the office on a two-way radio and asks the attendance secretary to generate a complete attendance history on Corey, using their computerized student information system. The group discusses the fact that Corey lives with her grandmother who does not make her go to school. In a few minutes, the secretary calls back with the information. Corey's history of absences is long-standing:

Kindergarten - 22 days

First grade - 59 days

Second Grade - 52 days

Third Grade - 43 days

Fourth Grade - 40 days

Fifth Grade - 25 days

Sixth Grade - 21 days to date.

Since kindergarten, Corey has been absent 262 days, which constitutes 1 1/2 years of school missed.

The assistant principal responds explosively.

Let's drag Grandma to court! The girl's missed a year and a half of school and she's only in sixth grade!

Retain her in grade, no options. Call Officer Brown and tell him to arrest Grandma! (Observation, March 10, 1994)

The group seems to enjoy and need the relief this emotional but humorous outburst provides. They continue discussing the case more seriously.

The team decide on the following course of action: 1. To have Officer Brown visit the home and talk frankly and sternly with Corey's grandmother about her obligations to see that Corey attends school; 2. Offer Corey the ability to be promoted if she comes to school regularly and passes all her subjects; 3. Provide Corey with tutoring to help assure that she passes here subjects; 4. Have her academic team meet with Corey on a weekly basis.

Grant.

This is the second time Grant has been recommended to the Mental Health Team this school year. Earlier in the year, the team recommended that his mother seeks regular counseling for Grant and that she consistently provides the medications prescribed to him for seizure control and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Grant was retained in sixth grade last year, and is failing all his subjects again this year. His teacher reports that he refuses to do any work in his classes.

The assistant principal reports that he has been suspended several times this year for weapons possession, fighting, and profanity. The counselor notes that he has above-average ability as evidenced by his IQ test and standardized achievement tests. His grade history shows that he received straight A's in first, second, and third grade, B's in fourth and fifth grades, and all F's in sixth.

His latest standardized achievement test showed him to be in the 99th percentile for the total battery of tests.

The teacher says that Grant "hangs out with other very intelligent but rebellious kids." She reports a recent telephone conversation she had in which Grant's mother reported that he is much more mature this year and takes care of himself and is doing real well at home. The referring teacher said, "So that means it's not Grant. It's the school. The school's at fault." The counselor responds, "Mom's not in touch. There's been no follow-up on counseling and she never got the meds."

The social worker said, "Mom brought a belt with her to school the last time Grant got in trouble. She beat him with it right in the hall."

The counselor responds, "Mom is ditsy."

The assistant principal agrees, "She's a bubble-head."

The team decide on the following course of action: 1. Invite Grant's mother to the next Mental Health Team Meeting; 2. Assign Grant a Big Brother from the Duke University Big Brother/Sister Program; 3. The physician on the team will confer with Grant's doctor to determine the best medical course of action.

Bobby.

Bobby is a seventh grade boy and his math teacher explains his problem to the team.

Bobby is such a nice boy. He's one I'd like to take home with me. He needs a real family. He's an easy mark for others to harass. He's got these big huge glasses, bad teeth. He's small and skinny, and kids pick on him mercilessly. He has stopped doing any work and just stays to himself (Observation, March 10, 1994).

The discussion reveals that Bobby comes from a very poor family. His father is bed-ridden and his mother stays home to take care of her husband. Neither parent has worked in the past two years. Bobby's two older brothers dropped out of school when they were 16, and there is little value for education evident in the family.

The team decides on the following course of action: 1. The counselor will begin seeing Bobby regularly; 2. The assistant principal will talk to Bobby about joining Winners Club, a school club aimed at incorporating alienated students into school activities, such as operating the concession stand at athletic events.

Tammy.

A sixth grade student, her Language Arts teacher reports that she is failing three subjects. "She's a sweet child, but not very smart. She wants to please and does for you when you ask her directly and pay her some attention." The discussion reveals that Tammy has limited academic

abilities, but should be able to pass her subjects. She was retained in third grade. The counselor notes that Tammy has matured quite a bit physically, and has been wearing a great deal of makeup and revealing clothing recently. The Language Arts teacher reports on an incident with Tammy.

One day I brought her to the office to call her mom because she wasn't feeling well. She said her mother wasn't home but she knew where to get her. She dialed a number by heart and got her mother on the phone. I talked to her and I could hear music and glasses and pool in the background. It was a bar! Mom picked her up and brought her there and she played pool the rest of the afternoon. Tammy told me, 'It's the East End Tavern about a mile from here. My mom's there every day' (Observation, March 10, 1994).

Her family contributes to her poor achievement, it is felt. She lives with her grandmother during the week and her mother on the weekends. Her mother dropped out of school and expresses strong displeasure with the Durham schools.

The team decides on the following course of action: 1. Assign Tammy to the Travelers' Team, which is a small, multigrade academic team focused on assisting at-risk students succeed academically; 2. The assistant principal will encourage Tammy to join the Winner's Circle; 3. The counselor will arrange regular tutoring for Tammy in the

areas she is failing; 4. The teaching team will confer with Tammy weekly and report her academic status to the Mental Health Team regularly.

Mental Health Team Meeting, March 17, 1994

Present: Counselor (chair), social worker, LD teacher, School Base Committee chair, assistant principal, physician, Language Arts teacher.

Grant.

Part of the team's intervention plan for Grant devised during last week's team meeting was to have his mother join this morning's meeting, have the team members describe Grant's behavioral problems at school, and try to establish some agreement for her role in helping Grant succeed in school. The following is an account of the interaction between the Mental Health Team and Grant's mother.

The counselor opens the discussion by reviewing Grant's school records. She points out that Grant did very well in school until he came to the middle school, where he "bombed out" in sixth grade.

Mom: He's good as gold at home, at Scouts, in church. Do I need to come to the school and hold y'all's hands? Y'all need more authority.

The Language Arts teacher (referred to as "Teacher") on Grant's team takes the lead in the discussion. She has had the most contact with the mother (referred to as "Mom") during the year, and has established a non-combative relationship with her.

Teacher: He's failing all four academic subjects.

Mom: I've noticed some changes this month. Do you ?

Teacher: Less playful, doing more work. But still only about a third of what's expected. His behavior is as outlandish as it was.

Mom: I learned I got to have more faith and believe in him. And since then, I've had a better relationship with him.

LD Teacher: Do you think he needs counseling?

Mom: He had it in elementary school and they said he needs activities. So he's in Scouts, church, and karate. He entertains everyone in the neighborhood. All the kids look up to him. Most of his friends are all in ninth grade.

Counselor: Maybe some outside counseling can help him make the changes he wants to make. It's hard to do it alone.

Mom: I already did that.

LD Teacher: Yeah, but that was in fifth grade.

Counselor: But why did he start failing after that?

Physician: What is his problem in class? Attention span?

Teacher: Yes, but now he seems to have some goals, some focus. He's still doing much less than he's capable of. He's still failing now.

Assistant Principal: If you took away all of his daily work and his homework and just counted his test grades, would he be passing?

Teacher: Yes.

Counselor: What we are exploring is whether Grant has an attention problem.

Mom: He can sit for two hours with baseball cards. He draws for hours. He prices and sets up stock in my store. He does his own laundry. I'm not allowed to do it.

Physician: What does he think of school?

Mom: He loves school.

Counselor: We have five minutes. What should we do?

Assistant Principal: He's a tactile learner and that's a hard child to teach. Why don't we modify his assignments? If you give 20 problems, tell him he has to do ten, but they have to be done.

Mom: Give him a challenge. He'll do it.

Assistant Principal: Instead of making him write a composition, let him draw it and then write about his picture.

Physician: Look at the Durham Arts Council for lessons.

Counselor: OK. We're out of time. We have some things to do and so do you. Let's give it a shot.

Mom: Well thank you all very much (she stands and leaves).

LD Teacher (to Language Arts Teacher): Are you all right with this?

Teacher: I'll try to hold it together with everything else that's going on (March 17, 1994).

The counselor thanks the teacher for coming to the meeting and spending so much of her time helping Grant. The teacher leaves and the assistant principal comments that nothing has changed.

Mary.

Mary is a new seventh grade student who transferred from another Durham middle school. She has been at Neal for only two weeks and has already had serious problems with teachers and students. She has been verbally and physically abusive to classmates and teachers. She is described by the counselor.

The teacher who presented the case said, "I brought her case to you as a preventive measure before something really big happens."

The counselor describes her. "She's small, cute and probably sexually active. She seems obsessed with sex."

The physician says, "I'm going to step out on a limb here, but her background and behavior now - I suspect sexual abuse in the past."

In studying her folder, they discover that in her previous school, Mary was recommended for a self-contained Behaviorally and Emotionally Handicapped classroom. She withdrew from the school before the placement was made. The social worker and assistant principal recognized the names of some of Mary's family members listed in her school records. Three of her cousins and a brother are in self-contained classes for behaviorally and emotionally handicapped students.

The team decides on the following course of action: The counselor agrees to call the school Mary last attended to find out why she was recommended for the special class and why the staff at that school did not inform the Neal staff of Mary's special needs and behavioral problems. The School Base Committee chair agrees to trace down the paperwork that was used to place Mary in the self-contained class and prepare the appropriate papers need to continue

the placement into a self-contained class for behaviorally and emotionally handicapped students.

Building Bridges

The counselor reported on a new program called Building Bridges that is aimed at promoting racial understanding. She says, "This racial issue is coming up more and more and tensions rising in this school racially." She explains that Building Bridges is a program best used within a classroom and she asked if anyone could recommend a class to pilot the program at Neal.

The assistant principal says, "Try it with Trelor's class. She's really interested in things like this and her class is accustomed to having discussions. How's the Travelers Team doing with the new teacher?"

The counselor responds, "Rough. The kids are giving her a hard time. They're having behavior problems.

The assistant principal continues.

If the Travelers team was like last year, I think they'd be good for the Building Bridges program, but not the way it is this year. I believe in the Travelers Program but the placements were wrong this year. It wasn't balanced racially, gender-wise. It needs to be restructured. It should be just for kids who really want to get ahead academically (Observation, March 17, 1994).

Jason.

There is a brief discussion about Jason, who is not on the day's agenda. The discussion is initiated by the teacher who is presenting the next case that is on the agenda. She reports that Jason brought a "girlie" magazine to school. He showed it around the class and disrupted the whole class. The teacher says that Jason and Jerry are trying to get rid of their new teacher in the Travelers Team. Jason, she reports can be cooperative. She says he responds to rewards, but there is no follow-through at home, so he feels no great need to do school work. There is no resolution.

Jerry.

His sixth grade Language Arts teacher reports. He's failing everything. He curses all the time. He curses out his mother. He told me, 'I ain't gonna do this goddamn paper', and threw it at me. Mom came in two weeks ago and we went through all this same stuff. She said don't call her anymore. It would be a disservice to every sixth grader to pass him. He's big and older, but he doesn't do any work (Observation, March 17, 1994).

The assistant principal responds.

If you don't have a good answer as to what he'll do different and how he'll benefit from retention, he'll

pass. Summer school's a waste of time and money. It's just an employment agency for teachers. Cross-team him with Crowley; she'll put him in his place (Observation, March 17, 1994).

The LD teacher, showing signs of exasperation, says, "It's so hard to keep track of all these kids. We see so many kids here!"

The physician, after reviewing Jerry's school records slides them to the middle of the table and says, "Check his records. He was AG in elementary school. Hits middle school and falls apart."

The counselor asks, "He's failing everything; what do we do?"

The teacher responds, "I'll talk to the teachers about cross-teaming. Let's have the parents in." There is a feeling of futility and anger around the table as the team deals with another of the many students who continue to fail socially and academically despite the best efforts of the team.

Timmy.

A seventh grader, Timmy's Math teacher presents the case to the team, reviewing some of Timmy's negative school history. "In class, he disrupts so much! You really have to see him. He uses anything to disrupt the class."

The assistant principal explains, "We video-taped him in class so mom could see how he behaves. The video camera was stolen with the tape still in it."

The teacher says, "Timmy is so very angry."

The LD teacher reports that Timmy is seeing a psychiatrist. She has talked with the psychiatrist and says that he has great disdain for the school and disregard for teachers. The group agrees that Timmy needs long-term counseling, but they have been unable to get those services.

The team decides on the following course of action: The counselor will invite the psychiatrist to the next Mental Health Team meeting to discuss Timmy.

Ginny.

The social worker gives a status report on Ginny, a sixth grade girl. Ginny is pregnant and is due to deliver this week. The teachers, counselors, and social worker have supported her throughout the pregnancy. They bought her maternity clothes, helped her get to school when she felt sick and could not ride the school bus, and made sure she had appropriate medical care throughout the school year. The school district has a support group for pregnant middle school girls, but Ginny's mother would not allow her to attend. Her mother would not allow her to get an abortion, will not let her give the baby up for adoption, and forced her to go to school every day throughout the pregnancy.

Her last period Language Arts teacher reports that she is dilating and has stomach pains. Ginny is 12 years old.

The team decides on the following course of action: The team leader, school nurse, and social worker will meet that afternoon to make contingency plans for delivering the baby at school, transporting her if needed before delivery, and supporting her after delivery.

Retention

The team ended the meeting with a discussion of retention. The members see retention as a dilemma. There is abundant evidence supporting the idea that retaining a student is ineffective and harmful. Yet, when students who fail most of their subjects and disrupt classes throughout the year are passed to the next grade, it is felt by many on the team that the motivation for other students to work hard toward promotion is destroyed. "The idea that you can do no work at all and get away with it permeates this school", says a Language Arts teacher.

The assistant principal responds.

Many of our teams have a third to a half failing at least one subject. A quarter of the school has to go to summer school to get promoted. That's not right. And you know the principal makes the final decision after summer school, and he promotes them all (Observation, March 17, 1994).

The counselor responds.

The best we can do is take each case individually. The principal meets with the teams about each child who goes to summer school. A lot of time is spent on each one. It's (promotion) not automatic. But our job here is to deal with the individual cases brought to us and do the best we can (March 17, 1994).

Mental Health Team Meeting March 24, 1994

Present: Counselor (chair), School Base Committee chair, L. teacher, assistant principal, physician, social worker.

Ellen.

An eighth grader, Ellen has a long history of receiving special educational services for learning disabilities. Her recent academic achievement test results were higher than before and thus she no longer qualifies for special services. The team is concerned that she is still very much in need of special services, especially help in math and occupational therapy (OT) to help her develop her fine motor coordination. Writing anything is difficult for Ellen and she has never been able to copy information from the chalkboard or overhead to paper accurately or quickly enough to keep up with the class. It is mentioned that she is a

hard worker and a delightful young girl. The assistant principal responds.

We know her and we can support her here. But what happens next year when she goes to high school? No follow-up services are available. She'll just be put in the EMH (Educable Mentally Handicapped) class, and she doesn't belong there. Central Office is pressuring us to eliminate all the borderline Exceptional Children identifications so we can save money (Observation, March 24, 1994).

The group expresses general dissatisfaction with the support they get from the central office administrators.

The School Base Committee chair says, "We can't just let her fall through the cracks. What can we do for her as a faculty? She needs to continue OT and get some math help so she can make it through this year."

The team decides on the following course of action: The math teacher who presented the case to the Mental Health Team agrees to tutor Ellen three times a week. The social worker will find out if the school can get financial aid to continue OT through Public Law 504.

Jennifer.

This seventh grade girl is five feet, eleven inches tall and weighs 230 pounds. She is described by her Language Arts teacher as "mean, angry, disruptive, and

argumentative". As the discussion continues, it becomes apparent that the teaching team has not enacted any organized interventions to improve Jennifer's behavior.

The team decides on the following course of action: The counselor suggests that this case is not severe enough to be handled by the Mental Health Team, and that the Teaching Team needs to try a few strategies over a reasonable period of time. If Jennifer is still a problem, then the teachers can re-submit her as a case for the Mental Health Team. The assistant principal says, "Let's approach her about counseling. We'll do it carefully and maybe she'll take the bait. I'll call mom, who's just like Jennifer."

The beat.

During the discussion over Jennifer's school problems, a student is drumming on the wall outside the conference room where the Mental Health Team is meeting. He is probably waiting in line with his class. The drumming is clear and constant, and is unnerving to most groups of adults involved in a meeting. But no one mentions it; nor does it interrupt the flow of the meeting. Three members of the team begin keeping the beat and moving to its rhythm in their seats. When the drumming stops, they all smile and sigh disappointedly. The meeting continues and no one mentions the drumming. The teachers show through this

incident that they are inextricably connected with the school and the student body. Their senses, their intellect, and their emotions seem interwoven with the school. This small incident also adds to this observer's feeling that the school has a pulse and a collective life of its own.

Jerry.

Jerry is an eighth grade boy with a history of medically-related school problems. He has been discussed by the team earlier in the year because of behavior problems. His Math teacher reports that the behavior problems continue and that his class work has also declined in quantity and quality. The physician studies Jerry's records and is struck by the inconsistent treatment of medical problems through the years. He indicates that some of the medical problems described in Jerry's records, like asthma and constipation, would have been resolved by now if he had received regular medical attention. Jerry should be taking three prescription medications, one for asthma, one for constipation, and one for hyperactivity. He has taken none of them in the past year. The assistant principal reports that Jerry's mother does not keep up with the medical needs of her son and never buys the prescribed medications. Jerry's medications cease when the original supply given to his mother by the health clinic is exhausted.

The team decides on the following course of action: The physician will contact Jerry's mother and see Jerry himself to get him caught up with his medical needs. No classroom interventions are planned.

Sally.

The assistant principal asks the group to discuss Sally briefly, even though she is not on the agenda. Sally is a 14 year old girl in the seventh grade. The assistant principal reports that Sally's attendance has been poor in the last two months and that she has been seen "walking the streets with some other young girls in the 'red light' district (of Durham) and they're all dressed like prostitutes". The social worker agrees to visit the home and the counselor agrees to talk with Sally the next day she comes to school.

Dupres.

The assistant principal brings another student not on the agenda to the attention of the team and asks that the team briefly considers his needs. Dupres is an eighth grade boy whose school records indicate periodic behavioral problems and generally low achievement throughout his schooling. The assistant principal expresses concern over Dupres' recent obsession with violence, death, and drugs and asks the group for advise regarding the school's response to

this behavior. The discussion reveals that Dupres lives with his mother in a small apartment in one of the subsidized housing areas. His mother does not work and has no employment history. She has been connected with drug use and dealing. There is suspicion among the group members that Dupres' mother has involved him in selling drugs for her. The counselor, who has had a good relationship with the mother in the past, agrees to call her and express concern about Dupres. She also agrees to see Dupres in school twice a week for counseling.

Big Brother/Sister Program

The physician and the counselor report on their progress in developing a big brother/sister program, matching students at Neal Middle School with medical students at Duke Medical Center. The physician has obtained the commitment of six Duke students to participate in the program by interacting with a young person from Neal at least once a month. The medical students are expected to meet with the student at the student's home and take them to an activity within the Durham area. The counselor sent home letters describing the program to the parents of all the identified at-risk students in the school. Attached to the letter was a form to be completed by the parent giving permission for their child to participate in the program. The letter was mailed home three weeks ago and not one

student has returned the forms to school. The team decides to call the parents who received the letters and describe the program to them individually and encourage them to return the permission form to school.

Mental Health Team Meeting, March 31, 1994

Present: Counselor, assistant principal, L.. teacher, School Base Committee chair, social worker (chair), Language Arts teacher, two pediatricians (one is a guest), and a school psychologists (attending to share information with the group regarding one of the students they will be discussing).

Timmy.

Timmy is a seventh grade boy who has displayed a great deal of behavior problems throughout the sixth and seventh grades. Through the efforts of the counselor, Timmy was evaluated by a school psychologist who followed the evaluation with several counseling sessions last year. Timmy's behavior has not improved. She says, "Something needs to be done for the sanity of all those kids and teachers around him." The counselor asked the psychologist to talk with the team about Timmy's behavior and efforts to control it.

The psychologist talks to the group about a concept he called "Order of Business". He explains that everyone has

issues that are prioritized. If a person is to deal with problems associated with a certain issue, then the issues that precede it in priority need to be resolved first, thus the Order of Business. Timmy's first order of business, or the issue that has the highest priority for him, the psychologist explains, is anger. The psychologist says, "The reason Timmy doesn't respond to your assistance to improve his behavior is that you haven't address his first order of business: anger."

The team decides on the following course of action: The L.. teacher, who has a close relationship with Timmy, agrees to see him several times a week to help him identify his anger and realize it as a significant problem in his relationships with his friends, family, and teachers.

No Dun.

No Dun is an eighth grade student who came from Cambodia. His family was one of the last "Boat People" refugees to leave Cambodia. They arrived in the United States several years ago. No Dun has two younger sisters and a brother who are all high achievers and identified as academically gifted. The father has been gone for two years, traveling around the country looking for work. He sends money home to support his family.

At the end of his sixth grade year, No Dun was convicted on four counts of Breaking and Entering and one

count of Grand Theft Auto. He spent a year in training school as a result. He progressed remarkably well in training school. He flourished in the regimental atmosphere, attained excellent grades, and was considered a model student.

No Dun is a favorite of his teaching team and his teachers regularly extend themselves to help him. He is being discussed by the Mental Health Team because his teachers report that he has ceased doing school work, has had irregular attendance over the past two months, and he has been arguing and fighting with other boys. They are concerned about him and do not want to see him in trouble again.

The School Base Committee chair made an emotional appeal for the Mental Health Team to get all of the school's resources and services behind No Dun and not let him fall.

The assistant principal says, "Somebody at Juvenile Services has dropped the ball. They have made no contact with him since he left training school. In two months, school's over. We have to get this community to support him!"

The L. teacher says, "He's failing every subject this grading period. He's getting into trouble and nobody's been able to help him. Let's get him back in training school where he did so well. Incarcerate him!" As has occurred in other team meetings, the group exhibits anger and

frustration over the evident inability of all the available agencies and services to really follow through with coordinated, consistent, and effective help for the students the Mental Health Team considers.

The team decided on the following course of action: The assistant principal will make a home visit with the School Base Committee chair and explain to No Dun's mother that he is getting into trouble again and needs help. The counselor will call Juvenile Services and tell them to follow up on No Dun's case.

Policy Proposal Review

The team is given copies of a proposed policy, written by Central Office staff, that outlines procedures to follow when a student is suspected of substance abuse. The procedures described are complex and, according to the policy's wording, must be strictly followed in every instance of suspected abuse. One portion of the policy states:

Upon suspecting a student of substance abuse, the principal must formally accuse the student in the principal's office with a witness present. Immediately following this meeting, the principal will notify Juvenile Services, the County Court, the County and/or City Police, the Superintendent's Office, the Student

Services Management Team Facilitator, and the student's family (Observation, March 24, 1994).

Team members express opinion that the policy proposal reflects a simplistic and unrealistic attitude about dealing with students and drug problems, and the capacity of the principal and his staff to deal with such a cumbersome procedure. Toward the end of the policy discussion, the group directs a great deal of humor and sarcasm at the policy and its authors.

Nikki.

Nikki is repeating sixth grade. She has a long history of poor attendance, poor achievement, and exhibits a variety of inappropriate behaviors. Her Language Arts teacher reports that she often stares off into space for several minutes at a time. Nikki also urinates in her pants while seated in class. She seems to not notice or care about the wetness, but sits until class is over and walks to the next class. Her classmates do not want to sit near her because of the odor, and she is becoming more isolated socially because of this problem. This evidently has been occurring frequently over the past few weeks.

The physician reviews her school records and reports to the team that Nikki has suffered from epilepsy for years and her mother has neglected to provide her with proper medication consistently since the epilepsy was diagnosed.

He says that if her epilepsy is out of control, she will suffer petit mal seizures which may manifest themselves by aimless staring and loss of bladder control.

The assistant principal reports that the mother called her last week asking what Nikki had to do to pass. She told the mother that Nikki's grades have improved, but not enough to pass. The assistant principal says to the team, "She'll beat the system in Summer School."

The team decides on the following course of action: The physician will follow up with Nikki's doctor and her mother and see to it that she establishes an appropriate routine to control the epilepsy.

Mental Health Team Meeting, April 7, 1994

Present: Counselor (chair), social worker, assistant principal, School Base Committee chair, L.. teacher, physician.

Lonny.

An eighth grade student with a long history of violent behavior, Lonny is being discussed by the team because his teaching team cannot control him. Most recently, he was sent to the principal's office for feeling a girl's breasts in class. He has been evaluated by a private psychologist who feels that there is very little the school can do for or with Lonny. He says that Lonny has an Attention Deficit

Disordered (ADD) and an Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and should be placed in a special school for behaviorally disordered students. The school does not have adequate documentation and testing accomplished to qualify Lonny for any special program or school. So, the staff will develop another behavior contract for him.

The L.. teacher complains, "We're not consistent. He is supposed to be suspended every time he's written up. We said we agreed on three, five, and then ten days suspension, but the administration doesn't follow through."

The assistant principal responds, "I agree, but I can't make sure the other assistant follows through or even reads the recommendations we send him." She promises to see that he is suspended for the most recent incident.

The team decides on the following course of action: The counselor will assist the teaching team develop a new behavior contract for Lonny and present it to the principal with a strong recommendation to follow through with the plan.

Ginny.

Ginny is the sixth grade girl who was pregnant. The counselor reports that she had a health seven pound girl and both were doing fine. Ginny came right back to school. She and her mother have established a cooperative schedule to share taking care of the baby. Mom will take care of the

baby during the school day and go to work at night. She is more supportive and upbeat about Ginny now than before the delivery.

Ellen.

On March 24, the team discussed Ellen and her need for tutoring and OT services even though she no longer qualified for them under Exceptional Children Program rules. The team decided to explore public law 504 as a possible funding source for Ellen's services, especially OT. The assistant principal reports that they are able to process Ellen's service needs through PL 504 and payment will be supported by the state. The group is happy to celebrate this small victory.

Mario.

Mario is a sixth grade boy of limited mental ability who is in a special self-contained class for the Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH). His teacher reports that Mario is increasingly focused on sexual activity in school, and most recently felt her breasts. She reports that he behaves almost childlike and displays no sense of remorse, guilt, or responsibility for his actions. He has already been to court to face rape charges. The teacher talked recently to Mario's mother, who told the teacher she was "looking to get rid of him - put him in a group home", and that she did not

care what we did with him. The teacher said, "The most consistent part of his life is me and this school."

The team decides on the following course of action: The assistant principal will call the Department of Social Services and ask them to get involved with Mario. The counselor will hire a consultant to develop with her a responsibility training program for students, with Mario in mind. The counselor will contact the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) and see if they have any services that can be helpful with Mario.

An aside.

Toni, a seventh grade Social Studies teacher and sponsor of the Young Women In Action club shares an incident with the team.

One of my students just humiliated herself big time. She went to take her sweater off in class 'cause it was getting warm. Her T-shirt got caught on the sweater and came up with it. She bared it all for the world to see. She flashed everything. That's a middle school nightmare on a par with peeing in pants and throwing up in class (Observation, April 7, 1994).

Although everyone feels bad for the girl, Toni's delivery and the image the story gives causes a general roar of laughter. This is only the second time this group laughed during the meetings attended by this observer.

Alfred.

Alfred is a sixth grade boy with limited mental ability. The counselor reports that he was suspended for two days last week. He lives with his grandparents. When he did not return to school after the suspension, the attendance secretary called the grandparents to find out why he was not in school. The grandmother said they had not seen Alfred in five days and did not know where he was. The grandparents had not notified anyone that Alfred was missing. The counselor said she called the Department of Social Services to report Alfred missing and also to report the grandparents as negligent in caring for Alfred.

Missy.

She is a eighth grade girl who has been missing from home for two days. The counselor reports that the parents have reported this to the police. Several of the team members know Missy and her family background. They know she does not get along with her mother and there are frequent arguments at home. Members of the group express the opinion that perhaps she ran away with her boyfriend, who is 19. The assistant principal says, "If the police find her, they can't make her go home. She's 16. We've been working on Missy for years and now she's gone."

Craig.

An eighth grader, Craig has a long history of behavior problems and violence. He is presented to the team because his teachers are beginning to fear him. The math teacher reports.

He scares me. He's going to grow up and do terrible things. Mom is a felon and guardian of two kids that were given to her by a friend who didn't want them anymore. She has two other adopted kids and her husband left the house two years ago. She called me Monday and asked what Craig had to do to pass. He's failing all his subjects. He's not going to pass (April 7, 1994).

The counselor said, "He was written up twice yesterday and sent to SAC (School Alternative Class). There's been a strong recommendation for counseling for years but mom doesn't follow through."

The assistant principal said comments.

He's tortured and killed mice in Science class. Lies about everything. He is severely profane and abusive to kids in class and on the bus. Mother was accused of murdering her business partner - strangled with a wire, but she was acquitted. When 'A Current Affair' comes to interview us, I want to be able to say, "We did everything we could" (Observation, April 7, 1994).

The team decides on the following course of action: The counselor will write a letter to the principal asking him to have a meeting with Craig's mother. The School Base Committee chair will initiate the process that they hope leads to a placement in a special class for behaviorally emotionally handicapped (BEH) students. The process involves completing several forms documenting behavior and student information. These forms go to the Assistance Team which recommends interventions for the teachers to engage for a six-week period. If no improvement is observed after this period, the Assistance Team may refer the case to the School Base Committee (SBC), which initiates another series of forms to document student information and behavior. The SBC will evaluate the information and make a recommendation for placement in a special program if the information satisfies the criteria for entry to a program.

The Assistance Team and SBC processes together may take five months before a decision for placement is made. These processes are heavily regulated by the state, which demands strict adherence to them. Federal and state funds for special education can be withheld from a school district that does not comply with these procedures.

Non-English-Speaking Students

The counselor reports that there are four new Hispanic students at Neal Middle School who require English as a Second Language (ESL) services. They receive ESL services once a week from a teacher who is highly regarded by the team, but she does not have the time to see the students enough to really be effective. The Hispanic Cultural Center of Durham, operated by the Episcopal Church, has offered some services, but they are also inadequate. The Cultural Center is reported to be dissatisfied with Durham School's response to the needs of Hispanic children and are preparing a law suit against the school system to force it to increase its ESL program.

Teachers are concerned because the four Hispanic students are not mingling with other students and do not seem to try and learn English. Recently a Peer Mediation session was held because the Hispanic kids were doing "weird" things. One example given was that the Hispanic girls hold hands at times when walking through the hallways. The teacher in the mediation session explained that these were cultural differences and were not wrong or bad, just different. Behavior among the Hispanic students is disintegrating and more of the other students are becoming uneasy around them.

The team decides on the following course of action:
The School Base Committee chair will request more ESL

services for Neal Middle School. The counselor will enroll the four students in a special English immersion program held in the summer at Githens Middle School in Durham.

Mental Health Team meeting, April 21, 1994

Present: Counselor (chair), assistant principal, social worker, L.. teacher, School Base Committee chair, Language Arts teacher, physician, Sheriff's deputy, Assistant District Attorney for Juvenile Services.

Tan.

The counselor reports on Tan, an eighth grade Oriental boy who is being discussed by the team because of decreased attendance and grades. Tan's father died two years ago. She explains that each year a teacher at the middle school has taken Tan under their wing and given him attention and support. That seemed to keep him going. No one has taken that role this year, and he is falling behind academically. He has missed over 20 days of school so far this year. His sister dropped out of school last year and had a baby. His Language Arts teacher says, "He's a sweet precious kid, but he's getting in with the wrong crowd."

The team decides on the following course of action: The L.. teacher will make a home visit and talk with the mother, who does not speak or understand very much English. She will try to convey to the mother how important it is for Tan to go to school, and will threaten to report her to the

police if she does not see to it that Tan goes to school. The L.. teacher will establish a tutoring time for him during the week and try to be the supportive teacher he needs this year.

Discussion with the Assistant District Attorney for Juvenile Services

Durham's District Attorney's (DA) office recently established a new position, Assistant Attorney for Juvenile Services. Marcia Corey holds the post, and asked to sit in on a Mental Health Team meeting and address the group after the meeting's business was accomplished. She explains the major reason for her position being created was the dramatic increase in juvenile crime in the area. Juveniles are involved in more crimes of all types than ever before. In addition, juveniles are involved at an ever-increasing level in serious and violent crimes. This situation has clogs the court system and causes a crisis in the juvenile detention center system. Marcia's goals are to reduce the number of juvenile crimes and reverse the rate of juveniles entering the court system in the Durham area. She intends to accomplish these goals by intervening in systems that spawn a great deal of juvenile crime, like subsidized housing neighborhoods, and develop alternatives to the court system for juvenile offenders. She talks about the importance of the work the Mental Health Team is doing to keep young

people out of crime and the court system. She also says that Neal Middle School is known throughout the county as the one school that takes seriously its responsibility to help at-risk students. She believes the Mental Health Team should serve as a model for all the other schools. The discussion ends with some general questions by Marcia about the school and how the administration operates. The team members give Marcia several suggestions they feel will help improve access to services for students and families.

Gang activity at Neal Middle School

The assistant principal reports that yesterday a student was severely beaten at school by a group of young boys. It is coincidental that the district attorney is present the day after this incident. The team discusses the beating. "It was a massacre," said the deputy.

The assistant principal describes the events leading up to the beating.

Raymond is a new student. He enrolled about two weeks ago and already he's organized a gang called the New Fools. This is his third school. He was thrown out of two schools this year. The Dog Pound, a gang we've had in the school awhile doesn't like a new gang coming in, so they beat up one of the New Fools and sent the others threatening letters, saying they'll be hit soon (Observation, April 21, 1994).

The boy who was beaten is in stable condition in the hospital. The incident drew media attention and the radio and television news, and local newspapers ran the story. The media coverage irritates the staff and several team members voice their concern that this is unfair to the school.

Marcia Corey, the Assistant DA, agrees to meet with members of the Dog Pound at 9:30 next Tuesday at school. She will warn them not to get involved in any more beatings. She will tell them they will go to jail if they make another hit.

Deputy Lee, who volunteers a day a week at Neal discusses the new redistricting plan.

The new student assignment plan will place rival gangs - four of them - at Neal Middle School. There'll be a blood bath here if they do that. Nobody asked the police what they thought when the school board was making this plan. They're crazy if they do it (Observation, April 21, 1994).

Mental Health Team Meeting, April 28, 1994

Present: Counselor (chair), L.. teacher, School Base Committee chair, social worker, assistant principal, physician.

Maynard.

The counselor reports that Maynard is in eighth grade and is failing. He has been retained twice in his school career. He is six feet, three inches tall and very mature-looking. The group discusses the wisdom of retaining him again. He is not a behavior problem, and his teachers feel he is limited in his ability. But, the fact remains that he has not met minimum requirements for promotion.

The team decides on the following action: Enroll Maynard in summer school. If he still does not pass, then the group will recommend that the principal "place" Maynard in the ninth grade.

Terri.

The Social Studies teacher describes Terri as a bright, attractive sixth grade girl with red hair, freckles, and a great smile. She is well-liked by her classmates and teachers, and holds an office in the Student Council. Terri's Social Studies teacher referred Terri for the team to consider, because she and the teaching team are worried about her. She is failing most of her subjects and has missed 32 days of school this year. She seems depressed and says she has no friends and no one to confide in.

The physician, after studying Terri's records, says, "She had excellent fabulous grades until this year. Her CAT

scores are 97th and 99th percentile. She's been in the AG program since third grade. What happened?"

The counselor investigated Terri's family life and activities before the team meeting. She talked to her friends and teachers from her elementary school and relays to the team what she found.

Terri and her parents are homeless. They've been living on the streets and in shelters for three years. All that time, Terri's maintained excellent attendance at school and excellent grades. She's seen as a regular middle class girl with lots of friends.

Terri's parents are drug addicts and have been for years. Sometime during this school year, both were diagnosed as HIV positive. They realized they couldn't keep Terri, and persuaded a friend of theirs to take Terri and raise her in her home. The Department of Social Services (DSS) is investigating the friend to see if she is fit to be given legal custody of the girl. Terri feels abandoned and alone. Her experience certainly explains the change in her behavior at school and her apparent depression (Observation, April 28, 1994).

The team decides on the following course of action: The counselor will contact DSS and monitor the custody process and she will start seeing Terri regularly in counseling sessions. The assistant principal will involve

Terri in activities, such as helping run the concession stand at basketball games, to help Terri get involved with other students and feel less alone. The teacher team will tutor Terri several times a week and assure that she does not fail.

One of Terri's teachers who helped present the case to the team says, "Terri is such a dear child. How could this happen to her or any child? I feel like taking her home." The L. teacher and the School Base Committee chair say they, too want to take Terri home. This is an emotional moment. Everyone's eyes are filled with tears and the group sits silently for a moment.

The problems this team takes on are so big. There's just so little we can really do (Interview with counselor, March 17, 1994).

Summary

Teaching teams and the Mental Health Team are the two major representations of Neal Middle School's staff empowered to make decisions about the experiences of the students. The teaching teams have the power to decide the day's schedule, how the curriculum will be delivered, how they will interact with parents, and what strategies they will engage to assist individual students. The Mental Health Team decides on interventions to assist students who are experiencing serious school and social problems. The

Mental Health Team can quickly focus the resources of the school and community to effectively solve a problem.

Orienting Question Number Five:

How does the school employ teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents?

Teachers help each other be successful (Interview with Social Studies teacher, March 17, 1994).

This is a very innovative staff. They do everything for at-risk kids. They try every intervention and alternative. The staff is close and supportive. They help each other (Interview with Language Arts teacher, March 10, 1994).

Neal Middle School has 72 certified staff members. There are three administrators, 25 teachers in support programs, and 44 academic teachers. All are certified in the areas in which they work, and most hold certifications in additional areas. For example, one of the assistant principals holds certifications for the following positions: Elementary Teacher, Reading Specialist, Curriculum Specialist, Secondary Language Arts Teacher, Academically Gifted Teacher, Principal, and Superintendent. No staff member holds a degree or certificate specifically designed for the middle grades. Two student teachers in the school

are in undergraduate programs that will earn them a middle grades concentration in their major.

The majority of teachers have been at Neal for more than four years, which means most of the staff is tenured. Turnover is low and teachers are aware of the importance of supporting each other. This support leads to unity and the staff seems quite unified. Many of the teachers socialize with each other after school and on weekends. Several teachers rented a beach house together for a week during the past few summers.

All teachers have received staff development training in areas that would heighten their awareness and understanding of young adolescents. Training in peer mediation and conflict resolution, strategies to assist learning disabled students in the regular classroom, and strategies for accommodating different learning styles. In addition, all teachers experienced a three-day workshop to learn to use the Quest program in their Home Base classes.

Summary

Although the teachers at Neal Middle School were not initially trained to teach young adolescents and middle school, the combination of their experience, continuity in years with the school, and in service training results in a faculty that is in fact expert in teaching young adolescents.

Orienting Question Number Six:

How does the school foster the health and physical fitness of its students?

All students participate in Physical Education classes daily for one semester during the school year. They attend Health Education classes daily in the alternating semester. Teacher teams monitor the health of their students and refer them to appropriate services or the Mental Health Team if a problem with health cannot be resolved within the team. The Home Base teachers and the regular core academic teachers counsel students on healthful living very often and on an informal, situational basis. The Mental Health Team, with a physician in its membership, is a significant factor in the health and well-being of students, especially at-risk students.

Summary

All students experience the same Physical Education and Health programs as mandated by the state through the Standard Course of Study. Teaching teams and the Mental Health Team provide additional assistance in the area of health for at-risk students as needed.

Orienting Question Number Seven:

How does the school re-engage the family in the education of students?

Neal Middle School, through the efforts of the principal and incorporation of the Comer School Improvement model, operates a wide array of strategies that engage families in the school and educational process.

The Comer Model

The Comer model includes a school governance committee, called the School Planning and Management Team, that includes parents and community members working together with teachers and administrators to set the goals and direction for the school. The Comer model also requires a Parents Program that is organized to include large numbers of parents in a variety of projects and activities. The Parent-Teacher-Student Association, and Parent Volunteer Program are examples of aspects of the Parents Program. A third element of the Comer model that involves parents and community members in school affairs is the Mental Health Team, which is designed to plan interventions for at-risk students.

Family Nights

The principal and staff have, in addition to the Comer initiatives instituted several strategies to involve parents in school affairs and inform them about their children's education. The teachers and administrators host Neal Middle School Family Night twice during the school year. The

teachers prepare and serve dinner in the school cafeteria to the Neal students and their families (hot dogs and beans one night and spaghetti the other night). After dinner, entertainment is provided by students. Teachers then present information about several aspects of the school program. The dinners are very well-attended and are reported by the principal and assistant principal to be an activity that creates a greater feeling of partnership and unity between parents and the school than any other activity the school sponsors.

Algebra Nights

The school also sponsors Algebra Nights for parents whose children are taking Algebra. This began as a strategy to diminish the anxiety parents and students were feeling about Algebra. Math teachers sponsor five evening meetings and provide light refreshments. The five meetings are spent sharing information and discussing topics such as expectations for succeeding in math, the End of Course Test, technology in math, and real-world applications of Algebra. All sessions include hands-on activities for parents to try so they will become familiar with the subject and see that it is not something about which to be anxious.

Neighborhood Meetings

The teachers and principal offer neighborhood meetings several times a year. The principal reserves a community center or church in various areas of Neal's attendance zone and he and teacher volunteers spend an evening talking about the school and answering questions. The principal explains.

Sometimes the teachers and I outnumbered the audience.

One night we were in a high-crime neighborhood and I had to pay a couple of my students to watch our cars so they didn't get stolen or trashed during the meeting (Interview, February 24, 1994).

Teaching Teams

Teaching teams do a great deal to incorporate parents into the school process. There are parent meetings with teachers every day within the teams. Team members communicate directly with parents, developing strong bonds with many. As in many other areas of the school, the teaching team is a critical element to the school's success in engaging families in education..

Summary

Neal Middle School has many successful efforts that re-engage the family in education. The Comer Model has included parents in the governance of the school. The staff offers many informational meetings for parents in the

evenings that encourage parents to become involved in the school and their children's education. The teaching teams engage families in the education process on an individual basis.

Orienting Question Number Eight:

How does the school connect students to the community?

Many of the programs and strategies described in this study connect students to the community. The Mental Health Team plans interventions for students at risk and very often those strategies include direct contact with community agencies, professionals, and businesses. The contacts often result in the interaction of students and members of these community agencies. For example, the Methodist Children's Home outside of Durham provides Neal Middle School with home-school counselors. The RHORS program, which offers tutoring and counseling on Saturday mornings, brings students, parents, and community members together each session. The program that involves students with community members most often is Save Our Males. The program sponsors take students to various community activities (museums, concerts) and invites community members to come to the school and talk with the young boys in the program.

Summary

Neal serves students from at least two distinct communities and does not serve as a center for either one. It does, however, provide activities for students that engage them in the larger Durham community through participating in cultural and recreational events.

Guilford and Neal Middle Schools are alike in many ways, one being the commitment of their teachers to assisting at-risk students. They are different in their approaches to this assistance. Chapter V compares and contrasts the two schools in their approaches and draws implications from the data reported in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS,
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the data of both schools in three ways that compare their efforts to assist at-risk students. The first compares the schools and their efforts in the key elements of Community, School, Administration, Staff, and Programs and Practices For At-Risk Students. The second compares them in relation to the Orienting Questions. The third way compares themes that emerge from the data collected in each school. Convergent themes, ones in which both schools are similar, and divergent themes, ones in which the schools differ, are described. Conclusions are drawn following the comparisons, and are organized under the four Carnegie Recommendations that represent most of the data collected. The chapter continues with a discussion of implications from the data and recommendations from those implications for educators seeking to develop successful interventions for at-risk middle school students. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research.

Comparison of Schools By Key Elements

The Communities

Guilford Middle School is situated in a predominately middle class community that has enjoyed a close relationship with the school for decades. The first school in the area was built on the same location 70 years ago and the community and its school have been interconnected since. The two federally-subsidized housing areas are located relatively close to the school, so they also have a connectedness with Guilford Middle. The close relationship between the school and community is magnified by the fact that the school campus houses the community's elementary school, so the families whose children attend identify the school as theirs for six years. The community's economy is supported by light industry, businesses, a college, and a university. The community's minority population, the primary group being African-American, comprises about 25% of its citizens, and is similarly represented in Guilford Middle School's enrollment.

Neal Middle School serves a geographically scattered population. The school is relatively new and situated in a remote rural area of northern Durham County. Its school population consists of rural families who are economically middle class or poor and urban poor families, most of whom live in the four large federally-subsidized housing areas. The school serves a minority population of approximately

52%, the majority of whom are African-American. The lack of a defined community, its remote location, and its relatively short history in the county contribute to Neal Middle School's lack of a strong connection with its community. The principal has tried to build links to the various communities the school serves by engaging in a great many outreach activities, such as visiting area churches and community centers with teachers and conducting evening discussions with parents. These efforts do not seem to be creating the links wanted, as illustrated by the fact that the school staff often outnumber the parents who attend these community outreach efforts.

The Schools

Guilford and Neal Middle Schools are well maintained, clean, and orderly. During the visits to Guilford Middle, the researcher felt students and teachers enjoyed harmonious relationships in a climate of safety and security. A higher degree of tension was sensed by the researcher when visiting Neal Middle. Students and teachers did not seem to interact in a friendly and relaxed manner as in Guilford, and the constant presence of armed police in the halls at Neal heightened the feeling of tension. During the course of this study, Neal Middle School experienced several episodes of violence in the school. A student was shot on the campus after a football game and another student was beaten

critically by four other students in the hallways during school, the result of rival gang activity. Both incidents were widely covered in the local media and served to magnify the sense of tension surrounding issues of safety at school. The staff members at Neal were angered over the media coverage, which depicted the school as unsafe. They felt their school and its students were unfairly and negatively portrayed to the public. Yet many staff members do not feel the school is particularly safe, as expressed in the Teacher Questionnaire in which 23% responded negatively regarding the school's safety and security.

Guilford and Neal Middle Schools were both designed to accommodate a traditional secondary model of education whose subject-centered organization is reflected in a six or seven period day where students travel to different rooms for different subjects. Even after several years of adopting a middle school model of organization, both schools are still limited in their efforts at creating small, intimate learning communities by the size and design of their buildings. Teachers and students are isolated in separate classrooms with little flexibility in teaching spaces. Their block schedules represent a middle school model in that they have large uninterrupted time for the teaching team to schedule students flexibly to accommodate program needs. However, both schools divide those schedule blocks into discrete periods of time for students to meet with

specific subject-centered classes, much like the secondary model that preceded the middle school.

There are very similar institutional values portrayed in both schools. Academic achievement in the form of high grades, is celebrated and rewarded, as illustrated by Honor Rolls and parties for students with good grades. A narrow range of student behavior and appearance is condoned, as evidenced by the lengthy list of rules regarding behavior and appearance in both schools' handbooks. Both elements seem to reinforce the conformist, achievement-oriented middle class white student, while alienating others, many of whom show evidence of being at risk of school failure. The grading and promotion systems seem to be institutional impediments to school success for many students.

Administration

The principals of both schools have been recognized with awards and commendations as successful and effective school leaders. Both enjoy the respect of their teachers, and have successfully created within their faculties esprit de corps and loyalty to the school. Although both principals fit the role of "visionary and energetic leadership" (Kershner and Connolly, 1991), their leadership styles are very different.

Guilford's principal has been in that position for over a decade and is active in the community. He has cultivated

strong political support throughout the community and the school district. He most likely would not have avoided being sanctioned for straying from state testing regulations in the TOPS program without such support. He is a paternal image to the teachers, a wise father figure who judges fairly and can be counted on for consistent support.

Neal's principal has been in the position for only three years. He is young and very energetic, distributing that energy in many areas of the school. He is perceived by teachers as bright, supportive, committed to the school and the students, and very demanding of his staff.

Guilford Middle has two assistant principals who have been assigned specific areas to manage. One deals with special education issues, and one handles most of the daily discipline problems. Neal Middle has two assistant principals. Unlike the division of whole areas to each assistant in Guilford, Neal's assistants are generalists. Each does a little of everything, depending on who is available when the needs arise.

The Staff

The schools have similar enrollments, yet they are staffed at quite different levels. Guilford Middle has 75 employees, 50 of whom are in professional positions. Neal Middle has 87 employees, 72 of whom are in professional positions. Neal has more clerical support and a greater

number of certified staff supported by special federal and state grants or programs than Guilford. Neither school has many teachers specifically trained to teach young adolescents in their pre-service teacher preparation. Both schools have very little teacher turnover and most teachers have been at their schools for over four years. They have been given in-service training in aspects of middle grades education, and with this training and their experience, both faculties can be considered expert at teaching young adolescents.

Camaraderie among teachers is strong in both schools. Guilford Middle teachers seem to have a stronger loyalty to the school than do the teachers at Neal, but the fact that Guilford Middle is highly regarded throughout the county may contribute to their feelings about the school. Teachers at Guilford seem to feel safer from the bureaucracy than do their counterparts at Neal. There seems to be some resentment on the Neal faculty toward the central office administration. Both faculties are dominated by teachers who genuinely enjoy working with young adolescents.

There were striking differences between the two schools' Teacher Questionnaires. Guilford Middle teachers feel very positive about every aspect of their school and the work they do in it. Neal's teachers question the school's safety, do not believe the school meets the needs

of its students and are frustrated at the lack of parental support, especially from families of at-risk students.

A valuable characteristic found among teachers in both schools is their unwavering dedication to students, especially those young people in need of help. This characteristic is recognized in the literature as being present in schools where effective interventions for at-risk students exist (Kershner and Connolly, 1991). Teachers in both schools have said, "I just want to take him home with me.", which can be interpreted as a heartfelt desire to wipe away the terrible conditions some of their children live with every day. When a student is in need, teachers in both schools give of themselves to an extent not expected by any administrator, parent or board member. And usually, their efforts are never known by the larger school community and thus never recognized and celebrated.

Teachers in both schools exhibited emotional and physical stress, perhaps partially caused by the lack of recognition and respect they receive from the school systems and the larger communities in relation to the degree of commitment and caring they show for the children. Some of the stress may be due to the feelings of exasperation and futility when they see that many of their efforts to help young people are negated by stronger, more pervasive destructive elements in the lives of their students. It is impressive to observe these teachers continue to give of

themselves in the form of their personal time, their money, and often the needs of their own families.

Programs and Practices Aimed At Assisting At-Risk Students

The two schools organize their efforts to assist at-risk students very differently. Guilford Middle focuses on one program, TOPS. The principal actively supports the program, and the school has gained considerable notoriety because of TOPS. The program has been an important part of the school for six years and the originators are still at the school, guiding it and assuring its success. Consistency over time, high administrative priority, the involvement of the entire faculty, and the program's success contribute to TOPS becoming a strong influence on the entire school. That influence, as reported by several staff members, has resulted in the entire faculty feeling more responsible for the success of at-risk students. In turn, it is reported that the whole faculty is more sensitive and responsive to the needs and characteristics of all the young adolescents in the school. Focusing the energy and resources of the school on one program, assuring its success, seems to have strongly influenced the attitudes and behaviors of the entire faculty regarding its perceptions of young adolescents and at-risk students.

Almost half of Neal Middle School's population lives in poverty. It would make sense that Neal's approach to at-

risk efforts would be different than Guilford's. Instead of focusing on one program as Guilford does, Neal Middle School distributes its energies and resources over many programs and strategies to assist at-risk students. There are several positive outcomes to this approach. There is a group, club, or program to fit the social and academic needs of almost any student in the school. More parents and community members are involved with the school through volunteering in these groups. A great number of students are engaged in a supportive group of their choosing and are connected with a caring adult through that group. Although several staff members feel that offering so many programs and strategies for at-risk students adds to the stress among Neal's staff, the approach seems to fit the need.

Comparison of Schools By Orienting Questions

Most of the data generated in this study were captured under four of the eight orienting questions, which are based on the following Carnegie Recommendations.

1. Create a small learning community where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental.
3. Ensure success for all students.

4. Empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of their students.
7. Re-engage the family in the education of its students.

Orienting Question One:

How does a school create a small community for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental?

Guilford Middle School has a large stable middle class population that values education and supports the school. The long history of the school as part of the community creates a strong bond between the community and the school. However, the architecture of the school, with its long corridors of classrooms, works against the creation of such learning communities. For the general student population, small learning communities that nurture close relationships occur in some clubs and activities, such as Math Counts Team and athletic teams, but seldom in their regular school day. Two exceptions are In-School Suspension (ISS) and the TOPS program, both aimed at assisting at-risk students. While ISS does not serve a specific group of identified students, stable, close, mutually respectful relationships exist between the ISS teacher and several of the students that are sent to ISS frequently. These strong relationships develop because the teacher approaches ISS as an opportunity to

counsel and guide rather than punish. Several students at Guilford Middle remain productive in school in large part because they are able to have contact with the ISS teacher daily.

The TOPS program also creates the kinds of learning communities described in question one, but does so in a more structured way than ISS. The TOPS program serves a specific group of students who are identified as at risk of school failure. The interaction between the students and the teacher is also structured; they join together daily as a group with their teacher. The TOPS program allows for the development of strong relationships between teachers and students, as does ISS; but unlike ISS, TOPS encourages the development of supportive relationships among students in each group. In most TOPS classes observed, students worked closely together in a friendly and supportive manner.

Neal Middle School has many external factors making it difficult to develop the kind of learning community described in question one. The school serves a dispersed population that does not share a common community. Neal is located in an isolated, rural part of southeastern Durham County and is not a center of community activities or support. The school's programs and initiatives are generated and controlled to a great degree from the central office of the school district, often leaving the staff

disenfranchised from decision-making as evidenced by the central office-mandated peer mediation program.

Within Neal Middle, the potential exists for teaching teams to develop stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with their students; but this seldom occurs. Most teacher energy and time are used in the development of teaching materials and activities or problem-solving and strategy development associated with academically or behaviorally dysfunctional students. Several teachers reported to the Mental Health Team that coping with the characteristics and needs of the students they referred to the team took inordinate time and energy from them and the rest of the students, making stable, close, mutually respectful relationships impossible.

Neal Middle School offers a large number of clubs, activities, and support groups for students. These represent the most important arenas where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers develop. Save Our Males, Young Women In Action, and the Winners Club are examples of organizations within the school that, by design, create environments for strong relationships to flourish among students and teachers. Through these groups, alienated students gain a sense of belonging; minority students gain a feeling of camaraderie and identity; teachers, parents and adults from the community often become important mentors and role models for

students. The clubs, activities, and support groups at Neal Middle seem to be critical to the sense of belonging, support, and school success for many students in the school.

Orienting Question Number Two:

How does the school teach a core academic program that results in students who can think critically and behave responsibly?

Guilford Middle School provides the state-mandated core curriculum to all students. School averages of achievement test scores in math, reading, writing, and total battery have risen each year for the past three years, giving evidence that more students are performing at higher levels of academic competence. TOPS teachers assist TOPS students in the core academic program by tutoring them as needed, helping them complete assignments, and giving them organizational skills necessary for school success. In addition, TOPS classes focus on developing critical thinking skills and responsible behavior as elements necessary for school success.

Neal Middle School provides the state-mandated curriculum to all students. Test scores have remained constant in the past three years and are generally below the state average. The school provides a wide variety of tutorial services in clubs such as Remedial Opportunities For High Risk Students (ROHRS), Save Our Males, and Winners

Club, that help at-risk students acquire academic competence. The teaching team and the Peer Mediation program are important factors in developing responsible behavior among the student body.

Orienting Question Number Three:

How does the school ensure success for all students?

About two-thirds of Guilford Middle School students come from middle class, white families that value education and strongly support the school. Most of these students conform to school expectations, seem to share the values the school espouses, and seem to be achievement and goal oriented. The school has institutional rewards for these students in the form of grades, Honor Rolls, student leadership opportunities, and clubs and activities that allow for the social interaction and development they enjoy. Most students considered to be at risk of school failure do not fall into the above category and there is little in the institutional culture that assures them success. In fact, the same rewards that ensure success for the majority of students may be inhibitors to success for at-risk students. For example, the grading and promotion systems emerge as impediments to success every time students and teachers discuss the struggles at-risk students endure as they try to cope with their identity and place in school.

The TOPS program and ISS are the two institutional elements that work for at-risk students in their attempts to succeed at Guilford Middle School. The interviews and observations of the TOPS program give evidence of its importance as a factor in the social and academic success of the identified at-risk students it serves. Several TOPS teachers describe themselves as being intensely engaged with their students and advocates for them to the rest of the school, community, and often the students' families. TOPS classes seem to be one of the few times in the school day where TOPS students feel at ease and supported. The classes also provide students with a forum to vent their frustrations regarding school, teachers, peers, and family. Many staff members believe the TOPS program is responsible for the relative success of many students. The TOPS program, as reported by several teachers and administrators, influences the whole school's faculty by making teachers more aware of the characteristics and needs of at-risk students and, more important, by heightening the sense of responsibility teachers feel for helping at-risk students succeed in school.

The In-School Suspension program also focuses on assuring the success of at-risk students, but operates very differently from TOPS. Any student in the school can be served by ISS, as students are assigned to it when they commit offenses serious enough to warrant suspension. Most

students assigned spend one to three days in the program, and many are considered at risk of school failure. During their time in ISS, the teacher interacts with them in several ways. She counsels them about their behavior that resulted in being assigned to ISS, and she assists them with their academic assignments so that when they return to classes, they will not be behind. More important to the at-risk students that frequent ISS, the teacher provides them with a significant adult in their school lives. Students with habitual behavior problems often check in with the ISS teacher daily for the purpose, it seems, of keeping connected with the one adult in the school that gives them a sense of support and advocacy. The ISS teacher often mediates and communicates between other teachers and her ISS students regarding various issues including behavior, academic performance, and family crises. The effectiveness of the ISS program in helping at-risk students succeed in school seems to be more dependent on the ISS teacher than the program itself. The ISS teacher designed the program and has been its only teacher. The combination of strong counseling skills, respect from the faculty and students, and commitment to at-risk students makes this teacher and ISS effective.

More than half of Neal Middle School's students come from rural or urban families in poverty. There is little evidence of strong support for the school or value for

educational achievement by many of the school's families. The institutionalized rewards common to many schools, such as grades and Honor Rolls, are incentives for achievement to fewer students at Neal than at Guilford Middle. The grading and promotion systems seem to be impediments to school success for many students. For example, a conversation with a group of TOPS students at Guilford Middle revealed that most of them believed they were not good students because they received poor grades. Yet they believed they were very capable of doing some things well; just not things that were graded. Even the school staff devised ways to combat the destructive effects of these systems, as illustrated by the creation of the Travelers Team at Neal Middle. Neal's staff devised the team for students that have failed several subjects and were retained in grade at least once. One of the incentives the Travelers Team offers students is the opportunity to "skip" a grade by performing well academically and on achievement tests. This enables Travelers students to re-enter the grade level of their age peers with which they began school. This incentive is essentially an attempt to neutralize the destructive effects the grading system and promotion policies have had on these students by circumventing the policies.

The primary strategy employed at Neal to assure success for all students, particularly at-risk students, is barraging the student body with support groups, clubs, and

programs individually tailored to the needs and characteristics of every major ethnic, social and cultural group in the school. These activities counter the sense of alienation by giving students a group in which they feel belonging. They guard against students giving up on school by providing a support group that acts as a safety net when a student experience failure. The adults in these groups provide role models for students and help them learn to set goals and focus on achievement.

In addition to the various groups at Neal, the school provides an organizational structure to assist all students in their efforts to succeed: the core academic team. Teaching teams, usually comprised of four academic teachers responsible for about 100 students, often become large support groups for their students. Many teachers feel the teaching teams hold more potential for achieving success for all students than all the clubs, groups, and programs combined.

Orienting Question Number Four:

How does the school empower the staff to make decisions about the experiences of students?

Guilford Middle School has many areas that involve teachers very little in decisions. The principal manages the budget. The counselor develops the schedules. The

state of North Carolina prescribes the curriculum. One arena where teachers actively engage in decision-making about the experiences of students is in the TOPS team meetings. The meetings provide structure for teachers, support staff, and administrators to openly discuss and eventually decide about issues and problems associated with TOPS students. The principal facilitates meetings, supporting and encouraging the staff to make decisions regarding TOPS students. Often, after decisions are made, he offers the resources and influence of his office to carry them out. The principal's assuming a relatively passive, "gate-keeper" role more fully empowers teachers and support staff as the actual decision-makers in the process. There is a feeling of camaraderie among the staff during the meetings that is most likely strengthened by their knowledge that they are in fact the decision-makers.

Neal Middle School teachers are left out of the decision-making process in many of the same areas as Guilford's teachers. However, Neal's principal gives the teaching teams more latitude for daily operational decisions. For example, teams at Neal often decide to alter the daily schedule to accommodate a special program or event. Teams decide on strategies to assist individual students overcome academic, social, family, or personal problems. They also coordinate the behavior management and punishments for their students who misbehave.

The arena giving teachers and staff the most decision-making power at Neal is the Mental Health Team meetings. The Mental Health Team meets weekly to decide interventions for students who are referred to the team by classroom teachers. The team, comprised of classroom teachers, special education teachers, counselors, a social worker, an assistant principal, and a physician, is chaired by a counselor, and decisions are made in a consensus mode. The staff has the power to engage the many school and community services available to assist students and their families with any type of problem a young adolescent may have. The team is often frustrated by the failure of many of their decisions to effectively solve the initial problem. Usually that failure is due to a lack of support by the student's family, the school system, or a community agency like Juvenile Services or Social Services. Despite these occasional failures, the Mental Health Team wields tremendous decision-making power within its domain of responsibility.

Orienting Question Number Five

How does the school employ teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents?

Guilford Middle School's 45 professional staff members are all employed in positions for which they are certified

by the State of `North Carolina. Their undergraduate training is in either elementary education or a junior high/secondary content area. None was specifically trained as a middle school teacher in undergraduate school. There is very little turnover in the staff and most have been with the school for more than four years. During their time of service at Guilford, teachers have received in-service training in critical areas focused on teaching the young adolescent. As a result of many years of experience coupled with in-service training, seem to have resulted in the Guilford Middle School staff becoming expert at teaching young adolescents.

Neal Middle School's 72 professional staff members at Neal are all employed in positions for which they hold North Carolina State certification. As in Guilford, none was specifically trained in undergraduate school to work with young adolescents in middle school. Almost all teachers have been at the school for more than four years, and have received significant staff development in areas critical to young adolescent education. The years of experience coupled with staff development seem to have resulted in a middle school staff that is expert in teaching young adolescents.

Orienting Question Number Six:

How does the school foster the health and physical fitness of its students?

Guilford Middle School students receive physical education and health classes as prescribed by the state's curriculum. TOPS students receive additional assistance and support in obtaining medical treatment (physicals, glasses) and coping with other health-related problems typical of young adolescents.

Neal Middle School students receive physical education and health classes as prescribed by the state's curriculum. The Mental Health Team and teaching teams provide additional medical and health services for particular students as needed. The teaching teams also provide students with support and information regarding other health-related issues common to young adolescents.

Orienting Question Number Seven:

How does the school Re-engage the family in the education of students?

Many studies of effective interventions for at-risk students list involving the families of students in the educational process as an important element to success (Carnegie Council, 1989; Kershner and Connolly, 1991; Van

Hoose, et al in Arnold, 1992). Both schools studied make great efforts to include families in their at-risk students' education. Guilford Middle School attempts to re-engage families in two ways. One consists of attempts to engage large groups of parents. Strategies in this category include newsletters, very active PTO/PTA organizations, volunteer programs, and special information nights focused at particular families such as those with TOPS students. The other category consists of strategies to re-engage the families of specific students as part of overall plans to assist the student through a problem or to help the student experience more school success. The TOPS program offers parents many opportunities to join with the teachers in discussions about school and engages each family directly through communications with the TOPS teachers. The community outreach tutorial program, Expanding Horizons, is another example of Guilford Middle's efforts to re-engage the families in education.

Through the Comer Model of School Improvement, Neal has institutionalized the re engagement of families in education by creating decision-making bodies within the school that include parents. The School Governance Committee, for example, sets the educational goals for the school and it is comprised of a significant number of parents. Other less formalized strategies to re-engage families include Family Nights, community outreach meetings, and including parents

as sponsors of clubs and activities at school. The teaching teams re-engage families regularly by communicating with parents frequently and including them in solutions to school problems their children are experiencing. Both faculties believe their efforts to assist at-risk students are more effective when the families are actively engaged with the teachers in assisting the student.

Orienting Question Number Eight:

How does the school connect students with the community?

The surrounding community has always been highly engaged in Guilford Middle School. One illustration of that is the nearly \$100,000 the PTO raises for the school each year. The majority of the suburban students who live in the neighborhoods surrounding the school are already connected with the community through recreation programs, arts activities, and other community-based organizations. The TOPS program staff members create specific strategies to involve TOPS students with the community, for these students are often not from the suburban neighborhoods surrounding the school and their families are often unable to involve their children in the activities and organizations available in the larger community. The TOPS program staff arranged for the local professional hockey team, The Monarchs, to "adopt" the TOPS program as a community service project for

the team. The team visited the school, treated the TOPS students to a dinner at the ice rink, and gave them and their families choice seats at a hockey game.

Neal Middle School serves students from at least two distinct communities in Durham City and County, and does not serve as the center of activities for either one. Neal's many student clubs, groups, and activities involve students in various community projects and enables them to enjoy many community athletic or arts performances. As such, the connection of students to the community is dependent on parent and community volunteers assisting in activities such as clubs and support groups.

Comparison of Schools By Themes

Several themes emerged from the data collected at each school. The themes help bring data from the real to the symbolic level and thus closer to generalizations that can be useful to other educators and researchers exploring effective interventions for at-risk students. The themes are divided into two categories: Divergent Themes, those that are manifested very differently by the two schools; and Convergent Themes, those that are manifested similarly in both schools.

Divergent Themes

School and Community Bonds

The degree to which the schools seemed to have a bond with larger community differed greatly. Guilford Middle School showed evidence of strong bonds with its community. The long history of the school at its present site contributes to that bond, but other factors seem more important. Perhaps the most influential factor is the nature of the community surrounding the school. It is a densely populated middle class suburban area with the overwhelming majority of the residents being white and relatively well-educated. Several colleges and universities, a medical center, and "white-collar" companies are part of the surrounding community of Guilford Middle School.

Neal Middle School did not enjoy a strong bond with its community. Several factors contributed to this lack of strong community bond. There was a lack of a discrete community reflecting the school's population. The isolated location of the school in a rural corner of the county makes it difficult for any one area or population mass to identify with Neal as "their school".

Another reason for a lack of community identity with the school has to do with the nature of many of the families whose children attended Neal. Many of Neal's students came from families in poverty or struggling just above poverty.

The caretakers of these students did not have the flexibility in their lives to devote time and energy to being involved in their children's education.

The Learning Environment

Both schools' efforts to assist at-risk students were influenced by the learning environment. Three aspects of the learning environments seemed most influential. First, the physical design of the schools made it difficult to create small learning communities as recommended by the Carnegie Council. The buildings were designed to accommodate traditional high school and junior high school programs that are more subject-centered than student-centered. Guilford Middle diminished the effects of the building design by modifying the groupings of students and teachers and their schedules to form the TOPS classes. Neal Middle School diminished the effects of the building design by operating most activities for at-risk students after regular school hours. The activities allowed students, teachers, and parents to meet in small settings at a time and place most convenient for the group.

Second, expectations of students by teachers influenced the learning environment and the way in which staff members interacted with at-risk students. The Guilford Middle School staff expected students to generally conform to the behavioral and academic standards of the school. For the

most part, students met these expectations and the staff's perception of that fact is reflected in their positive responses on the Teacher Survey. Neal Middle School teachers, did not reflect a positive portrayal of student performance and behavior on their survey. Their expectations may be different because their student population is much more in need of the basic necessities to live and develop normally.

The third aspect of the learning environment that impacted on at-risk students is the overall climate of the school. Guilford Middle School showed evidence of a supportive, secure, safe, and nurturing climate. Such a climate seems necessary for creating positive and supportive relationships among teachers and students. Neal Middle School showed evidence that the staff, parents and students did not necessarily feel safe, secure, and supported. The school's armed guards added to the feeling that safety and security were questionable. It seemed more difficult for strong relationships to flourish in this climate.

The Nature of Student Assistance and Support

Both schools engaged in efforts to assist and support at-risk students, but the nature of the assistance and support was different between the two schools. In the TOPS program at Guilford Middle, the most prevalent form of assistance and support was keeping students organized and

encouraged about their academic work. TOPS teachers spent most of their time helping students with projects, organizing notebooks, and helping them plan their time so that all their academic work could be accomplished..

Neal Middle School's staff most prevalent area of assistance and support was planning for the provision of basic needs of students and their families. . The Mental Health Team was involved in such activities as initiating doctors' appointments for students, securing needed medications, and coordinating efforts with social services to assist students involved in abusive families. The difference in how the two schools manifest their assistance and support of at-risk students reflects the vast difference in the student populations of the two schools. While Guilford Middle School's TOPS students are at-risk, they are as a group significantly less needy of basic resources to survive and flourish than those at Neal Middle School. The most basic needs must be satisfied before other efforts, such as those to improve academic performance, can be effective.

Convergent Themes

Self Esteem

The at-risk students at both schools showed evidence of low self-esteem, especially when confronted with academic challenges. Many seemed convinced they could not succeed in

school and this seemed to affect their chances for success in various school activities. Most of the interventions operated by the schools attempted to raise students' self-esteem.

Family Involvement

The involvement of key family members as partners with the school in assisting students was an important factor in both schools. The staffs of both schools felt their efforts were more productive when family members were involved with and supportive of the efforts to help students. Both staffs also expressed great frustration with families who would not become involved, because the school's efforts were very often fruitless without family involvement.

Institutional Impediments

Grading, promotion, behavior, and appearance policies and practices showed evidence of impeding the chances for school success of at-risk students in both schools. In addition, the existence of these policies and practices resulted in significant staff energy and resources being expended combating their deleterious effects on at-risk students.

The Principal's Leadership Impact

Evidence quickly mounted during data collection at both schools that the principals played active and significant roles in the successful and consistent operation of interventions to assist at-risk students. Guilford Middle School's principal was the leading advocate of the TOPS program and saw to it that the resources and support necessary for its success were made available. Neal Middle School's principal held a constant high level of expectation for all teachers regarding their efforts in assisting at-risk students. Both principals displayed political power and astuteness that allowed many of the at-risk programs to flourish in their schools. They were both demanding yet supportive of their staffs, and set high standards for everyone.

Staff Commitment

Both schools had teachers who exhibited an impressively strong dedication to their students. These were the teachers most involved with assisting at-risk students. They often, with their own resources, provided students with food, clothing, transportation, money, and medical attention. Both schools had teachers who genuinely wanted to take students home with them to give them a better life. They saw within these students potentials that would not develop within the construct of their present family and

living environment. Many of these teachers gave of themselves so totally that they often suffered from a high degree of stress. Their greatest relief from the stress and exasperation that often came with failed efforts to help students seemed to be the camaraderie they had with each other.

Relationships

Relationships between teachers and students were the essential element in assisting at-risk students. The ISS program at Guilford Middle was successful because of the relationships established by the teacher with students. Relationships among TOPS students and with their TOPS teachers gave the students the support they needed to meet the challenges they faced at school. Neal Middle School's regular academic teachers established important relationships with students that often became crucial to working through social, emotional, family, or academic problems.

Staff Empowerment

The principals and staffs of both schools were empowered to make a broad range of decisions affecting the lives of students and their experiences at school. The principals enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from their central office administration, most likely due to their

history of effectiveness and their popularity with the communities and the school staffs. Teachers at both schools were given decision-making powers in different areas. For example, at Guilford Middle School, TOPS teachers and staff made decisions about interventions, activities, rewards, academic modifications, and family involvement for the TOPS students. Similar decision-making occurred at Neal Middle School in the Mental Health Team. Such empowerment to make decisions seemed to increase the degree of involvement and commitment teachers had in the efforts to assist at-risk students.

Conclusions

The conclusions are organized by the Carnegie Recommendations they reflect. Most of the data generated in this study were captured under four of the eight Carnegie Recommendations. These four recommendations, listed below, may be thought of as critical to the success of efforts to assist at-risk students.

1. Create a small learning community where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships are fundamental.
3. Ensure success for all students.
4. Empower staff to make decisions about the experiences of their students.
7. Re-engage the family in the education of its students.

Conclusions related to the Carnegie Recommendation to create a small learning community where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships are fundamental.

1. The populations of the two schools differ greatly. Guilford Middle is primarily middle class and Neal has a significantly larger population of children from poverty and many more students who fall into the category of being at risk of school failure than does Guilford. The approaches to assisting at-risk students at the two schools differ because of the differing needs of their respective at-risk population. Guilford focuses on one comprehensive program, TOPS. Neal Middle offers a wide array of programs and strategies that serve to meet the varied needs of many different groups of at-risk students. The TOPS program and ISS at Guilford and the wide array of small clubs that in essence are support groups at Neal constitute the creation of small communities tailored to the specific needs of the students for whom the efforts were designed. These "small learning communities" in both schools give students a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school, and diminishes the sense of alienation that many at-risk students experience.

The central theme of both approaches is the development of relationships. TOPS success relies on the supportive relationships between students and between teachers and

students. Neal's many clubs and groups also focus on developing relationships between students and between students and the adults that sponsor or participate in the groups. The development of relationships seems to be a critical element in the effective assistance of at-risk students. Close bonds develop between individual teachers and students that at times resemble parent-child relationships. Although they are sometimes exasperated and demoralized by the destructive influences that seem to dwarf their efforts at improving the lives of their students, teachers in both schools exhibit selfless commitment to needy students and never give up on a child. The enduring love of a teacher for her students is vividly represented at both middle schools.

2. Both faculties are highly committed to their students, loyal to their schools, and enjoy a high degree of camaraderie. The relationships the faculties have with their students, their schools, and themselves are central to the culture and functioning of the schools and their successful efforts to assist at-risk students.

Conclusions related to the Carnegie Recommendation to ensure success for all students.

1. The TOPS program influences the school staff's perception of young adolescents. Six years of focusing on one program that promotes understanding of and advocacy for at-risk students has resulted in heightened understanding of and response to the characteristics and needs of at-risk students and young adolescents in general by the whole school staff. Because of TOPS, the school moves closer to assuring success for all students.

2. There are impediments to school success for at-risk students built into the institutional values of both schools. The schools place high value on academic achievement and group conformity. The State-mandated curriculum, grading practices, homework requirements, promotion and retention policies, and behavior and appearance rules are examples of institutional values that are impediments to school success for at-risk students. Much of the discussions in TOPS classes centered on grades, usually failing grades. Many TOPS students, judging from their comments during TOPS classes, seemed defeated by the grading system and that may contribute to the difficulty in motivating them to achieve in school. Most of the cases considered by Neal's Mental Health Team were students who were failing many subjects and who had been retained in grade at least once during their schooling.

A great deal of energy and resources is expended at both schools to counteract or circumvent the grading and promotion policies. The Travelers Team at Neal was created just for students who had been retained and gives them a chance to "skip" a year and get back to their original cohort of students. TOPS teachers spend considerable time negotiating with subject area teachers around issues of grades for TOPS students. Grading and promotion issues also seem to create conflicts among the staffs of both schools, with some supporting the grading system, believing everyone should be held to the same standards, and others believing the grading system is an impediment to success for at-risk students.

Conclusions related to the Carnegie Recommendation to empower staff members to make decisions about the experiences of students.

1. Both principals are highly regarded by their respective school districts and seem to enjoy more autonomy from the central office because of their stature as excellent educational leaders. This point is illustrated by Guilford's County's superintendent giving Guilford Middle School's principal tacit approval of exempting TOPS students from portions of the state-mandated testing program. The principals of both schools are major influences on the

efforts to assist at-risk students. Both principals are initiators and supporters of the efforts and create an expectation throughout the staff that these efforts will be a priority. Both principals developed organizational structures within which teachers make decisions about the experiences of their students. Guilford Middle School's TOPS Team Meetings and Neal Middle School's Mental Health Team give teachers and support staff the opportunity to explore issues and problems together and make group decisions that have significant impact on at-risk students.

2. Both staffs are empowered to make decisions about the experiences of their students. The TOPS team at Guilford and the Mental Health Team at Neal are examples of staff decision-making groups. Both groups exert considerable influence on the rest of the school and the experiences of at-risk students. Individual teachers in both schools also have a great deal of decision-making power to assist at-risk students. The sense of empowerment seems to be a major element in the high levels of camaraderie and school loyalty that exist in the faculties of both schools.

Conclusions related to the Carnegie Recommendation to re-engage the family in the education of its students.

1. Guilford and Neal have extensive family outreach efforts and both heavily involve parents in solutions to problems facing their students.
2. Efforts to assist at-risk students are most effective when parents are supportive of and involved in the efforts of the schools.

Implications

Several implications regarding elements needed to effectively assist at-risk students arose from the data. Success in assisting at-risk students seems dependent on these elements.

Leadership

Two areas of leadership emerged as critical to both schools: the principal as leader, and teachers as leaders. Both school principals exhibited strong leadership over extended periods of time, and were recognized state-wide as exemplary educational leaders. They were both supportive of their staffs, very active and visible in the schools,

demanding of students and staff, and politically successful within their school systems.

Teachers often assumed important leadership roles in both schools. Teaching teams at Neal Middle School had a great deal of decision-making power. By virtue of their positions, team leaders had the potential to develop strong leadership roles. Teachers and counselors assumed leadership of the Mental Health Team and led the initiation and implementation of strategies to assist the students brought to the Team. Guilford Middle School teachers and counselors also led the efforts to initiate and implement assistance to at-risk students through the TOPS Team Meetings. The In-School Suspension teacher at Guilford Middle assumed a great deal of leadership and was seen by many as a key leader among the staff.

Empowerment of Staff

Another element that seems critical to the success of efforts to assist at-risk students is the empowerment of the school staffs to make decisions about the experiences of their students. Both schools had areas where staff members were empowered to make decisions. At Guilford Middle, it was within the TOPS Team and at Neal Middle, decision-making empowerment was most evident in the teaching teams and the Mental Health Team. It seemed the more teachers had control over decisions about their students the more heavily

invested they were in implementing and following through on the planned interventions for assisting at-risk students.

The Creation of Settings and Relationships

Two salient truths emerged from this study. First, people - students, teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, deputies, parents - create the settings in which the needs of at-risk students can be met. Sarason calls settings "...any instance when two or more people come together in new and sustaining relationships to achieve certain goals" (Sarason, 1988, p. xiii). And so the study is not so much about programs, policies, and practices, but about people and the settings they create to assist at-risk students.

Second, the development of relationships within these settings is the key to successful intervention with at-risk students. Guilford Middle's ISS and TOPS programs focus on the development of stable, close relationships between teachers and students. Their success is dependent on these relationships. Neal's various clubs focus on developing supportive relationships between students and mentoring relationships with adults. The success of Neal's teaching teams in assisting at-risk students is based on the strong relationships built between teachers and students, where teachers begin to take on the advocacy role of the parent for the child.

The Creation of Success

Both schools staffs were heavily involved in creating successful experiences for at-risk students. They did this with the recognition that issues of low self-esteem plague the at-risk student and often keep him or her from fully participating and developing as a young person and student. The staff at both schools planned overt strategies, rewards, and activities designed to let their at-risk students experience success. These included the TOPS students' relationship with the Monarchs Hockey Team, rocket-building, and help with homework and projects. Neal Middle School teachers provided support groups, tutoring, and special parties within their teaching teams to celebrate improvements made by at-risk students.

Less obvious and planned were the advocacy roles teachers assumed for their students in order to create more success for them in their lives. Teachers at both schools sought medical attention for students, and provided them with clothing, transportation, and money. Teachers often negotiated with other teachers to give their at-risk students the benefit of the doubt on assignments or plead with them to allow extra time for a project. Teachers often argued and negotiated with parents, the police, the courts, and Social Services in efforts to improve the circumstances of a child. This was particularly true at Neal Middle School, where more students were involved in problems

outside of school and whose families tended to be less supportive of them than those at Guilford Middle.

Helping at-risk students overcome institutional impediments to success engages a significant amount of teacher time and energy. Grading practices and promotion policies are the two institutional impediments that consume the largest portions of teacher time and energy. TOPS teachers at Guilford Middle School are often negotiating with other teachers to help raise the grade of a TOPS student or group of students. Many of the counseling activities and discussions observed in TOPS classes centered around problems and issues of grades and promotion. Neal Middle School invented a new team, The Travelers, specifically to circumvent the promotion policies of the school system. Students assigned to the team had been retained in grade and were given the opportunity to "test out" of a year and enroll the following year with their original social and age peer group. These strategies are aimed at diminishing the negative influences institutional impediments to success, such as grading practices and promotion policies, have on at-risk students' chances for experiencing school success. The outcome is increased potential for school success.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to describe through the framework of the Carnegie Recommendations the efforts to assist at-risk students in two middle schools experiencing success in this area. Most of the data generated fell under four of the eight recommendations, and thus these four seem to be critical to the success of efforts to assist at-risk students. It is possible, however, that the other four recommendations may be critical in other studies.

Therefore, educators seeking to establish effective assistance to at-risk students should explore all eight Carnegie Recommendations, but should consider focusing their attention on the four that became critical in this study. These four are listed below..

1. Create a small learning community where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental.
2. Ensure success for all students.
3. Empower staff members to make decisions about the experiences of their students.
4. Re-engage the family in the education of its students.

The study also supports the notion that effective people create effective programs. Educators in schools seeking to develop successful interventions for at-risk middle school students should recruit people who understand

the needs of young adolescents and are committed to assisting at-risk students and allow them to create settings where they can develop meaningful relationships with students.

Suggestions For Further Research

This study raises several questions that are of value for further research. The grading and promotion policies and practices at Guilford and Neal Middle Schools are typical of traditional schools throughout the nation. These institutionalized policies and practices seem to be insidious contributors to school failure for many at-risk students in two ways. First, grading and promotion policies and practices can define and label students as school failures. Second, they entrap students in a cycle of failure and become impediments to at-risk students experiencing any meaningful success at school.

An analysis of the impact of institutional values on at-risk students would be a valuable contribution to educational research. Values that impede and values that promote school success for at-risk students should be identified.

This study began with eight orienting questions as organizers of the data. The questions were based on the Carnegie Recommendations found in Turning Points (1989).

Most of the data fell under four of the eight orienting questions, and thus four of the eight Carnegie Recommendations appeared to be critical to the success of assisting at-risk students in the two schools studied. Similar studies should be conducted to determine if the same Carnegie Recommendations are generally critical to the success of efforts to assist at-risk students.

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APPENDIX A

Dear _____:

I am beginning a dissertation that will study schools that have proven to be effective for middle school at-risk students. This will be a descriptive study of how three schools or programs address the recommendations of the Carnegie Council For Adolescent Development found in Turning Points. I am asking several experts in the field to identify programs or schools that have been successful with at-risk students. From the pool of school and programs identified, three will be chosen based on their success in the areas of increasing academic performance and attendance, and decreasing discipline referrals for at-risk students.

As a leader in middle level education, your participation in this process is greatly appreciated. Enclosed for your convenience is a form for you to list six schools or programs you recommend looking at for this study. Please complete the form and mail it to me in the self-addressed envelope enclosed. I want to identify programs this summer and begin collecting data this fall. Your participation, again, is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jim Colavito

APPENDIX B

NORTH CAROLINA MIDDLE SCHOOLS PROGRAMS OR SCHOOLS
RECOMMENDED AS
EFFECTIVE WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Please list programs or schools that you think may be particularly successful in addressing the needs of at-risk middle schools students.

<u>Name of School or Program</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Contact Person</u>
----------------------------------	-----------------	-----------------------

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

Comments:

Your Name: _____

Thank you.

APPENDIX C

September 6, 1993

Dear

Your school has been recommended to me for your success with at-risk students. I am a doctoral student at UNC-Greensboro researching how such programs address the recommendations of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development found in its report, Turning Points.

In order to learn more about your school's efforts with at-risk students, please check "Yes" or "No" on the following questions and return your responses in the envelope provided. I appreciate your cooperation and time.

1. Does your school operate a program specifically for at-risk students? Yes No

2. Does your school engage strategies throughout the school aimed at assisting at-risk students?

Yes No

3. How many students involved in your school's at-risk efforts improved in:

Attendance? Yes No

Academic Performance? Yes No

Behavior? Yes No

Thank you for answering these questions and returning your response in the envelope provided.

Sincerely,

Jim Colavito

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

SUCCESSFUL AT-RISK PROGRAM QUESTIONNAIRE

The study of successful at-risk programs is organized around eight recommendations for middle schools found in the Carnegie report, Turning Points. The purpose of this questionnaire is to see if those recommendations are reflected in schools or programs that are successful with assisting at-risk students. Please answer the questions with as much depth as you wish. Your responses will help create a full description of the at-risk efforts in your school.

What is your position at school? _____

1. Does your school provide identified at-risk students with a different learning environment? _____
If yes, please describe.

2. Do identified at-risk students have special opportunities to develop close relationships with adults and peers? _____
If yes, please explain.

APPENDIX D

3. Is the core academic program altered for at-risk students? _____
If yes, please explain.

4. Are there built-in mechanisms to assure that at-risk students experience some success at school? _____
If yes, please explain.

5. Do teachers have a say in decisions regarding what at-risk students experience at school? _____
If yes, please explain.

APPENDIX D

6. Does your school or program involve at-risk students in community activities? _____
If yes, please explain.

7. Does your school or program involve parents of at-risk students in the school? _____
If yes, please explain.

8. How often do at-risk students have Physical Education?

9. How often do at-risk students have Health?

10. What are your areas of certification?

