



At-risk students in rural Montana : a description and comparison of characteristics of programs/services and identification processes utilized in rural elementary schools
by Joseph Paul Ingalls

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment . of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The majority of students in the state of Montana attend schools that are by definition rural. The implementation of effective programs to develop resiliency in children are at the forefront in the state. The need for effective programs to meet the needs of at-risk children is of importance to rural elementary schools. Recognizing the identification factors of at-risk children can assist schools in meeting the needs of this population. This study identified, described and compared what rural elementary schools in the state of Montana do to meet the needs of at-risk students and indicated processes used to identify those students.

The population for the study consisted of 114 rural elementary school principals employed during the 2002-2003 school year. This survey research used a researcher developed instrument to investigate the characteristics of effective programs offered and the services provided in the elementary schools. It also examined the factors used to identify these children.

Based upon the data, the following conclusions were drawn: positive school climate was important to the overall services and programs offered to all students; well defined curriculum and instructional programs were important considerations; the link between learning difficulties and a student's low self-esteem coupled with a lack of hope for the future was made by the principals; principals recognized the impact of the family on a student's level of being at-risk; a student's behavior and frustration with school was identified as a very important factor related to school success; ability grouping was not considered to be as important when identifying those students who could be at-risk; early intervention programs designed to increase student academic and social skills were not evident in the majority of the rural elementary schools surveyed, and rural Montana elementary schools viewed the creation of an atmosphere where promoting personal, social and emotional growth of at-risk students was important and evident.

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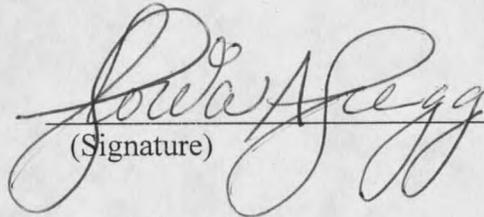
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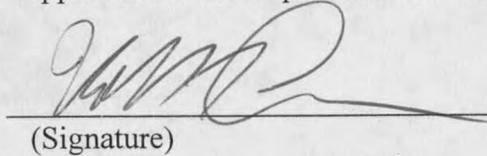

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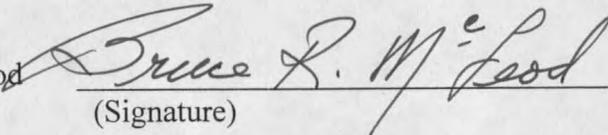

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ABSTRACT

The majority of students in the state of Montana attend schools that are by definition rural. The implementation of effective programs to develop resiliency in children are at the forefront in the state. The need for effective programs to meet the needs of at-risk children is of importance to rural elementary schools. Recognizing the identification factors of at-risk children can assist schools in meeting the needs of this population. This study identified, described and compared what rural elementary schools in the state of Montana do to meet the needs of at-risk students and indicated processes used to identify those students.

The population for the study consisted of 114 rural elementary school principals employed during the 2002-2003 school year. This survey research used a researcher-developed instrument to investigate the characteristics of effective programs offered and the services provided in the elementary schools. It also examined the factors used to identify these children.

Based upon the data, the following conclusions were drawn: positive school climate was important to the overall services and programs offered to all students; well defined curriculum and instructional programs were important considerations; the link between learning difficulties and a student's low self-esteem coupled with a lack of hope for the future was made by the principals; principals recognized the impact of the family on a student's level of being at-risk; a student's behavior and frustration with school was identified as a very important factor related to school success; ability grouping was not considered to be as important when identifying those students who could be at-risk; early intervention programs designed to increase student academic and social skills were not evident in the majority of the rural elementary schools surveyed, and rural Montana elementary schools viewed the creation of an atmosphere where promoting personal, social and emotional growth of at-risk students was important and evident.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The well-being of America's children is a crucial factor in maintaining the stability of the social structure. The importance is evidenced in the numerous government and private industry partnerships created as an attempt to address complications and issues inherent to the problems that place children in a classification commonly referred to in the literature as at-risk. Numerous studies have been conducted that focus on developing profiles of children in the United States who are at-risk for adverse outcomes. These profiles identify specific indicators that tend to place children at higher risk of behaviors that adversely affect the success of the individual child and the impact upon the larger society. Identification alone does not begin to solve the problems facing these children. Effective programs to assist these children need to be implemented in order to institute systemic change that will allow them the opportunity to become contributing members of the larger society. Further study is needed to identify common factors that increase the likelihood of children being placed at-risk, to identify research-based programs that are effective in supporting such children and to describe the programs used to assist at-risk children within Montana's rural elementary schools.

Statement of the Problem

The increased expectations for schools to continually set higher expectations for student achievement coupled with increased pressure to handle a wide array of societal issues has created an atmosphere that places the public schools at the forefront of solving society's ills. The issues are manifest in the characteristics adherent to children labeled at-risk. Willis (1989) pointed out, "there are risks for these students in the society at large and the risks to their educational attainment and entry into productive lives of employment are increasing." Levin (1988) indicated that at least 30% of elementary and secondary school students in the United States today are educationally at-risk and the proportion will rise rapidly in the future. Today, the reality of the situation is growing to include all children. There has been a growing realization that it is not just the poor or minority student who is of concern. At various times in the lives of all youth, there are episodes of disappointment and sometimes depression; there are encounters and pressures relating to alcohol, drugs, and the possibility of teenage parenthood. With the occurrence of widespread sexually transmitted disease and a startling increase in teenage suicide, the risks now facing our youths have become a matter of life and death (Barr & Parrett, 2001).

Yet to recognize that all youth can, at one time or another, become at-risk cannot cause educators to overlook the fact that they can identify with high predictability a large group of students who arrive at school each year with little or no hope of success in school or productivity in later life (Barr & Parrett, 2001). It is this growing group that educators can no longer afford to ignore.

The Committee for Children (1991) located in Seattle, Washington clearly identified the problem facing our public schools and teachers with the statement, "As more and more young children are experiencing broken homes, drug abuse within the family, disharmony at home, less access to their parents, and television as the primary source of entertainment and values, teachers must deal with the effects these experiences have on children." Teachers in the public schools are faced with determining solutions for children with at-risk behaviors who come from families that may not be supportive of the efforts to change the situation.

An indicator of at-risk behavior identified in the research is that of low performance in school. Poor academic performance is typically accompanied by other risk factors and is the most frequently reported reason for dropping out of school (Willis, 1989). McDill, Natiello and Pollas (1986) reported that the consistent failure and frustration of low academic achievement inevitably leads to increases in absenteeism, truancy and school-related behavior problems. The low achieving phenomenon often starts in the earliest grades of schooling and increases in severity as students proceed through elementary and junior high school (Willis, 1989). Prevention is critical because while success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the school years and beyond, failure in the early grades does virtually guarantee failure in later schooling (Slavin, Karweit & Wasik, 1992). Using only a few factors, schools can predict with better than 90% accuracy students in the third grade who will later drop out of school (McPartland & Slavin, 1990). Researchers maintain that if a poor child attends a school composed of largely poor children, is reading a year behind by the third grade, and has

been retained a grade, the chances of this child ever graduating from high school are near zero (McPartland & Slavin, 1990). The literature indicated the importance of identification of and intervention for low achieving children in the primary grades.

In addition to the low academic performance factor, children are entering school with fewer academic, social and emotional skills intact. The impact these children have on the classroom has long lasting effects on all children including those who come from more supportive backgrounds. These at-risk children are characterized by excessively aggressive and impulsive behavior which is a burden to all members of their classrooms. This behavioral pattern emerges as early as three years of age (Karoly et al., 1998). The core elements in this early high-risk pattern include: a tendency to become involved in poking, pushing and other annoying social behavior; a tendency to rush into things; negative and defiant behavior; and self-centered verbal responsiveness to others, exemplified by interrupting others, blurting out their thoughts, and talk which is irrelevant to the ongoing conversation (Spivack & Cianci, 1987). The changing make-up of the school population has an impact on the focus and climate of the classroom and the larger school setting.

The impact of these at-risk children is not solely seen within the school setting. The impact is far reaching and will be felt by the larger society. Research shows that many are headed for a lifetime of failure, exacting a great toll from society. Asher and Cole (1990) pointed out that this group is particularly at risk for rejection by their peers, underachieving in school or dropping out, performing below their potential throughout their careers, landing in prison for adult crimes (a one in four chance by age 30) and

becoming physically and/or sexually abusive. Barr and Parrett (2001) pointed out, "If children do not learn to read well, usually by the end of third grade, what they learn is that they are dumb. They will usually suffer from low self-confidence and self-concept and often exhibit disruptive behavior. Ultimately, the vast majority will drop out of school and experience no more success outside of school than they did in school."

Karoly's (1998) studies of students who dropped out of school found that they live out their lives unemployed, underemployed, or worse, unemployable. They also tend to abuse drugs and alcohol, and many experience parenthood while still teenagers. Many end up in prison or jail. As the cycle continues, raising another generation of at-risk children may be a reality.

Another aspect of the problems facing schools in their attempt to assist at-risk children is the implementation of effective programs. Educators need to begin by identifying themselves as part of the solution by searching for an effective path for helping the child to help him/herself (Committee for Children, 1991). Numerous programs have proven to be effective, especially those that place an emphasis upon early intervention. Programs focusing on preschool and primary grade interventions have the most impact upon the child who is at-risk of social, behavior or academic problems. The period from conception and infancy through third grade encompasses the most critical stage in the development of children (Barr & Parrett, 2001). In terms of the potential for personal development and learning, these are indeed the wonder years. For at-risk children, this period of time is even more critical. Without early success in school, hope of successfully completing school diminishes with each passing year (Barr & Parrett,

2001).

Preschool programs have been documented extensively. No federally funded program has ever been studied so carefully over time, and with such positive results, as Head Start (Schorr & Schorr, 1989). The research on the importance of early intervention programs such as Head Start demonstrates that the most effective intervention is one that occurs as early in the child's life as possible.

Intervention programs need to be identified, implemented and integrated into schools to enhance the protective mechanisms that foster resiliency and empower children. Westfall and Pisapia (1994) categorized protective mechanisms into four categories. They include reducing the negative outcomes of problems by altering the child's exposure to the risk; reducing the negative reactions that follow exposure to a risk; establishing and maintaining self-efficacy and self-esteem; and providing opportunities for at-risk children to receive skills necessary for school and career success. A 1998 RAND Corporation study found that intervention programs can benefit disadvantaged children and, in the long run, significantly save on the cost of welfare, criminal justice and special education (Karoly et al., 1998).

One research-based program that fosters the development of the protective mechanisms was developed by the Committee for Children and is referred to as the Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum (Spivack & Cianci, 1987). The Second Step curriculum incorporates the teaching of necessary skills for positive social behavior. Those skills identified in the literature as imperative to positive social development include empathy, impulse control, problem-solving skills, anger management and

assertiveness (Spivack & Cianci, 1987). The development of these important skills within the at-risk child's repertoire will provide the needed tools to create resiliency. Other programs exist to assist schools in meeting the needs of their changing clientele and assist children in becoming resilient.

The need for effective programs to meet the needs of the at-risk student population is of importance to rural communities. The existence of students who are considered at-risk due to the combination of a number of characteristics is more prevalent in rural schools. A nation-wide study conducted by the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (1998) found that while both rural and non-rural school personnel estimated relatively large percentages of their students to be at-risk, rural children fared worse than non-rural children in 34 out of 39 statistical comparisons. These included:

1. Eighteen percent of rural high school students were estimated to be substance abusers, compared with 10% in non-rural districts.
2. Twelve percent of rural elementary school children were found to be suffering depression/suicide attempts/low self-esteem, compared with 10% of urban and 9% of suburban youngsters.
3. Twenty-six percent of rural high school pupils were considered sexually active, compared to 22% of urban and 21% of suburban students.
4. Seven percent of rural middle schoolers were said to be involved in crime, compared with an estimated 6% in urban and suburban schools.
5. Thirteen percent of rural preschoolers were considered victims of child abuse, compared with 12% in urban and 10% in suburban districts.

An analysis of the above data suggests that the social and economic strains facing rural students are every bit as bad, perhaps worse, than those facing urban youth. The images of rural children leading wholesome, trouble-free lives compared with youth in more crowded settings may be in need of revision.

The majority of students residing in the state of Montana attend schools that are by definition rural. The implementation of effective programs to develop resiliency in children are at the forefront in Montana as well. Montana schools are not insulated from the issues faced by at-risk children. Sibling or parent school dropout, low socioeconomic status, dysfunctional family, poor communication between home and school, learned helplessness, suicide, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, learning disabilities, trouble with the law, and a significant lack of coping skills are all at-risk characteristics that impact children and, consequently, the schools.

The situation that exists for families and children in Montana is the same as or worse than families and children in the United States as a whole. In 1999, Montana's unemployment rate was 5.2% compared to 4.2% nationally. The percentage of children in Montana under the age of 19 who had no health insurance coverage in 1999 was 16.6% compared to 15.4% nationally. The Child Poverty Rate in the state in 1999 was at 22.1% compared to 19.1% nationally. The percentage of poor families with children with a worker in 1999 was 84.9% compared to 70.2% nationally (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2000). Montana has families and children who are living in conditions that place these children at-risk according to socioeconomic status.

Currently, there is more focused attention within Montana schools to increase the resiliency of children. The Montana Behavioral Initiative is one example of a systematic approach designed to assess the needs of individual schools in their attempt to meet the needs of children. Numerous programs are being implemented through the MBI process, but are these programs effective? The problems facing Montana's elementary schools are early recognition, intervention, an understanding of students that demonstrates characteristics of the at-risk population, and how schools can assess individual needs and implement research-based effective programs to address those needs.

Purpose of the Study

Using the literature and research as a basis, the purpose of this study was to identify, describe and compare what rural elementary schools in Montana are doing to meet the needs of at-risk students. This was accomplished by determining what characteristics of schools were evident and which programs, services and processes that identify at-risk students are most often utilized in these schools.

Questions

The following questions guided the research:

1. What were the characteristics of programs and services for at-risk students?
2. What were the common characteristics of the programs and services?
3. What processes were utilized to identify at-risk students?
4. What were the processes common to all students?

5. Which specific programs for at-risk students were being utilized?
6. How did rural districts differ based on size measured by the number of students and organizational structure by grade levels, and the principal's years of experience?

Importance of Study

A description of those schools' effective programs provides important information to assist other schools with program ideas that have been field tested and shown to be effective. A description of the current situation in our elementary schools may assist policy makers within the state to better understand the nature of the programs by which at-risk students are being served. Further, a description of the current situation of Montana rural schools in relation to at-risk student identification and services would be of benefit to other states with rural populations and would contribute to the literature and research base that already exists.

No Child Left Behind legislation from the national level has placed an increased emphasis on student achievement as measured by standardized achievement tests. Today, understanding and serving the at-risk student population is even more important to schools and district level policy makers. National and state pressure from No Child Left Behind filters down to the local level. It is important that a clearer understanding of effective programs and services be developed and that program implementation becomes a priority at the building level.

Through careful analysis, at-risk program trends can be described on a statewide basis. Careful evaluation of the situation within the state can delineate areas of need and provide necessary information to justify resources for the implementation of research-based programs that positively impact the at-risk child(ren).

Definition of Terms

At-Risk Students: Students who are labeled at-risk are those who, because of a combination and interaction of multiple variables, possess characteristics that are likely to result in the student's failure to graduate from high school, to attain work skills, and to become a productive member of society. Emerging from the research are three central groups of factors that are characteristic of students at risk: social family background, personal problems, and school factors.

Social Family Background: Sibling or parent dropout, low socioeconomic status, English is a second language, dysfunctional family, poor communication between home and school.

Personal Problems: External locus of control, learned helplessness or accepting failure, suicide attempt(s), substance abuse, low self-esteem, teenage pregnancy, trouble with the law, learning disabilities, lack of life goals, lack of hope for the future, significant lack of coping skills, works many hours per week.

School Factors: Behavior problems, absenteeism, lack of respect of authority, grade retention, suspension expulsion, course failure, tracking ability grouping, dissatisfaction with school, lack of available and adequate counseling

possibilities, inadequate school services, school climate hostile to students who do not “fit the norm” (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994).

Effective Programs: Research from the past 25 years has documented a number of components that are essential to school programs where all children, particularly those at risk, are learning effectively. The essential components of effective programs include:

Positive School Climate: Choice, commitment, and voluntary participation; small, safe, supportive learning environment; shared vision, cooperative governance, and local autonomy; flexible organization; community partnerships and coordination of services.

Customized Curriculum and Instructional Program: Caring, demanding, and well-prepared teachers; comprehensive and continuing programs; challenging and relevant curricula; high academic standards and continuing assessment of student progress; individualized instruction: personal, diverse, accelerated, and flexible; successful transitions.

Personal, Social, and Emotional Growth: Promoting personal growth and responsibility; developing personal resiliency; developing emotional maturity through service, promoting emotional growth; promoting social growth (Barr & Parrett, 2001).

First Step to Success: Is a collaborative school and home early intervention program designed to address the problem of emerging antisocial behavior patterns among at-risk kindergartners. It is delivered by someone who can set up the program,

demonstrate its effective operation, support the kindergarten teacher's role in implementation, train parents and caregivers in teaching school-success skills, and provide overall coordination of the implementation (Walker, Kavanaugh, Stiller, Golly, Severson & Geil, 1998).

Montana Behavior Initiative: Is a comprehensive staff development venture created to improve the capacities of schools and communities to meet the diverse and increasingly complex social, emotional and behavioral needs of students (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 1995).

Protective Mechanisms: Reduce the negative outcomes of problems by altering the child's exposure to the risk, reduce the negative reactions that follow exposure to a risk, establish and maintain self-efficacy and self-esteem, and provide opportunities for at-risk children to receive the skills necessary for school and career services.

Resiliency: Implies that a web of abilities and support enable at-risk students to succeed. The resilient characteristics appear to fall into three fundamental categories: personal, family and school.

Personal Factors: The students seem to have a personal strength and temperament that allow them to search out help and become self-reliant.

Family Factors: Parental involvement and support tends to be available to these students. Parents have high expectations for their children's education and encourage high achievement.

School Factors: A strong school experience and a positive attitude toward school help mitigate home and societal problems (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994).

Second Step: Is a curriculum designed to reduce impulsive and aggressive behavior in young children and increase their level of social competence. It does this by teaching skills in empathy, impulse control and anger management (Committee for Children, 1991).

Success for All: Is a project coordinated by Robert Slavin and other leading scholars at Johns Hopkins University. The program prescribes a schoolwide effort that has successfully experimented with Chapter I funds to enrich the entire school student body, rather than to support a separate pullout program. It is grounded in a strong foundational knowledge base and has demonstrated exceptional success in helping at-risk youth achievement (Madden et al., 1991).

Assumptions/Limitations/Delimitations

This study made these assumptions: that for survey purposes, the principal of each elementary school knows which programs are being utilized on behalf of at-risk students within his/her school, and that the principal understands the characteristics indicative of at-risk students.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

In Chapter 1 the problem of identifying at-risk students and developing effective programs to meet their needs in rural Montana schools was delineated. The purpose of this study was to identify and describe what rural schools in Montana are doing to meet the needs of at-risk students and what conditions exist in those schools. This was accomplished by determining which characteristics of effective programs, services and processes that identify at-risk students are most often utilized in these schools. Guiding this study were the following questions: What are the common characteristics of programs and services for at-risk students? What common processes are utilized to identify at-risk students? What are the processes common to all schools? What specific programs for at-risk students are being utilized?

The problem of at-risk students and the use of effective programs to meet their needs at the present time was outlined with a review of previous research and findings that have been derived are presented. The methodologies used to elicit the current findings in regard to at-risk students and programs used are reviewed. The importance of this study for the schools and students in Montana was indicated through careful review of the research and findings.

Literature Selection Criteria

This study of at-risk students and effective programs to meet their needs focused on the research that was applicable to the rural population found in Montana. The focus of the review was on the themes that are most pertinent to factors indicative of elementary school age children deemed to be at-risk and the characteristics of the programs regarded to be most effective when working with this population.

One focus for this literature review was the identification of circumstances that have been traditionally regarded as placing children at risk of educational failure with the concentration being on relevance of the information to the situation that was indicative of and applicable to situations found in Montana elementary schools.

Another focus was the identification of behaviors that are exhibited by elementary age children that the research suggests as being indicative of children who are considered at-risk of educational and ultimately societal failure. The identification of these characteristics was important to understand when attempting to identify specific at-risk children.

A third theme for the literature review was to identify broad overarching conditions that need to exist within schools in order to meet the needs of at-risk children. Those conditions considered imperative for a school to begin to create the climate needed to address the needs of at-risk children was discussed within the confines of this research synthesis.

A fourth focal area was the identification of research-based effective programs that exist and are regarded as being successful in meeting the needs of at-risk children. The key components of these programs were delineated and provide a foundation to compare with those programs being used in rural elementary schools. The identification of such program components and their relevance to conditions set forth in Montana rural elementary schools was important in this study. A comparison can be made between the rural Montana elementary schools and the relevant information derived from the literature review.

Finally, this study utilized information that has been comprised within the last 15 years. It was important to draw upon a historical perspective when reviewing programs and conditions that have been successful with at-risk student populations. Primary resources were used when possible as a focus for the literature review. In order to fully understand the past and present research, it was imperative to understand the current problem of at-risk students and the educational atmospheres and programs they are encountering.

Current Understanding of the Problem

Circumstances of At-Risk Children

At-risk appears to be the latest label that American educators attach to several groups of students who have experienced difficulty or failure in their careers as learners. Historically, other category names have been associated with these same populations: culturally deprived, low income, dropout, alienated, marginal, disenfranchised,

impoverished, underprivileged, disadvantaged, learning disabled, low performing, low achieving, remedial, language-impaired, etc. (Presseisen, 1991).

Children labeled at-risk often face similar circumstances. These children often come from poverty-stricken backgrounds. They are more prone to social and familial stress, characterized by a lack of control over their lives, by a dim perspective in terms of their future hopes, as well as a limited view of their own personal growth and self-esteem (Presseisen, 1991). The interplay of these circumstantial factors have long-lasting impacts upon the children and their future.

Currently, the at-risk problem is seen as a complex interplay of a multitude of variables—home, school and societal—that combine to give a student at-risk status. Some common characteristics emerge as a definition of students at-risk.

McMillan divides the definition into three categorical areas: social/ family background, personal problems, and school factors. The social/family background includes: sibling or parent dropout, low socioeconomic status, membership in an ethnic or racial minority group, dysfunctional family—lack of structure and stability, substance abuse, physical/sexual abuse, single-parent families, lack of family commitment to school, lack of parent education, and poor communication between home and school (1992, p.4). Personal problems include: external locus of control, learned helplessness, suicide attempt(s), substance abuse, low self-esteem, teenage pregnancy, trouble with the law, learning disabilities, lack of life goals, lack of hope for future, significant lack of coping skills (McMillan, 1992, p.5). Finally, the school factors include: behavior problems, absenteeism, lack of respect for authority, suspension/expulsion, course/grade failure, tracking/ability grouping, dissatisfaction and frustration with school, lack of available and adequate counseling possibilities, inadequate school services, and school climates hostile to students who do not “fit the norm” (McMillan, 1992, p. 5).

These circumstances are not an exclusive or inclusive list; however, the factors or a combination of a number of these factors can contribute to a child experiencing educational and/or future failure.

The circumstances facing at-risk children are a reality in rural areas. Two-thirds of all schools in the United States are in rural areas. The majority of under-served and unserved children are located in rural America (Sellers, 1996). Distances, scattered populations, and inadequate or unavailable services are obstacles to program development, particularly when specialized facilities and personnel are required (National Research Council, 1993). The isolation of many rural areas, especially those in remote locations with sparse populations, exacerbate many conditions that place youth at-risk (National Research Council, 1993). Many rural areas attempt to deal with the needs of an at-risk population without readily available resources. The circumstances at-risk students are facing, such as poverty, inadequate services, unique cultural attitudes, and familial factors are prevalent in rural areas.

Rural students are placed at risk by certain unique characteristics of the rural environment that may not be captured by broad-based school or demographic data. Two relevant themes emerged from Bull's (1992) review of the literature: first, virtually all students in an isolated community may be at higher risk of not achieving their potential, and second, low self-esteem and lowered aspirations may be more prevalent among rural students. Many of the services, opportunities, and conveniences afforded to those who live in larger cities and towns are not as readily available to people in isolated areas. Health and social services, educational opportunities, cultural resources, etc., are limited or totally lacking in these remote regions. Schools in rural areas as well deal with the needs of at-risk students differently than their urban counterparts.

A critical finding drawn from one study concerns the incongruence in how rural school principals define and identify at-risk versus programs in place in schools to address the needs of at-risk students (Sellers, 1996). Another important finding was the perception held by rural school principals that schools needed to incorporate change. Generally speaking, these changes include such intangible criteria as attributes of teachers needing change, the examination of the traditional structure of schools and improvement of school culture. While recognition that a change of existing attributes of teachers, traditional structure and culture of schools is needed, there was a significant lack of any suggested direction how this change could be effected (Sellers, 1996). Given the social dynamics unique to many rural communities, the delay or lack of intercession with at-risk interventions individualized to students' needs may be explained by the reluctance of school principals to "get in the business" of families who are their neighbors, friends and colleagues (Sellers, 1996). The rural school and community present unique situations and challenges that need to be understood in order to meet the needs of the at-risk student.

Behaviors Exhibited by At-Risk Children

Research indicates that children considered at-risk exhibit certain behaviors at a young age. These children are characterized by excessively aggressive and impulsive behavior which can emerge as early as three years of age.

The core elements in this early risk pattern include: a tendency to become involved in poking; pushing and other annoying social behavior; a tendency to rush into things; negative and defiant behavior; and self-centered verbal responsiveness to others; exemplified by interrupting others, blurting out their thoughts, and talk which is irrelevant to the ongoing conversation (Spivack & Cianci, 1987).

These behaviors can lead to rejection by their peers, underachieving in school, performing below their potential, landing in prison as adults and becoming physically abusive as adults (Asher & Cole, 1990).

Children considered at-risk tend to have a consistent pattern of personal problems that are often manifested in school and other social settings. The personal problems can be characterized by external locus of control, learned helplessness, suicide attempt(s), substance abuse, low self-esteem, learning disabilities, lack of life goals, lack of hope for the future and significant lack of coping skills (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). These behavior patterns can lead to the child experiencing significant problems in the classroom and ultimately the risk of dropping out of school.

Westfall and Pisapia further elaborate on the common behaviors found in students who are considered at-risk. They identified the following indicative behaviors or contributing factors: disruptive to the learning environment, high absenteeism, grade retention—especially in early grades, actions leading to suspension/expulsion, poor academic record, tracking/ability grouping and dissatisfaction and frustration with school (1994). Further, the school's reaction to these students can exacerbate the aforementioned problems through a lack of adequate school services, such as mental health, social services and health services. Schools can also create a climate that is hostile toward those students who do not "fit the norm." The lack of services and a hostile climate toward students who do not "fit the norm" are especially apparent in the rural school environment (Sellers, 1996). At-risk students in rural school environments face a variety of challenges that are not as apparent in their urban school counterparts.

Conditions for Successful Intervention

Irmsher (1997) indicated that the components of successful programs that meet the needs of at-risk children tend to fall within two broad, overarching conditions which are present in the schools. These schools function as caring, cohesive communities and they operate under standards similar to high-reliability organizations (Irmsher, 1997). The high-reliability organizations typically have three features. First, they have a clearly stated mission with central goals that are clear and widely shared. Second, the management structure is a flexible hierarchy with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Third, they rely on the professional judgment of all staff members (Irmsher, 1997). Effective programs are built around a team approach to meet the needs of children considered at-risk.

The more successful efforts in meeting the needs of at-risk children are those programs that take a more comprehensive approach and focus on a multitude of various needs and problems. These comprehensive programs view the at-risk students as youth with problems stemming from many sources, and thus their intervention must attempt to attack the problems from several perspectives. Some of the characteristics of effective programs include early intervention, a positive school climate, school faculty that is cooperative and mutually supportive, small class sizes, parent involvement, self-esteem building and support, guidance and mental health counseling, emphasis on teaching and social/life skills, peer involvement/extracurricular and easing grade level transitions (McMillan, 1992). A clear focus on the organization of the school and development of a supportive environment appear to be critical components of a successful program.

The most effective strategies used by teachers of at-risk students provide more specific methods of assisting these students within the confines of the classroom. The top three strategies in terms of effectiveness at the elementary school level were individualizing instruction, the utilization of special teachers, and more specific time on basic skills (George & Antes, 1992). The utilization of teacher-suggested strategies is important when considering which strategies are viewed by the practitioners as being most effective.

Effective Programs in Meeting Needs of At-Risk

Programs that have been shown to be effective with at-risk students are numerous and contain many of the components identified as being necessary. The following programs have been established, implemented and reviewed to determine their effectiveness.

Educational leaders in the Northwest have shown interest in the concept of a school-based early childhood center. The major premise of these programs is early identification and intervention.

The defining features of such centers include: 1) Adherence to quality parameters based on child development principles and developmentally appropriate practice as these apply to children through the age of eight; 2) Active involvement and support of parents as partners in their child(ren)'s development; 3) Active involvement with and responsiveness to the resources and needs of the community; and 4) A school-based commitment to educate preschoolers in the community either on-site or in collaborative relationships with preschool providers (Jewett, 1991).

The emphasis of this program is the importance of early intervention and the development of collaborative efforts between the school, parents and preschool providers.

Early intervention and the development of collaborative efforts between parents and the school are the major program components of one of the most successful federal programs for providing assistance to preschool youth. The program is known as Head Start. Head Start has been federally funded since 1965. Over 600,000 disadvantaged preschool youth are served annually. The effectiveness of Head Start has been studied extensively over the last 35 years. A wide variety of research has documented that Head Start has had strong positive effects on language development and IQ scores (Lang, 1992). There is evidence from longitudinal studies that Head Start children do have long-term positive gains in high school graduation and lack of delinquency (McPartland & Slavin, 1990). A 1999 study conducted by the National Institute for Child Health and Development reported that the Head Start Program was effectively preparing young children for kindergarten. This study, conducted in 1997, followed 3,200 children in 40 Head Start programs. The study not only found Head Start children ready to learn, but found that graduates had made significant progress at the end of kindergarten. The study also found that Head Start teachers needed to emphasize early reading skills to a greater degree in order to improve reading readiness (Study: High-quality child care pays off, 1999). Many states have developed programs to supplement the success of Head Start with names like Great Start, Even Start, and Strong Start. The state of Montana has developed Even Start as a supplement to the Head Start program. Such federally funded programs have created opportunities for many disadvantaged youth in urban as well as rural areas.

The literature indicated that the best time to address the needs of at-risk youth is as early as possible. For schools, that means that the maximum opportunity to have a positive impact on children is in kindergarten and grades 1 through 3 (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Early intervention programs have enormous potential for at-risk students especially in the area of reading development. It is critical that all children, with the exception of the severely handicapped, learn to read by the end of third grade. It is reported in the literature that reading deficiency is the most frequently identified problem of at-risk children (Barr & Parrett, 2001).

Throughout the research, the Success for All Program is consistently mentioned and regarded as having a significant impact on improving students' achievement particularly in the core subject areas. The Success for All Program is coordinated by Robert Slavin and others at The Johns Hopkins University. It is grounded in a strong foundational knowledge base and has demonstrated exceptional success in helping at-risk children achieve (Herman, 1999). Success for All has four major goals: 1) to ensure that every student will perform at grade level in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of the third grade; 2) to reduce the number of students referred to special education classes; 3) to reduce the number of children who are held back a grade; and 4) to increase attendance (Madden et al., 1991). Success for All incorporates a variety of effective characteristics to achieve its goals including one-on-one reading tutors, cross-age leveled reading group, family support teams, and building-level advisory committees composed of teachers, parents, the principal and trained facilitators (Ascher, 1993). The Success for All Program provides proof of how research-based approaches can be integrated into a

schoolwide approach to effectively teach at-risk youth.

Another program, *Second Step: A Violence-Prevention Curriculum*, is highly regarded in the literature and focuses on reducing impulsive and aggressive behavior in children. The program has a well-defined curriculum and emphasizes the importance of early intervention. The focus of this curriculum is to increase children's levels of social competence by teaching skills in empathy, impulse control and anger management.

Second Step teaches how not to become a victimizer. Empathy training, impulse control and anger management are fostered through teaching strategies that reduce social bias and promote recognition of the different feelings and needs of others. The primary target group is preschool and kindergarten (Committee for Children, 1991).

Second Step for Preschoolers and Kindergartners was piloted in two school districts in the Seattle area. The pilot program was taught by eleven teachers and two counselors in four public schools, and one private school and a Headstart program (Committee for Children, 1991). The program demonstrated promising results through a thorough evaluation of its effectiveness. The results showed significant enhancement of the children's empathy, impulse control and anger management skills. Teachers gave highly favorable ratings and planned to use the program again the next year. Anecdotal information supplied by the teachers attested that some transfer of training had occurred during the three months of the pilot (Committee for Children, 1991).

Early identification and intervention was a consistent characteristic reported in the literature to be effective in meeting the needs of at-risk children. The *First Step to Success Program* stresses the importance of early intervention. The program targets at-

risk kindergartners who show early signs of an antisocial pattern of behavior (i.e., aggression, oppositional-defiant behavior, severe tantrumming, victimization of others) (Walker et al., 1998). First Step to Success consists of three interconnected modules: (a) proactive, universal screening of all kindergartners; (b) school intervention involving the teacher, peers and the target child; and (c) parent/caregiver training and involvement to support the child's school adjustment. The major goal of the program is to divert at-risk kindergartners from an antisocial path in their subsequent school career (Walker, et al., 1998).

The Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior (1998) reported that the program was tested on two cohorts of at-risk kindergartners screened and selected in succeeding school years (1993-1994 and 1994-1995). The program produced powerful intervention effects for kindergartners in each cohort from pre- to post-intervention (approximately three months) time points, as measured by teacher ratings and structured behavioral observations recorded by professionally trained and supervised observers. Results indicated a measurable intervention effect for both cohorts and persistence of gains into the primary grades.

Review of Previous Research and Findings

The body of research in regard to at-risk students focuses on factors that relate to environmental contexts, identification of characteristics of behavior and effective components and programs that meet the needs of the at-risk student. The literature contains many commonalities and appears to provide a body of knowledge upon which

this study of the situation in Montana can build.

Research on Identification of At-Risk Student Characteristics

Numerous studies have been conducted that identify characteristics of at-risk students. This body of research can be utilized by schools to understand students considered at-risk. Westfall and Pisapia (1994), in a well-documented research brief, indicate that three central groups of factors are characteristic of students at-risk: social family backgrounds, personal problems, and school factors.

Social/Family background factors include: sibling or parent dropout; low socioeconomic—inadequate nutrition, damage to dignity, inadequate home facilities; English as a second language; dysfunctional family—lack of structure and stability, substance abuse, physical/sexual abuse, lack of family commitment to school; and poor communication between home and school. The factors identified as personal problems include: external locus of control; learned helplessness, accepting failure; suicide attempt (s); substance abuse; low self-esteem; teenage pregnancy or raising children; trouble with the law; learning disabilities; lack of goals, inability to see options, lack of hope for the future; and a significant lack of coping skills. Finally, the school factors identified include: behavior problems—disruptive to learning environment; absenteeism; lack of respect for authority, feelings of alienation from school authorities; grade retention—especially in the early grades; suspension/expulsion; poor academic record; tracking/ability grouping; dissatisfaction and frustration with school; lack of availability and adequate counseling possibilities; inadequate school services; and a school climate hostile to students who do not fit the norm (1994).

In an article written by Miller (1993), five factors were identified that contribute to a student's academic risk level. These include poverty, racial or ethnic minority status, a single parent family, a poorly educated mother, and limited proficiency with English (p.442). Each of these characteristics was encompassed in the research brief outlined by Westfall and Pisapia.

Seldner (1992) added yet another set of factors that seemed to identify those students who are at-risk of school failure. He considered those who have reading and math levels of a year or more behind grade level, those who have been retained in a grade or experienced other academic failures, and students with problems of adjustment such as self control or social control to be potentially at-risk (p. 109). Family circumstances, substance abuse, absenteeism, tardiness, and truancy are also conditions that must be considered (Seldner, 1992, p. 110).

Research on Effective Program Components

The research identified program components that are considered most effective when determining the needs of at-risk students in schools. McMillan (1992) identified the need of early intervention as a critical component. He stated, "Early educational experiences may intervene to break the strong bond between particular family characteristics and school failure" (p.6). Slavin, Karweit and Wasik (1992) confirmed the need for early intervention when they stated, "Prevention is critical because success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the school years and beyond, but failure in the early grades virtually guarantees failure in later schooling" (p.11).

Another component of an effective program is the development of a positive school climate. Attributes of an inviting and positive climate include ensuring high time-on-task, facilitating a high degree of student interaction, providing positive reinforcement for desired classroom behavior, maintaining high expectations, inviting success and establishing a cooperative learning environment (McMillan, 1992, p.7). It is important

for the student to have a sense of belonging and an elevated level of importance.

Irmsher (1997) identified two broad overarching conditions typically present in schools that successfully serve at-risk students. First, these schools function as caring, cohesive communities. Second, they operate under standards similar to high-reliability organizations. Noneducational examples of high-reliability organizations are air-traffic controllers and regional power grids (1997). Schools operating as high reliability organizations tightly guide the educational flight path of each child. The researchers believe individual schools acting in isolation cannot ensure that at-risk students will receive a quality education (Irmsher, 1997). However, changing the overall atmosphere of the school can have a significant impact on the type of programs utilized to meet the educational needs of all children.

The importance of parent involvement and collaboration cannot be overlooked. The more involved the parent, the more engaged the child will become. It appears that parent involvement can even help improve the home learning environment. Giving parents roles in the schools as well as home visiting results in higher-level participation (Dryfoos, 1997). Through increased parental participation, the child's perception of the importance of education will be positively influenced. Researchers and educators have long agreed that when parents get involved in education, children try harder and achieve more at school. Parents who help and encourage their child to learn at home, and who help develop positive attitudes toward school, contribute to the personal growth and academic success of their children (Epstein, 1995).

Research indicated that the more parents are interested and involved in children's schoolwork, the better children tend to do in school. Schools need to establish a parent-friendly environment that encourages collaboration between families and the school. Parents should be encouraged to visit their child's school on a regular basis, become acquainted with the teacher, learn how they can help their children at home, and discuss how they can encourage the child to be more effective in school (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Increased collaboration between home and school will benefit all children in their educational achievement.

Various approaches have been developed to help schools gain greater parent involvement. These approaches have several features in common: programs that focus on parenting skills and the development of home conditions that support learning; school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children's progress; the use of volunteers in school or in other locations to support the school and students; and participation by families in decision-making, governance and advocacy (Bauch, 1994).

Taking into account both the opportunities and challenges posed by conditions of rural life, educators can work to involve parents by setting up programs that include features with well-documented, positive results. The features most often recommended include: parent enrollment in adult education and parenting education programs; cooperative strategies for extending the school curriculum beyond the school walls; efforts to help parents provide learning experiences at home; home visits by personnel trained to facilitate home-school communication; in-classroom involvement of parents,

business leaders, and citizens; summer enrichment programs for both parents and children; community-based learning; use of school facilities for community activities; and university participation in an advisory and supportive role (Bauch, 1994). Creating such programs will assist schools in assisting parents to become active players in their children's success and lessen the likelihood of children being placed at-risk of educational failure.

One area of vital importance is children learning how to read early in their schooling experience. Parents play an important role in the development of children academically. Research indicates that there are few specific practices which have such positive long-lasting influence as that of reading aloud to infants and young children. Reading aloud provides both the closeness and human warmth that are essential to early bonding; it also provides an essential foundation for school success (Barr & Parrett, 2001).

Strategies and experiences that develop phonemic awareness are also an essential factor in literacy development. Phonemic awareness, the ability to distinguish and manipulate speech sounds, is a requisite skill for beginning instruction in reading. Varied language experiences with songs, fingerplays, games, poems, and stories which use rhyme and alliteration patterns are critically important (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). Children who experience early success in the area of reading have a significantly greater chance of experiencing academic success. Therefore, it is crucial that schools and parents work together to ensure that all children experience academic success in the primary grades, particularly in the areas of reading

and language development.

Another key area in successful school programs that meets the needs of at-risk students is the development of protective factors that develop resiliency in these children. Dryfoos (1997) emphasized the importance of programs that integrate protective factors at-risk children need in order to develop resiliency. Four factors have been frequently mentioned that foster resiliency or invulnerability to the consequences of high-risk behaviors. The implementation and development of protective factors have implications for programs. First, the child needs to gain an attachment to a caring adult. The best documented fact in the extensive literature is the importance of social bonding between a young person and an adult. Second is the enhancement of independence and competency. Many children who make it despite all odds appear to have a strong streak of independence that leads to the development of competency. The third factor involves the creation of high aspirations within the child. The hope of a better future and the fulfillment of dreams creates a positive outlook in the mind of the child. Usually, a significant adult is involved in helping turn the aspirations into reality. Finally, effective schools play an important role in fostering resiliency. A supportive and challenging school can act as a significant influence in the life of a disadvantaged youngster. Caring teachers with high expectations for students can act as buffers against the outside world and assist young people in achieving their goals (p.41). The development of the aforementioned protective factors can have significant implications for effective programs designed to meet the needs of at-risk children.

Other Pertinent Research

Resiliency is a term used throughout the literature involving at-risk students. The term is used to describe children who have overcome the presence of several at-risk factors and developed characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed. They become individuals with stable, healthy personas, sound values, high self-esteem, good interpersonal relationships, success in school and positive goals and plans for the future (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994, p.1). It is estimated that approximately 19% of at-risk students are resilient (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994, p. 1).

The resilient characteristics appeared to fall into three fundamental categories: personal, family, and school factors. Personal factors were manifest in the students' personal strength and temperament that allowed them to search out help and become self-reliant. Family factors included the presence of parental involvement and support that was available to the resilient student. The parents exerted pressure on their children to work toward high achievement. School factors encompassed the strong school experience and a positive attitude toward school that helped to mitigate home and societal problems (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994, p. 2).

McMillan provided additional characteristics found in the persona, family and school factors described by Westfall and Pisapia. The three factors presented by McMillan in his review of the relevant research included:

1. Personal Factors - temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from individuals around them; high intrinsic motivation and internal locus of control seem to enable an at-risk student to succeed; active involvement in extracurricular events, at school or in other arenas, seems to provide a refuge for resilient students; involvement in "required helpfulness" can be a powerful

piece of resilient students' experiences.

2. Family Factors - most resilient at-risk students have had the opportunity to establish a close bond with at least one care giver who gave them much attention in the crucial first year of life; family support seems to be an attribute of successful at-risk students; parents of resilient students have higher expectations for their children's educations; and parental education is related to student resiliency.
3. School Factors - resilient students seem to find support outside the home environment; they seem to like school and involve themselves in classroom discussions and activities; teachers play an immensely important role in resilient students' success (1992).

Benard (1991) has identified protective factors in families, schools and communities which foster resiliency in children. The family factors included caring and support, having high expectations and encouraging children's participation. Each factor was further described by Benard as follows:

Caring and Support involves a close bond with at least one person who provided the child with stable care and from whom he/she received adequate attention during the first year of life. A caring and supportive relationship remains the most critical variable throughout childhood and adolescence.

High expectations are set by the family for their children's behavior from an early age. Concomitant with high expectations are other family characteristics such as structure, discipline, and clear rules and regulations. Encourage children's participation and acknowledge them as valued participants in the life and work of the family. A critical factor is that the child is provided with lots of opportunities to participate meaningfully in the life and work of the family (p.14-15).

Benard identified three overarching protective factors which were found within schools that significantly impacted the lives of children and possibly led to resiliency in children. The school factors included caring and support, high expectations and youth participation and involvement. Each factor is further defined:

Caring and support within the school is a powerful predictor of positive outcome for youth. For the resilient child, a caring teacher is not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive role model for personal identification. High expectations are established for all children. Research

