

DOUGLAS MIDDLE SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF A MIDDLE SCHOOL'S  
IMPROVEMENT OF THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ITS AT-RISK STUDENTS

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(ABSTRACT)

Jackson and Davis noted in *Turning Points 2000*, "Changes in middle grades practices have least often occurred where they are needed most: in high poverty urban and rural communities where unacceptably poor student achievement is rampant" (2000, p.5). Virginia has many school districts that fall into these categories. Even though they fall into these categories, middle schools across the state are still expected to have their students pass assessments at a high rate and meet state standards.

The purpose of the study was to investigate and describe how one middle school went from being accredited with warning to making AYP and meeting high standards of academic achievement with at-risk students. Poor academic achievement is one of the most consistent predictors of dropout, whether measured through grades, test scores, or course failure (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). Investigating test scores and the research-based practices that may have influenced scores to improve in this particular middle school were the primary areas of study. The researcher utilized qualitative research methods to investigate a middle school that has been successful in improving the academic success rate for its at-risk students.

The overarching research question for the study was What practices were used in this middle school to ensure the academic success of at-risk students? Research-based practices found in the literature to have influenced at-risk middle school students' achievement are (a) strong principal leadership, (b) focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships. The study attempted to determine which, if any of the practices were used by the school and if factors other than the practices identified for investigation may have contributed to the success of at-risk students in the school.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM .....	3
CURRENT CONTEXT OF EDUCATION FOR AT-RISK MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS.....	4
Examining the Need and Pressure to Raise Academic Achievement.....	5
The Problem that Affects Everything in the Curriculum.....	6
NEED FOR THE STUDY .....	6
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.....	7
RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	7
SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY .....	8
PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	8
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	9
DEFINITIONS .....	10
DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	11
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY .....	11
OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES.....	12
ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY .....	12
<b>CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>14</b>
DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS .....	14
MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS.....	17
Specific Programs and Interventions for At-Risk Students .....	17
THREE PRACTICES THAT PROMISE SUCCESS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS .....	21
Strong Principal Leadership.....	22
A Focused Curriculum and Reading Intervention .....	24
Positive Teacher-Student Relationships .....	28
SUMMARY .....	32
<b>CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>35</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	35
ASSUMPTIONS AND RATIONALE FOR A QUALITATIVE DESIGN .....	35
RESEARCH DESIGN .....	35
PROCEDURES .....	36
Setting Selection .....	36
GAINING ACCESS AND ENTRY.....	37
RESEARCHER’S ROLE.....	38
ASSURANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONSENT.....	39
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES .....	40
Interview Protocol and Procedures .....	41
FIELD TEST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	42
DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES .....	42
CONTENT VALIDITY.....	44
TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	44
SUMMARY .....	45

<b>CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>46</b>
PROFILE OF DOUGLAS MIDDLE SCHOOL .....	47
PROFILE OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS .....	47
INTERVIEWS AND DOCUMENT ANALYSIS .....	48
OVERVIEW OF RESULTS .....	49
DESCRIPTION OF THE FINDINGS.....	49
CATEGORY: STRONG PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP .....	51
Pattern: Trust.....	52
Pattern: School Culture .....	53
Pattern: Teacher Empowerment.....	53
CATEGORY: A FOCUSED CURRICULUM AND READING INTERVENTION .....	56
Pattern: Vertical Articulation Team.....	56
Pattern: School Improvement Plan .....	57
Pattern: Remediation.....	59
CATEGORY: TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS.....	60
Pattern: High Expectations for All Students.....	60
Pattern: Engagement .....	61
CATEGORY: TEACHER COLLABORATION .....	62
Pattern: Cross-Curricular Instruction.....	62
Pattern: Teaming.....	64
SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS .....	65
<b>CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>67</b>
DISCUSSION .....	67
STRONG PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP .....	67
Trust .....	68
School Culture .....	68
Teacher Empowerment .....	69
A FOCUSED CURRICULUM AND READING INTERVENTION.....	69
Vertical Articulation Team .....	70
School Improvement Plan.....	70
Remediation .....	71
POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS .....	71
High Expectations for All Students .....	71
Engagement.....	72
TEACHER COLLABORATION .....	72
Cross-Curricular Instruction .....	72
Teaming .....	73
CONCLUSIONS.....	73
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE .....	74
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	77
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS .....	77
CONCLUDING STATEMENTS .....	78
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>80</b>

<b>APPENDIX A FIRST CONTACT .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>APPENDIX B PROPOSED STUDY LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>APPENDIX C VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS OF INVESTIGATIVE PROJECTS: STAFF PARTICIPANT FORM.....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>APPENDIX D STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>APPENDIX E PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>APPENDIX F HUMAN SUBJECT TRAINING CERTIFICATE.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>APPENDIX G IRB APPROVAL MEMO .....</b>	<b>99</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 <i>Researcher Based Practices that Promote Success for At-Risk Students</i> .....	33
Table 2 <i>Douglas Middle School</i> .....	37
Table 3 <i>Data Sources</i> .....	40
Table 4 <i>Demographic Information for Study Participants</i> .....	48
Table 5 <i>Comparison of Categories and Patterns Identified by Interviewees</i> .....	50
Table 6 <i>Categories and Patterns Identified from Document Analysis</i> .....	51
Table 7 <i>Instructional Strategies and Practices Shared at the November 2007 Faculty Meeting</i> . 55	
Table 8 <i>Sol Pass Rates in 2005-06</i> .....	58
Table 9 <i>Strategies to Improve Sol English Pass Rates from the 2006-07 School Improvement Plan</i> .....	58

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Historically, school administrators and teachers have worked with students who are at-risk of failure in school. At-risk students enter school behind other students academically. It is up to individual schools to narrow the achievement gap that exists between at-risk students and the rest of the student population. Students who are at-risk often fall even farther behind in the middle school years and begin to struggle on a daily basis. However, school administrators and teachers in some schools have created an environment for these students to succeed (Sturtevant & Linek, 2003). To do so, they have identified and used certain practices to enhance the chance of academic success for at-risk students (Reeves, 2003).

Researchers and scholars still use the term *at-risk* loosely. Up to 35 different characteristics have been used by researchers to describe students who are at-risk (Hammons-Bryner, 1995). In 1994, the U.S. Department of Education estimated that at-risk students made up to anywhere from 20% to 40% of the student population in the nation (Improving Possibilities for Students Placed At Risk, 1994). Most of these students who were considered at risk were poor, Black, or both (Improving Possibilities for Students Placed At Risk, 1994). Educators could see that there was a significant achievement gap for minority students that was growing and was not being addressed.

There is increased accountability for principals, teachers, and schools to meet and achieve the standards set by state and federal laws and regulations (Ravitch, 2010). More importantly, school leaders have a responsibility to all students to assure that they are given all the opportunities to succeed and acquire the skills necessary for academic success (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). Despite the efforts of educators, the middle school years continue to be a difficult transition period and a key determinant of the school success trajectory for adolescents (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & MacIver, 1993).

“We cannot prevent middle school from being a time of change for students, but there is a great deal we can do to make sure that, at this tipping point, they get a push in the right direction” (Whitehouse, 2009, p. 21). The goal of improving the academic success of at-risk students is a focus of middle schools across the nation today. The literature suggests that the practices which stand out are (a) strong principal leadership (Fisher & Frey, 2007; George,



2009), (b) focused curriculum and reading intervention (Reeves, 2003; Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008), and (c) positive teacher-student relationships (Chambers, Hylan, & Schrieber, 2006; Sturtevant et al., 2003). According to Aronson, Cohen, and McCloskey (2009), the success of students in middle school can affect high school graduation rates for Black students who are often over-represented in the at-risk category. Approximately 45% of Black male students graduated from high school in 2003 compared with 65% of white male students (Aronson, 2009).

Principal leadership has been shown to make a difference in the quality of student learning in schools (Supovitz et al., 2010). The leadership and knowledge of the principal has been documented as integral for the success of at-risk students, both academically and socially (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). George (2009) emphasized that schools should see that principals are able to be free in their ability to schedule in flexible fashion. Nowadays, some principals attempt to use collaborative leadership which focuses on shared leadership among principals, teachers, administrators and others in the building (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). Shared leadership is the type of leadership that involves key members of a school's staff (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals who use collaborative techniques recognize the pool of talent in their own building waiting to be tapped for good ideas which can spread in a school.

One of the current trends in accountability has been to strengthen literacy education in middle schools to improve overall academic success among at-risk students. A commitment to early grade reading programs such as Reading First has not been enough to produce substantial progress on national reading assessments (George, 2009). When a middle school is supportive and understanding of the importance of at-risk students' literacy skills, overall academic improvement in the school usually follows (Reeves, 2003). Researchers have demonstrated that reading continues to be a protective factor and sometimes a contributing factor for dropout prevention, as literacy is a key to help students move beyond basic skills to higher level reading skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Therefore, improving literacy skills is a good reason to focus on middle school when investigating practices that will enable at-risk students to become successful academically.

Powers, Bowen, and Rose (2005) found that school satisfaction and climate had a positive influence on students' level of school engagement, which in turn had an impact on academic achievement. Wentzel (1999) asserted that the relationship between teachers and students is one of the most important factors in academic success.

Combining the three practices identified in the literature: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships appears to produce improved achievement for at-risk students (Reeves, 2003). In hopes of attaining the desired levels of student achievement, it appears that there needs to be a good mixture of the three practices in a school's culture (Reeves, 2003). Some middle schools are quite successful in combining the practices; some struggle with the mixture. An in-depth look at the experience of one successful middle school could provide insight into the implementation of these practices which appear to support the academic success of at-risk students.

### Statement of the Problem

Many school leaders and teachers are frustrated with the growing accountability their schools face to ensure that at-risk students, including those who come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and/or are from a minority background, achieve at a high rate each year (Reeves, 2003). One challenge is reaching Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is the minimum level of annual progress toward the 100 % pass rate required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2001). AYP is calculated for these at-risk subgroups along with several others, with each group required to meet the same statistical proficiency.

Schools have sometimes set up large scale programs to intervene with at-risk students rather than adopting small scale strategies to work with a few students. These innovations include evidence-based programs along with documentation and end-of-year annual reports to update school leaders on the effectiveness of the programs (Hammond, Smink, & Drew, 2007). Middle school principals face the challenge in current economic times to use resources already available inside their schools to help their at-risk student population. Successful interventions by a principal begin with the specific needs of a school's students in mind. When the schedule, organization, and curriculum are driven by those needs, the likelihood of academic success increases (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008). Successful middle schools provide interventions for reading, foster positive relationships with students who are at-risk, and have principals who set goals for reaching the academic benchmarks for AYP (Whitehouse, 2009).

Aronson et al., (2009) report that dropout rates are consistently higher in urban areas than in suburban or rural areas. These rates show that geographic locations matter for dropout rates.

For example, higher rates are found in southern states compared to other parts of the nation (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). Middle school is a critical time for at-risk students which could later prevent students from dropping out of high school (Whitehouse, 2009). Another significant factor for at-risk students is the fact that dropout rates are higher in areas with high proportions of minorities, single-parent households, and communities with a high amount of instability and mobility (Rosenthal, 1998). Consequently, middle schools in locations with higher dropout rates or with populations of students with a higher potential of dropping out must see that the needs of potential dropouts are addressed in the important sixth through eighth grade years.

### Current Context of Education for At-Risk Middle School Students

The main focus involving at-risk students for school administrators today has to do with student achievement and how it is tied to AYP and accountability. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all students including at-risk students need to be college ready and prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation and compete with students from nations around the world (Friedman, 2005). Whitehouse (2009) described middle schools as the root of the dropout crisis in the United States. Whitehouse made it clear that strong teacher-student relationships at the middle school level can have a positive effect on the success of at-risk students. Building positive relationships can mean so much to students by helping them become a better person and student, and it can also include improving student achievement as a goal. The old type of education of lecture is fading, leading to middle school staffs stressing the importance of engaging students and forging new relationships with them (Whitehouse, 2009).

Improving student achievement for at-risk students is a complicated issue that involves not only a positive teacher-student relationship, but also strong principal leadership, and focused curriculum that emphasizes strong literacy skills. Improving student achievement is an issue that is important nationwide. The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University has investigated programs that have helped at-risk students and found some common threads (Hammond et al., 2007).

The National Dropout Center's key practices include: (a) tutoring, (b) computer labs to help with reading, (c) behavior interventions, (d) social skills improvement, and (e) making academic support a key feature (Hammond et al., 2007). These practices are important for any

middle school seeking to prevent dropouts, and all are tied to school leadership, curriculum choices with a focus on reading, and relationship building.

Middle schools must excel academically in a time of accountability. To help at-risk students, there are several practices that stand out in the literature. Establishing and maintaining positive relationships with students can be goals for all members of a middle school's staff, but especially the administrators, teachers, and support staff (Reeves, 2003). Building administrators promote practices that encourage participation and support by teachers in building positive relationships. Administrators are the key to fostering collegiality and collaboration in the schools to focus the curriculum (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). Teachers use the curriculum to streamline their lessons, focus on reading, and provide extra time and practice to ensure that the students are grasping one concept before moving on to the next (Reeves, 2003). At-risk students need to know that they are cared for and that they can be successful academically and that reading is the starting point. Most middle school teachers know who their at-risk students are and many of these same middle school teachers are asking what they can do to help them.

#### *Examining the Need and Pressure to Raise Academic Achievement*

The purpose of having a focused curriculum is to ensure that all students are academically successful. Ensuring the success of all students is becoming more and more difficult for middle schools in particular because of the achievement gap between the academic performances of minority and affluent students and the performances of students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged for students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged (Reeves, 2003). The middle school level has become a focal point for accountability because the minimum threshold for reporting subgroup performance is often reached for the first time in middle schools (United States Department of Education, 2009). For example, in parts of the country, a growing Hispanic population and the slow economy have caused increased numbers of English Language Learner students to be found in the economically disadvantaged category (United States Department of Education, 2009).

At-risk students who often have fallen behind in elementary school and middle schools are left to make up those years. Some improvement can be seen recently. According to the *Nation's Report Card* from the United States Department of Education (2009) eighth grade reading scores were higher in 2009 than in 1992 for Black and Hispanic students and average

reading scores were higher in 2009 than in 2007 for all racial/ethnic groups. However, racial and ethnic gaps still persist in the nation because neither the White-Black nor the White-Hispanic score gap was significantly different from its corresponding gap in 2007 or 1992 (United States Department of Education, 2009).

### *The Problem that Affects Everything in the Curriculum*

The U. S. Government is committed to assessing student progress (Ravitch, 2010). However, the trend in assessment seems to be shifting towards measuring the growth of individual students over a particular school year (Ravitch, 2010). The stated goal of NCLB was the promise to ensure that poor children were not neglected and to close the achievement gap between rich and poor, Black and White (Ravitch, 2010). Despite the relative gains in reading over the last few years and the emphasis on reading achievement by NCLB, many students have serious literacy needs in the middle school grades (Mariage, Burgener, Wolbers, Shankland, Wasburn-Moses, Dimling, Kosobud, & Peters, 2009). Middle schools have set goals to improve reading instruction in a variety of ways to achieve higher reading scores for at-risk students. Fads and acronyms come and go, but in the end the academic success for at-risk students comes down to the blending of reading into a school's curriculum and instruction (Ravitch, 2010).

Improving curriculum and integrating reading instruction is not an easy task and it does take time to accomplish. Middle schools that want to improve their reading outcomes for at-risk students will typically look at individualizing programs for their students and differentiation of instruction to ensure that each at-risk student has the opportunity to be educated to their potential (Mariage et al., 2009). With middle schools often having enough students in subgroups in which at-risk students are frequently found, middle schools are frequently subject to meeting the annual measureable objective target for those subgroups. Consequently, many are seeing little improvement in meeting the targets and their own goals. Many middle schools are still looking for success for their at-risk students on state and local assessments.

### Need for the Study

The issue for middle schools becomes how to improve student achievement for at-risk students. Of particular interest in the study are the ways in which one middle school addressed the issue and actually did improve the student achievement of its at-risk students. What practices

were used to ensure the academic success of at-risk students? The question is compelling considering that the end result of a low performing school could be at-risk students dropping out of school a few years later.

Despite facing the same challenges that middle schools nationwide confront, some middle schools in Virginia have shown improvement. One Southside Virginia middle school has achieved great improvement on Virginia's state assessment tests throughout their school. The middle school's success is even more impressive given the school's numbers of minority and disadvantaged students. The school seems to be doing something right to help its at-risk students to be successful academically. The study here investigated whether the school has used practices identified from the research and if there are any other promising practices in use in the school that could be used by other middle schools to help at-risk students be successful academically.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to describe how one middle school moved from being accredited with warning to making AYP and meeting high standards of academic achievement with at-risk students. As a middle school principal for curriculum and instruction, the researcher's interest is in school administrators and teachers as they engage in the day-to-day work of improving academic achievement for at-risk students. The goal was to report the experiences of a middle school that improved academic achievement for at-risk students to document the research-based practices that the school used.

### Research Questions

The guiding research question for the study was: What practices were used to help at-risk students become academically successful in a high performing middle school in Southside Virginia?

To address the guiding research question, the following questions were addressed:

1. Which, if any, of the three practices identified in the research were used by the school to help at-risk students achieve academic success?
2. What factors other than the ones identified for investigation appear to have contributed to the success of at-risk students in the school?

### Scholarly Significance of Study

Rumberger (1995) contended that success for an at-risk student is linked to a school's environment, such as the climate that a school administrator promotes. The disheartening fact is that educational failure is not a single event. It is an event precipitated by a long process of disengagement that shows warning signs throughout a student's career (Bridgeland, Dilalio, & Morrison, 2006). Administrators and teachers can attempt to ensure that their schools are performing at a high level to help at-risk students become academically successful. Most administrators believe that all students can learn and do well; these same administrators do not accept students at-risk of educational failure as an option (Hammond et al., 2007).

The issue of how to help at-risk students become academically successful continues to be a relevant topic for school leaders (Chambers, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Waters, 2003; McIntosh, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Slavin, 2008). Decisions about how a school deals with at-risk students usually begin with the school leader and are implemented by the teachers and staff. The completed research may assist school administrators in making decisions that positively influence teachers' work with at-risk students. The research adds a component to the basic knowledge about at-risk students in the middle school that school administrators may use to make strategic decisions for their individual schools. Thus, the study contributed to the body of research about practices that are thought to contribute to the academic success of middle school at-risk students.

### Practical Significance of the Study

The study is relevant to middle school educators because it reports the practices of a middle school that improved the achievement of its at-risk students. The study also may validate other practices that similarly situated schools are already using as well. Furthermore, the in-depth qualitative study highlighted the nature of the relationship between school decisions and the success of at-risk students. These insights may bring a greater understanding of how the practices used by the school can affect students. Those insights may be of interest to faculty and staff at other middle schools.

Finally, the study has significance for future research. The results could provide data for analyzing how certain practices can affect at-risk students in other schools. Future research might replicate the methodology of the study, but focus on a different type of middle school or a

different organizational level. The results of the study may have implications for school board members, community stakeholders, and educational advocates. Policymakers' decisions whether or not to approve a principal's innovative ideas might be influenced by looking at how certain practices can impact a school and the academic success for its at-risk students.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework and model for the study was based on practices identified from the literature that appear to have contributed to at-risk students reaching a level of academic success. School administrators and teachers all over the United States work to help students perform well on standardized tests, mature into good citizens, and have them appreciate learning. Reeves (2003) has mentioned in his research that schools must have well-structured learning environments in order for students to reach their full academic potential. Reeves (2003), Fisher and Frey (2007), and Slavin (2008) have conducted studies in schools and classrooms to attempt to identify practices that encourage focused learning in schools that have a large number of at-risk students and are successful with them.

Reeves (2003) conducted what has been described as the 90/90/90 study of high achieving schools. Reeves found that there were certain schools that had high percentages of students in the lower SES, high percentages of minority students, and high percentages of students who were successful. The schools were found in a variety of school settings, from elementary through high school and in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Fisher and Frey (2007) and Slavin (2008) conducted further studies on schools with at-risk students to investigate other practices which encouraged success. Both studies recognized that a strong, focused curriculum and high expectations for academic achievement were factors that contributed to the success of at-risk students. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) also conducted a meta-analysis of studies that had looked at the implementation of curricula that focused on facilitating student achievement. The researchers found that several important instructional strategies were used such as cooperative learning, frequent assessments, and question and answer time to cue a student's feedback. Waters et al. concluded that schools can control instructional strategies and curricula as means to improve student achievement.

Stevens (2003) found that reading deficiencies can impact other subjects taken by a student. Ma'ayan (2010) discussed how differentiating for at-risk students in middle school



could help them gain a new desire for reading and the positives of doing alternative testing. Computerized help has also been another important tool in helping at-risk students overcome reading obstacles (Jones, Staats, Bowling, Bickel, Cunningham, & Cadle, 2004).

Studies conducted by Heck and Hallinger (2010), George (2009), Supovitz et al. (2010), and Chambers et al. (2006) have demonstrated the impact that the school administrator has on student achievement and the success of at-risk students. Sturtevant and Linek (2003) and Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007) completed empirical research studies of the impact of student teacher relationships on the success of at-risk students. These studies along with the others that are discussed in Chapter 2, provided the research foundation for the three practices that have been associated with the success of at-risk students: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships.

### Definitions

The following definitions are presented to indicate their meaning in this study.

**At-risk students:** The phrase refers to students who are negatively affected in their educational performance by environmental, societal, economic, political, and educational factors (Tidwell & Corona, 1994).

**Focused curriculum:** The term is defined as a school where the focus is on learning and achievement (Reeves, 2003).

**Intervention:** The term means “integrated, strategic, meaningful, and if necessary, intensive curriculum and instruction to powerfully enrich and expand adolescents’ reading lives” (Greenleaf & Roller, 2002, p. 495).

**Literacy:** The term is defined as “the set of skills and abilities that students need in grades 4 through 12 to read, write, and think about text materials they encounter” (National Governors Association [NGA], 2005, p. 6).

**Middle school:** The term is defined as a place to articulate young adolescents’ transition into high school (McEwin, 1998).

**90/90/90:** The term refers to schools that have the following characteristics: About 90% of the student population is minority, about 90% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and about 90% of the students scored at or above grade level on state administered assessments (Reeves, 2003).

SES: The term is defined as socioeconomic status (Reeves, 2003).

Standards of Learning (SOLs): The Standards of Learning describe Virginia's expectations for student learning and achievement in grades K-12 in English, mathematics, science, history and social science, technology, the fine arts, foreign language, health and physical education, and driver education (<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/glossary.shtml>).

Success: The term is defined as students being academically competent with school and literacy which demonstrates their understanding and knowledge (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Vertical Articulation Team (VAT): The term is defined as a group of lead teachers and administrators that met to collect, disaggregate, and analyze critical information such as sol scores and student performance by question (Reeves, 2003).

### Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations are defined here as factors or conditions that the researcher chose to employ that may have affected the outcome of the study. The primary delimitation concerns the choice to investigate the practices of one particular middle school in a Southside Virginia school system. Consequently, in keeping with the case study method of inquiry, the results may or may not be representative of other middle schools in Virginia or any other state.

A second delimitation was that the participants for the study were selected from two categories: (a) faculty and (b) administration. The faculty participants included only teachers who had worked at the school during the three-year period of improved scores and who were still working at the school at the time the study was conducted. The administrative participant chosen was the principal of the school during the three-year period of improvement rather than the principal of the school at the time of the study.

### Limitations of the Study

Limitations are defined here as factors or conditions over which the researcher had no control, but which may have affected the outcome of the study. The primary limitation of the study was the honesty of the participants. Another limitation was the passage of time since the three-year period of improved academic achievement for the middle school occurred.

Participants in the study may have exercised selective recall of the events that took place or their

memories may have simply faded over time. Either or both limitations may have affected the accuracy of the study's findings.

### Overview of the Research Methodologies

The study was a case study of the school selected for investigation. The case study approach was utilized because that research method was well suited as a means to answer the guiding research question. "A case study description illustrates the complexities of a situation, depicts how the passage of time has shaped events, provides vivid material, and presents differing perspectives or opinions" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.104).

Case studies typically rely on a variety of techniques for data gathering such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing documents. Rossman and Rallis (2003) stated that the strength of case studies is in their detail, their complexity, and their use of multiple sources to obtain different perspectives on what is being studied. The context of the study brought forth the need to go directly to the middle school and investigate the practices that have helped increase academic achievement for at-risk students.

The primary source of data for the study was participant interviews and a secondary source was document analysis. Rossman and Rallis (2003) believed strongly in learning as much about the lived experiences of the subject that one is interviewing. Seidman (2006) advocated for conducting three interviews with each participant, but also noted that alternatives to the three-interview method may be used successfully as long as the subjects' life histories, details of their experiences, and reflections of the meaning of their experiences are captured during the interviews. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest that two interviews are sufficient to obtain the necessary data. The researcher used a two-interview approach in an effort to enhance participation by respecting the time participants had available, to facilitate the organization and conduct of interviews, and to facilitate the analysis of data gathered in the interviews using Maykut and Morehouse's Constant Comparative Method (2003).

### Organization of the Study

The study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, definitions, significance of the study, and the organization of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature related to principal

leadership, curriculum choices, assessments, computer assisted programs, and teacher-student relationships and how they relate to the success of at-risk students academically. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, significance of the study, research design, limitations and advantages, the setting, the participants, assurance of confidentiality, data collection procedures and the method of data analysis. The findings of the study will be reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for practice and future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chapter Two presents an examination of the literature related to practices that appear to play a role in the academic success of at-risk students in middle schools. The review begins with an examination of the historical development of educational programs for at-risk students with an emphasis on programs for middle school at-risk students. The review continues with a discussion of recent perspectives of the at-risk student and practices that appear to promote their academic success. The review is followed by a synthesis of empirical studies related to the topic. In conclusion, a summary of the research is provided.

The review of the literature was supported by electronic searches of the ERIC database utilizing search terms including, but not limited to, middle school, at-risk students, achievement, intervention, and reading. To locate peer-reviewed studies, the InfoTrac database was used. Readings from books and peer-reviewed journals provided a foundation for the literature review. Due to change of the political landscape in terms of desegregation of public schools and the definition of at-risk students, searches were completed dating back to the 1960s. Nearly fifty studies were found. In addition, books and studies referred by professors and some commentary literature were also used in the review.

#### Development of Educational Programs for At-risk Students

Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, school leaders introduced graded schools where all children were taught the same content at the same time and academic failure was seen as a sign of deficits of character (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). Darling-Hammond (1997) referred to urban schools during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as large, impersonal, factory model schools created to teach basic skills to poor children. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Progressive reform movement promoted equal opportunity for all students, including children of immigrants, but tracked students into a specific curriculum or vocational program (Deschenes et al., 2001). The students who were minorities or immigrants were immediately segregated.

In the mid-1960s, the Coleman Report indicated that socioeconomic status and home influences more or less determined success in school (Coleman, 2006). If that were true, all at-risk students who came from low socioeconomic homes and difficult home would have been predicted to fail (Coleman, 2006). At the start of the 1970s, individual states began to use

competency testing as a means to reform schools, requiring students to earn at least minimum levels of academic success to move to the next grade level or graduate (Amerin & Berliner, 2002). The most serious issue with the testing became the achievement of at-risk students and the reality of those students dropping out. Before the early 1980s, poor and minority students were seen by some as students who would end up failing in the schools and educators were resigned to the fact that they would eventually drop out. These same students were often ignored over the years in education (Deschenes et al., 2001). However, school reformers in the early 1980s were hopeful in their belief that U. S. schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would improve dramatically compared to the schools of the 70s (Schlechty, 2001).

On August 21, 1981, Secretary of Education T. H. Bell established the National Commission on Excellence to examine education in the United States which resulted in the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in April of 1983. The term at-risk had been in use in education circles previously, but this report lifted up the term and brought it to the entire nation's attention. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* also brought out concerns surrounding the transition to high school from middle school. Those concerns included: academic achievement, conduct, attendance, gender, and race. The term 'at-risk' was used in the educational community by both teachers and school leaders (United States Department of Education, 1983). The science community used the term to describe infants who were born with a low birth weight and other negative symptoms (Horner, Theut & Murdoch, 1984). Magid and McKelvey (1988) said that health providers and educators have long argued about the term 'at-risk', thinking that factors that place a person at risk for drug abuse may also place them at risk of dropping out of school or getting in trouble with the court system.

In the 1980s researchers began dissecting the term at-risk for what they truly thought it meant and redefining it for their own purposes. At-risk also was being used more often as a term to describe students who were identified as being aggressive and disruptive, students who were on the road to juvenile delinquency (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1986). After the term became widely used in the education community, many teachers looked at students who were likely to drop out or had already dropped out of high school as examples of what *A Nation at Risk* was warning (Bloch, 1989). By the 1990s, the United States was placing much greater demands on public schools. Now all students are pushed to learn and aspire to high levels of academic progress (Schlechty, 1997).

The current number of students in the U. S. who are identified as at-risk may be even higher than the estimates cited (Willis, 2008). Recent interpretations by the U. S. Department of Education have indicated even more students who could be considered at-risk (NAREN, 2003). Many students are now considered to be at-risk because they are failing to meet the proficiency requirements of state mandated tests. Ethnicities commonly represented in at-risk schools have more than twice the percentage of below basic readers at the middle school level as White students. For example, research completed by the National Assessment of Education Progress showed that although 16% of White students score in the below basic category, 42% of Hispanic students, 44% of American Indian students, and 45% of Black students score below basic (Archer, 2010). With NCLB forcing educators to take an even closer look at subgroups of students, many of which are often labeled at-risk, the education community has begun to distinguish individually which students are considered as at-risk. These subgroups include English Language Learners, minority, special needs, or economically disadvantaged students (Tough, 2006). When NCLB took effect in 2002, there was a pledge to eliminate the achievement gap between Black and White students and the one between poor and middle class students in just 12 years, once again primarily by working with students classified as at-risk (Ravitch, 2010).

The implementation of the NCLB act with its mandate for AYP has made the achievement issue even more important in the eyes of all educators today. School leaders and other educators must now monitor the achievement and progress of children in the respective subgroups in order to assess AYP. While NCLB has created a long list of challenges for schools across the nation, one of the main benefits from it has been that school systems everywhere are now paying attention to students who are considered to be at-risk. These at-risk students are now often identified at the start of the year before they even step foot into the school. Those same students are consciously placed with the teachers who best match their learning styles. Their progress is closely tracked during the school year and instead of falling by the wayside, they are given every chance throughout the year to become successful.

One definition of at-risk is when a student's educational performance is negatively affected by educational factors (Archer, 2010). An example is a student's ability to read on grade level. In 2002, only 13% of the nation's Black eighth grade students were 'proficient' in reading,

which was defined in Tough's study as a standard assessment's measure of grade-level competence or students reading on grade level (2006).

Strong literacy rates have been documented as one of the factors necessary for students to become successful in school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The inability to read on grade level is a factor that affects many students across the country regardless of race or gender or even if they are in an urban, suburban or rural school. Reading deficiencies are a critically important issue especially at the middle school level where they can lead to students dropping out early in their high school career. There are quite clear implications for reading achievement which can be a springboard to ensuring the success of students (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

NCLB has been a driving force behind the accountability movement in American schools and has caused there to be an emphasis on addressing the needs of at risk students. Studies by Frymier (1992) and Kaufman, Bradbury, and Owings (1992) found that students who were overage for their grade nearly tripled the likelihood of performing below the basic proficiency level in reading. NCLB has left many school districts across the nation looking for ideas to address the specific learning needs of select groups of students (Neill, 2006). Improving reading will help the students become successful and help the nation's middle schools in terms of accountability.

### Middle School Programs for At-Risk Students

Middle school is where at-risk students start to seriously get off track either because of being retained, low reading ability, or other variables (Whitehouse, 2009). However, the middle school years are also a time in a student's life when the student is still open to positive influences such as teachers, school administrators, and other staff members. Middle school students are still at the age where positive adult role models can explain the importance of education to them (Whitehouse, 2009). Moreover, there are certain programs and practices that appear to improve their potential for success both in middle school and later in life.

#### *Specific Programs and Interventions for At-Risk Students*

There is disagreement about what the defining characteristics of an at-risk student are. While some researchers have noted a direct relationship between academic failure and underachievement with urban or inner city students (McMillan & Reed, 1994), others have



contended that the outcomes could be tied to anybody who is a potential dropout, retained, or failing two or more courses (Willis, 2008). Other researchers like Reeves (2003) while not specifically picking one characteristic, have maintained that the concept of being at-risk could incorporate one, two or many more traits. A study to identify the characteristics of an at-risk student found a modest, direct relationship between academics, social behavior and the possibility of dropping out (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun & Cochrane, 2008). However, the indirect impact in the McIntosh et al. study, shows that waiting until high school to identify individual students at-risk may be too late for students already on the road to dropping out. Sometimes the middle school is viewed as a stopover between elementary school and high school. Many parents and educators emphasize the importance of the beginning and the end of the educational experiences and tend to forget about the middle. However, the middle is what holds the two ends together and research shows how important those years can be for students in altering the course of their lives in a positive way (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009).

As seen in recent studies conducted in a variety of settings, the question of who is at-risk is still being debated and that determination has a strong effect on a student's achievement, adjustment, and behavior (Reeves, 2003; Slavin et al, 2008). Willis (2008) described an at-risk student as (a) a student who is not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade level, (b) a student who is a potential dropout, (c) a student who has significant social problems which could be either family background or living in poverty, or (d) a student who has been retained. Willis' research went beyond the reported outward manifestations and attempted to investigate some of the causes of the negative behaviors of at-risk students. Willis was specifically interested in how classroom teachers, counselors, and administrators could assist in making learning more successful for at-risk students. Using qualitative methods, Willis focused on three first grade students, one second grader, one fifth grader, and one tenth grader. The data were obtained by asking the students, 'What does it feel like to live in your house?' This question was used by counselors and teachers to examine what was behind the problems of the students. (Willis, 2008).

Based on the data obtained, Willis (2008) concluded that many of the people involved in a young person's life are vital to the success of at-risk students. The principal of the school is as important as the social worker and the courts. Willis noted further, "The difference between an at-risk child who is resilient and one who is not is that those who are resilient have a caring adult

in their lives” (p. 38). Although Willis found the results promising from a research perspective as a means of identifying ways to address the problems of at-risk students, her concern is evident. “Ideally, this effort should be a combined effort by the home, school, faith-based organizations, and community at large, including the criminal justice system, when necessary” (p. 33).

In a review of the literature, McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane (2008) found evidence of a strong link between academic deficits of at-risk students and the students’ behavioral problems. Specifically, there was a significant relationship between academic scores and office discipline referrals at the middle school level (McIntosh et al., 2008). The review also noted that minority students characterized as at-risk sometimes had more difficulty in the middle school years and transitioning to the high school than at-risk Caucasian students, although programs have been put in place to help ease the problem. The setting for the McIntosh’s study was a small district in the Pacific Northwest which had a population of 5,000 students and a low number of ethnic minorities during the 2003 and 2004 school years (McIntosh et al., 2008). The researchers tracked academic and school discipline records for 350 at-risk students as they transitioned from Grade 8 to Grade 9.

Results from the study indicated significant interactions between academic scores and office discipline referrals, both within and across grades (McIntosh et al., 2008). When the direct effects were controlled, the crossover effects of Grade 8 discipline referrals on Grade 9 academic scores remained statistically significant, though the effects of Grade 8 state reading assessment scores on Grade 9 discipline referrals did not. McIntosh et al. also noted that there are increased risk factors in the transition years from middle to high school, especially around the eighth grade years for both students receiving general and special education services and programs. This evidence shows the need for interventions and programs that address academic skill levels as a way to prevent future dropouts.

McIntosh et al.’s 2008 study could be criticized because it employed non-random sampling. The methodology used may have had an effect on the findings of the study such as the homogeneity of the ethnic background distribution, which should be kept in mind when considering the study’s findings. McIntosh reported the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch in the district was at 53% with individual schools ranging from 32% to 73%. The free lunch statistics were a vital part of the study because even though the ethnic minority group that was sampled was not high, the percentage of lower SES students in the sample was similar

to the student population. Furthermore, in terms of at-risk students, Latinos have been found to have the highest dropout rate of any ethnicity in the United States (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2006) and this was the largest ethnic group in McIntosh's study.

For at-risk students, low academic skills continue to be seen as a problem (Slavin, 1999). Academic problems restrict success for at-risk students. Continued academic failure is a precursor to dropping out of high school eventually (Slavin, 1999). At the heart of all of the descriptions of at-risk students, one fact continues to emerge: at-risk students are usually low achievers who are not having a successful school experience (Willis, 2008). The research shows that with such a broad range of characteristics describing an at-risk student, nearly one-third to one-half of all students could be considered at-risk (Johnson, 1998). It is clear, then, that how schools label students at-risk could be just as important as the interventions and programs implemented to help them once they are labeled at-risk.

African American students are also considered at-risk and are monitored closely in the middle school years because of the difficult transition and the social risks that some of them experience. Sadly, most African American students on average suffer from falling behind their more advantaged peers academically during these years (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Similarly, social risk for African American students can severely affect their cognitive development (Sonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel and Rowley (2008) examined the transition to middle school for at-risk students and how it often was characterized by decreased academic achievement and an increased emotional stress that can be even more difficult for at-risk students during this time of transition (Burchinal et al., 2008). Burchinal and his colleagues found a significant link between promoting language skills, decreasing expectations of racial discrimination, and promoting academic skills to the success of African American students during their transition to the middle school level (Burchinal et al., 2008).

While Burchinal et al.'s (2008) research focused more on language and other risk factors not correlated with in-school expectations; the researchers contended that both language and reading skills in middle school help protect African American students from academic failure. Undoubtedly, African American children tend to use the same language patterns at home and in the classroom (Burchinal et al.). The language that African American students use can differ in terms of dialect and style depending upon whether they come from rural or urban areas.

Therefore, consideration should be given to the effects of culturally biased tests which use language that may confuse students who come from these types of backgrounds.

Burchinal and her colleagues (2008) examined a sample of 74 African American children. The students' parents were interviewed and their teachers completed questionnaires about the students focusing specifically on grades four to six. There were five social risk factors identified: poverty, single mother, large household size, low maternal education, and low school quality (Burchinal et al.). The study involved a number of different qualitative measurement methods such as the direct assessment of language skills and the teacher's reports. Burchinal and her colleagues found direct links to the success of students in middle school, especially African American students, and the protective factors and the risk factors they experienced over the years. In general, research has confirmed that support needs to be continued into the middle school years for African American students when it comes to teaching them language and reading skills to help alleviate the social risk to help them succeed in school (Archer, 2010).

It is evident that African American students have to deal with more risk factors in the middle school years compared to what students who are not of color have to deal with. However, most studies focus on the transition to the high school and only a few studies are available that describe ninth grade transition programs. While African American students will probably continue to be seen as at-risk students, they need to be seen more as students with "possibilities" than "liabilities" (Willis, 2008, p. 33). Indeed, some educators in the field may lessen their expectations for African American students because of where they come from and sadly because of the way that they look or even dress (Burchinal et al., 2008).

### Three Practices That Promise Success for At-risk Students

Based on the review of research on middle school programs that attempt to help at-risk students become academically successful, three practices are prevalent in the literature: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships. These three practices appear to hold promise for success for at-risk students. The following sections present the research studies that helped focus the proposed study around the three practices.

### *Strong Principal Leadership*

It is only since the 1960s that researchers began to investigate school leadership as having a direct impact towards improvement in the quality of teaching and student learning (Gross & Herriott, 1965). Soon afterwards, the focus of researchers shifted to expand the knowledge of the effects of principal leadership on student learning (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982). Hallinger and Heck (1998) synthesized the findings of 43 studies conducted between 1980 and 1995 that investigated evidence of the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement. Their study was divided into three categories: direct effects on student outcomes, principal leadership mediated by other people, and relationships between leadership efforts and school/environmental factors. Hallinger and Heck (1998) found little evidence of direct effects or mediation by others and concluded that principals have a measurable, but indirect effect on student achievement

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) synthesized 70 studies relating principal leadership to student achievement that were conducted from the early 1970s through the early 2000s. The studies they analyzed examined different school leader responsibilities, including the culture of a school, and the support of instruction. They concluded that there was a significant relationship between leadership and student achievement (Waters et al., 2003).

Reeves (2003) also believes that school leadership has an effect on the success of at-risk students. His research showed that every adult had value in the schools. School leaders recognized that the student's day does not really begin in the classroom, but on the bus or during breakfast. Strong principal leadership emphasized the education and behavior of adults since any adult with whom the student came in contact was seen as an adult leader in the student's life (Reeves, 2003). Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) believed that one of the most important roles for a principal was to focus on the mission, vision, and goals of a school organization.

The effect of strong principal leadership also coincided with principals empowering their staff to think out of the box in terms of helping at-risk students. In some cases empowerment means allowing a flexible type of scheduling which permits staff members to break from the rigid and inflexible schedules of the typical middle school (George, 2009). Administrators and teachers need flexibility and more time to deal with the diverse range of learning needs when dealing with at-risk students (Whitehouse, 2009).

Supovitz et al. (2010) used teacher survey and student achievement data from an urban southeastern district in the United States in 2006 to examine the relationships between student learning and dimensions of principal leadership, teacher peer influence, and instructional changes. The study found that trust and collaboration pointed directly to the culture of a school organization and that the principal was a key component (Supovitz et al.). The researchers concluded that principals who focus on instruction, foster community and trust in their school, and clearly communicate a goal and vision have teachers who make more instructional changes in their practice (Supovitz et al.). Their findings suggest that principal influence is even broader than some researchers believe and that they work through other leaders in the school to influence what occurs in the classroom in terms of student achievement (Supovitz et al.).

Recent research supports the theory that leadership contributes to learning through the development of a set of structures and processes that promote a school's potential for academic improvement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Heck and Hallinger (2005) have followed this theory with their own research using surveys of principal effectiveness and case studies of school improvement. Researchers have suggested that a key role of leadership is to define the areas in which their school will try to improve (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). School leaders who have been successful in their schools have created a culture where effective teaching and learning builds capacity for professional learning and change (Mulford & Silins, 2009).

Along with supporting teaching and learning, school leaders continue to implement strategic actions which are created to have continuous school improvement. The work of school leaders at any time during a school year is shaped by the culture and vision of the individual school (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). School leaders who empower teachers foster changes in work structures, curriculum, instructional practices, and do so with the school's capacity to be flexible in mind (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). Research shows that successful middle schools should incorporate a research-based, integrated curriculum that uses a variety of assessment measures to ensure that teachers have accurate data and information to determine an individual student's level of comprehension of a particular subject (Whitehouse, 2009).

According to Chapman and Tunmer (1995), by eight years of age, children have come to understand the concept of academic ability. This in turn also causes at-risk students to become sensitive to the academic achievement of their peers (Lingo, Slaton, & Jolivette, 2006). Consequently, the concern expressed by researchers about at-risk students becoming sensitive to

the academic achievement of their peers may be warranted. School principals' decisions to separate students into achievement-based groups, typical in many schools starting in the late elementary grades, can exact a heavy toll on children and evoke powerful and negative feelings in students who are not part of high-achieving peer groups. Those negative feelings can have far-reaching implications later in their middle school years. In one study, the statistical analyses produced results that were consistent with a hypothesis that linked academic skills with problem behavior in the middle schools (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). Other similar studies have documented the link between academic skills and problem behavior with at-risk students (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009). In a review of the literature, McIntosh, Horner, Chard, Dickey, and Braun (2003) found evidence of a strong link between an at-risk student who has skill deficits and the problem behavior that goes along with or after it.

#### *A Focused Curriculum and Reading Intervention*

Reeves (2003) completed a review of the research conducted in high poverty schools that have demonstrated high academic performance. These were the so called 90/90/90 schools. Ninety percent of their students were minority students. Ninety percent of their students were from lower socioeconomic settings. Ninety percent of their students were successful. The original research was done between 1995 and 1998 in a variety of school settings from elementary to high school. Reeves' analysis considered data from more than 130,000 students in 228 buildings. Reeves reported that even though there is a link between socioeconomic status and at-risk students, demographic characteristics do not determine academic performance (Reeves, 2003).

Data showed that in the Norfolk, Virginia Public Schools where 67% of students were Black and 65% qualified for free and reduced lunch, 100% of the middle schools exhibited positive trends in reading, literature, and research (Reeves, 2003). One hundred percent of the schools met the Virginia benchmarks in writing in all grades tested. In a Milwaukee 90/90/90 school, over 90% of the students in the schools met or exceeded state standards. The Wayne Township in Indianapolis had dramatic gains in their students' achievement. The Wayne Township is a district that enrolls students who speak 26 different languages, has schools with as much as 80% of their students receiving free or reduced lunch prices and includes many schools with the majority of their students listed as minority (Reeves, 2003). When their state

assessments were given, every school in the district showed significant growth, and the ones with the highest poverty levels showed the greatest growth in academic achievement, some as high as 20% gains (Reeves, 2003).

Even with all of the success of the 90/90/90 schools, Reeves (2003) noted that the impact of poverty remains controversial when the question of how to assist at-risk students is discussed. It is common to find high poverty rates in large urban settings across the United States (Reeves, 2003). Reeves maintains that success can be found in an urban educational setting that deals with students who are at-risk. Critics often see the success as the result of fervent test preparation rather than a systematic process of working with students and not giving up on them regardless of their circumstances (Reeves, 2003). The dynamics of poverty have a great deal of mental toll on the students, families, and staff of these schools and often lead them to work even harder if there is support in the school for the student. High poverty schools with at-risk students can be found in urban, suburban, and rural settings. However, Reeves focused on the urban setting where culturally there is still a gap that exists and extends to the larger society as a whole.

For the last 40 years in the United States, the primary goal of middle school education has been to make schools more aware of the special needs and abilities of students in that age group (Stevens, 2003). In the last decade or so, a similar goal has been advanced by those who believe that the development of reading skills is an important goal for students who are considered at-risk. Reflecting the national interest in at-risk students, poor reading skills have been found to be a problem in particular since both reading and writing skills are vital to learning and academic performance in the other content courses (Stevens, 2003). Furthermore, Stevens contends that poor reading skills are a good predictor of a student's potential for dropping out years later when the student is in high school. The phenomenon of dropping out in high school is not restricted to just urban areas, but appears in suburban and rural ones as well.

Given the recent attention to at-risk middle school students and reading deficiencies, research to investigate ways to improve their reading skills is necessary. The transition to the middle school represents a major developmental milestone for all students but is particularly stressful for at-risk students who are already behind when it comes to their academic skills (Stevens, 2003). At the same time that at-risk students are struggling to negotiate themselves into their new identities, they are dealing with complex and abstract ideas that are being taught to them in school. Chronic feelings of isolation during the middle school years can be detrimental



to at-risk students and can become even worse when they are already feeling detached (Stevens, 2003). Stevens suggests that a literacy instruction practice is needed to not only help students at risk with academic skills, but to address the instructional, motivational, and social needs of at-risk students in middle school (p. 139). Anderman, Maehr, and Midgely (1999) agree and their findings provide support for Stevens' research. Fisher and Frey (2007) stated that some school districts criticize the middle school concept out of concern that it causes a decline in students' achievement and motivation resulting in lower attendance, achievement, and attachment. Supovitz et al. (2010) focused on the effects of the principal's leadership on student achievement. Those findings showed a significant relation to Language Arts achievement, but not Mathematics achievement. Despite the perceived positives attributes of middle schools, few studies have provided affirmation that the middle school concept works as a means to provide confidence and feelings of self-worth among at-risk students.

Stevens (2003) summarized an analysis of a creative literacy approach in the middle schools for at-risk students and found that a multifaceted approach could effectively improve the achievement of at-risk students in urban middle schools. Most research and measurement instruments show that much of what is expected and needed in Reading and Language Arts by students at-risk is not found during the middle school years (Irvin, Valentine & Clark, 1994). Stevens (2003) argued that restructuring high poverty urban middle school reading instruction by using research based interventions can significantly result in higher student achievement. The implementation of new procedures for reading is therefore seen as the key to getting students to work at grade level for at-risk students in the middle schools. Cooperative learning communities, in the form of the students reading and critiquing other students' work which helps them retain and recall what they are processing, are an essential feature to helping at-risk students succeed (Stevens, 2003).

Ma'ayan (2010) discussed how middle school students should be able to make their voices heard in the classroom in a different manner and not in the same standardized way as some reading teachers require. Disengaged readers are sometimes not understood by teachers who cannot understand the student's access to their literacy activities outside of the standard classroom fare. The choice of what to read for both silent reading and literature book groups which led to open ended discussions were strategies that could help students become more excited about their reading experiences (Ma'ayan, 2010). Age-appropriate texts or novels were

also recommended and included works to represent a wide range of races, cultures, and genders among the main characters.

How at-risk students experience their middle school years is a relatively recent focus of the current research in the field of literacy instruction (Donahue, Voekl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000). To address this situation, researchers have developed more quantitative approaches to study the benefits peers can have in activities that enhance learning for at risk students (Anderman et al., 1999; Lounsbury, 2000). Most measurement tools use quantitative analysis of specific indicators of increases or decreases, which typically include total reading, total language, and an achievement test for pre and post testing. Data collection for these types of studies is often based on demographic information completed by either the school or teachers.

As noted by Stevens (2003), there are several recurrent measures of intervention approaches that have been reported in the literature. These include (a) improvements in reading comprehension, (b) the impact of the peers working with each other with reading and writing, (c) the number of times students are in groups that do cooperative learning and (d) an approach that will actively engage the student.

Reeves (2003) suggested that schools should focus on reading and writing in order to improve student opportunities in a wide variety of other subjects. Reeves' concern was not with the types of activities for at-risk students, but rather the focus and the intensity of the efforts in improving reading and writing skills. In fact, insofar as the 90/90/90 studies, using state or district tests as the sole measurement of achievement was not looked upon as a final assessment to see if students were successful (Reeves, 2003). Data from the Wayne Township indicated that every single building in the district, elementary through high school, achieved one of two equity indicators. At-risk students in the subgroup of economically disadvantaged were shown to improve dramatically. While socioeconomic status is a variable that is associated with lower performance in school, research shows that the improvements in teaching, curriculum, and leadership can increase the success of the students (Reeves, 2003).

Attitudes about at-risk students are changing because of the NCLB act and its AYP requirement. Traditionally, higher standards were not considered when educators looked for effective ways to educate at-risk students and there was no incentive to insist on the education of all students (Weinstein, 2002). In keeping with guidelines from NCLB, the current trend in

education for at-risk students is to expect success of all students and to provide new teaching strategies, techniques, motivational strategies, and assistance for at-risk students to become independent and sustained readers of challenging material (Weinstein, 2002). The emphasis of this new inclusive approach is to provide learning strategies in the schools to ensure that at-risk students are successful.

Recent data have shown that there have been some increasing shifts in terms of statistics for reading for eighth graders from 2007 to 2009 and that there were no states that showed a decline (United States Department of Education, 2009). Percentile scores were higher for lower and middle performing students compared to higher performing students. The lower being ones in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentiles and the middle being at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. Some improvement was also seen in achievement level results where the percentages of student performing at or above basic and at or above proficient each increased one percentage point from 2007 to 2009 (United States Department of Education, 2009).

Another positive statistic is that all racial and ethnic groups have made gains in reading since 2007, however Black students still trail American Indian and Hispanic students by five and three percentage points respectively (United States Department of Education, 2009). The increase has been good, but the racial and ethnic gaps remain with the White-Black and White-Hispanic score gaps not significantly different in 2009 from their corresponding gap in 2007 or in 1992 (United States Department of Education, 2009).

### *Positive Teacher-Student Relationships*

The relationship among teachers, principals, and students has been shown to have an effect on the success of at-risk students as well (Reeves, 2003). The case was made by Haycock and others at the Education Trust (1998) that the key variable for the success of at-risk students was teacher quality. The Education Trust did a research study to identify the characteristics of a high performing school. That study and other research such as the Lan and Lanthier (2003) study shows that supportive teachers and principals are also associated with higher academic performance. The evidence is clear that effective teaching and school leadership make a difference in student success (Reeves, 2003). The research shows that even though school leadership is a predecessor to school improvement, both the type of school leadership and its impact are shaped by both the history and current climate of the school (Heck & Hallinger,

2010). Easton (2008), an educator with over a decade of experience at a middle school for struggling students, commented on the importance of teachers and school leaders building honest and open relationships with their students as being one of the keys to their success.

Deficiencies in reading have the potential to show a link between being a poor reader and having behavior issues in school, especially for students in the middle school level. Some believe that improving the reading skills of a student will have a direct impact on their behaviors and their desire to escape an aversive task such as homework or reading a passage in class in front of others (Morgan, Farkas, Tuffs, & Sperling, 2008). Students with challenging behaviors and learning difficulties are often excluded because of their aggression, disruption, and overall attitude to school (Lingo, Slaton & Jolivette, 2006). Providing counseling to help manage and alleviate these circumstances would be appropriate and timely during the middle school years.

At-risk students tend to become unmotivated at school because of the lack of success in subjects such as reading (Margolis & McCabe, 2004). These learners often resist academics because of a learned belief system that they do not have the ability to succeed even if they do the best that they can. Consequently, they have a very low self-worth image (Margolis & McCabe, 2004). Good teachers create classes that contain an emotionally safe environment, which can spur self belief in a learner. Strong classroom structure puts an emphasis on motivational keys that provide a desire for at-risk students to learn and achieve at their highest level possible (Margolis & McCabe, 2004).

The teacher is a key component when working with a student's behavior and reading deficiencies. Sturtevant and Linek (2003) conducted a study to examine the perspectives of nine content area middle and high schools teachers from the Southwest and Mid-Atlantic areas of the United States. The teachers chosen were seen as excellent educators who used a number of literacy interventions. They were interviewed about their impact on literacy development among their students (Sturtevant & Linek, 2003).

Sturtevant and Linek (2003) used a qualitative approach with ethnographic techniques to collect and analyze the data. The responses were gathered through two one-hour interviews with each teacher. The teacher responses were examined using a cross-case analysis. The questions dealt with the teacher's school, types of reading used, and why the teachers chose their particular instructional strategies. The findings indicated that the teachers believed that to improve student behavior, the students should be engaged in the learning process. The teachers also believed that

the instruction should be tied to real life connections that would show the at-risk students that what they learned would be useful for their future. The nine teachers also believed there was a need to build an innate relationship with the students to show them that they cared, and this in turn would help with behavior issues as well (Sturtevant & Linek, 2003).

The second finding was that “lifelong learner” was seen throughout the responses made of the nine teachers. This drove their belief in promoting literacy in their at-risk students. The evidence showed that the teachers cared deeply for their students and their learning and they wanted to improve their own tools in teaching so that they could help the students become successful in and out of the classroom (Sturtevant & Linek, 2003).

Future research about instructional influences over a student’s behavior could help teachers connect their classroom’s culture and with improved school achievement. Sturtevant and Linek’s (2003) study demonstrated how important the teacher’s instructional decisions are when they relate to literacy improvement for at-risk students.

The single best predictor of school reading achievement, according to Stanovich (1986), however, is low socioeconomic status, from which low achievers seem to suffer disproportionately. Stanovich (1986) called this phenomenon the ‘Matthew Effect’ where the low income children start to slip, the faster they fall and the farther behind they go in each succeeding grade. Further up the educational ladder, it is imperative that the curriculum in teachers’ colleges focus on the relevant information about the long term effects of letting children slip and fall behind their peers. Training in remedial reading techniques should also be a prominent feature of teacher-training pedagogy (Slavin et al., 2008).

People in and out of education, not surprisingly, believe that there is a logical relationship between poverty, ethnicity, and academic achievement (Reeves, 2003). Non-readers in particular appear to assume that they are unable to learn when faced with their limited progress (McCormick, 1994). The relationship between poverty, ethnicity, and academic achievement is seen quite often in the schools that Reeves studied. Nevertheless, data from the Milwaukee Public Schools indicate that throughout the 100,000 student system there are numbers of at-risk students who are both poor and minority that are successful in the classroom (Reeves, 2003).

Abbott, Joireman, and Stroh (2002) replicated a study completed by Bickel in 2000. Abbott’s study was conducted through the Washington School Research Center (WSRC), a research and data analysis center at Seattle Pacific University. The data for the study were

provided by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in the state of Washington and consisted of scale scores of 3,924 seventh grade students and 3,903 fourth graders on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning used to assess math and reading achievement for all students. Hierarchical linear modeling allowed for the researchers to evaluate cross level interactions between district size and socioeconomic status (Abbott et al.). The researchers found that large district size appears to strengthen the negative relationship between poverty and academic achievement.

There may also be a need to have further research done to examine the deeper relationships between socioeconomic status, district size, school size, and academic achievement. The impact of demographics must be considered to evaluate these findings. The data are collected in Washington State may be different from data collected in the states of Virginia or Florida because Washington State is less diverse than Virginia or Florida which may limit the value of the study's findings for other school districts.

Abbott (2002) and Willis (2008) have expressed concern at commonly held beliefs about at-risk students in general. Critics have suggested that success in schools with at-risk students must be the result of excluding those students from assessment testing that occurs frequently (Reeves, 2003). The etiology of such beliefs when it comes to at-risk students can be traced to the 1960s when schools first integrated. Many arguments have been advanced to overcome the negative perception of at-risk students' potential for success and of the schools and teachers that work with them. Reeves points to simply prizing academic performance in the schools by the school principals and teachers as the solution. He believes that achievement in schools where there are many students with academic skills below grade level can be improved by measuring improvement and teachers letting students know it is not where they start but where they finish academically that matters (Reeves, 2003). He cites as an example the progress in reading which in turn affects a student's success in other subjects.

Recent research has shown that there have been some positive gains in reading for lower SES students (United States Department of Education, 2009). The National Assessment of Educational Progress eighth grade reading assessment given to students from all states focused on critiquing and evaluating text, integrating and interpreting text, and locating and recalling small amounts of the text read (United States Department of Education, 2009). Average reading scores were higher in 2009 than in 2007 and 2003 for students who were eligible for free school

lunch while the score for 2009 for students eligible for reduced price lunch was not significantly different from either 2007 or 2003 (United States Department of Education, 2009). It is evident that there is no perfect solution for at-risk students, but the data and evidence show that there are strategies that can be used in schools by teachers who are building relationships with at-risk students to promote their success (Reeves, 2003).

In 2008, Christle and Yell (2008) did a study to investigate which factors put youths at-risk for delinquency. Low reading ability was cited earlier in this review as a factor that can affect students for a lifetime. Christle and Yell discussed the protective factor of reading remediation and argued that schools should adopt effective remedial reading programs for at-risk youths. Christle and Yell's study included a 2005 three-state multi-method approach that examined school characteristics related to risks for delinquency. The study featured data connected with risk factors such as academic failure, suspension and dropout-at all three levels of schooling. As comprehensive as the study was, it did have its limitations. Specifically, Christle and Yell compared schools that were categorized only as low risk and high risk rather than by characteristics such as location or size.

Christle and Yell (2008) found that school based interventions for reading vary by school district. The most common approach is remedial reading programs for the students. Another approach concentrates on school protective factors where identification of the at-risk students, prevention for future trouble, and a caring treatment of at-risk students by school staff are the focus (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999). The approach, however, hinges on developing a comprehensive reading intervention plan for at-risk students and a commitment to its implementation by a caring school principal and teachers. The emphasis in the protective factor approach is on the involvement a caring school personnel group, which includes the principal and teachers playing a critical role in the development of at-risk students.

## Summary

The research presented in Chapter 2 was selected to identify and document practices that play a role in the academic success for at-risk students in middle schools. In summary, there were similarities and differences throughout all nine of the main articles that were considered. Three effective practices to promote achievement and success for at-risk students emerged: (a)

strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships. The practices are shown in the matrix in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Researcher Based Practices That Promote Success for At-risk Students*

Researcher	Principal Leadership	Relationships	Curriculum/Reading
Robinson et al. (2008)	X		
Waters et al. (2003)	X		
Reeves (2003)	X	X	X
Supovitz et al. (2010)	X		
Stanovich (1986)		X	
Slavin (1999)			X
Abbott et al. (2002)		X	
Christle & Yell (2008)		X	
George (2009)	X		
Fisher & Frey (2007)			X
Ma'ayan (2010)			X
Bossert et al. (1982)	X		
Whitehouse (2009)	X	X	
Stevens (2003)			X
Hallinger & Heck (1998)	X		

Viewed together, the studies present a basis for the understanding of reading ability, poverty, and race as factors in the trials of at-risk students in the middle schools and the need for a myriad of practices to help them achieve success. The links that tie these areas of concern together were strong principal leadership, a focused curriculum and reading intervention, and positive teacher-student relationships, which existed in all of the factors that have been mentioned. With the increased role of federal and state governments in the policies that impact the most vulnerable students, the use of a variety of interventions at the district level is an



important tool in aiding at-risk students. No matter if a school is in an urban, rural, or suburban area, the needs of these types of students should be met.

Overall, the impact that principal leadership, student-teacher relationships, and a focused curriculum with reading interventions has on at-risk students can be refined and strengthened by the collection of observable data. The body of literature presented in this review indicates that reading ability, as an umbrella scheme, has an impact on the at-risk student's desire to drop out of school. In addition, other barriers were presented that could exacerbate low reading ability. Unfortunately, generalizations about at-risk students continue to prevail in some educators' minds. The findings of the nine main articles confirmed many prior studies.

Middle school is one area that remains relatively unexplored in the current at-risk student literature. Three practices mentioned to ensure the success of at-risk students can be found in all types schools, such as urban, rural, and suburban-high, low poverty and high minority, and low minority. By studying middle schools that have successfully dealt with at-risk students with low reading abilities, one could further examine the influence of reading and a focused curriculum on successful outcomes for this population. Several additional avenues for further research emerged from this literature review. Research suggests that leadership by itself indirectly helps to bring about improvement in learning outcomes, but with other factors it could be a key, such as a school's culture and curriculum (Heck & Hallinger, 2010).

With more research in these areas, it is possible to ensure that every middle school teacher has access to the knowledge he or she needs to teach at-risk students effectively and that every middle school student has access to intervention programs to help them. Making such changes would require more research in this area to help all districts including rural, suburban, and urban. Such a goal in future research is critical for the United States if it is indeed to leave no child behind.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of the study was to investigate and describe how one middle school went from being accredited with warning to making AYP and meeting high standards of academic achievement with at-risk students. Three major practices identified from the literature describe what the researcher looked for in the study of the middle school. These practices are (a) strong principal leadership, (b) focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships. The guiding question for the study was: What practices were used to help at-risk students become academically successful in a middle school in Southside Virginia? To address this question, the following research questions will be addressed: (1) Which, if any of the three practices identified in the research were used by the school to help at-risk students achieve academic success? (2) What factors other than the ones identified for investigation appear to have contributed to the success of at-risk students in the school?

#### Assumptions and Rationale for a Qualitative Design

The practices identified in the literature review and any other factors that may have contributed to the success of at-risk students at the middle school will be studied by conducting a case study using a qualitative research design. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), qualitative research helps researchers who seek answers to their questions in the real world and “gather what they see, hear, and read from people and places and from events and activities” (p. 4). The goals of the study were to find answers to the research questions, to learn about the experiences of the school staff, and to present any new understandings of practices that promote the academic success of at-risk students in middle school.

#### Research Design

A case study was used to describe the middle school and develop answers to the overall guiding question of ‘What practices were used to help at-risk students become academically successful in a middle school in Southside Virginia?’ Merriam (1998) believed that among the different types of qualitative research, the case study design is a particularly useful approach for studying educational innovations. According to Yin (1994), case studies are particularly useful

for their rich description, as they give a real life context to the situations under study. Rossman and Rallis (2003) added that case studies can explore a group or organization which gives a deeper understanding about a phenomenon through close examination (p. 104). These perspectives have been supported by Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993) and Stake (2000), who focused on the type of problem being investigated in a case study or the choice of what is to be studied. Yin (1994) also explained that case studies are beneficial when questions are being asked about a situation that a researcher has little or no control over.

### Procedures

The selection of the school and school system and the participants who took part in the study is described in this section. Access, confidentiality, and consent procedures are explained.

#### *Setting Selection*

The setting for the study was a middle school in a Southside Virginia school division located in Superintendents Study Group Region 6. The school housed approximately 549 students in grades sixth through eighth. According to the Virginia Department of Education (2006), 369 of the school's students were Black; 151 were White; 16 were Hispanic; and 12 were Asian. Seventy-two percent of the students are considered minority, 68% percent fall into the economically disadvantaged category, and 12% are identified as special education students. There are one principal and one assistant principal for this middle school which was called Douglas Middle School, a pseudonym for the real school.

The school was selected because of its performance on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) Tests. Documents that provided evidence of improved SOL scores were collected by accessing the Virginia DOE site and the middle school website ([www.doe.virginia.gov](http://www.doe.virginia.gov)). The middle school moved from accredited with warning status to accredited status in three years. The researcher was interested in using a middle school with a large population of at-risk students because of Reeves' findings in the 90/90/90 study (Reeves, 2003) and similar findings by other researchers (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Slavin et al., 2008) who targeted at-risk students for study. Table 2 below shows the academic progress that the middle school made from 2006-07 to 2008-09.

Table 2

*Douglas Middle School*

	<u>2006-07</u>	<u>2007-08</u>	<u>2008-09</u>
Accreditation Pass Rate Combined			
Eng	82%	85%	88%
Math	63%	73%	80%
Percentage Passing SOL Reading Assessments Combined			
ALL	76%	82%	86%
Black	70%	77%	80%
SWD	31%	62%	59%
SES	70%	75%	81%
Percentage Passing SOL Math Assessments Combined			
ALL	60%	70%	79%
Black	45%	59%	73%
SWD	25%	42%	72%
SES	44%	58%	72%

*Note.* SWD = Students with Disabilities; SES = Socio Economic Status (Free or Reduced Lunch)

A secondary factor for the school’s selection was the proximity of the school to the researcher. The location of the school facilitated travel to and from the school. It also afforded the opportunity to spend more time on-site to conduct the investigation. According to Seidman (2006), on-site interviews and observations are helpful to a successful case study.

### Gaining Access and Entry

The first step in gaining access and entry into the school involved an email to the division superintendent to explain the nature of the study that was being proposed. Approval for the study was granted by the superintendent in the Spring of 2010. Copies of the correspondence with the superintendent are in Appendix A.

Approval from Virginia Tech’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before conducting the proposed study. Following permission from the IRB, the researcher obtained a list of all the teachers at the middle school from the former principal, who led the middle school during its improvement. The group where the sample came from had thirty teachers that were there during the three year period of improvement. The list had 30 teachers who had worked in

the school during the three year period of improvement. From the list of 30 teachers, 10 were selected as study participants. The teachers were selected to ensure representation of teachers from each grade level and core subject area. The list of teachers was provided by the former principal identifying from an alphabetized list all thirty teachers still at the school. Starting from Z to A, every two teachers were skipped and then one was picked.

A letter detailing the rationale for the study, the purpose of the study, and a description of the methodology was emailed to the division superintendent. The division superintendent requested that the researcher work with the former principal to complete the study because of his knowledge of the school during its three years of progress. The email was also sent to the current principal, the former school principal, and selected staff members. A copy of the email appears in Appendix B.

An overview of the process of how access was gained follows:

1. After receiving approval from the division superintendent and contacting the former principal of the middle school by phone, a meeting was arranged to discuss the study, obtain written consent, and set up a time to conduct interviews with the former principal.
2. The researcher interviewed the former principal two times.
3. Written consent to participate in the study was gained from each staff member using the consent form that appears in Appendix C. Participants were able to withdraw if they so desired.
4. The staff members were contacted and meeting times that were during their planning times were set up.

Completion of the steps above provided access and entry into the middle school to conduct the proposed study and provide the individuals with a clear purpose of the study and allow sufficient time to conduct the research.

### Researcher's Role

It was important that the researcher listened intently to the respondents and establish a rapport. Seidman (2006) explained that qualitative researchers must listen on at least three levels. First, the researcher must listen to what the participant is saying and assess whether or not what they are hearing is as complete as needed. Secondly, the researcher must listen to the “inner

voice” and encourage the participant to use descriptive language and not be too vague. The third level consists of listening while remembering the process of questioning along with the depth of information. The researcher was able to visit the school twice and stay for an entire school day on each visit. This enabled the researcher to meet individually with each teacher and the former principal to gather information in a useful way through the in-depth interviews and collection of relevant documents.

The researcher was the instrument of analysis for the study, developing understanding through the questions asked and context investigated (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The researcher acted as the listener, observer, and analyzer. The researcher added reflections to describe the participants’ actions and expressions during the interview to add to the process. The background and prior experiences of the researcher had an impact in the study because the researcher taught math, social studies, and science in the middle school.

The researcher is currently the Principal for Curriculum and Instruction in a small suburban division. He previously held a position as a general education teacher in the same division. These two roles formed an appropriate background for the study. The researcher kept a journal log of the details including the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the data. The study met standards for acceptable and competent practice, and all efforts were made to ensure that the study was credible, systematic, and useful (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

#### Assurance of Confidentiality and Consent

A consent form that explained the purpose of the study, procedures, and the future use of the data was submitted to the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board. The IRB approval of the study is found in Appendix F and the certificate is in Appendix G. All participants signed confidentiality assurances that were obtained before the collection of data began which can be found in Appendix C.

The name of the school division, school used, and all participants’ names were kept confidential. The school district was assigned a fictitious name, Holly County. The middle school was assigned one as well, Douglas Middle. Ensuring confidentiality was important in gaining meaningful data from the participants. The researcher identified participants with a coding system by using Participant 1, 2, etc that will be explained more in depth in the analysis

section of this chapter. The data will be secured under lock and key by the researcher for three years after the study.

### Data Collection Procedures

The choice of a qualitative design defined the methods and techniques proposed for collecting and analyzing data. A data collection instrument for qualitative data needed to be one that would facilitate the researcher finding meaning while also gathering and analyzing the data. Merriam (1998) said that being a good listener is the key to this since, “interviewing, observing and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research” (p. 23). Data were primarily collected through interviews and document analysis.

The researcher interviewed the former principal and members of the school and support staff. Each of them was interviewed twice to respect their time constraints and, as Seidman (2006) indicated, two well-designed and conducted interviews are sufficient. The data collection in the natural setting was important because the natural setting is the place where the researcher is most likely to discover, or uncover, what is known about the incident of interest (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). Relevant documents listed in Table 3 below were also used as data sources.

Table 3  
*Data Sources*

Documents	Interviews
SOL scores	Principal (1)
Curriculum guides	Staff members (10)
School description	
Faculty meeting notes	
Pacing guides	
Assessments	
School Improvement Plans	

The researcher had the interviews transcribed by a third party and saved the results on his personal computer. All other data collection materials are stored in a locked filing cabinet.

The researcher scheduled personal interviews with the principal first, then with the chosen teachers. Responses from the administrator and teacher guided document requests and selection. The researcher obtained documents from the administrator and staff members of Douglas Middle School. The researcher contacted the principal and teachers via email after interviews to clarify terms used and to obtain documents.

The framework of the interview questions stemmed from the qualitative research interviewing techniques of Seidman (2006). The review of the literature and the researcher's knowledge of the workings of a middle school guided the development of the interview protocol and the selection of the documents. Interviews were the primary means of data collection which enabled the researcher to gain information about the implementation of the three practices.

There were specific types of data that the researcher kept: (a) A field journal-this was something that the researcher wrote in regularly, recording the observations and reflections about my experiences with Douglas Middle School. The researcher's approach was to record information related to the purpose of the study and the research questions. The researcher also recorded other information which he thought could be important data later in the study. (b) Field notes were collected in the journal as well which were not the researcher's beliefs but simply observations. Maykut and Morehouse (2003) stressed that these notes should, "contain what has been said and heard by the researcher, but without interpretation" (p. 73). If the researcher thought his interpretation should be included the researcher regarding what was said by any participants it was included it in brackets to make sure it was known as simply commentary. These were later categorized in the analysis process as themes were organized. Casual conversations with the interview participants were also included in the field notes, but were not considered part of the interview. (c) Documents were gathered and included such things as school improvement plans, curriculum and pacing guides.

### *Interview Protocol and Procedures*

Two taped, formal interviews of 40 to 60 minutes in length were conducted with (a) the former principal of the school and (b) 10 selected staff members. The interview protocols are presented for review in appendix D and E. The interviews were scheduled at a convenient time



for the individuals involved. At the start of each interview, written consent for participation was obtained. Seidman (2006) stated how important the interviewer is in this scenario, “listening is the most important skill in interviewing” (p. 78). The goal of the interview process was to get the information necessary along with making the participant feel comfortable in the research process. Another goal was to remain objective as the data were collected and analyzed. Merriam (1998) suggested an interview log to gather information such as the participant’s health, mood, and any other factors that could influence the data collected.

Differentiating between the actual gathering of data and the data analysis is not an easy task. Once the interview questions are framed, the researcher begins with the analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 272). The interviews were taped and then transcribed. After each interview was completed, the participants were asked to review the transcripts for any inaccuracies.

#### Field Test of Interview Questions

A pilot study using the methods proposed for use in this research was conducted at a school in another division. The pilot school had similar demographics to the school proposed for the study and has achieved AYP. However, the pilot school does not match all of the characteristics of the school on which this study is based. The researcher interviewed the principal and five staff members identified by the principal. The field test was an important tool providing information and experiences to prepare the researcher for the actual study. In the pilot study, the interviews were audio taped and reviewed. After analyzing the data, the researcher invited the participants to comment on the effectiveness of the interview protocol. The field test was helpful in adjusting the questions for the actual study. One question was omitted from the interview questions for the second teacher interviews and a part of a question that was to be used in the first teacher interview was eliminated. The field test demonstrated to the researcher that those questions were repetitive. For the first interview with the principal there was one question that was omitted for the same reason.

#### Data Analysis Procedures

Seidman (2006) commented that interpreting data is not a process that researchers do only at the end of a study. The data analysis process is where the identification of themes, labeling the answers, and grouping them are part of the interpretation process. The researcher

used an interpretation approach to qualitative analysis on transcribed text of interview responses and on documents selected for review. The data analysis approach used was the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003).

Interview text and documents were divided into meaningful segments and coded into schemes and categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). Coded segments of text and documents were reviewed for “meaning from the words and actions of the participants in the study, framed by the researcher’s focus of inquiry” (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003, p. 128) which served as the foundation for defining larger categories of meaning. The units of meaning will be identified by carefully reviewing the transcripts and documents.

Coded segments of text and documents were examined to develop statements of fact and to stay close to the research participants’ feelings, thoughts, and actions as they related to the focus of the study (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). The themes were not grouped according to predetermined categories, but from the data itself or as Maykut and Morehouse put it, “out of a process of inductive reasoning” (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003, p. 127).

Maykut and Morehouse (2003) created a coding system that guided the researcher’s analysis:

1. Unitizing the data: After all of the data has been photocopied: identify the chunks or units of meaning in the data, or ‘unitizing’ the data. This will later help as the basis for defining larger categories of meaning. This could be short responses to questions or a full paragraph. The units of meaning are identified by carefully reading through transcripts, documents, and journals. Next, index cards are used as the units of meaning are cut and taped onto them. With this, on the back of the cards will be the gender, job in the school system, and grade level (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003).
2. Discovery process: The journal is a good practice with this in terms of writing down recurring ideas, questions, and thoughts. The goal of this important step is to identify substantial experiences, ideas, concepts, or themes in the data. The discovery process continues throughout the collection process. Certain questions need to be asked at this point: What are the recurring words, phrases, and topics in the data?

The constant comparative method was used in the analysis as each new unit of meaning was selected for analysis, it was compared to the other units of meaning and grouped with similar units of meaning (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). If there are no similar units, a new category will be created. Categories can be changed, merged, or omitted depending on what is found. The researcher uses the categorizing and coding process to develop a set of categories that provide a reasonable reconstruction of the data collected. The constant comparative method includes the following steps: (a) inductive category coding and simultaneous comparing of units of meaning across categories, (b) refinement of categories, (c) exploration of relationships and patterns across categories, and (d) integration of data yielding an understanding of people and settings being studied (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003).

Using the constant comparative method, units of meaning from the transcribed interview texts were coded inductively. Further units of meaning were then categorized and coded, new categories formed, and categories continuously refined as the researcher created a reasonable reconstruction of the data that included significant themes. The individual interviews were separated to make their contributions easily identified. Categories were then grouped by writing ‘rules of inclusion’ which served to identify or exclude certain data by distilling meaning into that category (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). The completed rules of inclusion represent the outcomes propositions of the research and were grouped into main headings as will be discussed in Chapters four and five (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003).

### Content Validity

The standards for assessing the quality and rigor of qualitative research are important when it comes to validity, reliability, and objectivity (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Creswell (1998) recommends that qualitative researchers engage in at least two of eight verification procedures in any given study such as persistent observation, triangulation, member checks, and thick descriptions. In this study, the researcher used triangulation, member checks, and thick descriptions.

### Trustworthiness

Maykut and Morehouse (2003) address the trustworthiness questions, “To what extent can we place confidence in the outcomes of the study?” and “Do we believe what the researcher

has reported?" (p.145). Researchers understand that a study requires a detailed explanation of the data collection, analysis, procedures, and outcomes to achieve trustworthiness.

The multiple methods of data collection included interview data, field notes, and the review of relevant literature. The audit trail is very important in the process as a research journal would be included for potential replication purposes. Member checks are also necessary to ensure discussion or a discovery of bias can be monitored by others. Member checks were conducted to confirm if the research participants believed the researcher accurately had described their experience. The checks were done by the participants reviewing each transcript (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). As the researcher did not have the luxury of a research team, he periodically discussed the process of the research with two colleagues, who have offered feedback as the study proceeded. Confidentiality was maintained by using codes for the participants and not identifying them by gender. A journal was kept and all notes, transcripts, data, and analysis have been kept and archived.

### Summary

Chapter Three began with the researcher restating the purpose of the research and the specific practices used to guide the study. The researcher then presented the rationale behind the selection of a qualitative design using a case study approach. The research context and participant selection was described to explain the selection of the school. The section also addressed to the issues of access and entry, confidentiality, and informed consent. Data collection procedures were described along with interview protocols, observation guidelines and checklists were presented.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to investigate and describe how one middle school went from being accredited with warning to making AYP and meeting high standards of academic achievement with at-risk students. The investigation focused on detecting evidence of three practices found in the research and if the three practices were factors in the school's success with at-risk students: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships. The qualitative research design used allowed for the emergence of other practices to reveal them during the analysis process.

The overall guiding question for the study was "What practices were used to help at-risk students become academically successful in a middle school in Southside Virginia?" Two research questions guided the data collection for the study: (a) Which, if any of the three practices identified in the research, were used by the school to help at-risk students achieve academic success? (b) What factors other than the ones identified for investigation appear to have contributed to the success of at-risk students in the school?

A section follows which gives a profile of the school division and the school chosen to participate in the study. Demographic information about the participants is also shared. The description specifically provides information on the backgrounds of the participants. Following that section is a review of the findings and description of categories that emerged from the interviews and document reviews.

Data collection occurred during the months of January and February of 2011. Data collection procedures consisted of (a) one-to-one interviews with the former principal and 10 teachers who worked at the school during the three-year period of improved student achievement and (b) a review of school documents to gather information on the research questions. The data collected were used to develop categories and patterns that resulted in an understanding of what made the middle school academically successful.

The constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003) was the method used to analyze the data that were collected from the middle school. The interviews and document analysis were used to form the categories, establish the boundaries of the categories, and summarize the content of each category. The goal in the analysis was to find similarities and to discover patterns that made the middle school's at-risk students successful academically.

## Profile of Douglas Middle School

Douglas Middle School is the pseudonym used in the study for the school in which the study took place. Holly County Public Schools is the pseudonym to represent the school system in Southside Virginia in which the middle school is located. Based on the information from the Virginia Department of Education for the 2008-09 school year, Douglas was serving approximately 549 students with an instructional staff of 49 teachers in a traditional middle school alignment of sixth through eighth grade. The student body race/ethnicity distribution was 27% White; 67% African American; .02% Hispanic; and .02% Asian. There were approximately 180 students in each grade. About 68% of the students free or reduced price lunches. The community surrounding the school system is made up of families with diverse backgrounds and income levels. Statistics from 2008-09 are used because that was the third year of the three-year period of improved achievement scores.

## Profile of the Study Participants

Demographic information was verbally collected from the study participants at the first interview. The information is found in Table 4:

All of the participants interviewed were working at the middle school during the three year period in 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09. The group differed in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and experience. The participants in the study were the former principal of the middle school and 10 teachers from the school. The former principal was selected as an interview participant because he led the school during the three-year period of improvement. In addition, the division superintendent requested his participation as the person to provide the administrative perspective for the study. The teachers were well represented by years of experience, grade level, and content area. There were few male teachers in the school, which was reflected by the fact that there was only one male participant. The former principal had been in the education field for over 15 years. He was a white male who had been principal at the school since 2002.

Table 4

*Demographic Information for Study Participants*

Total	Teachers	Principal
	10	1
Race		
Black	3	
White	7	1
Gender		
Male	1	1
Female	9	
Years Experience		
4-7	6	
13-15	2	
>15	2	1
Grade		
6	3	
7	4	
8	3	
Subject		
Math	3	
SS	1	
Science	1	
LA/Exp	4	

## Interviews and Document Analysis

A code was developed for the findings of this study so that quotes can be attributed to the different interviewees. Each interviewee will be identified by number 1 through 11. This code will be used to reference the source of quotations by the interviewee number and the corresponding page number from the transcripts of the identified interviewee. The data are referenced throughout Chapters IV and V. Transcripts are followed by numbers that identify the

specific participant and page number of the transcript. For example, (T2/3- 3) indicates the data came from the second interview transcript of Participant 3 and it would be found on page three of the corresponding transcript.

Multiple documents were reviewed during the research study process. The review included the school improvement plan for 2006-07 and the three year school improvement plan for 2006-09, the principal's operation guide, faculty meeting notes, teacher plans, and the school schedule. All five document sources were reviewed and analyzed as part of the document review process. Each of these sources of data are discussed as separate entities as they relate to the themes previously identified in the study as positively impacted academic achievement.

### Overview of Results

Four major categories emerged during the two interview sessions. They were (a) strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, (c) positive teacher-student relationships, and (d) teacher collaboration. The researcher was always open to other categories emerging during the interviews and the data analysis process. The first three categories were practices found in the literature that were also supported by the data. The fourth category emerged from the data independently. The first two categories appeared as factors in the school's improvement in the 2006-07 school year. The third and fourth categories developed and began to influence the school in the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years.

### Description of the Findings

Data from the interviews fell into four categories: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, (c) positive teacher-student relationships, and (d) teacher collaboration.

As displayed in Table 5, overall categories and patterns were consistent among interview participants; however identified patterns within these themes are where perspectives sometimes differed. Table 6 is a matrix that lists the documents used:



Table 5

*Comparison of Categories and Patterns Identified by Interviewees*

Categories	Patterns	Interviewee										
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
<b>Strong Principal Leadership</b>												
	Trust	X	X			X	X	X	X	X		
	School Culture				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Empowerment	X	X	X		X	X	X				X
<b>A Focused Curriculum/Reading Intervention</b>												
	Vert Art Team			X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
	Sch Imp Plan	X	X	X					X	X	X	X
	Remediation	X		X		X	X			X	X	X
<b>Positive Teacher/Student Relationships</b>												
	High Expect	X		X		X	X	X		X	X	X
	Engagement		X	X				X	X	X	X	X
<b>Teacher Collaboration</b>												
	Cross-curr Inst	X	X	X			X			X	X	X
	Teaming	X	X	X			X		X		X	X

*Note.* Vert Art Team = Vertical Articulation Team; Sch Imp Plan = School Improvement Plan; High Expect = High Expectations for All Students; Cross-curr Inst = Cross-Curriculum Instruction

Table 6

*Categories and Patterns Identified from Document Analysis*

	(D1 A/B)	(D2)	(D3)	(D4)	(D5)
Practices					
Strong Principal Leadership	X			X	X
A Focused Curriculum/Reading Intervention	X	X	X		X
Positive Teacher/Student Relationships	X			X	
Teacher Collaboration	X	X	X	X	X

*Note.* D1 A/B = School Improvement Plan; D2 = Teacher Plans; D3 = Faculty Notes; D4 = Principal Guide; D5 = School Schedule

Category: Strong Principal Leadership

Strong principal leadership has long been known to be an important factor in school improvement (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). In order to comply with all of the federal and state mandates, today’s principal must be the instructional leader in the school to ensure that the staff will work with the principal to improve the academic skills of the students most in need. Most principals around the country have done well with the charge of leading instructionally, especially for at-risk students (Reeves, 2003). The former principal of Douglas Middle School demonstrated strong leadership in the 2006-07 school year, and it continued into the next two school years.

During the participant interviews, three patterns emerged in the category of strong principal leadership. First, the principal believed that trust between the teachers and him was important in the school’s culture (T1/11-17). He believed that teachers performed at a higher level when they knew they would not be second guessed about instructional decisions. However, the teachers felt trust was vital in their building because of the type of culture that was built throughout the school that enabled them to work in the best of interests of the students. Three patterns that surfaced within the category of strong principal leadership were trust, school culture, and teacher empowerment.

*Pattern: Trust*

When asked about what was going on in Douglas Middle during the time of improving academic achievement, the teachers and principal interviewed stated that they believed that a culture of trust had been built. One teacher shared the following experience:

A key word that needs to be addressed is trust. There was a trust from the school administration in the building that the teachers were going to get the job done. It was almost an empowerment. We know what we need to do in regards to our testing, our scoring, our educating, which is even more important than the testing, get it done, you've got the abilities, which were instilled in us by the Principal, Assistant Principal and others, get it done, and we were left to our own to get it done. (T1/ 4-3)

Another teacher expressed a belief in how trust was important to the school culture:

Under the Principal personally I felt like I could take risks. I felt like I had a real support system that if I went to him and said I thought this child was at risk of failing, he rallied behind me and gave me ideas and suggestions. There was one year I had a class that was absolutely horrible, and I just went to him and say [sic] I don't know how to reach them, I'm failing. And that, to be able to go to your administrator and trust him not to use that against you and then he came down to the room and did an observation, not a formal that went into my file, but an observation and then he and I talked about strategies that I could use to deal with these certain groups of kids we had and the mix that we had that was going on with this group. (T1/ 8-2)

In their interviews, most of the teacher reported positive experiences and attitudes in terms of being treated as a professional during the three year period of improvement for the school. Most of them felt that it was important for the teachers to have trust in the principal and vice versa for two reasons: The students could see the mutual respect demonstrated on a daily basis and the teachers could focus on academics with the confidence of knowing their decisions would be respected by the principal.

When asked about the culture of trust in the school, the principal explained, "If they come up with the strategies and they tell me we'll be successful, I trust them to do that and then we experience that sustainable growth and it's not imposed" (T1/11-1). He also explained that the trust was imperative to be able to work together. He added, "The teachers are the real key players" (T1/11-2).

### *Pattern: School Culture*

Many of the interview participants shared that they believed that the strong culture of the school was a positive for both teachers and students. Interview participants expressed that the principal set this supportive culture which caused teachers to feel like they could accomplish anything. The principal mentioned that he felt it was a personal goal to ensure that teachers and students felt like they were part of a positive culture that could be felt on a daily basis. One teacher stated that they felt the principal could be approached for new ideas and suggestions and not feel like a failure. Another participant went further to explain that with the principal the teachers felt like if things did not go well, he would be there to pick them back up and help them. One participant remarked, “I think we had an administrator who pushed for try it, whatever it is, and if you fall flat, it doesn’t matter. Get up and try again” (T1/5-5).

When asked to describe what was going on in the middle school during their time of success, the former principal explained that he did not want make decisions without input from the teachers. That went against his leadership philosophy and he wanted to be a different kind of principal, he explained. The principal continued by saying, “I wanted to be a teacher-centered principal” (T1/11-4). He continued, “A school is no better than the teacher my kid has” (T1/11-4), explaining his reason for being teacher-centered instead of student-centered. One teacher explained the culture of the school and how the principal created it:

He didn’t complain. He basically left you alone to be a professional. He didn’t micromanage people or constantly threaten you with being written up if you don’t dot your I’s or cross your T’s. He just expected you to be a professional and he expected you to do your job. (T2/7-2)

Most of the teachers voiced their appreciation for being treated as a professional by the principal. The principal believed that strength of culture permeated all the way down to the students that they worked with, almost like a feeling of respect for everyone in the school.

### *Pattern: Teacher Empowerment*

A majority of the participants felt that the principal empowered them to be able to make instructional decisions which they felt were most appropriate for their at-risk students, which in turn improved academic performance. Most felt that the autonomy that was granted by the principal gave the teachers the opportunity to operate their classroom in a flexible manner. The

principal wanted the teachers to think for themselves since they were the ones who knew their students the best. One participant gave her feelings on the subject:

I would say that there was an independence given to the teachers in regards to getting to the goals and objectives that were prescribed by the administration in the building. While we would attend, you know, division-wide seminars on test taking, use of graphic organizers, again, from language arts perspectives I can recall. I know there were other ones by different disciplines, but we were allowed to gather the information from those seminars and use them or not use them. Use parts of them, use them to our advantage, we were given more of an independence in regards to how we were going to deal with our pacing guides and our curriculum and get the end result done. (T1/4-3)

The principal stated, “My goal was to empower teachers as teacher leaders and really see them become the dynamic in a school” (T1/11-4). The principal knew this went against the research that was out in the public, but he truly believed this was important for his school. The research said that the principal should be the main instructional leader in the school and the principal wanted to develop teacher leaders to make some of those decisions to help the at-risk students. He thought that in his last two years at Douglas he had achieved what he set out do, which was to cultivate teacher leaders. The belief was summed up in the principal’s operational guide to the school, “Teachers are in the best position to make instructional decisions” (D4/1).

Most of the teachers interviewed commented on the teacher empowerment that was developed by the principal and the fact developing teacher leaders was not simply talked about, but done. One teacher commented on it by explaining, “There was a trust from the school administration in the building that the teachers were going to get the job done. It was almost an empowerment” (T1/4-3). The teachers were appreciative that their voices were being heard since they were the ones with the students the majority of the school day.

One teacher credited the principal with the feeling around the school that the teachers were part of the decision making process:

The principal trusted his teachers to be professionals. He trusted our decisions that we made regarding curriculum instruction to students. He allowed us the freedom to move students around if needed, he allowed, he never questioned what it was we were doing in the classrooms that was working. I never felt a sense of I need to go down and have anything approved by him. He allowed me to the job that I was hired to do. (T2/5-1)

The principal felt that if the teachers were led in a dictatorial style that there would not be a strong culture in the school. He set expectations and goals for the middle school, but believed that the teachers had to feel part of the decision making process to make a difference in the school. One of the methods he used to promote teacher involvement was to have a showcase of the teachers' talents at a faculty meeting. (D2/2) The meeting was conducted on an early dismissal day in the afternoon from 2:30 to 3:30 and was divided into two sessions. Eight faculty members were asked to present mini-workshops on instructional strategies and practices that were being used in their classrooms for at-risk students. The rest of the faculty was asked to select two sessions to attend during the faculty meeting hour. The sessions were limited to no more than eight participants. Teacher empowerment by the principal was documented in this statement from the principal's operational guide as well, "Schools are most effective when leadership is nurtured from the classroom up" (D4/1).

The instructional strategies and practices in Table 7 were derived from the review and analysis of the faculty meeting notes:

Table 7

*Instructional Strategies and Practices Shared at the November 2007 Faculty Meeting*

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Best Practices

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Using Learning Centers to Differentiate Instruction

Selecting and Using Foldables

Passing Notes to Students: Using teacher distributed notes

Smart Board for Dummies

Read 180: A look at our newest program

Making and Using the Jeopardy Game

Spicing Up Your Lessons with Power Point

Four Square Writing: writing across the curriculum

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### Category: A Focused Curriculum and Reading Intervention

There are mandates from both the state and local level to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with national, state, and local standards. Research shows that a strong curriculum is a practice that helps at-risk students to succeed academically (Reeves, 2003). Almost every teacher participant mentioned the importance of the curriculum being focused in Douglas Middle School as a key to the success for the school. The 2006-07 school year was when this practice was seen first given emphasis and it continued throughout the next two school years. Within the category of a focused curriculum, three patterns emerged from the participants' responses: (a) the Vertical Articulation Team, (b) the School Improvement Plan, (c) the remediation of students in math and reading. The principal also expressed the importance of all three patterns.

#### *Pattern: Vertical Articulation Team*

Douglas Middle School was feeling the pressure to improve achievement scores for their at-risk students. Because of that pressure, there was a focused drive to gather more data through the Vertical Articulation Team. Teachers across the board believed that benchmark testing every few weeks had a positive impact on the achievement of the at-risk students in the school. The teachers and principal believed that the vertical team articulation did not just help the at-risk students, but all of the students. The Vertical Articulation Team's goals were stated in the Data Analysis section of the School Improvement Plan for the 2006-07 school year: Under the leadership of the lead teachers, teachers met in the Vertical Articulation Teams to collect, disaggregate, and analyze critical information such as strand scores and student performance by question. (D1/10) One participant commented that the monthly meetings were attended by the principal which added to the improved communication. That same participant commented:

And we had those Vertical Team meetings and with the meetings all of the subject area teachers from each grade level would meet, and we would look at the test scores, we would look at the areas where they were exceptionally weak, and we would put goals and objectives as to how to raise those skills in those particular. (T1/2-6)

One participant also explained that the principal believed strongly in the Vertical Articulation Team approach. The participant expressed how the results were used to help their at-risk students, "We looked at the test results, we looked at the areas of weakness, you know, where the students had performed most poorly, and we targeted those areas for extra work during

the course of the year” (T2/2-3). Another participant talked about the benefits of these meetings, “We would discuss issues, we’d talk about remediation, we’d talk about other practical aspects we can do in order to boost up test scores. I found that very, very helpful” (T2/5-7).

The principal credited the Vertical Articulation Team as one of the practices that helped the school decide where they were going and how they would get there. He further explained that the teams met monthly and that all of the administrators participated with the team. This was a goal that was carried over into the three year School Improvement Plan for 2006-09. Improvement from these goals could be seen in the academic scores for each of the three years.

*Pattern: School Improvement Plan*

Six out of 10 participants commented that the School Improvement Plan (SIP) gave them focus for the school year and that the principal believed strongly in it. Many participants saw the plan as forcing them to zero in on their at-risk students for potential success academically. One participant expressed the following:

One of the things they started implementing was what we called our school improvement plan and every year we’d sit down at the beginning of the school year and look at the previous year’s SOL scores and we’d look at like the student answers by each question to see what questions the majority of your students were missing, what their answers were and we would choose three biggest topics. (T1/9-6).

The SIP process was an approach that the principal used to guide the teachers so they could target at-risk students that were not achieving at levels they should be. The principal took this process very seriously and the first paragraph of the SIP is evidence of the value he attached to it:

The School Improvement Process is a long-range planning process that involves collecting and analyzing data that impacts curriculum, instructional, and assessment decisions that positively affect student learning and performance. (D1/1)

The principal believed that having measurable goals to attack problem areas for at-risk students was critical for the start of the year. Members of the School Improvement Team included the principal and assistant principal along with the department heads for the core classes in math, social studies, science, and language arts. Interview participants stated that input was fluid and open at the start of the year in the individual departments to ensure everyone had a



voice in the process. The school improvement goals for the 2006-07 school year and for the three year school improvement plan were reviewed annually to ensure that the goals were attempted and met. At the start of the 2006-07 school year, the staff reviewed the scores in English which were low in 2005-06 as can be seen in Table 8. Table 9 shows the School Improvement Plan which included details about what would occur in each core area as documented by an example of Reading (D1/14).

Table 8

*SOL Pass Rates in 2005-06*

	Overall	AA	SWD	SES
6 <sup>th</sup> Math	42%	29%	20%	20%
7 <sup>th</sup> Math	29%	14%	55%	14%
8 <sup>th</sup> Math	61%	52%	45%	52%
Reading	72%	64%	52%	64%

*Note.* SWD = Students With Disabilities; SES = Socio Economic Status (Free and Reduced Lunch)

Table 9

*Strategies to Improve SOL English Pass Rates from the 2006-07 School Improvement Plan*

Strategies	Time Frame	Person responsible	Financial	Resources	Evidence
Graphic novels	10/06-6/07	English VAT	inst funds	Basil books	tests
4 square model	10/06	Department	inst funds	None	notes
Data analysis	12/6/06	Department	inst funds	None	notes
Remediation	1/07-3/07	Lead teachers	rem funds	in-house	students
Staff Dev	10/06	Department	inst funds	None	notes
Foldables	10/06-6/07	Lead teachers	inst funds	paper, pen	samples

*Pattern: Remediation*

Eight of 10 participants mentioned the importance of remediation. As stated in the School Improvement Plan for 2006-07, remedial reading was a focus school-wide and the principal made sure that there was ample remedial reading for the at-risk students. All teachers at the school were involved in the remediation process. Some responses to the interview question about a plan that was implemented for the entire school varied to how important remediation was for the students and how everyone was involved to help students make real gains. One participant expressed their feelings about how important remediation was when asked what was deeply implemented in the school that had an effect on the at-risk students academically, “Remediation. And the flexibility, the fact that the remediation, that the exploratory teachers would not penalize the children’s grades for missing. The principal gave us money to do rewards for kids that came to remediation” (T1/8-15).

The teachers interviewed discussed the importance regarding remediation with at-risk students, including not only reading but also mathematics; they also mentioned that some teachers were paid for the providing remediation in the mornings and afternoons. Students were eager to be pulled for remediation from exploratory teachers were very helpful with the process when remediation was done during the school day. According to one teacher, the principal would present end of the year awards to the exploratory teachers to symbolize the school’s appreciation for what they did for the good of the school. Working with the delicate balance of having students pulled from classes was not easy, but the teachers explained that there was never any hesitation on anybody’s part because they knew they were together in what the goal of the school was.

A teacher explained:

We did remediation. We worked as a team. I would let some of my kids go over to the other 7<sup>th</sup> grade hall and let that teacher review some of the kids that really seemed to be struggling. We did that that first year, but the principal just gave us an open window to try new methods and strategies that we thought would be beneficial to our kids. (T1/ 7-5)

When asked about remediation, the principal explained that programs would come and go and remediation was successful not because of the programs but because the relationships with the teachers and the teachers’ ability to get the most out of their students.

### Category: Teacher-Student Relationships

Throughout the interview data, there was a consistent theme of the importance of relationships in the school to everyone involved. This practice was identified by the participants as beginning in the first year and continuing to develop during the three-year period of improvement. The importance of relationships was evidenced in the responses of both the teachers and the principal. Support was a word that was mentioned during the interviews as an example of a practice that was effective with the at-risk students in the school. Teachers were expected to be in the classrooms early because students would often visit for academic help or to just talk about their night at home and problems they were experiencing. Students would often visit their old teachers in the sixth and seventh grades when they got older. The principal was seen by the participants as a person who the students respected and could talk to easily. At both the principal and teacher level, relationships were seen as vital to get the best performances out of the students in the classroom. In the participants' responses, these themes surfaced in the teacher/student relationships category: high expectations for all students and the student engagement that the teachers wanted to provide for the special population of at-risk students.

#### *Pattern: High Expectations for All Students*

Eight of 10 teachers mentioned that expectations were a given for the at-risk students and that the expectations began with the principal and moved down into the classroom. The principal felt that students would achieve at a higher level if they were seen as capable of performing over and beyond what was typically expected of them. The school mission statement found in the School Improvement Plan demonstrated that high expectations were present for students: "It is the mission of Douglas Middle School to engage students in a personalized, challenging, and exciting learning opportunities that are interesting and meaningful so that more students will perform at higher levels of achievement" (D1/4). The mission statement showed that the principal and teachers involved expected relationships and engagement with students to promote students motivation to learn. As one teacher explained:

We have to have expectations of them rather than making excuses for certain conditions and most of the kids say I was a little bit too hard because I didn't buy into a lot of because and this is getting personal, but I am a product of a single parent home. I didn't buy into that excuse. (T1/2-3)

One participant felt that the mission statement caused teachers to look at themselves and perform at a higher level to get the best from their at-risk students. One participant described this feeling: “It’s just the bottom line. It’s what we expect, gives us what our achievement for our kids and we have, truly the principal believed that our kids could achieve and that was the root of our tree so anybody else that didn’t believe it they almost stuck out like a sore thumb” (T1/10-30). This participant added that it was ingrained in the teachers that all students were capable and that belief would empower the students. Another participant supported that point of view with them added about the teachers’ role in believing in the students:

It was the kids need help, you know, we need them to get to where we need them to be and that was one of the reasons why we’ve seen such great increase in the last few years with SOL scores because teachers are willing to pretty much break their backs and do what we can to help the kids out. (T1/9-5)

The principal felt strongly that relationships were about the trust that was built with the students. He mentioned that students would routinely want to hug him or speak to him because of the relationships he had built with them. He also believed that these relationships would in turn make students want to do well because of the high expectations of them. As one teacher stated, “The human part has to be promoted and that’s what the principal did” (T1/10-32).

#### *Pattern: Engagement*

The majority of the teachers, even the principal, agreed that their at-risk student population was a group that needed a lot of hands-on work to be engaged in the classroom. The teachers indicated that the principal realized this and that he wanted to see high student engagement when he did his walkthroughs or formal observations. One teacher who teaches math stated that she realized that direct instruction was needed in her classroom. She talked about using rap songs, cooperative groups, and believing in the power of each other and learning from each other. Another teacher added that hands-on was the way to go with at-risk students. She further explained:

I have to draw them in, I have to want them to have their head up, I have to want them to look at me and sometimes that’s what the song a dance and a joke and a treat question and you’ve got your bag of tricks all the time because as soon as you get stable, they get

bored and it's, I don't know if it's just inner city or if it's children today, but we have got to highly stimulate them. (T1/8-14)

The principal believed strongly in differentiation and said that it was implemented throughout the school in terms of engaging all different types of students. He wanted the teachers to be hands-on with the at-risk students and believed that the ability to create was important for student engagement. The engagement would therefore lead into positive and constructive feedback, as one teacher believed. She added, "More feedback, you know, when they get that practice time, they get more one-on-one feedback" (T1/6-3).

When asked about student learning and methods of assessment, one teacher explained how engagement played a part in it:

Even when I am up and down the rows, it's constant assessment. I'm observing everybody and I'm getting constant feedback, constant feedback. I see faces on children, but I also see fragment error written across the forehead...we do a lot of pairing and group work and it's oral. (T2/5-5)

Overall, the teachers and principals stressed the importance of relationships and how it tied into the level of expectations they had for students and the engagement provided for the at-risk students.

#### Category: Teacher Collaboration

The researcher was open to new and unexpected categories emerging from the data after the interviews were completed and documents collected. The analysis of the data revealed that the teacher collaboration was strong at Douglas Middle School. The teachers and principal saw this as being important to the success of the at-risk students. Working together instructionally as a school and faculty was emphasized by the principal and the teachers took full advantage of the chance to work collaboratively.

#### *Pattern: Cross-Curricular Instruction*

When asked to describe what was going on in the school to help at-risk students, the majority of teachers believed that the teamwork found in the school helped the at-risk students become successful. This practice did not start the first year, but appeared later on in the three-year period of school improvement. The principal was seen as promoting teachers working

together and facilitating collaboration in the best interests of the students. The principal stated that he wanted the teachers in his building to have the freedom to work together, try, and fail.

One teacher explained how teachers were working together:

I think we started meeting a little more and talking about helping each other, you know kind of doing more teamwork with helping with the struggling subjects. I know I tried to incorporate math into science to help the math teacher. I think we just got together as a team. I think we've always at this school that's what I've loved about it. We've always been an overall team, you know. It's not my grade, my kids, it's our students, you know. (T1/1-4)

Another teacher who was interviewed explained that the teachers realized they had to come together when the school's goal became accreditation. She described:

Our goal was accreditation, our goal was meeting AYP. So, everyone just banded together. It wasn't like we sat down and said we've got to do this. During that three years, we had a true sense of family. It was a true sense of I've got your back and you've got mine. (T1/7-9)

Overall the teachers appreciated the collaboration in the school. Most of them felt strongly about being able to share with each other and felt that it was all of them against the world and not an individual competitive feeling. In the school, the teachers were encouraged to share with each other and look inside the building if help was needed. One teacher added, "I think a lot of it is that we started collaborating as teachers sharing information, you know, we also started looking at our strength and making sure we passed those strengths to somebody who might have that as a weakness" (T1/8-4).

One teacher explained that the path to the positive cross-curriculum work that was occurring in the school did not happen without any resistance initially:

You know, you co-teach, you re-teach, you cross curriculum, you bring in your science and math and your English classroom and they fought that for so long and then like I said it started to, it started to happen, it started to happen. (T1/10-20)

One teacher brought a document to the interview to show an example of the cross-curriculum work that was occurring in the school. The example given was a collaboration between the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English and Civics teacher in the fall of 2008. The assignment was a persuasive writing piece on political candidates (D3/1). The objective was to write a persuasive

essay using accurate information about the political candidates. The assignment was done using the four square writing method which had been presented in the faculty meeting in which instructional strategies were shared.

### *Pattern: Teaming*

Teaming and the use of core teachers on one academic team was a practice that the middle school found very helpful for their at-risk students. A number of teachers felt that teaming within the grade levels was a valuable organizational tool, along with the flexibility that went along with the practice. As mentioned before, the principal believed strongly in teacher collaboration, but teaming was where he believed collaboration began. The principal believed that the at-risk student was helped because of the teaming, both academically and relationally. He indicated that collaboration gave the teams an ability to work with each other in ways that did not work before. The feeling that teaming was important was consistently held among the teachers. One teacher explained:

As our year progressed, our numbers dwindled so much we were a four-person team; science, English, social studies, math, our numbers dwindled so much where we were able to combine the two lower classes to have a three-class day and that fourth person would go with a lower group. (T1/6-11)

As one teacher stated, “Our team has usually taken the liberties and our administration was okay with this. If you weren’t working out in first period, we just moved you to third. Whatever the conflict was something wasn’t happening we just moved you to where we needed to be” (T1/5-12). Another teacher explained how working together was made easier by teaming:

We stopped the whole idea that once you give us a schedule we have to go with that because as far as the timing, the time element was one thing, but what happened within that time could be very different. We had the autonomy to do a three-day period instead of a four day. (T1/10-15)

The teachers appreciated being treated as professionals within the teams. Therefore, they were able to move students and times to where they felt helped the students the most.

## Summary of the Findings

Four categories emerged from the interviews that were completed. These categories included: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, (c) positive teacher-student relationships, and (d) teacher collaboration. Patterns within these categories were identified: trust, school culture, and empowerment for strong principal leadership. For a focused curriculum and reading intervention the following patterns were found: vertical articulation team, school improvement plan, and remediation. High expectations for all and student engagement were found for positive teacher-student relationships. Teacher collaboration had the patterns of cross-curricular instruction and teaming. The participants believed each of these categories and patterns were factors that contributed to the academic success of their at-risk students.

As a result of the analysis process, relationships across the categories could be seen. Strong principal leadership could be seen in the former principal's creation of in role of the Vertical Articulation teams, emphasizing the relationships in the school, and allowing flexibility for teachers to enable them to collaborate academically. A focused curriculum was promoted by the former principal that helped teachers be better teachers in terms of student engagement and also helped with cross-curriculum work. The school's six period schedule reflected multiple opportunities for collaboration, reading intervention, and the cultivation of teacher-student relationships because of teaming (D5).

The only disagreement regarding the practices implemented in the school came from a teacher who was not directly involved with many at-risk students because he taught in the Academically Gifted (AG) area. The AG students at Douglas Middle School are self-contained and physically separated from the rest of the student population in the school. They have little interaction with non-AG students other than traveling with them by bus to and from school. There are at-risk students in the AG wing, but they are performing at a very high level. The AG teacher did help with remediation as some students came to him to get extra help in the subjects and the principal truly wanted everyone involved to help the at-risk student population in the school.

The document review and analysis provided rich data that supported the categories and patterns. The school improvement plan was one example that incorporated many of the categories and patterns that impacted everyone in the middle school such as reading intervention,



a focused curriculum, collaboration, and positive teacher-student relationships. The school improvement plan was a working document as the principal stated, was continuous in nature, focusing on the three year period of 2006-09. The faculty meeting notes reflected ample opportunities to collaborate, have teaming on the grade levels, and provide student engagement. The teachers' plans that were reviewed made it clear that a focus in the school was collaboration, positive teacher-student relationships, and reading intervention. The collaboration was seen as a focus by the strong principal who created a master schedule that enabled common planning time. The school's master schedule reflected that common planning time for core subject established from 9:00 to 10:30. The review and analysis also gave credence to the fact that many teachers were doing cross-curricular work and that the principal was the catalyst for teacher empowerment and the culture found throughout the school.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe how one middle school moved from being accredited with warning to making AYP and meeting high standards of academic achievement with at-risk students. This chapter begins with a discussion of the findings of the study and continues with a presentation of conclusions derived from the data. Following the findings and conclusions, implications and recommendations for school leaders and policy makers are described. Recommendations for future research are offered along with personal reflections about the study.

#### Discussion

The theoretical framework of the study was based on school improvement practices identified from the literature that appear to have contributed to at-risk students achieving academic success. The three identified practices include: (a) strong principal leadership, (b) focused curriculum and reading intervention, and (c) positive teacher-student relationships. These three areas guided the development of the interview questions asked of the teachers and principal who participated in the study. The interview questions were also used to guide the review and analysis of documents. The interviews and document review data were used to answer two research questions: (1) Which, if any of the three practices identified in the research were used by the school to help at-risk students achieve academic success? (2) What factors other than the ones identified for investigation appear to have contributed to the success of at-risk students in the school? Categories and patterns that emerged from the data analysis are discussed in the sections that follow.

#### Strong Principal Leadership

The category of strong principal leadership includes the patterns of the trust, school culture, and empowerment that were found in the data collected in the middle school. According to both teachers and the principal, the patterns were present in the school during the three-year period of improvement in achievement among at-risk students.

### *Trust*

The teachers and principal who participated in the study stated that they experienced a level of trust between each other that contributed to a feeling that any idea could be tested in the classroom if it had potential to improve academic achievement for at-risk students. The principal had the type of personality that allowed him to give the trust to his teachers. His management style enabled him to be able to have that belief in the teachers. The principal felt that trust could be a factor in transforming a school from the top all the way down to the students as he said, “Human beings that are trusted are more likely to enlarge their own circle of trust and begin to trust students and to treat students in a way that makes the students more accountable for their own behaviors and their own learning, and I think our best teachers were able to do that” (T2/11-8). Given the importance of trust that was mentioned by both teachers and the principal, the pattern was important in the middle school’s academic success for at-risk students.

### *School Culture*

The principal of the middle school reported that the school culture created a kind of commitment from teachers that would not have been found unless the culture allowed it. The teachers described their experiences as being supported by a feeling of self-worth brought about by the culture created by the principal. They also reported that the culture of support could be felt not only by the teachers, but by the students as well. Again, the principal’s personality and management style enabled him to promote the collegiality between teachers and the principal. His leadership style and personality stressed cooperation and collaboration. The principal summed the culture of the school well by saying, “We developed a culture of caring, a culture of trust that spilled over into the whole family” (T2/11-21). The teachers commented that the culture of the school was a factor that made the staff feel good about themselves and about what they did on a daily basis. The principal also believed that the culture of the school enabled teachers to become better teachers and they were open to helping each other more freely.

The teachers gave the principal much credit for the trust, empowerment, and school culture that was present in the school at the time. Likewise, the principal gave credit to the teachers in terms for becoming teacher leaders and using the trust and school culture to the advantage of their at-risk students. The principal and teachers agreed that all three factors genuinely changed the focus and goals in the building and supported the at-risk students in

increasing their academic success. The principal was confident that none of these patterns that were revealed would have been possible without the teachers he had assembled in the school. The dynamics of success began with the principal and extended through the teachers to the students. As the principal said at the end of the first interview, “We facilitated leadership and let them decide, you know, what it was that a professional working in this building would do and what the professional would look like” (T2/11-18).

### *Teacher Empowerment*

The principal expressed that empowerment was key to the teachers’ confidence in themselves and in the school. Teachers reported that they appreciated being participants in the decision making process and not just the recipients of decisions. The students were the recipients of the teacher empowerment as they were able to enjoy the creativity that was cultivated in the classroom. One teacher explained the feeling in the school about the empowerment, “It was just that creativity and flexibility that makes it fun and when your teachers are happy, everybody is happy” (T2/8-21). The principal wanted the teachers to have the freedom to attempt new strategies in their classrooms, knowing it would help the at-risk students.

Research by Reeves (2003) and Whitehouse (2009) supports the finding of trust as a key element in school improvement as they reported flexibility in the thinking of school leaders and principals came from trust. The research of Waters et al. (2003) and Supovitz et al. (2010) said that the culture of a school could have an influence on teachers and the academic achievement of the students in the school. This finding is also similar to the research done by Mulford and Silins (2009). Mulford and Silins found that principals who had successful schools had created a positive culture for the teachers in the school. Supovitz et al. and Waters et al. supported this finding as their research pointed clearly to the culture of a school as important and the principal as key to the existence of a strong culture in any school.

### *A Focused Curriculum and Reading Intervention*

The category of a focused curriculum and reading intervention also emerged from the data as important for at risk-students to be successful academically. The principal believed that having a focused curriculum and ensuring that reading intervention was valued and utilized in the school were necessary steps in helping at-risk students improve academically. The lack of a

focused curriculum was an issue that was on the minds of teachers at the start of the 2006-07 school year. They actively sought out ways to improve the curriculum and instructional interventions for at-risk students in the middle school. The findings conform with findings from a study conducted by Reeves (2003) that indicated that schools should focus on their curricula and reading in particular to improve the academic success of at-risk students. According to Stevens (2003), the development of reading skills is an important goal for students who are considered at-risk.

#### *Vertical Articulation Team*

The teachers and principal were also faced with the challenges of making sure communication about the curriculum was consistent, constant and thorough. The Vertical Articulation Team was an important means to overcome the challenge. Many of the teachers and the principal agreed that the Vertical Articulation Teams were crucial because they were led by lead teachers. The principal agreed that the Vertical Articulation Teams were used to communicate and disaggregate data that in turn helped the teachers choose and implement effective strategies for the at-risk students. One of the key goals of the teams was to work with students who they thought were in danger of dropping out. Targeting at-risk students who were in danger of dropping out was supported by findings from the studies of Stevens (2003) and Reeves (2003). The success of the Vertical Articulation Teams allowed the school to identify and use strategies that might not have been used otherwise. Since achievement scores continued to go up, the district and central office left the middle school alone. Decisions made by the Vertical Articulation Teams were facilitated by the teacher leaders and coincided with the philosophy of the principal. Consequently, they enjoyed widespread support.

#### *School Improvement Plan*

The teachers and principal described their experiences with building the School Improvement Plan and how the plan became the framework for what occurred in the school to improve academic success. The principal and teachers planned exactly how the school would attempt to achieve their goals throughout the plan. The plan was created in the late summer before the 2006-07 school year by teacher leaders and then was used by everyone in the school. Curriculum alignment and strategies to improve reading skills were intentionally included in the

plan. Their inclusion resulted in more input by teachers in the school and more guidance from the principal in the writing of the plan. The principal's personality that fostered collaboration enabled him to be able to help the teachers pick goals for the SIP and see them through to the end. The rationale behind the strategies was, "The improvement of student performance is based on setting specific measurable goals supported by specific strategies and instructional practices in identified priority areas" (D1/2). The school improvement plan was a tool that was continuously evolving during the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years as well as a long-range plan for the success of the at-risk student population. The principal's personality was one that focused on data and that was seen in his development of the SIP.

### *Remediation*

Reading intervention was seen throughout the school in almost every subject area. The teachers and principal reported receiving cooperation from almost every teacher in improving the reading skills of at-risk students. Intervention strategies such as the use of graphic novels in English classrooms were consistent with a study conducted by Stevens (2003). Stevens found that creativity was a major key for middle schools in their approach to effectively improve the academic achievement for their students. Andermann et al. (1999) also found that the reading practices Stevens (2003) studied helped at-risk students not only with reading, but with motivational issues as well. The teachers and principal emphasized reading across the curriculum and the advantages the students had with the reading practice they would receive in all of their classes. Most of the teachers reported great support from colleagues in the school who taught the same students with reading intervention strategies and an improvement with the scores were evident in the 2006-07 school year as overall the percentage was in the 80 percent range. The principal was a proponent for the use of graphic novels, finding that many students who would not usually read a novel in class appreciated reading the same story in an easier to read, illustrated format.

### Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

#### *High Expectations for All Students*

Positive teacher-student relationships was a category that emerged from the data collected at the middle school. The teachers and the principal in this study reported that the

relationships cultivated with the at-risk students in the school were a factor in their academic success. In order to have positive teacher-student relationships, the principal set the tone in the school by setting high expectation for all students and holding the belief that at-risk students could succeed at a high level. The emphasis on positive teacher-student relationships is similar to a finding from a study conducted by Margolis and McCabe (2004) who found that motivational keys provide at-risk students with a desire to learn and achieve at their highest level possible. The principal reported that with students one has to have trusting relationships to get them to perform at the level they are capable of.

### *Engagement*

Student engagement was important for both the teachers and the principal to create an environment in which at-risk students felt comfortable and wanted to learn. The principal reported that he enjoyed seeing students out of their seat or “*chaotic*” as he described it, because that meant that the students were highly engaged and they were focused on the task at hand. Sturtevant and Linek (2003) completed a study that was congruent with the pattern of student engagement as they saw that instruction should be relevant to show true usefulness for the future. The principal also believed that relationships that were genuine caused the students to believe that the principal and staff cared about them. The student engagement allowed the at-risk students to work hard and focus in the classroom which therefore meant fewer discipline issues overall.

## Teacher Collaboration

### *Cross-Curricular Instruction*

In this study collaboration emerged from the data as a category that was important to school. However, this was one category that was not found in the literature reviewed. The teachers in reported that there was a strong sense of professional learning areas within the teaching community in the school. In order to have the luxury of working together, the principal ensured that the teachers would be able to schedule in a flexible manner which helped group certain students at-risk. The principal supported teachers who planned together and worked together to help at-risk students. Being able to plan together was vital for the staff who wanted to work across the curriculums to support reading and writing goals set forth in the School

Improvement Plan. The principal responded again about the trust factor and mentioned that the teachers enjoyed working with each other and agreed that there was no fear of being reprimanded by the principal if something did not work. The principal and teachers both agreed that they were all in this together and that working together for the at-risk students would work better than being on your own for your own students.

### *Teaming*

The teachers and principal reported teaming as an important part of the structure in the middle school. Teaming was used across all grade levels. The teachers stated that the principal gave them the latitude to be able to switch at-risk students across academic teams when necessary to help them academically. The teachers did not have to wait for guidance or the principal to give them permission to do so. If they thought a change needed to be made in the best interest of the student, the change was made. The academic teams fit under the category of collaboration and emerged from the interviews of the teacher and principal. The principal felt that the teaming gave the teachers more freedom as to how to group their at-risk students academically. Teachers believed that teaming was vital if true collaboration were to take place. Thinking in terms of academic success, the teaming of teachers across grade levels was to the benefit of everyone involved.

### Conclusions

In this study, data about Douglas Middle School's success with at-risk students were obtained from two interview sessions with 10 teachers and the principal and document analysis. Four major categories emerged from the interviews and from document review and analysis. The four major categories were (a) strong principal leadership, (b) a focused curriculum and reading intervention, (c) positive teacher-student relationships, and (d) teacher collaboration. Each category was embedded not only in the interviews, but also the documents reviewed. In addition, the results of the document analysis and review clearly illustrated each of the categories.

The results of the study corroborate and add to the findings of the research studies discussed in the literature review, the fourth category of collaboration was seen by the teachers and principal to have helped at-risk students as well.



Having strong principal leadership in Douglas Middle School appears to have been essential to the success of the at-risk students, echoing the findings of Reeves (2003) that having a strong leader is important to any school's success. Douglas Middle School focused on the talent they had inside the building to organize their curriculum and reading intervention. It directly affirms Reeves (2003) who believed that a focused curriculum was important for any school that had a high population of at-risk students. The achievement of the school during the three-year period appears to have been helped along by the strong relationships that the teachers and students had in the school which carried over into the classroom. Heck and Hallinger (2010) affirmed the study's finding that collaboration between staff was crucial to improving the academic success for struggling students as well.

There appear to have been relationship among the categories that could be seen through the analysis and review of the interviews and documents. Strong Principal leadership is important for almost every facet of running a school. This component could be seen in the categories of having a focused curriculum as well since the principal was the one who implemented the Vertical Articulation Teams and created the School Improvement Plan. It is logical to conclude that reading intervention was a focus for the school that contributed to the category of collaboration. Teachers commented that without the collaboration in the school, the goal of reading intervention for at-risk students would not have been realized. Douglas Middle School wanted teacher-student relationships to play a part in the success for at-risk students and this was seen in the strong principal leadership as well as the collaboration between teachers. One good example was how the AG teacher helped out with remediation even though his students were self contained for the year.

In general, the conclusions revealed that according to the teachers and principals, three categories were supported by the data and the fourth emerged from the data. The categories and patterns that emerged from data showed that there were also relationships across the categories; they all contributed to the academic success of the at-risk students in the middle school.

#### Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Several implications and recommendations for practice may be helpful for school leaders and policy makers are listed below. The implications and recommendations are drawn from the findings and presented here:

1. *Implication:* When a school leader empowers teachers on their staff to be teacher leaders in their school, decision making could be put in their hands and could be a positive for at-risk students which could result in higher academic achievement.

*Recommendations:* By making teacher empowerment a priority in the school, the teachers will feel they are a part of the decision making process. Through developing teacher leaders in their own schools, school leaders can cultivate a school culture that exhibits involvement by the teachers. The principal/school leader is the key in this practice as they must have trust in their teachers and there must be that trust in the school leader as well. The belief in teacher empowerment must be one that gives teacher the flexibility to make decisions that will benefit at-risk students who are struggling academically. This is supported by Reeves (2003) who found that successful schools that had high at-risk student populations were led by principals who gave teachers the freedom and power to make instructional decisions. School principals should consider empowering teachers so they can make sound instructional decisions for their students who are considered at-risk.
2. *Implication:* At-risk middle school students could be successful when high expectations are set for them and the belief that they can meet high expectations is found throughout the school.

*Recommendations:* The school leader should foster a belief throughout the school that at-risk students will experience the same expectations as any other student. In most cases, setting expectations is a leadership function. Principals can set the tone for the school and use leadership teams and school improvement plans to put an emphasis on that particular student population. However, it is clear from the findings that teacher involvement is necessary to implement the expectations. So teachers must be included in the decision making process. Cultivating relationships with at-risk students and letting them know that they can succeed at a high level is recommended to give the students the belief that someone cares about them and how they do academically. The principal should ensure that teachers hold at-risk students to high standards no matter their background. Teacher should make sure they are putting belief in their at-risk students and pushing them to strive for the

best. Instructional decisions should be made collectively in the school with the principal and teachers having input.

3. *Implications:* Teachers who collaborate and work together as a team of professionals may be able to improve the academic achievement of at-risk students. *Recommendations:* Teachers in middle schools could have built-in planning time to be able to work collaboratively to find strategies that will work in the classroom. Vertical and Horizontal Articulation Teams may be established to foster communication and collaboration throughout a school. Teachers will recognize strengths of others and work with them to do cross-curriculum work for at-risk students that can focus on reading and writing. Feedback will be given to teachers by each other and for each other to improve instruction. Allowing for time to plan and work together would foster less competition between teachers and more collegial efforts. Principals/school leaders should keep common planning time in mind when creating the master schedule. The principal may ensure that there is common planning time when completing the master schedule. The goal of the common planning time may be collaboration across the curriculum to help identify and help at-risk students become successful. In order for this to be successful, the entire school community should feel a part of it. The Vertical and Horizontal Teams will meet monthly to ensure good communication and collaboration is occurring.
4. *Implications:* When the School Improvement Plan is created, specific goals should be included for at-risk students. These goals should include timelines, people responsible, and outcomes and should be continuously evolving. There should be a short term and three year plan. *Recommendations:* The principal/school leader should identify teacher leaders to help with the plan at the start of the school year and review the plan throughout the year. Goals should be created for all core areas. Special attention should be given to the costs, if any, that will exist so that Central Office can be notified. Through monthly meeting and reports including data review and analysis, principals can assess whether or not the plan is being followed and the needs of the at-risk student population are being addressed.

## Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from the study could be applied to schools that have a significant population of at-risk students, which could include elementary, middle or high school. Future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study in other locations and at other levels to see if similar results are described by other school principals and teachers. High school or elementary school teachers and principals may have different descriptions of how their own at-risk students improved academically. Replicating this study at any school level could be beneficial to middle school researchers. Research in high schools and elementary schools investigating at-risk students is recommended. Extending research outside the state of Virginia would also increase the research knowledge on at-risk students and academic success.

The data in this study were obtained through one-on-one interviews and document analysis. In future studies, findings could be added to with observations of teachers who work at-risk students in their own classrooms over a length of time. This would provide more descriptions about particular strategies used for the academic success of at-risk students. Another recommendation is to visit Douglas Middle School for a follow-up study three to five years from now to see if there has been any other changes with the success of their at-risk students since the principal and other teachers will have moved on to other schools.

A replication of this study using quantitative methods could attempt to determine the statistical significance of the practices in the academic achievement of at-risk students. Further study on the impact of staff development practices in a school are recommended to see if they might have implications for the success of at-risk students. The professional development of teachers could become a force in improving the teaching of mediocre teachers which could have a positive effect on at-risk students.

## Personal Reflections on the Research Process

Reflecting on the process used to conduct this study, I can now point to some areas that I think would help future researchers if they decided to replicate the study. First, I would try to prepare for the study in the summer before the school year I wanted to do my interviews. I had to do my interviews in January which forced a couple of cancellations because of inclement weather. The disruptions were difficult to deal with since travel, hotel rooms, and schedules were involved and they had to be rescheduled. Trying to match school up and work around schedules

was also difficult in the winter because my own school system would be open on a given day and on the same day the school system which the middle school was located would be closed or operating on a delayed schedule due to bad weather. Another problem was that the school system had scheduled state testing during the time period I was gathering data. Changes in schedule for testing had to be accounted for as well. The best time to schedule the interviews would have been in late September or early October.

Second, I would have attempted to talk to the assistant principal who was at the school during the time period studied. The principal who was there during the period of improved achievement by the at-risk students was designated by the superintendent as the leader to interview. I believe future researchers should attempt to talk to not only the principal, but also the assistant principal to get their point of view also.

Finally, the input of students who were at the school during that time could serve as an additional data source for triangulation for future researchers. Getting into touch with former students would likely prove difficult, but would provide another, important perspective on the school's practices with at-risk students. I believe the students may be able to offer insight that the teachers and principal did not recognize.

### Concluding Statements

As the poverty rate increases and inequality grows from school district to district, the role of school leaders and teachers are even more important to ensure that at-risk students are being academically successful. The views of the teachers and principal at Douglas Middle School showed that good work is happening there and that much of the talent and many of the innovative ideas were found inside the school. The teachers and principal shared several practices they believe allowed their at-risk students to perform at high academic levels.

Three of the four practices that were found in the school were supported by researchers whose work were analyzed in the literature review such as Reeves (2003), Heck and Hallinger (2010), and Christle and Yell (2008). In looking at the success of the at-risk students at Douglas Middle School, I concluded that the role of the principal is a vital component in implementing a school culture that is conducive for at-risk students to succeed academically.

My advice to school principals comes from the researchers Heck and Hallinger (2010) who reported that "collaborated leadership, as opposed to leadership from the principal alone,

may offer a path towards more sustainable school improvement” (p.107). This was certainly the case in Douglas Middle School. As Supovitz et al. (2010) reported, individuals who aspire to be principals need to understand that “educational leadership influences instructional practice, which changes student performance” (p. 45).

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## APPENDIX A FIRST CONTACT

\_\_\_\_\_,

Hi there! My name is Forest Jones and I'm an assistant principal at Andrew Lewis Middle School in Salem, Virginia. I am an Ed.D student at Virginia Tech and Dr. Tripp gave me your name.

I am preparing for prospectus this summer and I'm investigating what factors come in to play for the academic success for at-risk students. I'm using three factors such as strong principal leadership, a focused curriculum and reading intervention, and positive teacher-student relationships, etc and also investigating other factors that come into play for academic success for this population of students.

I have looked at scores at \_\_\_\_\_ and have been very impressed with the increase in scores in math and reading and the success with subgroups such as SES and minorities. I would love to see if the factors I talk about are being used or if others are being used.

Dr. Tripp is my advisor and he said I should contact you and ask about the possibility of using that middle school for my research in the fall. This would mean interviewing teachers and administration only (no students).

I look forward to hearing back from you about the possibility of doing this at \_\_\_\_\_ in the fall!

Thanks, Forest.  
Reply Forward

Reply

\_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_, Wayne, me  
show details Apr 20

Forest,

We would be glad to participate with you in this study. I will refer you to \_\_\_\_\_, Principal of \_\_\_\_\_ for his coordination.

\_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX B  
PROPOSED STUDY LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS

**Title of the Project:** Douglas Middle School: A Case Study of a Middle School's Improvement of the Achievement of its At-Risk Students

**Investigator:** Forest I. Jones

Staff Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Staff Member,

You are invited to take part in a study which will engage middle school educators across Virginia in discussion to describe and analyze your perspectives regarding how your school went from being accredited with warning to making AYP and meeting high standards of academic achievement with at-risk students. As a middle school principal, I want to learn more about the success your school has achieved with at-risk students. I believe that educators, parents, and policy makers can benefit from hearing the voices of middle school educators.

The qualitative study will consist of individual interviews and document analysis. Each participant will be interviewed twice and the interviews will last 40 to 60 minutes each. In addition to answering interview questions, participants will be asked to bring available documents such as the curriculum and pacing guides or assessments of students.

Participation is voluntary and you may opt out at any time. The sessions will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by each participant. After the audio-recording is transcribed, the transcripts will be electronically sent to you for review for accuracy. With your permission, I will do a follow-up email to see if any details need clarification. After the interviews are transcribed by a third party, only my advisor and I will have access to the audio-recordings and the transcripts of the interviews.

I do not believe that you will encounter any identified risks during or upon completion of this study. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time under no penalty.

Thank you for your assistance. I will contact you within the next week to determine your interest in this study. Please contact me at 540-309-3706 or [forestij@vt.edu](mailto:forestij@vt.edu) if you have additional questions.

Sincerely,

Forest I. Jones  
Doctoral Candidate  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (0302)  
Blacksburg, VA 24061  
540-231-9730

N. Wayne Tripp, Ed.D., Professor  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (0302)  
Blacksburg, VA 24061  
540-231-9730

APPENDIX C  
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY  
INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS OF INVESTIGATIVE PROJECTS:  
STAFF PARTICIPANT FORM

**Title of the Project:** Douglas Middle School: A Case Study of a Middle School's Improvement of the Achievement of its At-Risk Students

**Investigators:** Forest I. Jones, N. Wayne Tripp (faculty advisor)

**Purpose of this Research/Project**

The purpose of this research study is to determine whether the major intervention practices identified in the research as impacting academic success (strong principal leadership, focused curriculum/reading intervention, and positive teacher-student relationships) are evident in the practices of a school. By identifying these practices and others that teachers and school leaders are using, educational leaders, schools, and the researcher will gain a more accurate understanding of the practices necessary to foster academic success for at risk students.

**Procedures**

You will be interviewed twice on two separate days for approximately 40 to 60 minutes about your experiences regarding practices used to ensure academic success for at-risk students. The interview will be recorded and notes will be taken during the interview. With your permission, the interview will take place at your school. You are also asked to bring any documentation you have from the school or your classroom that shows certain practices you are using with at-risk students.

**Risks**

There are no identified risks for participants who agree to participate in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no benefits for participants who agree to participate in this study. This study may help provide insight into the implementation of certain practices that appear to support the academic success of at-risk students.

**Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The discussion from the interviews will be audio-recorded. Confidentiality regarding your answers will be protected by removing names and any other identifiers from the transcripts of the audio-recorded answers. The audio-recording, electronic copies, and hard copies of the interview answers will be kept under lock and key. The key to the code of participants will be locked in a separate location than the other research materials.

**Compensation**

Participants will not be monetarily compensated for their contributions to the study.

**Freedom to Withdraw**

Participant involvement is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this project at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any questions that are asked during the interviews.

**Approval of Research**

The project will be approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and by the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

**Subject’s Responsibilities**

I voluntarily agree to participate in the study. I have the following responsibilities:

- To participate in both interviews;
- To review the interview data for accuracy; and
- To provide any documents related to practices that support the academic success for at-risk students.

**Subject’s Permission**

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of the project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Should I have any questions regarding this project or its conduct, I should contact:

<u>Forest I. Jones, Investigator</u>	<a href="mailto:forestij@vt.edu">forestij@vt.edu</a>	540-309-3706
<u>N. Wayne Tripp, Faculty Advisor</u>	<a href="mailto:wtripp@vt.edu">wtripp@vt.edu</a>	

NOTE: Subjects must be given a complete copy (or duplicate original) of the signed Informed Consent.

APPENDIX D  
STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Title of the Project:** Douglas Middle School: A Case Study of a Middle School's Improvement of the Achievement of its At-Risk Students

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Forest I. Jones

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Study Description:

I am interested in why your school is academically successful with at risk students and, in particular, the practices implemented to ensure academic success. I will be asking a series of questions to help me understand the reasons for your school's record of academic success.

I will be tape recording our interview in order to have an accurate transcription. The two interviews will each be approximately 40 to 60 minutes long.

INTERVIEW #1

1. Tell me about your position and what you do.
2. How many years have you been at this school?
3. How has the school changed since you have been there?
4. Your school showed improvement academically with at-risk students during the three year period. Describe what was going on in your school at that time.
5. Was there a plan to help with at-risk students doing better academically? If so, explain how the plan was implemented, the people involved, and what it looked like.
6. Was there something you stopped doing? (a) Why was this ended? (b) How did it affect teachers and students?
7. Was the plan implemented for the entire school or only at-risk students? If only the at-risk students, why?
8. Describe a typical school day for you. Pick a day last year and tell me what you did.

## INTERVIEW # 2

1. Explain how the principal played a part in the academic success of at-risk students. (a) How did the administrator monitor instruction?
2. What kind of interactions did you have with the at-risk students in your school? (a) How was their relationship with the principal?
3. How was the curriculum monitored? (a) How did this affect learning?
4. What were some the methods used to assess learning?
5. Describe how reading affected your school's improvement during those 3 years. (a) Was anything done differently in terms of reading intervention?
6. Was the success of the curriculum and reading intervention measurable? If so, how? (a) Did this affect how teachers taught and do you believe there was deep implementation?
7. Were there any other practices used during that time period that you would like to share?
8. After talking about these practices, how were they prioritized during those three years?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not covered?

APPENDIX E  
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Title of the Project:** Douglas Middle School: A Case Study of a Middle School's Improvement of the Achievement of its At-Risk Students

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Forest I. Jones

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Study Description:

I am interested in why your school is academically successful with at risk students and, in particular, the practices implemented to ensure academic success. I will be asking a series of questions to help me understand the reasons for your school's record of academic success.

I will be tape recording our interview in order to have an accurate transcription. The two interviews will each be approximately 40 to 60 minutes long.

INTERVIEW #1

1. Tell me about your position at the middle school and describe what you did there.
2. How many years were you there? (a) How did the school change during your tenure there?
3. Your school experienced positive gains in terms of the academic achievement of at-risk students over those 3 years. Please describe what was going on in your school during this period.
4. Were other people involved during this three year period of improved academic achievement for at-risk students (not including teachers)?
5. Was there a plan to improve the academic success for at-risk students at the start of the three year period of being accredited with warning to making AYP? (a) If so, what were the goals during this three year period?
6. How was this plan implemented and what did it look like?
7. Was this plan implemented for the entire school or only at-risk students? If only the at-risk students, why?

8. Describe what a typical school day was like for you. Pick a day last year and tell me what you did. (a) If he mentions visibility, go into how it affects teachers, students, and learning in general.

## INTERVIEW #2

1. What was your relationship like with the at-risk students in your school? Please describe. (a) Did you do anything differently with that population of students compared to all students?
2. How was the curriculum monitored? (a) How did this affect learning?
3. Describe how the staff involved in the implementation process of the curriculum.
4. What methods did teachers use to assess learning? (a) Describe how this was monitored.
5. Which instructional practices were deeply implemented in your school? (a) Were these practices in the school prioritized by you? If so, how?
6. Describe how reading affected your school's improvement during those three years. (a) How did this affect how teachers taught?
7. Were there any other practices used by your school that I did not mention?
8. Was there something that your teachers stopped doing during this three year period? (a) If so, why?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not covered?



APPENDIX F  
HUMAN SUBJECT TRAINING CERTIFICATE



APPENDIX G  
IRB APPROVAL MEMO



Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24060  
540/231-4808 Fax 540/231-0959  
e-mail [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)  
Website: [www.irb.vt.edu](http://www.irb.vt.edu)

**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** November 10, 2010

**TO:** Wayne Tripp, Forest Jones

**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires June 13, 2011)

**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Douglas Middle School: A Case Study of a Middle School's Improvement of the Achievement of its At-Risk Students

**IRB NUMBER:** 10-872

Effective November 10, 2010, the Virginia Tech IRB PAM, Andrea Nash, approved the amendment request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm> (please review before the commencement of your research).

**PROTOCOL INFORMATION:**

Approved as: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.101(b) category(ies) 4**

Protocol Approval Date: **11/5/2010**

Protocol Expiration Date: **NA**

Continuing Review Due Date\*: **NA**

\*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

**FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:**

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals / work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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