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PREVIEW

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**A descriptive case study of an alternative education program for  
at-risk youths in a small, rural high school**

**Rose, Steven William, Ed.D.**

**The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1992**

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Ann Arbor, MI 48106

PREVIEW

**A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY OF AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR AT-RISK  
YOUTHS IN A SMALL, RURAL HIGH SCHOOL**

**by**

**Steven W. Rose**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of Doctor of Education**

**Major: Interdepartmental Area of Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction**

**Under the Supervision of Professor F. William Sesow**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

**May, 1992**

DISSERTATION TITLE

A Descriptive Case Study of an Alternative Education Program for At-Risk

Students in a Small, Rural High School

BY

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Educators acknowledge that not all school-aged youths are equally served by the conventional secondary schools in America. This is especially true of youths who are beset by problems arising from their personal lives, their families, society, or schooling itself. Typically, these youths are referred to as being at-risk, that is, at -risk of abandoning their education before attaining a high school diploma. Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) reported that the number of youths classified as dropping out before graduation from high school during the late 1980's was at least 25%, and they believed that the actual percentage was much higher. Other estimations of the dropout rate in America range both above and below this 25% figure, but certainly educators have acknowledged that the dropout issue is a problem if more no other reason than the cost of dropouts to our society.

One means of serving at-risk youths is by providing alternative educational programs or schools. Since there has been increasing concern with youths who do not complete their education, alternative programs and schools designed to serve these youths have become increasingly common. Raywid (1982) reported that at least 2,500 alternative schools existed in 1981, most of them secondary level schools designed to serve at-risk youth, and she believed that the actual number of alternative schools was even higher.

At-risk students, high risk students, disaffected students, and potential dropouts are roughly synonymous terms used to refer to students likely to abandon their education

before graduating from high school. The salient characteristics of these students differ somewhat from source to source, but three general categories can be used to unify the characteristics commonly associated with at-risk status. These categories are: 1) social and family background, where factors such as belonging to certain racial groups or existing in an unstable family are correlated with a youth being at-risk; 2) personal problems such as pregnancy and substance abuse; and 3) school-related problems such as retention in grade or suspensions.

Alternative education programs and schools for at-risk youths at the secondary level vary widely. However, they are united by their efforts to provide instruction and an environment in ways likely to entice at-risk students to remain in school or dropouts to return to school. Typical components of these alternative programs and schools are instructional strategies not common in regular high schools and an emphasis on developing the students' self-esteem. These instructional strategies include an emphasis on individualized and personalized instruction, experiential learning, and course work designed upon the principles of mastery learning and continuous progress. An emphasis upon developing the students' self-esteem is often manifested by the incorporation of counseling or peer counseling groups into the alternative schools' offerings.

Although alternative schools and programs designed to serve secondary level, at-risk youths might be united by a desire to serve these youths, their structure, organization, and targeted clientele vary widely. Some alternative schools for at-risk youths are comprehensive to the point that they house their students within their facilities, although most do not. Some operate outside a regular school district's control, although most do not. Some are housed within a larger, regular school, and some are not.



Some have a heavy academic orientation, and some do not. Some are designed to serve a very specific clientele such as a particular ethnic group or pregnant teenagers, and some are not.

Many alternative schools and programs designed to serve at-risk youths are effective in allowing these youths to pursue and complete a high school education. According to a number of sources (Far West Laboratory for Educational Research, 1989; Gold & Mann, 1984; Wehlage, Fetter, Lesko, et al., 1989), many alternative schools report lower dropout rates than do their regular high school counterparts. Thus, the adoption of an alternative school or program designed to serve at-risk youths might seem an attractive option to a school district seeking to reduce the number of youths who will drop out or seeking to return those youths to the school system who have dropped out.

Besides an overriding desire to reduce the number of dropout youths in its community, a school district might consider the adoption of an alternative program for a more pragmatic reason. At-risk youths may often demand a disproportionately large amount of the the regular school's attention. This can occur for a number of reasons: For example, at-risk students may be disruptive, or they may be perceived as at-risk by the staff with ensuing efforts made to keep the students in school. Regardless, these traits and the staff's reaction to them may cause attention to be taken away from students who are not at-risk or as at-risk. By allowing at-risk students to attend an alternative program, they may better receive the attention they need, and the students remaining in the regular classrooms might receive more staff attention. Also, there is the strong possibility that some staff members might feel more comfortable in a school environment that does not contain as many at-risk students.

A larger amount of public aid and money is eventually devoted to dropouts in comparison to that directed to people who graduate from high school. Dropouts tend to produce earnings below the poverty level more often than people who graduate from high school. Dropouts also have a higher incidence of arrest and incarceration as well as being a disproportionate expense to society in terms of social welfare programs. Thus, school districts with a long range perspective may be willing to support alternative programs and schools for at-risk youths in an effort to save the larger community a greater expense in the long run. The decision to support alternative programs or schools may be made despite the fact that most alternative programs and schools for at-risk youths have a student-to-teacher ratio far smaller than is typical in regular classrooms. This small student-to-teacher ratio may make the program or school relatively expensive to staff.

Besides the issues of cost, time investment, and the effectiveness of alternative schools in keeping at-risk youths in school, there is another, less tangible reason for providing alternative education to these youths. In a field which most global goal is that of helping people, educators may feel a need to exhaust all resources in attempting to serve those suffering from the greatest difficulties. Also, dropouts report most generally that school factors, not their background or personal problems, are the primary causes for them to drop out (Hahn, 1987; Ralph, 1989). This perception on the part of the dropouts that they are, in effect, being pushed out of school may lead educators to pursue alternatives to regular schooling for at-risk youths.

As a result of the perceived need to keep at-risk youths in school, alternative schools and programs for these youths have become a common option for many school systems throughout the nation. Despite reports of success, alternative schools for at-

risk youth tend to be short-lived. Ingram and Klahn (1982) claimed that the average alternative school for at-risk youths exists only three years before it closes its doors, although the results of a survey taken by Raywid (1982) indicated that, in 1981, over half of all types of alternative schools had been in existence for at least six years. Thus, it would seem that alternative programs and schools for at-risk youths are often abandoned, even if the degree of abandonment is uncertain.

While considerable research has been devoted to larger alternative schools and programs designed to serve at-risk youths, very little research has focused on small, alternative programs for at-risk youths located in rural areas. This study, by means of the analysis of three forms of data--interviews, observations made by a participant-observer, and relevant documents--hopes to illuminate the phenomenon that existed when such a program was implemented in Lexington, Nebraska. This program, a half-day alternative program located in Lexington High School, became operational during the 1990-91 school year. It was entitled Lexington's Educational Alternative Program (LEAP). Given this study's findings, educators and researchers will have a better understanding of the LEAP-enrolled students' academic performance, their behavior, their comfortableness with their LEAP enrollment, and the strengths and weaknesses that existed in LEAP. Thus, this study hopes to illuminate both the students involved in LEAP and the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the program.

### Statement of the Problem

The implementation of Lexington's Educational Alternative Program (LEAP) provided an opportunity to research such a program and its students. There is a need to determine the effectiveness of small scale alternative education programs designed to

serve at-risk youths in rural areas since very little research has been performed regarding such programs and since such programs certainly exist.

### **Research Questions**

In order to illuminate the characteristics of the students enrolled in Lexington's Educational Alternative Program (LEAP) and the effectiveness of LEAP in serving at-risk youths, the following research questions were designed and pursued.

1. Based on an analysis of interviews, documents, and field notes, what were the academic performances demonstrated by LEAP-enrolled students?
2. Based on an analysis of interviews, documents, and field notes, what types of appropriate or inappropriate behaviors were demonstrated by the LEAP-enrolled students?
3. Based on an analysis of interviews, documents, and field notes, what evidence existed regarding the LEAP-enrolled students' comfortableness with their enrollment in LEAP?
4. Based on an analysis of interviews, documents, and field notes, what aspects of LEAP might be identified as its strengths or weaknesses?

### **Significance of the Study**

Very little has been done in using qualitative research methodology to better understand the implementation of small scale alternative programs located in rural areas and designed to serve at-risk youths. The implementation of Lexington High School's educational alternative program (LEAP) provided just such an opportunity. The working hypotheses regarding LEAP's effectiveness and ensuing recommendations will be

of value to Lexington Public Schools since the program is ongoing and the school system is still in the midst of change due to growing enrollment and limited facilities. Thus, the school system needs to make decisions regarding the programs it offers and to assess the effectiveness of these programs. These working hypotheses and recommendations may also be of value to other school systems similar in setting and context to Lexington Public Schools which have an ongoing alternative programs for at-risk youths or are considering the implementation of such a program.

### Definition of Terms

**Alternative Education Program:** a program designed for at-risk youths which uses different instructional strategies, course work, and staffing patterns than those commonly employed in a conjoint manner in a regular classroom setting.

**At-Risk Youth:** A school-aged person who meets the criteria set up by a given school district as indicating a high propensity for abandoning schooling before graduation or a school-aged person who had actually abandoned schooling before graduation.

**Regular Classroom:** a classroom planned for and provided for all students with little or no special allowances made for at-risk youths.

**Classroom Environment:** the milieu that arises out of the combination of a given educational facility and the interactional patterns of the students and staff placed in that facility.

**Informed Judgment:** an opinion based on some direct experience with the issue at hand and/or the knowledge of such an experience as it was shared by an individual who actually had direct experience with the issue at hand.

**Perception:** a voiced opinion expressed by an individual which was born at least

partly out of an informed judgment.

**Belief:** a voiced opinion expressed by an individual which did not necessarily arise out of an informed judgment but which may have arisen purely due to conjecture.

**Appropriate Behavior:** behavior which is commonly thought of as typical in a given context and conducive to the tasks, responsibilities, and expectations inherent in that context.

**Inappropriate Behavior:** behavior which is commonly thought of as untypical in a given context and not conducive to the tasks, responsibilities, and expectations inherent in that context.

**Naturalistic Case Study:** a method of qualitative research where data regarding a given phenomenon is collected, using interviews, observations, and documents as the primary sources of data; which changes course when needed during the actual process of research; and which is carried out in as much as possible within the actual context of the phenomenon.

**Working Hypothesis:** A generalization formed from the analysis of data which is ideographic, that is, arising from the examination of a phenomenon under study and applicable only to the phenomenon under study or a very similar phenomenon.

### Assumptions

In order to proceed with this study as described in its statement of purpose and the research questions, the following assumptions were made:

1. Students enrolled in Lexington High School's Educational Alternative Program (LEAP), their parents or guardians, and selected staff would give honest responses to questions regarding their perceptions and beliefs about the LEAP students, their

experiences and performances in LEAP and the Lexington High School, and the strengths and weaknesses of LEAP.

2. The perceptions and beliefs expressed by the students enrolled in LEAP, their parents or guardians, and selected staff would provide meaningful data regarding the LEAP students, their experiences and performances in LEAP and the Lexington High School, and the strengths and weaknesses of LEAP.

3. The fact that the researcher was professionally involved in the implementation of LEAP undoubtedly impacted this study, but not to the extent that the observations included in the findings of this study would be contradictory to those that would have been gathered by a nonparticipant observer.

### **Limitations**

This study was restricted by the following limitations:

1. It was limited to the perceptions and beliefs of specific students, parents or guardians, and professional staff members gathered over a length of time not longer than one school year.
2. It was limited by the fact that the researcher interviewing, observing, and collecting documents was also the coordinator and sole instructor directly involved with an alternative educational program designed to serve at-risk youths.
3. It was limited in its ability to generalize upon its findings by the descriptive and ideographic nature of naturalistic case study research.

### **Procedures**

The following procedures were followed in the descriptive study of the

implementation of a small scale alternative education program for at-risk youths in Lexington, Nebraska. These procedures are further delineated in Chapter Three, Setting and Context; Chapter Four, Methods; Chapter Five, Findings; and Chapter Six, Summary, Working Hypotheses, and Recommendations.

A review of the literature was conducted in the following areas: a description of alternative education programs and schools in general; a description of at-risk youths and the problems they present society; a description of effective alternative programs and schools designed specifically to serve at-risk youth; and a description of the research directed toward alternative programs and schools designed for at-risk youths which exist in small, rural communities.

In terms of this study's methods, it employed a naturalistic inquiry, case study approach. In keeping with this approach, data was collected by three different means: interviews, field notes, and relevant documents. Interview schedules were designed which sought to illuminate issues regarding the LEAP students' academic performance, their behavior in a variety of contexts, their comfortableness with LEAP enrollment, and the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Latter interview schedules were designed in part to test the trustworthiness of the data collected by earlier interview schedules. The following groups of people were interviewed: LEAP-enrolled students who consented to participate in this study and who were also granted permission to participate by their parents or guardians, the students' parents or guardians who consented to participate in this study, and members of Lexington High School's professional staff who had significant contact with LEAP enrolled students.

All three groups of informants consented to interview as is required by the University of Nebraska's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human